

Student engagement in distance learning environment: the experience of language certification preparation courses during the Coronavirus pandemic

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Abstract

Student engagement has been a hotly debated topic in the past couple of decades because it is a key element to students' success and to the success of a course. Student engagement is even more important and challenging when the course is held in a distance learning environment. The present work aims to explore how student engagement can be created and maintained in an online setting and it will focus on providing some of the practical solutions adopted by the researcher in her own English B2 language certification preparation courses taught at the University of Foggia during the national lockdown which occurred in the year 2020. Many people's lives were drastically changed at the beginning of the year 2020 when the Coronavirus disease spread globally to the point of causing a pandemic and subsequently a complete lockdown. Schools and universities in many countries – Italy included – closed, all the academic activities were moved online and the instructors found themselves in the situation of renovating and adapting their teaching approach and methodology to an online setting. Although the present work is a personal experience of the researcher and it lacks quantifiable data, it only represents the initial step of a larger project entailing a quantitative study which will use students as the subjects of the subsequent part of the project itself.

Keywords

Student engagement, distance learning, foreign language classroom.

Introduction

The year 2020 will always be remembered throughout history as the year of the Coronavirus pandemic in which people's lives were transformed abruptly. After the disease been firstly identified in China in December 2019 [1], it rapidly spread worldwide to the point that the World Health Organization declared it a Public Health Emergency of International Concern in January 2020 and a pandemic in March of the same year [2]. As a consequence, schools and universities in many countries worldwide – Italy included – were closed in March 2020 - and all the academic activities were moved online - and reopened in September, at the beginning of the following school and academic year, but many restrictions have persisted. For example, the University of Foggia, a state university in southeastern Italy, is offering face-to-face courses only to freshmen students (up to a pre-established number of students)[3], while the students enrolled in the following years are attending the courses on the Learning Management System (LMS) platform used by the University for its e-learning services.

Although the pandemic has occurred in a historical period in which digital technologies have had an enormous impact on people's private and professional lives, teachers were confronted with the need to suddenly adapt their face-to-face courses onto the online environment and renovate their whole learning approach while maintaining engagement in their students' learning process; similarly, students faced the challenge to adapt to this new learning style without losing motivation and engagement.

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This paper represents the initial step of a larger study which intends to analyze students' engagement and motivation to attend the English B2 certification preparation courses offered by the Language Center of the University of Foggia (Centro Linguistico d'Ateneo or CLA).

More specifically, this contribution represents the introductory phase of a larger project and the main question to which the researcher will try to give an answer is how instructors could modify their teaching approach when the course settings change, keeping in mind the objective of maintaining the students engaged and motivated. What will be explored here are the main challenges and solutions adopted by the researcher in her own English B2 certification preparation courses run at the CLA during the 2019-2020 academic year.

However, before looking at the different strategies and shifts implemented in the course in order to keep the students more engaged, it is important to provide information about what "student engagement" is, how this process can be initiated and maintained, and later the paper will be divided into looking at the different solutions presented to students using the Moodle platform.

What student engagement is

The term "student engagement" or "learner engagement" is a concept that has witnessed an explosion of interest in the past couple of decades as it refers to something that instructors hope to *see* and *feel* in their classrooms[4]. Student engagement tends to be seen as the level of curiosity that students demonstrate on the topic being taught or the task being assigned[5], their interaction with the instructor and the peers, as well as their motivation to learn.

Copious research exists on student engagement as it tends to be viewed as a key to students' success and to the success of a course, and it can also be used as a tool to interpret and prevent dropout, as Appleton and others argue[6].

Hiver, Al-Hoorie and Mercer, in their recent book entitled *Student Engagement in the Language Classroom*[7], highlight that student engagement has been examined concentrating on different elements, among which school engagement[8], specific school subjects [9][10], but also learning settings [11][12][13][14][15] can be identified.

Additionally, the American professor of education J. D. Finn[16] proposed a model according to which engagement was divided into behavioral (involvement in class) and affective components (school identification, belonging, valuing learning). The idea of classifying engagement was also supported by Fredericks et al.[17] who suggested it to be divided into three subtypes: behavioral (e.g., positive conduct, effort, participation), cognitive (e.g., self-regulation, learning goals, investment in learning), and emotional or affective (e.g., interest, belonging, and positive attitude about learning).

How to engage and keep students engaged

When talking about student engagement, it is important to differentiate *initial engagement* from *ongoing engagement*. Cambridge University Press offered a series of workshops to train teachers to distance learning and some of these workshops were held by Ms. Ceri Jones, an ELT professional who creates and writes teaching and training materials[18], who specified that initial engagement is the first teachers' challenge and it refers to "the hook, the bait that draws students into our lessons"[19]. Once the students are hooked, the instructor needs to keep them engaged. That is where the concept of *ongoing engagement* fits in. Attention needs to be kept alive so that students want to come back to class. To maintain engagement in the class, students need to receive the right level of challenge. Tasks should not be too easy or the students will get bored, but they should not be too hard either to prevent the students from switching off[20]. Ms. Jones was explicitly referring to distance learning when mentioning this differentiation, but the same distinction exists and is applied to traditional face-to-face classes. The only problem is that these tasks are more problematic in an online environment because of a general feeling of isolation and lack of support[21].

Research question

Students tend to feel isolated when they miss the usual interaction they experience in the classroom, and consequently they have a tendency to refer to “*online* education as a synonym for *distance* education”[22]. Thus, it is crucial to help them feel more connected to the instructor and the peers to not lose engagement.

This being said, the question that this contribution aims to provide an answer to is how engagement can be maintained. Some solutions will be proposed. These solutions are the ones that the researcher adopted in the classes she taught in her English B2 certification preparation courses at language center of the university during the 2019-2020 academic year.

The case of English B2 certification preparation courses

The University of Foggia held, among other languages, English certification preparation courses for the 2019-2020 academic year. The researcher taught three different B2 (English) courses. Each course met once a week for two or three hour lessons. As far as the size of the class was concerned, each class had a number of students ranging between 18 and 25. The courses started in mid-December 2019 and ended in July 2020. The first nine to ten class sessions were held in the traditional face-to-face setting, , but from March 9 2020, due to the national lockdown declared in consequence of the COVID pandemic, all the classes were transferred online onto Moodle, the LMS that the University of Foggia adopts for its e-learning services.

Moodle is a very user friendly learning platform designed for instructors and learners, among other parties, to create and personalize their learning environments[23]. Moodle has a wide variety of features that turned out to be very helpful in compensating the physical distance among the participants in the class in this period in which people were deprived of social relations and the greatest difficulty they had to face was the sense of belonging to a group.

Moodle was used both for the synchronous and asynchronous interaction. Both types of interaction were used to give students various opportunities to interact with the course content, their peers and the instructor.

Strategies used in synchronous interaction

If we consider *synchronous* interaction as the online communication that occurs in real time[24], several strategies were adopted to keep students focused and motivated on what was being taught: live online sessions, active web cameras, active participation in discussions, feedback, PowerPoint presentations.

Firstly, the most widely used strategy during the courses was hosting live online lessons. As we just said, this strategy helped to bridge the gap between the students and the instructor, and among the students themselves. During the online lessons, the instructor would keep the camera on at all times, so that the students would feel part of the conversation and the possible distractions caused by being away from the classroom could be reduced.

In addition, during the live sessions the students were encouraged to participate actively through discussions with their peers and with the instructor herself. Discussions could be done using the chat box placed inside the virtual room where the lessons were taking place or in the breakout rooms[25]. In fact, depending on the situation and on the activity to be carried out, the students could be divided into smaller groups - usually 3 or 4 people maximum – and they were free to turn on their microphones and their cameras to communicate with their peers. This Moodle feature was very well accepted by the students because they did not feel much of a difference compared to being in the real classroom setting.

After finishing the activity, the students would return to the main virtual room and report to the class on what being discussed and decided. Students could use the chat box or unmute their microphones and report orally.

A further strategy used to keep the students engaged during the online class was to ask them to give feedback and express their opinions by clicking on icons. Depending on the instructions, students would use emojis in the chat box, just like they do when using their cell phones, they could click on the “happy, sad, confused, surprised, ...” icon to express how they were feeling, or they could use the “raise hand” option. This last way of providing feedback was mostly used to catch the instructor’s attention since an audio/video signal is activated so that the student may be allowed to interact verbally . One last way that turned out to be useful and engaging was using surveys and/or polls created directly on Moodle or using Google Modules. They were a striking way to begin or end a lesson.

The last strategy used synchronously during the lessons was using PPT presentations. This was something already used in face-to-face lessons, but it proved to be even more useful in an online learning environment because everyone participating in the lesson could stay focused on what was being taught.

Organization of activities in synchronous lessons

Given the change in the environment in which distance learning takes place, it is imperative to realize that also the organization of the language skills being handled needs to be revised. When in traditional face-to-face lessons, textbooks, and more specifically the *Complete First* textbook published by Cambridge University Press, generally cover the four language skills and the components of the language in the following order (fig.1):



Figure 1. Organization of language skills in traditional foreign language textbooks

However, when the lessons are online, it is necessary to adapt the coursebook material and activities. This is in line with what Maley suggests when he argues that there needs to be “flexibility in decisions about content, order, pace and procedures”[26] as the coursebook is a tool to aid the learning process rather than a mandatory tool that needs to be used literally.

Therefore, the approach used by the researcher in her classes followed a pattern similar to the following (fig. 2):

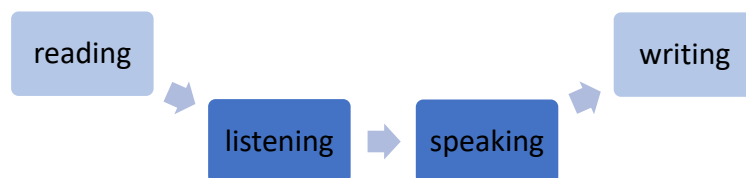


Figure 2. Reorganization of language skills in distance learning

The researcher mainly used a flipped approach when dealing with reading. The students would be asked to read the text at home prior to class time (see light blue boxes in figure 2) and do a couple of simple exercises on it by themselves. Then, a more in-depth analysis would be dealt with in class. This was done mainly because reading a one-page text requires some time and effort. The students could approach the text the way they preferred and could take all the time they needed to carry it out. The researcher found it was more effective for the students to do such activities at home and maximize the little time spent online speaking and using the language[27] (see dark blue box in figure 2). This approach was validated by the ELT specialist Ceri Jones in one of her October 2020 workshops.

The same approach was used with grammar rules and writing activities. The students would study the grammar rules on their own asynchronously watching some videos chosen by the instructor and completing exercises from the textbook or online before joining the live class session. When writing activities were to be completed, the instructor would give directions on how to complete the task and the amount of time allotted. The students would complete the activity independently, they would submit it to the instructor via email and then they would receive individual feedback. In this way, the time spent together in the live session would be devoted to applying what was previously learnt.

Strategies used in asynchronous interaction

If we consider asynchronous interaction as the communication that does not occur in real time[28], some of the strategies adopted were the use of emails, whatsapp e some free apps.

Emails were mainly used by the students to communicate with the instructor to submit writing assignments or to ask for clarifications or help. One of the Moodle features allows students to submit their work, but given the nature of the assignments it had some shortcomings as it is not possible to make corrections directly in the text. The instructor can only leave a general comment. Therefore, it was found more advantageous to use word processor software to write the assignment and submit it via email. In this way, it was easier to check the progress of the students individually and offer support and encouragement[29].

As for WhatsApp[30], it was used by the students to interact with each other when not in class. They really liked it because it helped create a sense of belonging to the group and it helped them being in contact with each other. Moreover, the instructor was not part of it. It was their own informal space; they were the ones managing it and setting the rules. They could type messages, record voice messages and share content. Their rule number one (the instructor was told) was to use English as a way to communicate.

Lastly, students were given the opportunity to use certain apps such as Quizlet[31] to practice vocabulary and compete against their classmates. In fact, it is widely known that competition arises interest and it helps establish community. This is what BiWorldWide argues when referring to gamification and startups, but the concept can be easily linked to distance learning because in both cases there is something being “sold”, either it be a product or a company or else a learning process[32].

Conclusions

Creating and maintaining engagement in distance learning language courses is very challenging because of different factors, among which a general feeling of isolation and lack of support. However, thanks to technological advances in ICT, distance learning does not mean being distant from each other anymore.

The present paper intended to present the personal experience of the researcher in teaching online courses offered by the Language Center of the University of Foggia during the COVID pandemic lockdown. In particular, the research question of the paper was how engagement was created and maintained. Some practical solutions were offered.

The researcher is well aware that the main limitation of the present contribution lies on the lack of quantifiable data. However, it is meant to be the initial step of a larger study. The next step would be

to carry out a quantitative study on engagement using the students of the upcoming courses as the subjects. In particular, the students will be asked to complete a questionnaire once one third of the course is completed in order to better evaluate and adjust the types of activities to retain engagement and retain students. The questionnaire will provide “a more comprehensive understanding of student engagement and fosters insight beyond what is visible in behavioural observations of classroom engagement”[33].

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