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# Language at a Distance: Sharpening a Communication Tool in the Online Classroom

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## Abstract

Both immensely powerful and entirely fickle, language in online instruction is a double-edged sword.[1] A potent intermediary between instructor and students, and among students themselves, language is a key tool in online learning. It carries and cultivates information. It builds knowledge and self-awareness. It brings learners together in a community. But language can turn perilous when ambiguity creeps in and ambivalence has its way. How can we make language work for us and our students as distance educators? Which instructional techniques serve the cause, in some cases even better than they serve the traditional classroom? Which ones must instructors rethink? And what is the students' responsibility, if any, to language? This paper examines language as a communication tool in online learning, exploring how it succeeds and fails. While it engages with current pedagogical theories, it also draws upon my own, admittedly limited, experience. I have taught both correspondence and online courses over the years, but I am not an expert in distance education. The aim of this paper is to digest this experience, reflect on some current theories of e-learning, and consequently offer some (hopefully useful) suggestions for both tapping and changing instructors' established pedagogy.

## A spectator sport

In any classroom, student involvement is central to learning. As Chickering and Ehrmann have affirmed, Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing pre-packaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write reflectively about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves.

Online learning is even more conducive to "spectator" behaviour among learners, and therefore all the more dependent on active involvement. It can be tempting for students, in distance mode, to "see" words, but not actually communicate. Without a live instructor who challenges students to think and to draw connections between concepts, and in the absence of other students with whom to share ideas,[2] students in the e-classroom can easily become passive receptacles for information. Self-direction in learners is not a given, especially in the e-learning mode, and it is easy for many students

never to move beyond a narrow understanding of course content. What is more, it may be very tempting for students to skip over parts of the course in order to get to the so-called “stuff that counts.” These temptations are to some degree foiled by the medium itself: precisely because the instructor is not available to guide students from A to B to C and so on, the learner is forced to some degree to take an active role in processing concepts, linking ideas, evaluating responses, and applying skills. For many students, however, these very demands alienate, discourage, and overwhelm, pushing them into cyberspace, sometimes never to be heard from again.

Motivating students in online learning is no easy feat. However, in my view, it can be sparked by consistent opportunities for participation and collaboration and by accountability on the part of the student.[3] In the online classroom, students who are given the right tools and who “act” to make meaning of their experience are likely to be more motivated, successful, and satisfied (Conrad and Donaldson 93). At the basis of that meaning-making is language use. Online “conversations,” in which students actively generate meaning, discuss processes, and consequently learn the “language” of their discipline, are at the heart of online learning (Anthony and Meskill 81).[4] Indeed, developing effective online conversations is a skill, and there are resources to help with this domain.[5] Other language tools that help motivate include opportunities for group work and interactive tasks. The work I have recently seen from students involved in a collaborative project was the best I have witnessed so far in e-learning.

The good news is that, by its very nature as a technological medium, online learning lends itself to interactivity. By “interactivity,” I mean that the tasks engage students directly and meaningfully with course material and, depending on the task, with other learners, prompting them to make decisions and, ideally, think critically. At the base level, games can “provide an entertaining approach to obtaining information” and create energy within the group (Conrad and Donaldson 94). Online practice-quizzes are a fun, quick, and relatively easy way for students to test their knowledge. They also allow students a dry-run before taking quizzes for marks. WebCT, the courseware at my college, features a quiz mode that is not overly technical and complex for either instructor or student. Question formats include multiple choice, fill in the blank, and true/false, and one can pre-set the number of attempts possible, the sequencing of questions, the release of scores, and the time limit. PowerPoint could be adapted for interactive games, and other dynamic software is available online. Websites like www.quia.com (paid subscription), www.ProProfs.com (free), www.download.com (free) have software for creating interactive quizzes.

Having students interact with one another in the game can be even more stimulating: one activity I am trying out has students read a particular story on our reading list, find or create a proverb to illustrate

its main point, and then challenge their peers to explain how the proverb links to the story. Students could also synthesize learning by creating online board-games and puzzles for their peers. PowerPoint is an accessible, widely available medium for this type of activity, and in student-authored versions I have seen using that software, the result is colourful and visually appealing.

Simulations, which re-create real-world experiences, offer an authenticity that makes learning relevant. They would also seem to engage language in an authentic way. One activity I like to use involves a virtual tour. In the online course, which is about travel writing, students first read a story about a trip to Machu Picchu and then take a virtual tour of the ancient Incan city. I was lucky enough to find a site that offered this interesting way of "being there." More than a visual image to accompany the story and the course notes, the cyber-tour allows students to take their own mini-trip (a kind of authentic experience) with a guide, much like the writer in the story itself. As they might do with a "real" field trip, students report back on the knowledge they gained and their opinion of this type of "tour." They compare the format and content of this experience with the writer's own, and then share their opinions with a small group of peers. Together the group then draws some conclusions about themes raised by the journeys (trust, safety, adventure, generosity) as well as the value of actual as opposed to virtual travel.

Interactive tasks that demand purposeful action can not only facilitate learning, but can do so at higher, more challenging, levels. "In an engaged learning environment, learners are required to perform at the higher levels of thinking in Bloom's taxonomy, which are application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation" (Conrad and Donaldson 25). Online activities can target progressively higher levels of learning—from, for example, the comprehension underlying summary to the analysis and synthesis of case-studies.

Tasks and games used in the classroom can often be transferred to the e-classroom bearing in mind certain qualifications. Instructors' expectations regarding time, for example, may need to change. If experience is any indicator, it takes time for the technology to activate and for students to get organized at the start of term. Then, mix in different schedules, levels of motivation, and learning styles, and you have an uneven pace—something that is true in classroom teaching though we may not always be aware of it. Some critics argue that our expectations for neatly progressing units online must adjust, so that we base our approach not on clock time, but on the progress students are making (Salmon 65). Although it is true that some elements of the course can move quickly, not only because the technology facilitates it but because students become engaged and eager, basing submission dates around student progress can be, practically speaking, difficult. This is especially true in large classes, where there are many marks for instructors to process that cannot be left until the end of term. Moreover, flexibility can also encourage students to procrastinate. What is certain is that some activities need

to occur at the right time in the course. Student-led discussions, for example, shouldn't take place in the beginning stages (Conrad and Donaldson 18). Also, it may be necessary to assign participation marks to ensure that tasks and games are completed and not just voluntary.

Many theorists offer models for the different, progressive stages of student engagement over the life of an online course. Learning activities can match these increasingly more demanding and intensive levels. Conrad and Donaldson offer a four-stage model. Phase 1 is a more traditional deliverer-receiver mode in which the instructor provides information. At the same time, though, learners are made aware that their peers will play a vital role in the learning "community," at times eclipsing the instructor as a resource. The tone for respectful, non-threatening interaction needs to be set at this point (10). Though it might seem necessary to move right into content at the start of a course, skipping this vital stage of foundation-building could be problematic. I'll return to the importance of socialization later.

In Phase 2, the instructor organizes students to work cooperatively in dyads. This minimizes the intimidation some students may feel about communicating with a large group right away. The activities can move toward academic topics and away from socializing ones.

In Phase 3, the peer partners "are organized into collaborative teams in which members support one another and are responsible for one another's learning" (Conrad and Donaldson 12).

In Phase 4, learners becoming leaders: individuals and teams have the opportunity to lead activities. The instructor is a member of the community, not the sole repository of information, and learners turn to one another for support and knowledge.

### Student-student connections

A model like this puts a lot of emphasis on student-student interaction, an approach supported by other theorists. Contrary to what we might think, e-learning lends itself to peer interaction because of the myriad forms of communication available and the rich exchange of ideas that build over time. Reflecting on the importance of student-student interaction in online learning, Rowntree holds that: participants are liable to learn as much from one another as from course material or from the interjections of a tutor. that they learn of course is not so much product (e.g., information) as process—in particular, the creative cognitive process of offering up ideas, having them criticised or expanded on, and getting the chance to reshape them (or abandon them) in the light of peer discussion (in Salmon 41).

I would argue that product, or content, is at much at stake as process: material is reinforced or challenged by this process of wrestling with ideas. Since it is so difficult to know just how much

reading and analyzing students are actually doing “out there,” the more they are involved with course readings, the likelier that they are engaging meaningfully with content.

Critics have noted the central, even crucial, place of verbal interaction in online learning: “Instructors of online courses say that cyber learning has electronic dialogue at its heart. A key component of the learning flows from the discussions that electronic bulletin boards, chat rooms, and e-mail make possible” (Maeroff 61; emphasis added). By interacting in small online-groups to, for example, brainstorm ideas, write reports, role-play scenarios, and research new topics, students in virtual classrooms can become much more than spectators in their own learning. They can emerge from the isolation always threatening this context, and go beyond rote learning to negotiating meaning and taking and re-evaluating positions (Salmon 45).

Because of the permanence of online dialogue, in turn, instructors and students have at their disposal a rich storehouse of information. Since information is continually available, students can “‘rewind’” a conversation [or comment], to pick out threads and make very direct links [to their own knowledge]” (Salmon 18). Information is available for further reflection, unlike the fleeting nature of a classroom discussion. Because “a whole series of ideas [can be] pulled together” (Salmon 19) online, the learner can not only keep track of points but also process the material according to their learning style. They can then interact with information by, for example, writing summaries or reviews of threaded discussions or course notes, or charting their changing views in a journal.

What is more, since a medium like the discussion board is permanent and can offer a range of topics, students can join people with common interests to explore a topic at great length. Recently, I had the very satisfying experience of seeing a discussion topic take off: students not only responded directly to each other’s comments, rather than making isolated posts, but deepened and broadened the discussion by asking hypothetical questions meant to continue the conversation. Control of that particular board shifted away from me to the students themselves. The independence of the learner-led stage seems highly satisfying for both participants and observer.

Online learning is sometimes thought to suffer a disadvantage compared to classroom learning in terms of lack of face-to-face contact between students and professors, and among students. However, “Salmon has argued, for example, that a lack of visual and verbal cues need not be detrimental, because it can mean freedom from the distraction of physical presence. ‘ If the remoteness and lack of visual cues are handled appropriately, they can increase the comfort level of e-moderators and participants alike’” (in Conrad and Donaldson 16).

That the absence of face-to face interaction could be

advantageous to learning is an interesting idea. Without the visual dimension of actual student-teacher contact, both are left, primarily, with words. This is not to ignore the visual elements that can so enhance an online course (videos, graphics) but to suggest that language online can provide a certain focus sometimes compromised in the classroom. Online, students and professors alike concentrate mainly on one medium instead of on other people's appearance, accent, disability, hierarchical status or any other marker of difference. Ideas and knowledge can be front and centre. Of course, this puts tremendous pressure on language to convey meaning, a topic I take up a bit later. More positively, this more anonymous verbal interaction can also prompt the usually timid student, now unobserved, to express herself. Safe behind the screen, not subject to judgement based on qualities such as race, nationality, gender, or sexual orientation, some students will run with words, as they would not in a classroom. A lack of face-to-face contact is an advantage, furthermore, where it eliminates the behavioural disruptions that waste so much time in the classroom.

### Self-assessment

Words can become meaningful tools, furthermore, through students' self-assessment. Often overlooked in classroom teaching, self-assessment is a valuable means for students to think critically about their own learning. Students are used to being shepherded and instructors are used to shepherding. The self-discipline necessary to complete readings and tasks eludes many students because they haven't had to assume so much responsibility for learning. It can be very useful for students to consider the strengths and weaknesses of their work and the gaps within their learning. Self-monitoring can "encourage students to make sense of their online process" (Conrad and Donaldson 31), enhancing their awareness of course material, the learning process, and learning online in particular. Being conscious of their needs is a necessary step to taking responsibility for meeting them.

To promote student's self-reflection and thus their self-empowerment, instructors can provide students a meta-language, a language for describing their experience with language. Self-check lists, journal or diary entries, self-evaluation rubrics, and portfolio reviews can give students this reflective opportunity. These can be used with instructor-generated assessments and team assessments or on their own. If the instructor reserves the right to change an inaccurate self-imposed grade, self-assessments can be very revealing for both student and instructor.

Through self-assessment, students may also gain added insight into their own experiences, attitudes, opinions, values, and feelings (Conrad and Donaldson 33). Conrad and Donaldson recommend using reflection to let students "describe how a situation had personal value for them" (74). This takes us back to the earlier point that learning must capitalize on prior experience and relate to student's

own lives. Many theorists affirm the importance of lived experience and personal identity in learning. Conrad and Donaldson talk of “empowering course members to capitalize on what they know” (19), and Wlodkowsi asserts that “for adult learners to experience intrinsic motivation, they need to connect who they are with what they learn” (12). Competence must be tied to personal identity to be desirable.

Self-evaluation might also lead to a greater awareness of one’s own learning style (Burge and Roberts 23). Student profiles, gathered early on, could identify for both learner and instructor such elements as how much direction and structure students need, how they like to study, and how they conceptualize information. For example, students who think and solve problems in linear terms and are “parts specific” (Arp 28) might be coached to complete online elements incrementally, to analyze ideas using logic and abstract conceptualization. Those who perceive information more globally and like to reflect and observe before coming to any conclusions (also called Theorists or Reflectors in some models) can be encouraged to make private postings or write journals until ready to go public. Some elements of online learning already meet different learning needs. The asynchronous nature of the e-classroom—that is, the fact that it does not happen in real time—complements the theoretical learners’ style, while an interactive approach serves the activist learner. Knowing something about students’ particular learning styles, instructors could try to make the most of them by building options into assignments, pairing students who have similar styles together in activities, and developing a range of activities (concrete vs. abstract; problem solving with reflective). Wlodkowski makes the point that learner motivation depends on having choice: “[I]t is difficult to feel responsible unless one has a choice to hold oneself accountable for” (13). Choice can also make course work culturally relevant, a key factor in motivation (Wlodkowsi 7).

### Ambiguities

A powerful channel for interactive learning and self-assessment, language is undoubtedly the friend of online practitioners. Indeed, in the e-classroom, it is the core of everything. But if it is true that the classroom is not automatically a ground for learning, it is also true that the e-classroom is not necessarily motivational despite the best activities and deepest self-reflection. Language in the online classroom is often ambiguous, loaded with connotations, and distrusted. Students can misconstrue the most seemingly clear phrase or read connotations into the most innocent words—all the while the eloquent, carefully worked lecture note appears to be passed over quickly. Established instructional approaches may be frustrated where language creates its own barrier to understanding.

One problem is that words are, of course, free agents whose meaning can never be ascertained but only agreed upon temporarily. To assume, in the e-classroom, that a word or phrase will mean for

others what you think it does is hazardous, since words can say more and less than you want them to. Take this example. Trying to provide an orientation to my online course, I created a link that I labelled, in all innocence, “Start Here.” It contained information about expectations, responsibilities, assignments, readings, and more. Though chock-full of information, many students didn’t access it. I found out sometime later that because the course has a fixed timeline of seven consecutive weeks, students assumed that by clicking on “Start Here,” they’d literally start the course and be on the clock. Apparently, no one was ready to start! To remove the confusion, I renamed the link “Important Preliminary Information.” So far, so good ...

The ambiguity of language means we need to be very clear about what we mean with students. Every public message—and we can encourage students to be this vigilant also—should be written in plain language and checked and re-checked for clarity. We should read our more important instructions and comments literally from the “Student View” within the software, to test for meaning. Careful explanation is critical, though it must be balanced with the need to keep information at a reasonable length so as not to overwhelm and thus discourage readers. Careful language also helps compensate for the lack of visual cues in any statement or exchange (Salmon 44).

Another difficulty with language is the channel that carries it. Technology itself can get in the way of dialogue. A generation for whom culture is technology can still be wary of using courseware. Early self-evaluation in the course asking learners to rate their facility with technology can allow a student, and consequently the instructor, to target pragmatic problems early on. An icebreaker activity or fun game can be a non-threatening way into the technology (Conrad and Donaldson 47).

Discomfort can extend beyond the mode of delivery to the fact of making language public. Students who have previously been talkative and engaged in classroom courses can turn mute online, in the very medium that requires more participation and input than any other. When students fear they will be judged on their public and permanent declarations, silence can result. It is a silence that can last beyond the usual two or three weeks of uncertainty and discomfort often present in the classroom. The weight of silence when no one responds to a posting is also hefty. By the time they reach my course, students have spent three years together in class: rather than encouraging lively discussion, this familiarity seems to dampen it. Students are careful with each other to the point of remaining very conservative in their pronouncements. The need to feel accepted, respected and supported as adult learners (Conrad 46) in the e-classroom is no less strong than in the traditional classroom. Building trust among learners is thus important, even when students know one another. Icebreakers can perform double-duty in this regard, building comfort with both the courseware and co-learners.

**Silence and intimidation**

Voices can also be silenced when “academese” limits expression too strictly and students feel self-conscious of their writing style. One student posted an introductory comment to the discussion board using emoticons and slang. This in itself wasn’t a problem, but the lack of reflective, insightful commentary was. The student had stated an opinion but not backed it up, so I drew attention to this gap and at the same time praised the effort to begin the course and respond to another student’s idea. He didn’t make another posting, and I worried I had silenced him with my comments. It seems more the case that the effort to craft a thoughtful, reflective message, and not the language itself, was the barrier. But it made me think. I make it a point now never to correct grammar or style in the discussion board (though it is often painful to read) so that participants are free to express themselves. The criteria, in this mode, are different than what I would set in classroom writing. I also never intervene directly in discussion groups unless they have stalled or are going off-track (or growing hostile), or to commend them for their work. My authority as the evaluator would no doubt hamper expression if I took part more actively and produced “the right answer.” I certainly never offer criticism publicly. With almost every posting, I write privately to students to comment on and commend their work, hoping they will take the feedback and apply it to their next post. They are also encouraged to create their own discussion topics and chat-room subjects (stage 4 of the phases of engagement), though few have so far taken me up on this.

In contrast to the reticence that can characterize a discussion board, aggression can also rear its head where students disagree or misperceive or begin to compete with one another. This has occurred where students from two different colleges interact. It reflects the necessity of that first phase of the model we looked at before. E-moderators really do have to use their skills to ensure that participants develop a sense of community in the medium” (Salmon 36). Conrad and Donaldson offer a wealth of ideas for interactive games that build community in their book Engaging the Online Learner. Ice-breaker games can create the “social presence” (Meyer in Conrad and Donaldson 46) usually established by students themselves in the classroom. A Bingo game, for example, could be based on questions keyed to student biographies that the rest of the class must first read. Ideally these types of games “open the lines of communication for the learning community in a non-threatening manner” (Conrad and Donaldson 46). Though group dynamics take time to build online, the payoff, as we have seen, can be great.

A positive relationship between instructor and student is equally important in making students comfortable. While the lack of face-to-face contact and non-verbal language may reduce bias, it also eliminates powerful channels for relationship-building. The instructor’s tone of voice is crucial in trying to compensate for this lack. Informal, conversational language and a polite, respectful sound put students at

ease and suggest that questions (and mistakes) are welcome. Encouraging students to be active also means encouraging them to be proactive about asking for help and support. Language and tone also model desirable behaviour (and don't doubt that your students will imitate your presentation mode—I've seen this in discussion postings, and I know you can start a chain reaction). Emoticons, something I'd discourage in business or academic writing, can help us create the right tone online. Humour, for example, can be difficult to discern without body language, and emoticons are useful in this regard. Criticism is also a sensitive matter in online instruction, and feedback needs to be especially cautious. Supportive feedback, even when negative, is another valuable intrinsic motivator, as is humour.

The Bingo exercise mentioned above and other phase 1 activities are another way to establish a human dimension in the medium. Instructors can play the game, as well as moderating it. Part of the human touch involves checking on students periodically to see where they are. Since I can't literally observe the general mood of the class or watch students struggle with or grasp ideas, I write individually to students to find out how they're doing in the course. I also check in with the group every few days, by posting an update, a reminder, a new activity, or giving or seeking feedback. It seems vital to provide constant and thoughtful feedback on ideas and assignments, responding more frequently and in greater depth than we do in classroom courses. Demonstrating interest in student's status and progress as well as in their thoughts and ideas helps to build the relationship and keep students on track from afar. Language is a way to reach out across the distance. Formative assessments keep students on track and aware. They also show that the process, and not just the final product, matters.

### Old habits hard to break

Last year I held an introductory session to the course in a computer lab. Approximately ten students (out of 40) attended. Afterward, several of them expressed how much they appreciate person-to-person contact and wish the course could have been delivered in the classroom. What I had done, though, in the lab was essentially "show and tell," orienting students to the course by navigating step-by-step through the homepage and assignments. The visual, physical dimension had returned briefly, and students were drawn to it. In two previous semesters, I also offered a class-wide chat session at a designated time in order to address problems and concerns. In each case, only one student out of forty actively participated! Evidently, in-person coaching and virtual coaching receive very different responses.

In order to both provide some direction and engage students in the process, I have implemented an online self-orientation for a pass/fail mark. In it, students must navigate through the course outline and key start-up information and then take a simple quiz testing their understanding of that material. Most students have scored highly on

this, and overall, their initiation into the course has been smoother than in previous terms. The perennial problem of students not reading key information remains—part of the hand-holding that is so difficult to break. Pairing a student who has already started with one who is beginning may be helpful: it could orient those students who either fail the quiz or, despite passing it, neglect other important information over the term.

These encounters sparked my interest in learning how to motivate and engage students online. Much is left to do, and I am heartened by the thought that when I throw down the challenge and expect more, students usually deliver it.

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**Notes:**

1. This is a revised version of a paper given (under the same title) at "The Power of Language" conference held October 23, 2007 at George Brown College in Toronto, Ontario.

2. The theories of Jerome Bruner and of L.S. Vygotsky on constructivist learning and learner collaboration are well known in this regard.

3. Self-direction is clearly a requirement and, in courses that try to build learning- skills, a goal of online learning. Ross Paul argues that "the most important criterion for success in distance education should relate to learner independence and that the ultimate challenge…is to develop each individual's capacity to look after his or her own learning needs" (in White 3).

4. See Meskill and Anthony also for ways to use language to "saturate" and "corral" learning.

5. See Uzuner on generating quality discussions.

6. At Quia.com, you can set up a page for each of your courses and create recall or matching games such as Hangman or Battleship.

7. This insight emerged through discussion with audience members attending my talk at "The Power of Language" conference. Thank you to those attendees for their contribution in this regard.

8. See Watkins for a sample inventory of learning styles.

9. See Watkins for checklists assessing learner readiness in the e-classroom.

10. Besides being a positive form of teacher-student engagement, timely feedback accords with Watkins' idea that instructors need to model participatory behaviour (39).

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