

Online Language Courses and 5 Laws of Language Learning

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Caveat: BYU is not a government language school, so our experience may not be directly applicable to your situation.

- Brigham Young University is a private university with an enrollment of over 33,000 students.
- On 12 March it was announced that beginning 18 March, classes would be taught online.
- That change had an impact on about:
 - 60 different languages programs.
 - 1,000 language classes.
 - 9,000 language students.
- We allowed teachers to take work computers home and assigned technology-savvy teaching assistants to help them make the transition.

Results of an After-Action Teacher Survey

- The **faculty** were asked what the major differences were between **synchronous “in class”** and **synchronous “online teaching”**.
- Almost all of them reported that when teaching online, they:
 - Spent more time preparing to teach and more time grading their students’ work.
 - Did not feel as connected to their students.
 - Found that the students were not as actively engaged.
- They also reported that some students didn’t have the computers or internet bandwidth needed to fully participate.

Results of an After-Action Student Survey

- **Students** responding to an *Instagram* poll gave 7 reasons why they participated less in online classes:
 1. It was more difficult to offer spontaneous comments.
 2. It was cumbersome trying to get the teacher's attention when they had a comment to offer.
 3. There were frequent inadvertent interruptions.
 4. They didn't think their peers were listening anyway.
 5. They received less teacher feedback; and the feedback they did receive was more difficult to interpret.
 6. They felt "exposed" by the constant video display.
 7. They worried that their roommates or family would make noise while their microphone was turned on.

Did the online students learn as much?

- We don't know yet.
 - We only administer standardized proficiency tests at major milestones – not after each language class.
 - We will be watching to see if the proficiency results change for students striving for a language major, a language minor, or a Language Certificate.
- We have some evidence that **language majors didn't think they were doing as well**. When the university offered students the option of withdrawing from the online class or switching to a Pass/Fail grade:
 - 8.2% of the language majors withdrew from the class.
 - 40.6% of the language majors chose to switch to the Pass/Fail grading option.

Responding to a VUCA teaching situation requires a VUCA* analysis.



How much do we really understand about online teaching and learning?

*<http://www.strategicalgilityinstitute.com/blog/2017/3/21/ready-to-shift-your-vuca-to-vuca-prime>

We understand that:

- Language is the most complex of human behaviors.
- Learning is one of the least understood of human endeavors.
- **Language Learning is complexity ².**
- Distance learning adds another complexity factor.
- **Language Learning Online can be viewed as complexity ³.**

At Least 139,968 Possible Combinations

($4 \times 3 \times 3 \times 3 \times 4 \times 3 \times 4 \times 3 \times 3 \times 3 = 139,968$ possible combinations)

1. **Who?** Teacher's expertise in pedagogy, in the subject matter, and in the technology. (Novice, Apprentice, Journeyman, Master)
2. **What?** Type of learning. (Direct Application, Near Transfer, Far Transfer)
3. **How?** Instructional method. (Lecture, Interactive, Mixed)
4. **Mode?** How delivered. (Synchronous, Asynchronous, or Blended)
5. **For whom?** Students' starting ability. (STANAG Level 0, 1, 2, or 3)
6. **Teacher "immediacy"?** (Close, Restricted, Remote)
7. **Class size?** (6 or fewer, 7 to 10, 11 to 20, 21 to 30)
8. **Technology Capabilities?** (Marginal, Adequate, Exceeds minimum needs)
9. **Curriculum?** (Fixed, Teacher-augmented, Teacher-developed)
10. **Instructional time?** (Limited, Adequate, Sufficient for all learners)

In the midst of this complexity...

- Some universal Laws of Language Learning have emerged.
- These interrelated, mutually reinforcing Laws of Language Learning apply in the classroom.
- They also apply in online classes.

L³ Number 1.

Effective language teaching requires more than presenting, broadcasting, or posting information.

- Effective language teaching is an interactive, interpersonal process.
- Instructional methods must be aligned with the desired learning outcomes.
 - Presenting information for to foster rote memorization does not result in creative thinking.
 - Teaching for STANAG Level 1 survival skills, does not result in STANAG Level 3 communication abilities.

Is the goal language for special purposes or for proficiency?

Army Trainer Magazine

Volume 13, Number 3. Spring 1994. Page 47.

“...the program can teach a brain surgeon to perform brain surgery in Spanish with a Spanish-speaking staff.... To perform routine brain surgery, we assume that you need 20 *basic commands, 10 comments or observations, and 15 yes and no questions as well as a specialized vocabulary of perhaps 30 to 40 words.*” [Italics added.]

Higher Level Learning Outcomes Limit Your Instructional Options.

Direct Application Learning: Beginning Chemistry Online

- Lecture and presentations.
- Class size is only limited by the technology.
- A “one-size-fits-all” curriculum is provided.
- Asynchronous online instruction is as effective as synchronous instruction.

Far Transfer Learning: Advanced English Online

- Highly Interactive.
- Large classes would limit interactivity.
- Curriculum must be individualized.
- Synchronous online learning is less interactive than learning in a classroom, and asynchronous instruction takes more teacher time.

L³ Number 2.

Effective language learning requires more than receiving, accessing, or observing language use.

- Language skill development requires “informed”, “deliberate” practice.
- Therefore, language learning requires formative feedback that is:
 - Immediate.
 - Accurate.
 - Informative.
 - Individualized.
 - Motivating.

Online learning can work – if there is sufficient individualized feedback.

A classroom example

- In a class with 10 students:
 - A teacher might organize 30 minutes of pair-wise, task-based speaking activities; where each student speaks for about 15 minutes.
 - During that **30 minutes**, the teacher notes the students' strengths and weaknesses.
 - The teacher also spends about **10 minutes** providing feedback to the students.
- Teacher time: **40 minutes.**

An online example

- For 10 students online:
 - The teacher might spend **30 minutes** recording task-based speaking prompts, which will take each student about 15 minutes to answer.
 - The teacher will spend **150 minutes** listening to the ten 15 minute recordings.
 - Then s/he will spend about **20 minutes** giving 2 minutes of feedback to each student.
- Teacher time: **200 minutes.**

L³ Number 3.

Learners' skills in speaking and writing provide rich opportunities for feedback – and that feedback has a beneficial effect on the learners' receptive skills of listening and reading.

- Learning to speak at higher proficiency levels draws the learner's attention to target language features not found in their first language – features that convey essential changes in meaning.
- Teaching the productive skills of speaking and writing requires more individualized instruction and more teacher time.

L³ Number 4.

The greater the perceived distance between the teacher and the individual students, the less the students learn.

- Teacher “immediacy” makes a difference.
- In a study involving 3 million students, students in online courses had significantly lower:
 - Course completion rates.
 - Course passing rates.
 - Rates of getting top grades.

Hart, Friedmann, and Hill (2016) “Online course-taking and student outcomes in California community colleges”, *Education Finance and Policy*, 1-30. doi: 10.1162/edfp_a_00218

L³ Number 5.

The more there is to learn, the longer it will take.

- There are no shortcuts to high levels of language learning.
- The most efficient path to high levels of proficiency is a balanced alignment of language form and language function – accompanied by immediate, accurate, informative feedback.
 - Focusing on form without function is a detour that produces grammarians with limited communication skills.
 - Focusing on function without form is a dead end that produces abominably fluent, “terminal 2” learners.

My Summary Observations

- To maintain the same quality of instruction, online teaching requires more teacher time than classroom teaching – even for the best teachers.
 - The structure and goals of the course must be more clearly communicated.
 - Learning activities must be more clearly explained.
 - Student feedback and coaching will take more time.
- However if the best teachers are given reduced teaching loads and smaller online classes, then it may be possible for them to:
 - Communicate personally with the students.
 - Provide individualized feedback to students.
 - Create and maintain student engagement.