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Online English Language Learning: Theory-Based Course Design and Pedagogy

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Abstract

The demand for higher education is increasing worldwide. To meet this demand, and to provide increased access, flexible forms of delivery are needed. Although online courses are criticized for a lack of interaction, when intentionally designed, they can provide learners with opportunities for collaboration that supports the achievement of desired learning outcomes. The latter may focus on only content mastery, however, rather than on specific learner needs. The diverse learners entering higher education institutions today due to widening access often need help with how to learn and particularly how to learn in an online context. Inclusion of this element in course design supports immediate and future academic success. This study illustrates how online English language courses, based on distance education, learning, and language acquisition theories and related pedagogical approaches, can result not only in improved linguistic skill, but also broader educational outcomes. The significance of this approach is its focus on how to learn and how to facilitate learning rather than simply on what to learn. The theoretical framework is introduced followed by application of the theories for course design and illustrations of instructor/learner interaction.

Keywords: distance education, English language learning, transactional distance, collaborative control, self-regulated learning

1. Introduction

Worldwide demand for higher education is expected to reach 250 million by 2025 compared to enrollments of fewer than 100 million in 2000 (UNESCO, 2011). Recognition that higher education enrollment correlates with national prosperity is increasing, and consequently, so are participation rates (UNESCO, 2011). Employers seek graduates who can solve problems, communicate effectively, think critically, collaborate, and possess global competencies (American Association of Colleges and Universities, 2015; European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, 2006). The latter may include foreign language proficiency, particularly in English, as well as the ability to understand diverse perspectives. These desired outcomes demonstrate that discipline-specific knowledge alone is inadequate in today's world.

Current changes in higher education are being driven by the need for higher level skills in the workforce, an increasingly diverse student body, and the demand for lifelong learning (European Commission, 2014). Flexible learning provides alternatives to traditional models of delivery based on set schedules and seat time in order to support the needs of non-traditional or historically underserved learners. Online courses in particular are increasing in popularity although widely criticized and perceived as being lower quality and having less value than face-to-face courses (Allen & Seaman, 2015). These courses are often characterized as lacking opportunities for interaction (Pundak & Dvir, 2014; Shulte, 2010), which may be based on the misconception that they simply entail posting lectures, readings, and tests online.

When well designed, however, online courses can provide learners with opportunities for collaboration that supports the achievement of learning outcomes. Outcomes should not be limited to discipline-based knowledge and skill but account for the larger educational goals valued by employers. The diverse learners entering higher education institutions today may need help with how to learn and particularly how to learn in an online context in order to achieve these outcomes. Designing courses with this in mind will support immediate and future academic success. It may also increase retention rates in online courses, which are 8% lower than in traditional courses (Lokken & Mullins, 2014).

This study shares an intervention for learner success in online English language courses using a course design model based on distance education theory, learning theory, language acquisition theory and related pedagogical approaches.

The model is hypothesized to support not only the development of linguistic proficiency, but also the attainment of broader educational outcomes. The significance of the approach is its focus on *how* to learn and how to facilitate learning rather than simply on *what* to learn. In other words, the courses aim to help learners acquire effective approaches to learning rather than providing them with only content. The study reviews the literature to identify central theories to guide the course design process and illustrates the application of these theories by case study examples from online English language courses. The theoretical framework is introduced followed by applications of the theories for course design and illustrations of instructor/learner interaction.

2. Theoretical Framework

Course designers may be familiar with a variety of pedagogical approaches and supporting technologies, but be unfamiliar with distance education theory. Similarly, online instructors may be knowledgeable in their content area but inexperienced with techniques for facilitating learner success in online courses. The literature reveals a number of theories relevant for enhancing online course design and strengthening instructor facilitation of learning. These theories provide insight into teaching learners how to learn, and thus achieving success in an online context, and how to do this in ways that support content and skill mastery; in this case, English language acquisition. An overview of these theories and their application can inform new approaches to online learning for both course designers and instructors.

2.1 Distance Learning Theory

As technology has developed to enable increased interaction in online contexts, the premise of distance education requiring learner independence or unassisted self-direction has been reconsidered. "There are limits to how far a student (or anyone, for that matter) can progress on the basis of self-directedness" without the opportunity to have one's views challenged or understanding deepened through critical discourse with multiple interlocutors (Garrison, 2009, p. 96).

In response to the need for increased interaction in distance learning, the concept of control (Garrison & Baynton, 1987), or collaborative control (White, 2003), has gained attention. Collaborative control refers to interaction among the instructor and learners to negotiate and manage the learning process (White, 2003). It entails independence, proficiency, and support (Anderson & Garrison, 1998; White, 2003). Independence is the learner's freedom to make choices about what, when, where, and how to learn; proficiency involves the skills and abilities to be a successful learner (e.g., motivation, confidence, strategy use), and support consists of resources that enable content mastery and course completion (e.g., supplemental materials, tutoring, technical help).

The theory of transactional distance, consisting of dialogue, structure, and autonomy (Moore, 2013), advances the discussion further. Dialogue entails interaction between and among the instructor and learners to promote critical analysis of content and reflection on learning. Dialogue may involve e-mail, announcements, assignment feedback, discussion forums, and peer review. Structure is provided through course materials (e.g., assignments, due dates, instructions, learning modules) to help learners successfully navigate the course and learn the content. Autonomy involves choice and the capacity for self-direction and is developed through dialogue and structure. As learners respond to dialogue with the instructor and their peers, and gain confidence from the structure provided through the course design, they increase their capacity for autonomy. As with collaborative control, autonomy does not imply independence in the sense of isolation or limited interaction with the instructor and other students, but rather self-direction and control of the learning process.

2.2 Learning Theories

Online learning has the "potential to bring students together and engage them collaboratively in purposeful and meaningful discourse through the creation of sustainable communities of learners" (Garrison, 2009, p. 97). This reflects a collaborative constructionist approach, consisting of interaction among learners with teacher guidance, as opposed to instructivism, or teacher-centered learning (Garrison, 2009; Gerstein, 2013).

Connectivism, or networking among learners, can also be encouraged in an online environment. This type of learning occurs "through communities of practice, [and] personal networks" (Siemens, 2005, para. 4). Connectivism includes decision-making and choice, exposure to diverse opinions, currency of knowledge, capacity for learning, and "nurturing and maintaining connections ... to facilitate continual learning" (Siemens, 2005, para. 25). Constructivism and connectivism share commonalities with collaborative control and aspects of the theory of transactional distance, particularly dialogue, which is designed to lead the learner toward autonomy

Finally, self-regulated learning (SRL), defined as "the ability of learners to control the factors or conditions affecting their learning" (Dembo, Junge, & Lynch, 2006, p. 188), teaches learners *how* to learn through the application of six dimensions: motive (purpose and goal-setting), method (learning strategies), time (prioritization and time management), physical environment (where to study), social environment (with whom to study; help-seeking strategies), and performance (monitoring and reflecting on progress) (Andrade, 2012, 2014; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994; Zimmerman

& Risemberg, 1997). It helps them become more proficient learners, make appropriate choices, and monitor their learning.

2.3 Language Acquisition Theory

In addition to distance education and learning theories, language acquisition theory (or other discipline-specific theories) must also guide course design and pedagogy. One such theory is the four-strand framework, or balanced language course, which identifies the elements needed for language acquisition (Nation, 2001). These consist of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, deliberate language study, and fluency development. Learners need opportunities to attend to meaning as they encounter the language in reading and listening; convey meaning in writing and speaking; focus on grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation; and practice the language with familiar content and structures to gain confidence and automaticity (Nation, 2001; Gass, Behney, & Plonsky, 2013).

Linguistic development is supported by the application of learning and distance education theories. A few examples illustrate. Input and output opportunities are provided through use of the social environment (self-regulated learning) and dialogue among the learners and instructor (theory of transactional distance). Deliberate study of the language can be supported with the inclusion of learning strategy instruction and practice (self-regulated learning). Finally, fluency is developed through collaborative control as learners use linguistic forms already required to negotiate control over the learning process.

3. Theories in Action

The theories explicate how tools and techniques can be applied to increase learner autonomy, or control of the learning process within a collaborative environment. As such, these distance education, learning, and language acquisition theories provide insight into teaching and learning and can direct course designers and instructors in helping learners achieve targeted outcomes.

To better understand the theories and their application, this section provides examples of course design and pedagogical approaches. The courses from which these case study examples are derived were developed at a university in the United States. Their purpose is to provide global learners with the opportunity to acquire English language proficiency for further studies and to expand employment opportunities. Learners have a range of proficiency levels and linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds. They vary in age from traditional college-age students to older, non-traditional learners. The courses are not only focused on the development of English language proficiency, but also the development of learning skills and abilities valued by employers (e.g., critical thinking, collaboration).

3.1 Course Design

Table 1. Course structure & learner / instructor roles

Activity	Structure	Learner Role	Instructor Role
Diagnostic assessment	Diagnostic measure with explanatory information to guide interpretation of results	Increase self-awareness of strengths and weaknesses in the skill area	Assist learners in using information to understand results and identify areas for improvement
Goal setting	Lessons and examples of well-written goals and short- and long-term goals	Identify goals related to assessment results; determine strategies and action plan	Provide feedback on specificity of goals, strategies, and feasibility; request revisions as needed
Learner Connections	Instructions for making a video; questions to guide content of the initial video and subsequent posts to classmates; example responses; rubric with grading criteria	Post a brief video outlining learning goals for the class and strategies for reaching the goals; respond to peer videos with suggestions, insights, or connections.	Provide feedback on video and peer responses based on the rubric
Learner Reflections	Examples and a rubric that sets expectations	Write or record regular reflections on goal strategies and progress	Indicate how learners can more deeply reflect on progress, provide examples, and create actionable plans (e.g., rather than "I need to study harder," identify steps for how this is to be done)

With the theoretical concepts as a foundation, course designers and instructors can accentuate learners' opportunities to increase their English language proficiency and adopt effective learning approaches. Ideas for how this can be accomplished are indicated in Table 1, which outlines course elements that might be included in an introductory week lesson. The table identifies possible activities, how these can be structured into the course, and the learner and instructor

roles related to the activities. The example activities provide a foundation for the learning strategy components in the course (e.g., self-regulated learning dimensions).

An examination of the learner role illustrates how assignments are designed to encourage ownership, choice, and control of the learning process. The learner identifies what to improve, creates a plan, interacts with and learns from peers, and reflects and reports on progress. The course materials provide the structure for the learner to accomplish these tasks. Dialogue (feedback, facilitation) from the instructor supports but does not overtly direct the learner.

For example, in the introductory lesson, learners analyze their current skill level in English and set goals, which are then shared with other learners in a video post. Learners follow guidelines for setting goals such as why the goal is important to them, exactly what they want to achieve and by when, and how they will measure progress. They then respond to the posts of their classmates and answer specific questions related to determining the effectiveness of their classmates' goal (e.g., level of specificity, if it's achievable within the timeframe, and if the means of measurement are appropriate). They might be asked to make 1-2 recommendations, add an encouraging comment, or make a personal connection. They are guided by a rubric by which they will be graded on the assignment and by instructor dialogue to help them develop the ability to provide effective peer feedback over time.

These initial interactions in the course not only provide the meaning-based input and output needed for language acquisition but simultaneously assist learners in developing self-regulation behaviors to be more successful in the course, and establish connections with other learners to form of a community of learning. The planning exercise illustrated in Table 1 helps the course designer identify learner and instructor roles that support the theoretical concepts. The activities demonstrate how a foundation for increased learner capacity for autonomy through interaction can be structured early in the course. The examples in the table illustrate how the theories of transactional distance (structure, dialogue, autonomy), collaborative control (learner and instructor partnership), and self-regulation can be integrated with language learning (or other course content).

Table 2 represents another design planning tool. It outlines a course plan that identifies activities and assignments which are repeated and reinforced in weekly course modules. The purpose of such a plan is to help course designers map key course activities to the theoretical underpinnings for the course.

The activities in Table 2 represent content that might typically be included in an advanced level academic reading/writing course for English language learners. The discussion board and instructor corner are characteristic of an online course. Discussion boards are a fairly standard component of an online course; however, they may be ineffective, particularly when they are optional, not assessed, and lack instructor facilitation. The theories upon which this course design is based indicate the need for learners to interact and for the instructor to facilitate this interaction. Participation needs to be structured within the course by being required and through the use of a rubric that sets expectations. Learners not only respond to tasks built into the course, but are encouraged to develop self-direction and autonomy as they post and answer their own questions and gain confidence in their abilities. Furthermore, supplementary materials provided in an instructor corner or similar feature in the learning management system allow the instructor to respond to student needs based on assignment performance rather than simply following the set materials provided in the course. This is characteristic of the dialogue component of transactional distance.

Table 2. Course plan

Content / Instruction	Learner Task	Language Acquisition Theory	Distance Education / Learning Theory
Learning strategies	Complete a self-selected activity; reflect and share with teacher or peer (written or oral)	Meaning-focused output through writing or speaking	Self-regulation –methods of learning and performance (self-reflection)
Readings on academic topics with vocabulary and reading strategy instruction; main reading & two shorter readings of choice	Identify vocabulary to study; demonstrate comprehension, analysis, synthesis in discussion board	Meaning-focused input (reading); deliberate language study - vocabulary instruction; fluency building in discussion board	Transactional distance - autonomy through choice (readings; vocabulary; discussion board prompt); collaborative control – interaction with other learners
Rhetorical pattern (e.g., persuasive, narrative, comparison, description, etc.); illustrated in readings and example writing; introduced with video or narrated slides	Do practice exercises, identify features of writing illustrated in the examples	Meaning-focused input (listening, reading)	Transactional distance - structure
Writing skill introduced with text, graphics, video (e.g., writing process; organization, thesis & topic sentences, support, etc.)	Complete practice activities	Meaning-focused input (reading, listening)	Transactional distance - structure
Grammar instruction based on common errors and specific to rhetorical patterns	Complete practice grammar activities	Deliberate language study to develop grammatical accuracy and vocabulary	Transactional distance - structure
Culminating assignment based on reading topic, rhetorical pattern, writing techniques, vocabulary and grammar studied	Apply content knowledge, linguistic skill; brainstorm, outline, draft, edit, revise; peer review; group work; set goals; access supplemental materials	Meaning-focused output through structured writing assignment	Collaborative control – learning from peers; self-regulation - goals, self-reflection, seeking help
Open question and answer discussion board/structured discussion board; learners pose and answer questions or respond to content-relevant questions; discussion topics are identified by both learners and instructors; participation required	Identify and communicate learning needs; help others in the learning process; respond to discussion tasks related to course objectives	Fluency building using known structures and vocabulary in an informal situation	Self-regulated learning - use of the social environment to seek help; collaborative control – managing the learning process with instructor and peers
Instructor corner; tips, strategies, feedback, supplemental material, links, examples; pose question and invite discussion	Identify most useful materials based on self-reflection, peer and instructor feedback	Meaning-focused input; fluency building through interaction	Transactional distance – autonomy / choice; self-regulation - methods and strategy application

The planning approaches represented in Tables 1 and 2 guide the design process to account for learner-instructor interaction along with course content, tasks, and structure. The first exercise encourages designers and instructors to consider expectations for the learner and instructor in terms of application of the foundational theories for the course. The second exercise focuses on integrating the content and learner tasks with the theories to support the achievement of desired learning outcomes. The activities are examples and will vary depending on course content and learning objectives; the purpose of these plans is to design content that supports the skill area of focus—in this case, English language acquisition—while enhancing learning through the application of the theories discussed earlier.

4. Interactions between the Instructor and Learner

The activities illustrated in Tables 1 and 2 cannot be effectively accomplished without instructor facilitation and learner interaction. Learners may not fully understand, at least initially, the expectations for thinking critically about a reading, or responding to each other's posts in substantive ways. Unless structure and instructor dialogue are present, comments on a peer's posts are likely to be "good job," or "I agree with your ideas." Although the use of rubrics can help learners see what is expected, learners need assistance understanding how the criteria reflect expectations. Instructor facilitation reflects the dialogue aspect of the theory of transactional distance in order to increase learner autonomy. It is also consistent with the concept of collaborative control.

Discussion boards are fairly common in online courses and involve collaboration among learners and the instructor (e.g., collaborative control). The elements of structure and dialogue from the theory of transactional distance can guide effective instructor response. Discussion board prompts that are part of the course structure represent typical academic tasks such as essay topics or exam questions. When provided with a complex multi-part prompt, learners may address only part of it, be off-topic, or not engage deeply with the question or their responses to peers. In the case of English language learners, this may be due to lack of knowledge of vocabulary or grammatical constructions in the prompt and unfamiliarity with academic tasks.

The following examples illustrate possible instructor dialogue to address this issue. In the first example, the instructor provides guidance related to organizational elements of writing. In the second and third examples, the instructor encourages the learners to compose a more thoughtful commentary.

Example One

Please carefully follow the directions for the discussion board prompt. Review the strategies below for help with this assignment.

- Choose a passage from the reading that illustrates the point you want to make either about the author's choice of writing technique or the main idea. Put the passage in quotation marks so that it is clear that it is from the reading.
- Choose one of the two prompts. One of them asks you *to discuss the author's writing techniques such as organization, use of description, effectiveness of the evidence, introduction type, or additional techniques*. The other prompt asks you to *explain how the passage you selected demonstrates the author's main idea or thesis.*
- Below is a good example of a response to the first prompt. See the comments I have made about the different parts of this response.

Prompt: The author's writing techniques are particularly effective in this story. First, the writer captures the reader's attention by telling a story about the main character's conversation with a woman who had recently moved to the small town where the story takes place. She describes the woman as "tall with a penetrating gaze from soft, grey eyes and an air of other-worldliness." The author then shares the feelings of the main character: "She felt a shrinking feeling inside at the words of the woman." These descriptive details help the reader see the characters and get a sense of their personalities.

Comments: The first sentence of the response clearly indicates which prompt the student has chosen. It begins with a topic sentence. The sentences in the paragraph give examples of different choices the author makes and why these choices are effective. Quotation marks are used to show where the quotation begins and ends.

Example Two

Student Post: In the reading, the neighbor was very kind to the little boy. She was impressed by his ability to talk about deep beliefs.

Instructor Response: Can you quote a specific part of the reading that leads you to this conclusion? Why did the neighbor keep thinking about what she had to do when she got home while she was talking to the boy? Did she agree with what the boy was saying? How did her previous experience with the boy's mother affect her interaction?

Example Three

Student Peer Response: I agree with you that organic foods are healthy. Thanks for sharing your experience. I enjoyed reading it.

Instructor Response: The author presents a convincing argument for organic food. What techniques does he use to provide evidence? Can you provide any counter arguments? Based on the responses in the discussion board, do most of your classmates agree or disagree with the author's view? Why do you think this is the case?

The instructor dialogue in these examples supports linguistic development in terms of effective academic writing, and encourages critical thinking. The instructor can probe, challenge assumptions, expand the conversation, ask learners to identify relationships across ideas, or help them evaluate information rather than simply accepting it. The instructor should not dominate the discussion, but respond in ways that help learners take greater control of their learning.

Instructors may be unfamiliar with how to provide the types of response most effective in guiding learners toward expected outcomes (language proficiency and increased autonomy through application of learning strategies). They

may be accustomed to an instructivist approach or not be conversant with the theoretical underpinnings of the course.

Lacking a vision of the potential of online learning, they may view their role as marking assignments rather than facilitating learning through response, responding to learner needs, or encouraging learners to become more autonomous. Instructors may need guidance in developing appropriate response and facilitation skills (Andrade, 2012, 2014). The examples provided indicate how an instructor can facilitate learning in a common but potentially effective online course activity—a discussion forum.

5. Cooperation Between and Among Learners

Learners in an online course should ideally be actively engaged with other learners and the instructor. This reflects the concept of collaborative control as well as the interaction needed for language acquisition. It also supports self-regulated learning in terms of using the social environment to seek help, and the component of dialogue from the theory of transactional distance. For English language learning, these types of interactions provide opportunities for input, output, and fluency building. As indicated earlier, complete independence or self-direction in an online context may limit learning due to a lack of exposure to different perspectives (Garrison, 1989).

Although earlier conceptualizations of distance learning adhered to the view of independence with minimal interaction being the ideal (Peters, 2003), this is no longer the case. Communities of learning in an online context can be encouraged to transform "higher education based on collaborative constructivist principles" (Garrison, 2009, p. 98). In keeping with current views, activities in the English language courses reflect the idea expressed below.

Learners, at times, become teachers and teachers learn from their learners. In the traditional models of education, the focus is on how the subject matter is structured and presented by the instructor. In non-traditional education, the learner can be an equal participant in the process of learning and teaching. . . . The learners' voice is increasingly amplified in the contemporary social media environment (Sabha, 2016).

The issue is how to structure these opportunities and encourage learners to take advantage of them. One approach is to provide an optional question and answer discussion board where learners can pose questions. Topics might include questions about a specific assignment (e.g., a missing link); technology problems (e.g., a video or quiz not working); general questions (e.g., contacting a course tutor), and advice about language learning (e.g., how to avoid translation). Students may also engage in discussions about course content and what they are learning. However, doing this may not occur to learners unless the teacher structures and facilitates it. This is the premise behind the components of structure and dialogue as accounted for in the theory of transactional distance (Moore, 2013). Balancing these components will lead to increased learner autonomy.

Since most courses require an extensive time commitment and many students are balancing work and family responsibilities with study, unless there is a real need, optional interaction opportunities may be underutilized. Additionally, if there is an assigned discussion forum in the course, students may see an additional opportunity as unneeded. However, even an assigned discussion board can encourage connectivism through choice in topics, exposure to a range of opinions, and increased capacity for learning (Siemens, 2005). Participants can encourage each other, provide constructive feedback, and share insights and knowledge. Learners need to recognize that knowledge does not reside with the instructor and that their classmates have significant experience and wisdom to share.

For maximum benefit to occur from discussion board opportunities, students must be willing to share responsibility for learning. A review of the discussion board assignments in the English language courses demonstrates the following types of learner responses to each other: agreement (e.g., I agree with your point of view), compliments and encouragement (e.g., I think you are trying your best; your post encouraged me; you did a great job showing us; keep on; it takes hard work and practice; I know you can do it), affinity-building (e.g., I also liked the topic you chose), encouragement of deeper thinking (e.g., What did the author do well in the essay you read? What did you find interesting?), and personal opinions, beliefs, and experiences related to the topics. These comments expand students' viewpoints beyond what they would experience on their own and validate their experience and knowledge. Such opportunities replicate what might occur in a classroom discussion but ensure that all students participate and also that those who need time to consider a response can do so.

Another important element supportive of effective learning is reflection. Learners not only need opportunities to engage with each other and the instructor in a collaborative environment, but to assess progress on their goals. Self-reflection has been demonstrated to be effective in online learning.

Promoting self-reflection, self-regulation and self-monitoring leads to more positive online learning outcomes. Features such as prompts for reflection, self-explanation and self-monitoring strategies have shown promise for improving online learning outcomes (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010, p. 45).

Self-reflection can be designed according to the phases self-regulation (forethought, performance, self-reflection), and

occur in a course on a recurring basis. It can be formative and summative. Effective reflection involves connecting ideas, asking questions, discovering new knowledge, and learning about oneself. The following captures the essence of reflection. "Looking back and recounting the struggles, problems, risks, failures, and successes of teaching/learning answers the "so what?" question, and poses the question anew" (Salt Lake Community College, n.d.).

Reflection is an intentional, active process that involves an investment of time, and leads to clarity of thought and greater understanding and insight as learners examine their experiences (Stevens & Cooper, 2009). Examples of different types of prompts follow (adapted from Salt Lake Community College, n. d.).

- Process – What steps did you follow to complete this assignment? What challenges did you encounter and how did you address them? What would you do differently next time? How did your thinking about the content or material related to the assignment change over time? What did you learn from your classmates (e.g., from the discussion board and other interactions)?
- Evaluative – What language skills do you feel you developed as you worked on this assignment? Which skills do you feel you need to work on further? What changes in your goal for this unit should be made? What is your goal for the next week?
- Summative – What did you learn in this course? What new English language skills did you acquire and how did the course assignments help you acquire these? To what degree do you think you mastered the course objectives? What writing, reading, grammar, or vocabulary strategies would you like to develop further? What would you tell a prospective student about this course and what advice would you give that person?
- Interpretive – What specific assignments, readings, or activities in the course helped you gain new perspectives, skills, or knowledge? Write a narrative about your life as an English language learner. What were the high points? What were the low points? What have you learned about yourself this semester? What did you learn about the English language? How did your initial expectations about the course change?

To encourage self-regulation and the capacity for autonomy, learners should be given choices of prompts, guiding questions, and formats (written, oral, video posts, etc.). One minute papers, graphic organizers, mind mapping, or self-assessment checklists (e.g., see TeacherStream, 2009) are options to help learners reflect on their performance and increase their capacity for effective learning.

6. Conclusion

This study identifies relevant theories for course design and learner success from the literature to create a theory-based course design model. Application of the model is illustrated through case study examples that emphasize how to infuse interaction and learner self-direction into an English language course, thereby increasing language acquisition, and potentially, learner success. This approach can be applied to other disciplines and learning contexts.

Learning online does not imply self-instruction or limited interaction. Collaboration is a key element. Instructors can improve learner success and mastery of course content through the use of dialogue, course structure, and collaboration accompanied by learning strategies to guide learners to greater autonomy and goal achievement. Through these course features, learners are given the means to practice and acquire language (or other knowledge and skills) and collaborate with the instructor and their peers to achieve success.

As demand for higher education increases, new solutions for providing access and ensuring success for a variety of learners are needed. This entails providing learners with the means to acquire needed academic skills and knowledge as well as the tools for navigating new learning spaces and technology. This article has demonstrated how course designers and instructors can benefit from theoretical lenses that provide insights into effective learning. Integrating theories from different disciplines, such as distance education, educational psychology, and linguistics, provides new perspectives and possibilities.

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