

BOOK REVIEW

ONLINE LANGUAGE LEARNING: TIPS FOR TEACHERS

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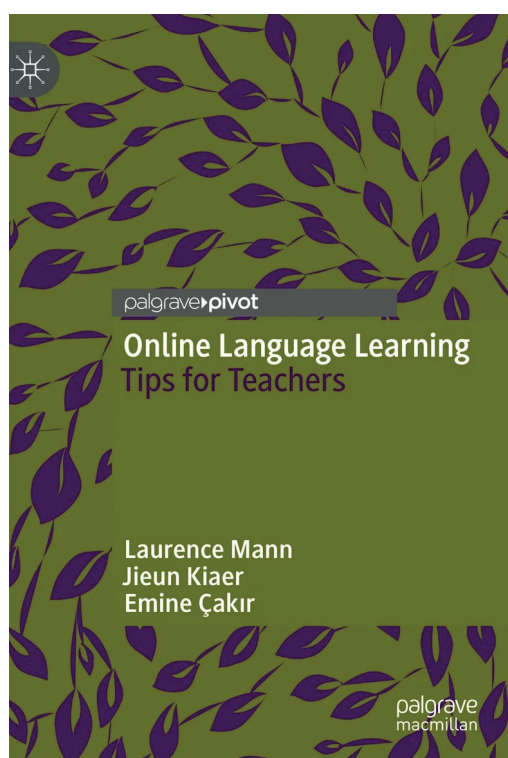
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INTRODUCTION

Among the many societal and educational ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, the move to various forms of online, hybrid, and blended learning seems to be one of those emergency responses that looks like it will become a permanent fixture. Though online learning modalities were of course available before the pandemic, the singularity of the situation meant that educational institutions were largely forced to move all of their pedagogical activities online. In seeking to transition classroom-based approaches to the digital world, this change naturally brought with it both challenges and opportunities for staff and students alike. For language teachers, given the added need to develop students' active and passive communication skills, the shift online has brought with it additional complexities and the book reviewed here provides a range of useful suggestions and guidance.

REVIEW OF THE BOOK

Online Language Learning: Tips for Teachers is part of the Palgrave Pivot short-form series. This slim but impactful 144-page volume is co-authored by three members of the University of Oxford's Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies: Laurence Mann (Associate Member, Japanese), Jieun Kiaer (Professor of Korean Linguistics), and Emine Çakır (Lecturer in Turkish). As such, the case studies presented are focused on non-Western languages; nonetheless, given the clarity of presentation, in the opinion of this reviewer this information is certainly transferable to the online teaching of all languages, an aim also hoped for by the authors of the volume (p. 15). As the book's subtitle "Tips for teachers" suggests, the work is advisory in character, with each of the four chapters centred around one core nugget of information. With the

focus being on encouraging readers to focus on their own pedagogical practice, each piece of advice is contextualised in the relevant theoretical and sociocultural context, with the latter being particularly relevant with regard to the pandemic and its legacy. This approach helps to ensure a balance that makes the resource useful from both academic and applied perspectives.

With the impact of the pandemic as a backdrop, the work's opening chapter skilfully combines an analysis of the role of the internet in language learning with a general overview of the situation of language teaching and learning at schools in England, where the number of pupils opting for languages is in decline. In acknowledging the relative complexity that the languages taught at the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies can pose for English speakers (p. 13), the authors reiterate the importance of reflective practice and empathy across the whole learning and teaching process, emphasising that the tips offered in the book are based on their own practical pedagogical experiences in preparing syllabi for online tertiary language teaching during the pandemic.

Chapter Two centres on the first tip, which involves using social media into teaching practice and advocates that it should be used as a valuable part of the teacher's toolkit. As such, recognising the challenges faced by teachers and students during the lockdowns, the authors outline a model of hybrid language teaching which mixes traditional approaches with social-media in synchronous and asynchronous contexts. In recognising the importance of social media as a possible language learning aid for today's generation, attention is paid not only to how it can help to enliven the classroom, but also how it can help students acquire the necessary pragmatic competence for certain East Asian languages, as well as for teaching non-standard language including emojis and slang terms. In addition, the chapter discusses how online language tandems can help to mitigate the pandemic-related cancellations of the 'Year Abroad', a feature of most undergraduate modern languages degrees in the United Kingdom where students typically spend the third year of a four-year programme in the country or countries where the relevant languages are spoken (pp. 36-38). All of this information is supplemented by a range of examples, including participant comments from a teaching workshop, excerpts from student feedback, and screenshots from apps.

The focus of the book's third chapter is on the digital diversification of the curriculum. After an overview of the need for diversity-related approaches in contemporary pedagogy, a highly-practical account of the design and implementation of a related case study is given. Within the context of a series of translation classes on hip-hop-related fandom in Japan, information is provided about the linguistic and cultural rationale behind the selection of the tasks (including giving the students an input in this regard), the format of the specific classes, as well as the reception of these lessons by the students. The chapter concludes with a succinct set of pointers useful for those teachers wishing to implement greater curricular diversity in virtual, hybrid, and face-to-face contexts.

The third tip, in Chapter Four, is centred on how educational practitioners can find 'self-generated opportunities' (p. 73) regarding their continuing professional development (CPD), including as teacher-researchers. Noting the challenges posed by the forced shift to online learning, theoretical aspects relating to action research and exploratory practice are detailed, before a case study of a CPD workshop on the topic at the authors' own workplace is given. Subsequently, written feedback from the participants is analysed, noting their own self-reflection on challenges and solutions that may have arisen during the online teaching process.

Assessment is the focal point of the last chapter, and in reiterating the importance of assessment in tertiary education, relevant context is given regarding its rationale and modes as well as to post-assessment debriefing. In the field of online language learning, a series of challenges faced by the move to internet-based assessment are presented, before possible solutions for each point are given. In reframing these situations, it is felt that this may represent a further opportunity for teachers to reflect on their own pedagogical practice.

In recognising the challenges that the move to virtual language teaching may have brought, the subtitle of the Conclusion is "don't lose faith". It brings together the points raised in the book, noting the "largely optimistic view" (p. 128) espoused, and highlighting that the techniques required for success in the online environment are basically already part of a teacher's core competencies. The book is completed by an appendix containing

the questions relating to the CPD workshop in Chapter 3, as well as a list of references, and an index. In addition, a list of further resources is outlined at the end of each of the work's chapters; though this does not generally include lists of suggested apps and other interactive tools, the authors justify this by drawing attention to the ever-changing nature of the internet (p. 11), thus ensuring that the book remains current.

CONCLUSION

As outlined above, this book has many merits. To that, this reviewer would also like to add some additional observations: for example, with regard to relevant aspects such as the digital divide and digital poverty, which could impact the process of teaching and learning languages online. Also, at first glance the information on the British educational context (for example, regarding the learning and teaching of languages as well as on the 'year abroad' for third-year undergraduate students) may seem to be largely irrelevant for an international audience. However, these may provide an interesting point for educators from elsewhere to compare with local approaches in their own countries.

Given that each chapter is well-signposted and clearly structured, additional praise is merited for the book's composition, which means that it is suitable for consultation as required. Indeed, the advice offered in the volume makes it of relevance to a broad audience, including not only experienced language teachers and lecturers, but also those currently in training for the profession at a time when digital competence is not only desired but expected. Accordingly, this book is recommended as a valuable pedagogical resource for language teachers working in virtual, hybrid, and even face-to-face environments.

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