THE TEMPTATIONS AND LIMITS OF THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

Kevin Garvey
Kanda University of International Studies

INTRODUCTION

The novel coronavirus outbreak in the Spring of 2020 led to the decision to hold all university courses for the semester exclusively online. In my role as an instructor, I teach a listening and speaking course to first-year university students. It is my experience that first-year students cultivate deep and lasting friendships in their courses that last well beyond their first year. In a semester conducted exclusively online, I was interested in how mandatory online teaching would change the design and expectations of the course. Furthermore, I was curious to observe how first-year students would negotiate the communicative limitations of online platforms.

Three negative changes to the course were identified through my teaching journal and my reflections on interactions with students. The changes are as follows: diminished casual student socialization, hyper-centralization of teacher control over the classroom, and the disappearance of the classroom through asynchronous teaching methods. These changes signify what I consider to be a significant threat to quality online language learning: the creation of a *single-channel classroom* in which communicative language use is significantly diminished.

DO THEY LIKE EACH OTHER? CHANGES TO STUDENT SOCIALIZATION

The first notable change from teaching online is that students are far less able to easily socialize with their peers. Happily, this change can be mediated by the actions of all parties involved: teachers can arrange for student-only online meetings, and students can connect through a variety of social media sites. However, these online interactions are *intentional* rather than *incidental*, as meetings cannot occur in neutral third spaces outside the classroom or the home, as they could on a physical campus.

As instructor of the course I made regular opportunities for students to interact "casually", but there is a limit to which students want their instructor to be involved with their social lives. In any given year, first-year students generally prioritize getting to know each other over getting to know me or getting to know the course. Without a physical campus to meet on, I believe typical processes of finding common ground, making friends, and spending free time together occurred more slowly than they would have in an offline, shared environment. These forms of socialization usually have a positive washback effect in the classroom by lowering the affective filter of language learners. In other words, students who are friends are much more likely to be good language-learning partners. An online-only language program seeking to replicate the appeal of offline courses must take seriously the need for students to socialize in neutral, casual spaces.

DO THEY LIKE THEIR TEACHER? THE SINGLE-CHANNEL CLASSROOM

I propose that the second and perhaps most serious change is that teachers can centralize and control their "classrooms" more than ever. As host of an online meeting, teachers can unilaterally silence, exclude, or move students between separate spaces. I do not believe most educators would consciously abuse these functions, which are in place for security and management purposes. Yet the unilateral control a teacher has over the digital classroom is a significant force in shaping online teaching and learning.

In an online teleconferencing meeting, the default mode of communication is that of the host/teacher speaking directly to every attendee/student at once. While alternative methods exist (separate chat rooms, a text chat function, visual or audio input from students), these tertiary channels still function at the whim of the meeting host, who must regularly modify and manage them. The single channel of one teacher-to-many students requires the least effort on the part of the instructor, and as such may become the default mode of instruction in many cases.

I suggest at least two negative effects of this tempting single-channel teaching. First, the teacher is not given the same real-time social-physical feedback from students on the quality of instruction. In language courses, on-going informal feedback is crucial for a teacher to understand if the tasks they have designed are engaging and effective. Students likewise benefit from clear signs of teacher attention to their comprehension or confusion regarding aspects of instruction. While offline classrooms can rely on conventional forms of interpersonal, nonverbal communication, teachers and students must deliberately innovate new methods for "reading the room" in the online setting. Examples include monitoring the chat function for student input, impromptu polls of student mood or understanding, and online office hours for follow-up on specific issues. Myself and my students worked very hard at using these methods, yet it still took several weeks for course members to innovate (imperfect) methods for giving and receiving on-going feedback online in real-time.

A second negative effect of single-channel teaching is that an audiovisual disconnect exists between all course members. When a student senses a teacher looking at them, they react in any number of ways: they may grow more attentive, remain the same, or look back and engage in dialogue. The same is true of student-to-student interactions. Awareness, in other words, stimulates interaction. This awareness is significantly diminished in single-channel teaching. Thus, not only are course members unable to easily read the room, but natural opportunities for interruption, turn-taking, or topic changes cannot be easily discerned in a single-channel digital classroom. Interaction must be deliberately stimulated in some other way that may feel unnatural or forced. In my class I observed multiple instances of hyper-awareness, unintentional silence, awkward interruption, or reticence as a result of course members not knowing who was addressing whom or where gaps in conversation were located. This confusion was reduced as the semester continued, though never completely absent.

It is unlikely that many or any teachers purposefully create the single-channel classroom, but it should be noted that the potential is well within reach and may be unthinkingly grasped by a teacher who is frustrated by the fact of diminished feedback and confused interaction.

DO THEY LIKE THE CLASS? ASYNCHRONOUS LEARNING

Frustrations with the single-channel classroom may create a third negative effect by encouraging excessive *de*-centralization. Many educators are experimenting with a balance between synchronous class time on the online platform, with asynchronous, independent work time for students, possibly occurring offline entirely. One stated motivation for this is to limit the effects of screen fatigue. I suggest that a second, unstated motivation is the frustration a teacher has with the tempting-but-limited single-channel classroom.

Despite my on-going efforts to re-create the classroom online, student responses generally left me with a distinct feeling that they did not feel a part of any classroom or campus community. Adaptation of offline language courses to an online format requires a great deal of creativity, collaboration, and improvisation, but the communicative capacity of any digital platform remains limited. No matter how hard a teacher works, in other words, they will always confront the limitations of the platform(s) they use. The frustration of these limitations (e.g. connectivity issues, diminished interpersonal feedback, unnatural interactions) will persist so long as the teacher expects the online classroom to satisfy the expectations of an offline environment. One solution for alleviating these frustrations is to take the class offline entirely at times in the form of asynchronous class sessions. While this has potential benefits (e.g. limiting screen fatigue, encouraging student autonomy), it also reduces or removes the classroom as the centralized, prioritized space of learning. In this way, de-centralizing the classroom is not a solution so much as an avoidance of the problem of online platforms' limited capacity for communicative language teaching.

CONCLUSION: RECOGNIZING THE LIMITS OF SINGLE-CHANNEL TEACHING

A theme throughout my interactions with students, my lesson journal, and lesson notes, was that course members wished for more and longer interaction with others. Various methods exist for fulfilling this wish: longer small discussion groups for students, frequent one-on-one meetings between the teacher and students, and alternative online channels for communication outside of class time. However, I suggest that all these methods, no matter how sophisticated or novel, will fall short of fulfilling the underlying desire of course members to be physically present in the same space.

If online courses are to successfully substitute or supplement offline courses, both teachers and students need to change their expectations of what an online language class is for. As noted above, the first-year course that this paper reflects on serves as a significant site for first-year student socialization. I believe that socialization still occurred online (and continues to occur), but it is much more contingent on *deliberate student action* (i.e. exchanging contact information and setting up times to chat) than it would be on a campus offering physical proximity and

spaces for casual mingling. The unique nature of online socialization between students is also deeply influenced by the constricted atmosphere of the single-channel classroom, a topic that could be fruitfully explored in future research. Moving forward with online courses, teachers will need to recognize and understand the changing nature of student socialization online as well as the dangers, temptations, and limitations of the single-channel classroom.