

Online instructional environments for language teaching: Designing the conversation

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As more and more language education activity moves to online venues, language educators are left with a great deal to consider in terms of their learners and their practices. Central to these considerations are two central questions that I address here. First is the critical question of our perceptions of online venues for language education. Do we see these venues as automated, that is pre-programmed and devoid of human contact or do we see these as what I call humanated, that is dominated by rich social interaction using the language and steered by the underlying culture that is the target of learning? The second critical question addresses our expanding online lives as users of social media and the relevance of these practices to language education; particularly implications for contemporary learners and online social connectivity. I take up these two central questions within the broader discussion of what constitutes effective online language education and how we as educators might think about the design of effective online conversations for our students.

Automated or humanated?

The question of whether effective online instructional practices are automated or whether they are orchestrated by professional educators is a vital one, particularly in the field of language education. Corporate and lay concepts of online learning tend to see online language education as something that can be efficiently and widely 'delivered' as a product; that is, pre-programmed instruction that provides software-driven lecture and practice activities while tracking and grading learners' **249**

performance. From over thirty years of trial and error with such a model, however, we know well that such forms of instruction are effective for a small portion of the population and, even for the most gifted and motivated, remain very limited in terms of supporting literacy and fluency.

The most recent evidence that counters an automated approach to online language instruction comes from a child language development study in the *Academy of Sciences* journal. This rigorous study, undertaken under random assignment and strict control in a laboratory setting, observed children encountering new words in their native language for the first time. The startling findings, findings that are especially startling for language educators, suggest that children's mother tongue word learning happens *not* via multiple exposures, repetitions as we have long held to be true and on which we have developed a good deal of language instruction practices. Instead, children learn new words via the *insight* they gain on first encounters with new words. That insight is socially motivated through conversations with others with and about the new word. What is even more startling and relevant for language education is that if there is no insight on the first encounter with the word, the word gets immediately forgotten on all subsequent, all-be-they multiple encounters. This is due to our brain's built-in efficiency whereby we do not hold incorrect interpretations in memory, in this case new words in order to reserve mental real estate for what the brain sorts as more pressing, more important. Remembering new words that have been encountered without insight – that have been sorted by the brain as non-salient – would get in the way of new mental calculations. These words are therefore dismissed, forgotten on subsequent encounters. Now consider foreign and second language education that relies on repeated drilling of new vocabulary. If what holds true for children learning their mother tongue for students learning additional languages, then the brain mechanism that is kicking in for drills and repetition is the forgetting mechanism, not a remembering mechanism. Further, what works for word learning is clearly initial insight through social, relational encounter, not decontextualized repetition. In short, *automated* online teaching of language may be plainly counterproductive whereas *humanated* encounters with new language may provide the insight required for word learning. The authors of the study conclude that rich interactions with others are what matters, not picture books and drills (Medina et al, 2011).

What know is that engaging learners in active, authentic, productive use of the target language is what leads to acquisition and mastery. Additionally, we know the following about effective, *online* language instruction:

- ✧ those less verbal in f2f thrive
- ✧ resources are drawn on to support and enhance postings/participation
- ✧ learners notice new language forms and vocabulary as they productively encounter them
- ✧ students report high satisfaction with authentic, yet instructionally motivated conversations, especially with the instructor and/or when the instructor is 'present'
- ✧ language educators find -especially in asynchronous environments – that they have many more fruitful opportunities to respond to teachable moments online as compared to the frantic give and take of the live classroom
- ✧ these are safe places for L2 learners to explore and experiment with L2 identities as developing bilinguals

(from Meskill & Anthony, 2010)

It makes sense, therefore, that as we move instructional activities online, that the instructor-designed and instructor-orchestrated instructional conversation is our primary tool for design and orchestration of online teaching. As backdrop for considering how we can *humanate* our online language instruction through instructional conversation is the relevance of our and our students' extensive use of social media and social networking as part of our professional and recreational lives. This is taken up in the following section.

Contemporary learners and social connectivity

The ongoing debate regarding the risks and benefits of living a good portion of our waking lives 'connected' to others via screens becomes a highly relevant one in the context of considering online language instruction and its design. In her series of three books exploring social and psychological impacts of technologies on their users, Sherry Turkle has systematically illuminated the ways that our online lives are reshaping our lives, how we think, how we operate as social beings, and how we construct our identities (Turkle, 1990, 2000, 2011). As language learners spend increasing amounts of their waking hours online, Turkle's work becomes increasingly relevant in our consideration of online instructional practices. Learners are, after all, spending the bulk of their time in front of the very screens through which we are designing our instruction.

Alone or together?

One of Turkle's ongoing and primary observations is that the main attraction of being online is connectivity, not automation. We prefer to play games with others versus solo, for example. We seek out communities of likeminded people with whom we can experience a sense of membership. We even maintain continual, oftentimes intimate digital contact with those with whom we are close. In contemporary times we seek connection with others through a range of social media and social networking. In her most recent book, *Alone Together*, Turkle empirically observes both positive and negative implications for this constant connectivity. Her central observation, as reflected in the title, is that we are more often confused about what constitutes being alone and what constitutes being with others. People who depend on continual digital connectivity, the digital natives who are our students, actually end up in a continual state of what she calls 'relational retreat' – shallow, meaningless acts of relationship in the form of empty messages, messages that trigger a feeling rather than transmit a thought, least of all a well developed thought. In short, this constant, oftentimes frenetic connectivity is devoid of content, of authentic meaning making thereby derailing extended thought.

This is reflected in a number of reports by subjects from her work:

I don't have enough time alone with my mind

I have to struggle to make time to think

I artificially make time to think

More positive findings in her study of digital connectivity indicate that many digitally connected people use their social experiences online as a way of practicing ways to improve their real lives. That is, their online behaviors are a means of exercising new ways of **251**

representing self, new ways of talking with and “being with” others that can positively affect one’s real life experiences.

What do these two fall-out aspects of online social connectivity imply for our work as online language educators?

Teaching languages online

A major imperative for the design and orchestration of online language learning is that our online spaces be places where students can experience genuine, not superficial, communities; where membership means successful negotiation of target language speaker identity in consort with others; where the conversation is enlivening and empowering while carrying both social and academic (mastery of the language) consequences. In short, rather than mimic the more shallow characteristics of digital connectivity, online language learning spaces can be genuinely relational.

Cultivating and managing such online instructional interactions is no small task. It is our responsibility to clarify when students are to work independently, when they should share their work with the learning community and how, and when and how learners are to be collaborating in that community. We do this via the instructional conversation choices we make. Like in the live classroom, we nurture a sense of membership, of belonging, of what Gee calls ‘affiliations’ as we do our identity work together (Gee, 2003). Online language learning environments can be such spaces – safe, quiet, focused, where conversation extends beyond superficial connectivity: a place of refuge, of comfort beyond what is otherwise a noisy, chaotic world of constant digital connectivity. Online language learning spaces can be the *other* space, the focused space, space to think, to imagine, to elaborate, a time out for identity exploration beyond the fleeting and frivolous. Indeed, anecdotal evidence from online learners clearly points to positive outcomes in this regard: learners can find safe, supportive online learning spaces conducive to practicing for effective real life interactions (see, for example Palloff & Pratt, 2007).

What aspects of our online connected lives are relevant to the design and orchestration of online language learning spaces? As language educators, we know that pedagogical spaces are conversational spaces – we converse using the target language to affect its acquisition. How do such conversations get structured? Figure 1 represents one way to conceptualize an online language learning module from and instructional conversation perspective.

In addition to this cyclical instructional conversation-based structure for online language teaching are features of being digitally literate that instructors can keep in mind and make good use of in their design of such activities:

- ✧ **at handedness** – digital natives are quite good at determining what tools to use and how choice about what resources within environment are immediately useful
- ✧ **navigation of spaces** is based on prior knowledge of and experiences with other spaces; one immediately scans the memory banks for reference.
- ✧ **talking about something in shared view** – an anchored referent or two streamlines meaning making.

Conclusion

As mentioned previously in the context of the automated/humanted in online language teaching, all the bells and whistles, the visuals, animations, and sounds in the world are

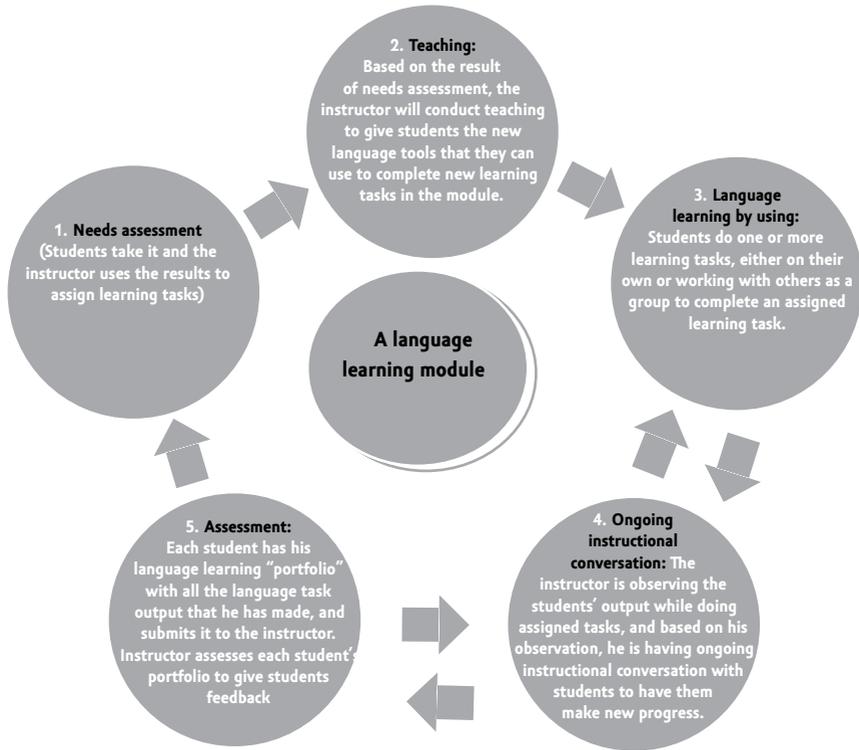


Figure 1: Sample online instructional conversation based module

not as powerful as that first novel encounter and insight with target language items. Compound this with other socio-evolutionary biology studies confirming the propensity of the human mind for social learning (e.g., Hermann et al, 2007), and you have a recipe for online teaching: orchestrated asynchronous and synchronous moments online whereby learners comprehend and use new target structures and vocabulary productively.

There is novelty and insight in optimally social exchanges. It follows that, as we move forward in conceptualizing effective teaching practices in online environments, instructional conversations become an important tool with the instructor's many roles in devising and orchestrating these conversations central (see Figure 2).

As Turkle's three decades of research on online human activity indicates, we all have much investment in connecting with others in terms of positive face, in terms of the conversation moving forward, being satisfying to all participants and, as is cited as one of the greatest allures on online communication, an investment in being heard. In this regard, online instructional conversations are particularly relevant in the design and conduct of our teaching.

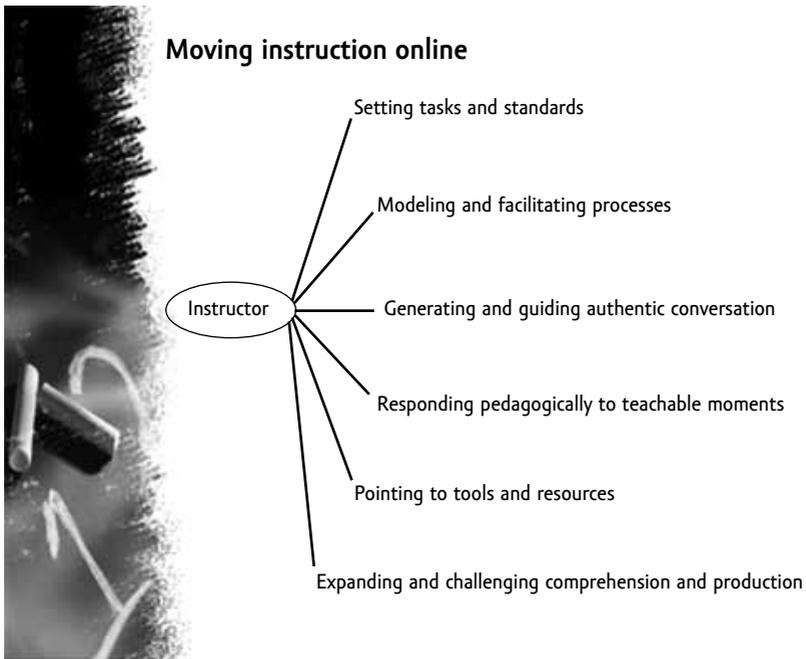


Figure 2: Moving language instruction online

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