

Building Relationships through the Online Classroom

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Vignette

"So how is everyone today?"

After getting no answers in my introductory Zoom session with first-year students in April 2020, I checked to see if my microphone was working. I asked the question again and received the same blank stares. Maybe students were smiling, but it was difficult to tell since they wore masks. A few had their cameras turned off and only the foreheads of others were visible. Subsequent icebreaking activities had limited success, as some participants remained silent or experienced various kinds of technical trouble.

This is not going to work, I thought. There has to be a better way.

At the end of the session, the students filled out a short questionnaire on Google Forms about their new online learning environment and if they had any trouble. I was expecting technical questions regarding hardware or software, but most of the students' responses were of a totally different kind.

"I'm worried if I can become friends with people at my new school."

"I don't know anyone here, so I feel lonely."

"I think my classmates are nice, but since we wear masks and have to keep social distance, it's hard to communicate with them."

The students' openness about their concerns allowed me to reflect on their situation and work on a solution that might allay their fears.

According to the results of the initial Google Forms questionnaire, over 70% of the incoming students had concerns about making friends. They were not able to have an entrance ceremony due to the spread of COVID-19 and there was no proper freshman orientation where they could get to know each other. Masks proved to be a barrier to communication. From the students' perspective, they were being thrown together into a new online environment and basically forced to have interactions in a foreign language with strangers.

Other responses to the questionnaire indicated that most students were not confident in their ability to use English and more than half of them shared a

computer at home with other family members. I needed to come up with an easy way for them to get to know each other gradually in their classes, even while being physically apart. The method also had to be accessible outside of a fixed class time.

After considering the needs of the students, I chose to incorporate the free applications Flipgrid (for speaking activities) and Padlet (for writing activities) into my English classes. Communicative tasks were easily separated into individual class pages within each application and the similar computer and smartphone interfaces allowed the students to navigate the apps easily. In addition, since many students were not able to work part-time jobs due to COVID-19 and were already concerned about using up their smartphone data plans by connecting to Zoom for multiple classes, it was vital to have applications that were free to use.

Objectives

- To provide successful examples of applications that give students a chance to communicate with each other in English without masks.
- To illustrate how structuring online classmate interaction allows students to get to know each other through easy communicative activities.

Practical Implications

The structure of the class interaction was the same for both speaking and writing activities, as listed below. Through the applications, the lengths of the submissions can be controlled by the teacher, but I stressed to the students that the most important thing was to have friendly interactions with one another. If the student's partner could understand their English, then the goal of successful communication was achieved.

1. Decide on a topic of discussion for that week's class (ideally related to the textbook, if one is used).
2. Provide model responses for the students that are either spoken (Flipgrid) or written

(Padlet).

3. Ask the students to add their individual responses to the classroom Flipgrid or Padlet page before the next week's lesson.

4. After checking the students' submissions, assign each of them a partner for that week.

5. Explain to the students the purpose of replying to their partner each week in order to get to know each other more. (The teacher can also give an example response by replying to a student's submission and addressing them by name, complimenting their work, asking a follow-up question, etc.)

6. Ask the students to comment on their partner's spoken or written submission and instruct them to give their partner a question to answer.

7. Assign a different topic of discussion for the next week's class. Students reply to their partner's question the following week. As the pattern continues through subsequent class sessions, students are engaged in simultaneously giving their opinions on that week's topic, commenting on a classmate's submission from the previous week, and replying to a different classmate's question from two weeks before. Through this cycle, each student can interact with most or all of their classmates before the end of the course.

Reflective Conclusion

Post-course survey results of the nearly 100 students who participated in these English classes showed that their relationships with classmates had improved through the online interaction. Since students were able to take their time formulating responses to their peers in the asynchronous tasks, their confidence in English also improved dramatically. Finally, an overwhelming number of students indicated that they preferred asynchronous over synchronous remote learning and appreciated that they could access the course tasks and content at any time and as many times as they wished.

As long as a communicative classroom community is properly structured and nurtured online, students can have the same opportunities for interaction as in a face-to-face classroom. Through written and spoken exchanges on applications such as Padlet and Flipgrid, first-year students who have yet to physically meet each other can get to know

their peers on a deeper level. Additionally, especially for low-confidence learners who require more time to formulate English output, this online environment may even be a more productive one in which they can grow.

Author Bio

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Link to Presentation on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vvCsOuX-OqE>

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