8 Student-centred learning and formative assessment: a possible answer to online language and literature teaching and learning

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Abstract

The University of Calgary transitioned to online teaching in March 2020. Subsequent months saw instructors working to overcome the personal, technological, and pedagogical challenges involved in this. Central to those discussions was the need to increase student engagement and develop effective assessment formats. Based on student feedback and personal reflection, the adoption of a synchronous learning environment fostering student-centred learning and formative assessment was considered appropriate in the context of online language teaching and learning. It responded to students' increased stress levels due to the lack of face-to-face communication and tackled the issues of student attention span and engagement, as well as academic integrity. This paper starts with a brief discussion of factors that affect students' behavioural patterns and academic performances during online teaching and learning. It then presents five activities and assessments used in language teaching and examines the effectiveness of these activities in improving student engagement and their retention of course material.

Keywords: online, academic integrity, student-centred, formative assessment, synchronous learning.

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1.   Introduction

Under the circumstances of COVID-19, the University of Calgary transitioned to online teaching in mid-March 2020. The following months saw instructors working individually and collectively to overcome various pedagogical challenges. Central to these discussions was the need to increase student engagement and develop effective assessment formats.

I taught three French language courses and one literature course from January to June, with class sizes of 30-40 students. Following student feedback, my personal reflection, and a literature review, I adopted synchronous student-centred learning and formative assessment for my 2020 fall term teaching. This approach aimed at responding to the increased stress levels that students reported experiencing due to the lack of face-to-face communication, and tackled issues of student attention span and engagement as well as academic integrity. My paper starts with a brief discussion of factors affecting students' behavioural patterns and academic performances in online learning. It then presents five activities and assessments: quizzes, skit, oral assessment, team-teaching, and forum discussion, followed by a discussion on their effectiveness in student engagement and retention of course material.

2.   Presentation of the project

2.1.   Factors affecting students' behavioural patterns and academic performances

During the spring 2020 term, I taught an accelerated French intermediate course over a period of six weeks via Zoom. The long contact hours, two hours per lesson and three times per week, caused Zoom fatigue to both me and the students, according to my observation and their feedback. I also became aware that certain traditional forms of language assessment, such as dictation, verb conjugation, listening comprehension, and grammar drilling, were no longer as valid when students completed assessments online, on their own, and with

an extension of 50% of test duration suggested by the university, in order to respond to any technical issues that may arise. Not only was it possible for students to collaborate or seek help from family and friends in completing these assessments, but they could also rely on online tools such as Microsoft Word 'dictate', Google Docs 'voice typing', Google Translate, and contract cheating (Eaton & Dressler, 2019).

According to Eaton (2020), a specialist in academic integrity and student learning in synchronous online classes, several factors affect academic misconduct. On the individual level, it is related to students' maturity levels, stress levels, unfamiliarity with or lack of awareness of expectations, personality, and self-regulation/self-control (time management). On the contextual level, students' academic misconduct can be explained by the pressure to perform (from instructor and family, etc.), the competitive learning environment, their perception of peers (they think others are cheating too), instructional expectations not communicated clearly, as well as instructor attitudes such as their care about students' success and academic integrity. Eaton (2020) concluded that it is impossible to completely avoid academic dishonesty, and proposed the following ideas for moving forward with integrity:

- model ethical behaviour: it is important to talk about academic integrity as early as possible;

- focus on compassion: ensure we provide enough support for students' learning, and ensure assessment expectations are clear;

- keep the focus on improving learning, rather than preventing cheating;

- create opportunities for formative assessment.

2.2. Activities and assessments

Based on Eaton's (2020) research findings and my personal experience, I gradually developed the following five activities and assessments, which

I used in my fall 2020 teaching. As indicated later in this paper, some activities were used in the two beginner-level language classes (FREN209), and some in a third-year course on 18th century French literature (FREN457). The principles behind these activities were to incorporate small-scale assessments in class, to increase in-class participation, and to promote students' engagement, interaction, and critical thinking. Finally, they also allowed the instructor to provide frequent and timely feedback.

The first activity I introduced was the quiz. Instead of creating high-stakes comprehensive exams (each worth more than 25%) that contained listening, reading, and writing, I introduced four low-stakes unit quizzes (each 5%) to the FREN209. Students could complete them at their own pace throughout the semester, using our online platform D2L[2]. Each quiz contained 80 questions and was automatically graded. Students could have unlimited attempts and the highest-scoring attempt by the deadline (the last day of class) was used for their final grades. For the FREN457, I designed three D2L home reading quizzes, each worth 3%, on the understanding of literary theories or appreciation of selected excerpts.

The second kind of activity was composition and skit, both used in FREN209. I explained to students the objectives of the assignment, proposed a list of words, expressions, and grammatical structures that students needed to include in their writing, and provided a detailed grading rubric. For the composition, I added a checklist for students to self-evaluate, and asked them to use different colours to highlight the required elements in their composition. For the skit, students were given the choice to perform it via Zoom or recorded video, depending on their preferences and comfort level[3]. FREN457 had a similar activity to the skit: students were asked to perform a group presentation on a literary excerpt from the reading list that I created at the beginning of the semester. To facilitate the participation of other students, in all my three classes, the presenter needed

2. Design to learn, a platform for instructors to post learning materials, and for students to submit online assignments, to complete online tests, and to communicate in forum discussions.

3. Students who experience speech anxiety may choose to submit their presentation in the video form. The marking criteria of the video format was slightly more severe since students could rehearse and edit their work.

to prepare a couple of comprehension questions to ask the audience afterward. I also asked the rest of the class to note down two things they had learned from the presenter and two things that the presenter could improve, etc.

The third activity was an oral interview used in FREN209. I provided students with a list of questions at the beginning of the semester so that they could have a concrete idea of the learning outcomes of the course and focus on important content during their online learning experience. These questions were related to the themes and grammatical concepts to be learned throughout the semester. Different colours were used to represent the units that the questions were related to. Students needed to pick one question from each colour, and then had to prepare for their answers and respond to these questions one by one. During their interview via Zoom, students were not allowed to read from a script and were asked to answer one to two additional questions related to their answers.

The fourth activity was team-teaching used in both FREN209 and FREN457. This activity was particularly effective for classes that lasted more than one hour. At the beginning of the semester, I proposed a list of teaching topics and dates. The students formed groups of two to three, signed up for their teaching slots, and could contact me at any time during their preparation. Each team-teaching slot lasted five to ten minutes. Throughout the semester, everyone had the opportunity to play the role of the teacher. This activity aimed not only to encourage students to be active learners, but also to add to the diversity of the class activities.

The last activity was the D2L forum discussion. In remote teaching, students may not have the same level of interaction with each other as in a regular classroom. I used the D2L online forum discussion to tackle this issue for my literature class. Throughout the semester, I asked students to complete three pre-class readings by themselves. They each needed to ask an original question regarding the interpretation and analysis of the text and provide original answers to two questions from their classmates. The forum discussion aimed at complementing their lack of face-to-face communication, allowing all students to contribute evenly to the discussion, which was hard to achieve in the Zoom lectures, and

preparing students for a more in-depth Zoom discussion afterward. D2L allowed students' participation in the forum to be counted, so I could easily use these statistics as an element to grade students' participation in this course.

3.   Discussion of outcomes

Although these activities and assessments addressed my concerns about students' learning experience and academic integrity, their addition to the regular assignments and assessments could potentially increase students' workload. Also, their effectiveness depended partly on student motivation. To assess their effectiveness and make any necessary adjustments, I invited students from all three classes to participate in an optional anonymous survey three weeks before the end of the semester; 22 out of the 76 students from the two FREN209 courses and five out of the 18 FREN457 students took part in the survey. The response rate was quite similar, at approximately 27-28%.

The surveys each contained eight questions. They asked students to reflect on the effectiveness of Zoom lectures compared to in-class learning, the number, format, and fairness of the assessments and assignments, and the fairness of the grading (see the supplementary materials).

In the FREN209 survey, six out of the 22 students found Zoom lectures to be less effective than regular classroom lectures. In the FREN457 survey, three out of the five shared the same impression. They expressed concerns with the lack of face-to-face communication, unstable internet connection, possible distraction in this learning environment, and the decreased quality of the discussions with classmates.

As for the number of assessments and assignments, 19 out of the 22 FREN209 students found them to be reasonable, while two out of the five FREN457 disagreed. The FREN209 students appreciated the variety of assignments to test their knowledge, practise what they had learned in class, and identify their mistakes. They also felt these assignments and assessments aligned with

the course content. Two of my FREN457 students found there were too many reading components. One explained that they were taking four third-year courses which required a large amount of reading and writing. The difference in reaction to the amount of assessment and assignments between the two levels seems to reflect the difference in workload, with the higher-level course having a heavier workload.

When reviewing the assessment and assignments formats, 21 out of 22 FREN209 students found them to be fair, while one found the typing to be not as easy as writing, partly due to their unfamiliarity with the typing of French accents. All the five FREN457 respondents agreed with the fairness of the assessment format, saying that the content was based on their learning and the formats were well thought through and carried out by the instructor. All the 22 FREN209 students felt the grades accurately reflected their effort. Four out of the five FREN457 students shared this opinion while one thought they might receive better grades if the course were taught in class.

It can be seen from Figure 1 and Figure 2 showing FREN209 students' evaluation of the effectiveness of the activities offered, that they still highly appreciated the traditional lectures and homework included in the Workbook. They found the lectures to be effective in helping them to correct mistakes as soon as possible. They also greatly appreciated the added assignments such as the D2L unit quizzes, with their unlimited and untimed attempts allowing for frequent reviews, and the compositions, which took some time to complete but forced them to apply what they had learned in class. Those who liked the skit and the oral interview found them a good way to deliver longer sentences. The Zoom breakout room and the team-teaching were among the least favourite activities. Students found that their breakout room experience was largely dependent on their fellow participants, and it was hard to interact if no one put the camera on. They also had little confidence in their classmates' knowledge and competence in teaching a new concept since everyone was at a beginner-level. As the instructor, I also found that I had to occasionally correct students' mistakes during their teaching, since they did not fully understand the concept and had not sought help or advice from me during their preparation.

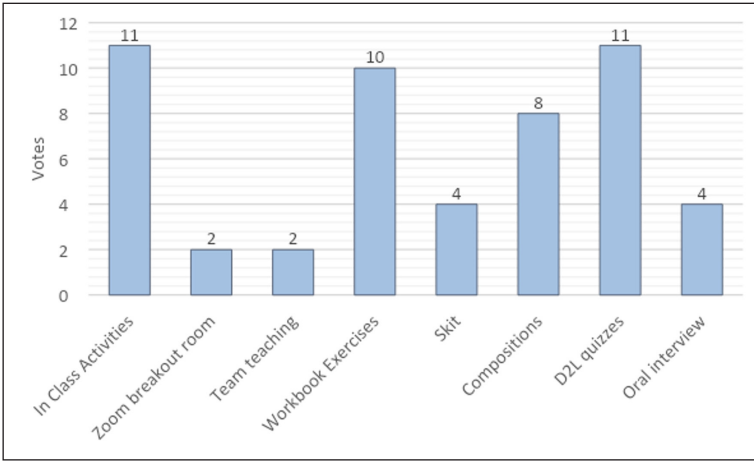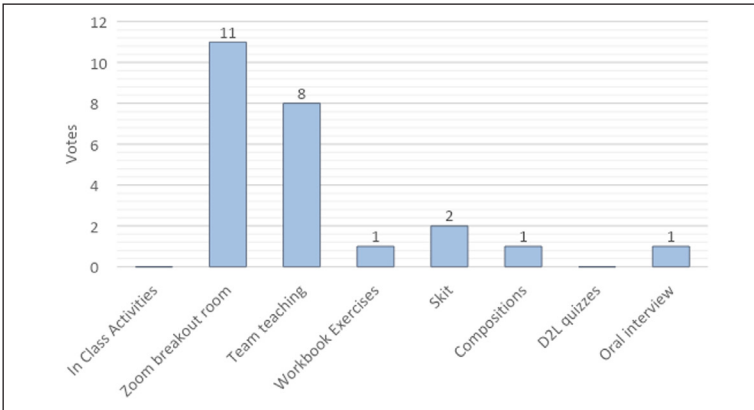Figure 1. FREN209 Students' choices of assignments and activities that best facilitated their learning[4]

Figure 2. FREN209 Students' choices of assignments and activities that least facilitated their learning[5]

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4. Students could check all the options that applied.

5. Students could check all the options that applied.

As for FREN457, due to the limited responses received, students' feedback was quite diverse. Overall, they found all the assessments and assignments to be effective. They did not comment specifically on team-teaching, however, two out of five students selected it as the activity that facilitated their learning the most. Both the pre-class reading and the D2L forums helped them to have a better understanding of the readings. The D2L forums helped them to reflect actively, integrate course material in their answers, and expand their knowledge and ideas since classmates provided different perspectives on the text. Group presentations and discussions allowed them to put into practice everything learned in class: they were an effective way to discuss findings and work together to analyse a specific topic. However, one student did report that their team members did not contribute evenly during the preparation of their group presentation. In their comments on the ineffectiveness of certain activities, they mentioned that the group discussions in Zoom were not always deep enough and not everyone had the same level of engagement.

4.   Conclusion

Due to the number of responses received, the study may not accurately represent students' overall opinions on the effectiveness of these activities and assessments. However, the detailed responses I received allowed me to reflect on the effectiveness of the five activities and assessments in creating a student-centred learning environment and addressing academic integrity issues that arose during online teaching and learning. Based on the above interpretations, I came to the following conclusions.

- The instructor needs to carefully consider the workload when designing activities and assessments, especially for higher-level courses in which each assessment is more time-consuming.

- The effectiveness of group projects is largely based on student motivation. Although it creates the opportunity for students to interact and learn from each other, the instructor should anticipate the

possibility of uneven contribution and provide guidelines for planning group projects that ensure the division of labour and the progress of the preparation.

- Team-teaching may not be suitable for beginner-level language students due to their limited knowledge of the course material. To address the problem, the instructor could consider asking students to review the concept learned previously and correct homework at the beginning of the class instead of teaching a new concept.

I will incorporate the above considerations in future online teaching and continue to collect feedback from students.

5. Supplementary materials

https://research-publishing.box.com/s/dt7lyugodxdo8b3iuhla1sihwd2c6aio

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Innovative language teaching and learning at university: facilitating transition from and to higher education
Edited by Cathy Hampton and Sandra Salin