COLLECTIVE DELIBERATE CHOICE IN ONLINE COURSE CREATION

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DESCRIPTION OF THE COURSE

This course is a first-year speaking and listening course that focuses on skills such as discussion, media analysis, and presentations in English. It meets four times a week for ninety-minute periods for a total of fifteen weeks. The same group of students also takes a reading and writing course that meets for the same amount of contact hours. The high number of contact hours with the same people generally leads to these courses being significant sites of socialization for first-year students.

As instructor of the speaking course, I seek to create a communicative environment. By this I mean an environment in which casual, colloquial, and communicative target language use is encouraged, while grammatically perfect language is rewarded but not required. In a functional communicative environment, students should feel free to contradict or supplement teacher instruction or lecture with their own ideas or learning outcomes, as expressions of learner autonomy. Additionally, students should feel comfortable socializing in the target language outside of classroom tasks, as a sign of intrinsic motivation for language learning.

Due to the pandemic in the spring of 2020, the course was moved to an online format. This change represented challenges for first-year students needing to form vital social support networks. It also presented a challenge for my goal of creating a communicative environment. As an instructor, I sought to identify and provide solutions for these challenges, detailed below. These efforts made clear the central importance of deliberate choice in creating a functional online classroom.

PROBLEMS ANTICIPATED

Three key issues were anticipated ahead of the start of the semester: the lack of opportunities for students to casually socialize, the absence of a common physical classroom in which students could freely mingle, and the limits of audiovisual communication via an online platform.

First-year university students typically spend a great deal of time socializing with peers. While students frequently produce detailed reflections on their coursework in their language journals, there is a universal trend towards mentioning social interactions with peers. As an instructor, I was deeply concerned that the online environment would not provide adequate opportunities for first-year students to build these social bonds that sustain them during their years at university.

During class time, I was similarly concerned that students would not have the freedom to move about a room as they normally would, collectively building an informal classroom community. I rely heavily, as an instructor, on the willingness of students to work together amicably in varying combinations throughout the semester and year.

The final issue I was concerned about was the intelligibility of my instructions as well as the intelligibility of student speech. Both the students and the teacher were largely unfamiliar with online learning, and I anticipated a steep learning curve for myself (with three weeks of preparation), and an even steeper learning curve for the students.

SOLUTIONS

My focus was on recreating the communicative environment of the offline classroom, wherein students felt they could naturally and organically communicate in the target language. The solutions I arrived at were a result of collaboration, experimentation, and improvisation. In each case, I have introduced my original issue and the methods devised for solving it.

Issue One: How Can I Help Students Socialize with Their Classmates?
Sharing Emails and Self-Introductions
Before the start of the semester, I emailed students with the contact details of their first (random) "study group" members. I encouraged them to communicate over email and to exchange contact information. Additionally, I instructed students to submit a self-introduction including pictures and a short biography. I compiled their submissions into one large shared document and shared this with the class. My goal with these activities was to give students an opportunity to open communicative channels with one another, find common interests, and begin building friendships.

Outcomes and Reflection
Students reported finding common interests and forming early friendships with classmates in their learning logs. Additionally, it was clear to me that students were often continuing on-going, long-term conversational topics during class time, and moving easily from the simple "warm-up" questions I provided into an extended interaction in the target language.

Issue Two: How Can I Recreate the Feeling and Structure of a "Room" In Which Students and Teachers Can "Mingle" and Interact?
I was able to mitigate this issue through two solutions: randomized student lists and regular quiz activities to structure the lesson.

Solution One: Creation of Randomized Study Group Lists
In order to ensure students were all meeting with one another, I created a spreadsheet with seven randomized versions of the class roster. With seven near-random study groups across thirteen weeks, I decided to change groups every two weeks. One eventual change to this method was to allow students to form their own groups by having them write their names on a digital whiteboard under categories based on preference (e.g. favorite sport, favorite food).

Outcomes and Reflection
At the beginning, I believe students felt limited to only talking with their study groups. After two rotations of study groups, I allowed students to choose their own groups by topic or members. This method was positively received by students, with some reporting that it felt more natural to group themselves with others who had similar topical preferences. However, I still introduce randomized pairs and assign study groups periodically to maximize student exposure and, in a word, keep things fresh.

Solution Two: Quizzes for Conversation
I used Google Forms and Classroom to write and distribute daily grammar and vocabulary quizzes that informed a warm-up question. Google Forms compiles and visually represents respondent answers, and I used this information to give immediate feedback to the whole class at once on commonly missed questions.

Outcomes and Reflection
Students often wrote about their grammar and vocabulary quiz scores in their learning logs, and sometimes asked questions during class time about a specific quiz item. The routine of daily quizzes gave the class more structure and regularity online. Overall, Google Classroom seems to work well as a framing device for coursework.

Issue #3: How Can I Maximize Student Comprehension?
Use of Google Meet
Google Meet is a free browser-based teleconferencing program. I ran a Meet session and resized the windows so that my slideshow and Meet window were adjacent. Within Meet I turned off my camera and activated auto-generated subtitles. I then shared my desktop screen on Zoom. This presented students with a display of my slides, subtitles, and a video feed of the teacher through Zoom. Students could take a screenshot at any time. I was able to display four lines of auto-generated text at one time, so a screenshot taken at the right moment could capture a great deal of teacher instruction for future reference.

Outcomes and Reflection
Multiple students reported greatly appreciating the subtitle function during teacher instruction, and I wonder if it would be possible to use it in some capacity in an offline class. Visiting with student groups, I often saw them referring to their screenshots as they negotiated their current task. Courses are not tiered in this department, and I believe the subtitle function was particularly helpful for students with lower listening ability.

UNDERSTANDING AND ACCEPTING CHANGE

Reimagining the face-to-face speaking and listening course for online teaching has been challenging but fascinating. I often found myself having to balance the need to digitally arrange student socialization with a strong desire to respect their autonomy. I feared being either too controlling, dictating when and where students could interact, or too hands-off, leaving students with unstructured time and amorphous tasks. The absence of a readable physical

atmosphere made me increasingly reliant on student learning journals, one-to-one interaction, and incidental communication during class time to understand how students felt about the course.

Teachers and students must learn that the online class "room" only exists through deliberate action. Motivational aspects of language learning, such as serendipity, familiarity, or community, do not appear without deliberate choices by participants to actively construct space for them in the disembodied online environment. Without a deliberate collective choice to construct this disembodied yet active learning community, online classes are simply a series of audiovisual cues and exchanges.

The techniques listed for classroom management above were developed in the shadow of the face-to-face class that did not happen this semester. I believe the course improved over time as the teacher and students were able to adjust our collective expectations of what the class could or should be, and thus get out from under the shadow of the face-to-face course. As our collective expectations shift, I hope to continue to improve and refine these classroom management techniques and develop the online course to be uniquely engaging and beneficial. At the heart of that improvement is an understanding that creating a communicative environment online requires a deliberate choice by teachers and students to interact and to build a class community.