



The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning™

2018

Volume 8/Issue 2

Article 8

Asynchronous Collaboration Integrating Online Learning in the Foreign Language Classroom

Bushra Wilkins, Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center, California, USA
bushra.wilkins@dliflc.edu

Recommended Citations:

APA

Wilkins, B. (2018, June 30). Asynchronous collaboration integrating online learning in the foreign language classroom. *The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning*, 8(2), 101-108.

MLA

Bushra Wilkins. "Asynchronous Collaboration Integrating Online Learning in the Foreign Language Classroom." *The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning* 8.2 (2018):101-108.

The JLTL is freely available online at www.jltl.org, with neither subscription nor membership required.

Contributors are invited to review the Submission page and manuscript templates at www.jltl.org/Submitonline

As an online journal, the JLTL adopts a green-policy journal. Please print out and copy responsibly.





The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning, 2018(2), pp.101-108

Asynchronous Collaboration Integrating Online Learning in the Foreign Language Classroom

Bushra Wilkins¹

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received January 11, 2018

Revisions completed April 7, 2018

Published June 30, 2018

Key Words:

Asynchronous Collaboration

Foreign Language

Asynchronous Online Discussion

Online Interactions

ABSTRACT

Collaboration is an inherent part of education and business processes today. With nearly global availability of online access, the diversified nature of learning is no longer tied to a traditional classroom setting. In an educational environment, be it a traditional or virtual setting, collaborative activities can greatly facilitate learning through realistic contexts and engage learners by devising solutions to complex problems. Regardless if a group of students working on a common project are co-located or geographically dispersed, interjecting an element of online collaboration can contribute greatly to the success of a group effort. In SLA/SLL and foreign language learning environments involving adult learners, interaction and collaboration are fundamental elements of the learning process through which knowledge is transferred and assimilated (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). In this paper, the rationale and a process of implementing online collaboration activities in a face-to-face (FTF) foreign language learning setting is presented.

©Association of Applied Linguistics. All rights reserved

In order to improve knowledge acquisition, numerous methodologies and strategies have been developed to address the various needs of learners involved in online, hybrid, and traditional FTF educational environments. According to Dornyei (2001), the term motivation is commonly used to apply meaning to a highly abstract, hypothetical concept that explains why people act, think, and behave as they do. In general, the degree to which a learner attaches value to any given task establishes the level of motivation, and consequently, the level of commitment the learner will allocate to task completion (Artino & McCoach, 2008). Essentially, motivation influences the amount of effort students are willing to invest in learning.

Knowledge acquisition is the result of interaction among four essential instructional components: students, instructor, content and environment (Darabi, Arrastia, Nelson, Cornille & Liang, 2010). Collaborative activities can greatly facilitate learning through realistic contexts and engage learners by devising solutions to complex problems. Linking learning activities to authentic and relevant real-world tasks can promote students' conscious perception of the value of course materials, thus heightening

¹ Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center, (DLIFLC), bushra.wilkins@dliflc.edu, (831) 224-0477.

motivation to engage in the process. Asynchronous learning processes are particularly relevant in today's classrooms due to the ubiquitous availability of web-based learning resources and technologies, as well as the nearly universal adoption, by students, of mobile applications. Gardner (2001) identified two types of learner orientation outlooks towards language learning: instrumental, signifying the practical value of learning a language; and integrative, reflecting a personal interest in the people and culture. Research suggests that asynchronous online discussion (AOD) may be a useful technique for increasing communication, interaction, and collaboration in FTF and blended language courses.

2. Adding an Asynchronous Component

Asynchronous online discussion (AOD), often referred to simply as the "Discussion Board" is widely used in online courses for interaction, communication, and collaboration. In the field of foreign language learning, asynchronous communications technologies offer several advantages to learners, even to those engaged in an FTF setting. Generalized findings derived from numerous research studies suggest that the integration of AOD into a FTF setting provides complementary learning opportunities. Effective AOD processes promote interaction among learners, which is vital in order for real learning to occur online (Moore, 1989). Learners have self-allotted time to reflect and revise composition of responses, resulting in decreased levels of anxiety among participants (Krish, Hussin & Sivapuniam, 2011). Other benefits include self-reported perceptions of improved capability, enjoyment of the process, and comfort interacting with others in the virtual setting (Aljumah, 2012).

Foreign language teachers in a FTF educational institution can utilize AOD to help offset one of the most potentially limiting factors that may affect students' success: time. Stated simply, there is often not enough time to adequately cover everything that both the instructor and students would like to go over during allotted class schedules. Properly employed, an AOD extends the learning process outside the FTF classroom, removing the restrictions of time and location. The advent of advanced, reliable communications technologies and the widespread use of social media sites provide a dynamic avenue of instruction not previously available to foreign language educators. AOD is not limited to the role of just a "discussion board", in which students post comments. With proper pedagogical application, AOD can be employed as a robust communications and collaboration tool that offers learners a means to engage with instructors and peers, as needed, in a medium that does not detract from valuable class time.

Additionally, one of the most useful aspects of employing AOD in this capacity is promoting learner autonomy by gradually decreasing learner dependency on teachers and peers (Foroutan, Noordin & Bin Hamzah, 2013). Asynchronous methods can assist students to take responsibility for their own learning processes, in their own time, at their own pace. Today's language learners at the post-secondary level are technology-oriented; consequently, in order to successfully engage in blended or online language learning, students need to be challenged in a manner that improves competence. Incorporating technology-based instructional strategies that support autonomy and competency positively affects students' needs satisfaction, which in turn positively affects their self-determination (Chen & Jang, 2012).

3. Importance of Learner Collaboration

Critical attributes of online collaborative groups include: participation, interdependence, synthesis of information, and independence (Thompson & Ku, 2006). Each group member's participation is central to the concept of collaboration, while interdependence requires interaction among group members to achieve a solution to the proposed problem. Synthesis of information reflects the distilled elements of each participant's individual contribution to the group project. The group achieves independence through the collaborative experience by relying upon the group's ability to solve problems and determine solutions without the direct supervision or intervention of the instructor.

There are several derived benefits of utilizing asynchronous communication processes to apply collaborative learning activities. In online courses, interaction provides two important functions: first, it is an opportunity for learners to engage in active learning as opposed to passive absorption of content; and second, interaction allows learners to learn from their peers (Lai, 2012). Numerous other research studies expound on the key finding that learners engaged in online learning consider collaboration among participants as essential to effective learning.

One practical application for FTF language teachers to employ an online activity of this nature is as a means to augment the existing curriculum. Collaborative activities conducted through an AOD can expand on, or correlate with, what students learn in the FTF classroom. Focused activities can reinforce topics covered in the curriculum through scaffolding exercises, while others might be independent, and draw upon existing knowledge or job-related expertise. The extent to which instructors employ collaborative learning exercises is limited only to the degree to which learners can be motivated to actively engage in the process.

4. Benefits of Collaboration to Learners

When conducted properly, incorporating the collaborative capabilities of online technologies can increase participants' engagement and improve the overall learning experience (Ray, Prosch & Roberts, 2007). Through the use of the asynchronous communications capabilities of a content management system (CMS), learners within a small group can explore or be exposed to different perceptions of a project or assignment they may not have considered. This factor in itself can result as the primary benefit of working together outside the sphere of a teacher's influence. Initially, each student sees an assignment as an individual endeavor; when detailed to work as part of a group, many students may be hesitant, or feel intimidated. As the collaborative process progresses, students learn from each other, and after a period of time, most learners assimilate into the dynamics of the group through which they develop a comfort zone of participation. Introducing the learners to collaborative activities in the course can also have a significant impact on how they interact with others outside the parameters of the online course.

For numerous reasons, many learners exhibit a resistance to the concept of collaboration in an online environment (Capdeferro & Romero, 2012; Thompson & Ku, 2006). Negative elements commonly cited by learners include a disproportionate workload, unproductive contributions or feedback, unresponsive group members, and the amount of time that collaboration actually takes to complete an assignment. To successfully implement any form of collaborative activity, it is imperative that the facilitator attend to those perceptions in a positive manner. Authentic and relevant collaborative activities address these issues by requiring the group members to establish group norms for working together, communication procedures, and responsibilities of each member in terms of contribution and timeliness.

A useful strategy to overcome learners' potential resistance is to ensure that the subject content of the activities is directly related to course work for the learners, or to their professional interests. In essence, collaborative work ought to reflect some tangible aspect of knowledge acquisition, which helps to keep learners focused and provide timely feedback to their peers (Zhu, Valcke & Schellens, 2009). Additionally, properly utilized collaborative activities create a positive sense of competition among groups, with resultant increases in individual motivation, satisfaction, and knowledge acquisition.

As mentioned previously, one of the prime benefits of the process is that collaborative activities can increase learner interactions, and consequently learner autonomy, in online courses without the direct involvement of the instructor (Watkins, 2005). The goal of an activity is to have the learners work amongst themselves, in a collaborative manner, without explicit questions to answer. As a group, through asynchronous communications, learners determine who will work on what area of the assignment, assign roles for each participant then compile and submit one finished product. Though this process can be a challenge in itself, due to the realistic application of the content, learners come to recognize the necessity,

as well as the benefit, of working together. In both FTF and virtual processes, strong students often act as mentors for classmates or other participants. These types of activities can help build a sense of community, a commonality of purpose, from which all participants benefit.

5. Designing Collaborative Activities

Although collaborative learning has long been a common strategy employed in traditional FTF education courses, developing applications of the strategy for hybrid or online courses entails a quite different methodology. The process requires much more time and detailed involvement from the instructor or facilitator to initiate productive and interesting interaction among learners. Even if those learners see each other every day, there is no need for interaction in a FTF capacity, as all collaboration is completed online.

One of the most important factors to consider in designing or employing collaborative activities is time-management. The intent of any learning activity conducted in this manner should be to provide a specific focus to achieve a limited objective that learners can complete without undue stress. An activity that interferes with learners' ability to reasonably manage their out-of-class study time may have a detrimental impact on several levels.

Well-designed collaborative activities are intended to foster an atmosphere conducive to small group online interactions, require each member of the group to actively participate in the process, and contribute to a common project. An important factor to consider regarding group assignments, is that if left to choose, many learners tend to seek a comfort zone and often will gravitate to the same group, which can actually be detrimental to the learning process. One means to address this issue is to randomly assign students to groups, varying assignments with each activity. If established as a norm at the beginning of a course, students will expect this, resulting in decreased anxiety and fostering a broader sense of community among engaged learners.

In the context of this article, collaborative activities can be designed to address any topic area, but should have a specific and limited focus; however, by extension, the same process can be applied to a more robust project requiring more time or effort. Common applications of collaborative strategies are to use them to help students target subjects which augment the curriculum, to build a stronger base of knowledge that is only covered superficially in classwork, or for topics in which the curriculum may be dated. Another application is to target subskills, such as improving writing skill in the target language, building specific vocabulary requirements, or working on a job-related skillset.

Following is an example collaborative activity designed to help students find viable authentic online sources. This is applicable to many students' in their future jobs, in which many of them may be doing some form of research or reporting requiring detailed knowledge of authentic sources. In the Source Search activity, learners need to locate specific online materials that meet the assignment criteria then contribute to a group compilation of information. Inherent in the activity process is each participant's adherence to the established and agreed upon norms of individual participation and contribution. The template for the activity organization and format is taken from Ryan Watkins' (2005) book, *75 e-Learning Activities: making online learning interactive*. Sections include: activity summary, objectives, group size applicability, delivery mode, time requirement, materials, facilitator preparation, sequential process, and any amplifying notes for the facilitator. Sections can be included or deleted as necessary.

Table 1.

Collaborative Activity: Source Search

Source Search
<p>Activity Summary</p> <p>The Source Search Activity provides a means to produce a collaborative project through small group interaction. Learners work collaboratively as members of a small team to search online, identify specific articles that meet the stated criteria, and provide justifications for their selections.</p>
<p>Objectives: During this activity:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Learners create and agree on group norms for effective online interaction.2. Learners build communication and collaboration skills in an asynchronous environment.3. Learners individually explore online sources to find material specific to the appropriate language level.4. Learners exchange ideas and compile their findings as a group5. Learners build skills for group activities and collaborate with other learners
<p>Collaborative Learning: Medium group (groups of 3-4 learners)</p>
<p>Delivery Mode: Asynchronous</p>
<p>Time Required: Three days</p>
<p>Materials:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Access to an online asynchronous assignment tool (CMS) for facilitator and learners.2. Internet access for facilitator and learners.3. List of Institutionally-approved online sources authorized for educational purposes.
<p>Preparation:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Assign learners to small groups. Post an announcement that includes a brief introduction to the activity, learner groups, and instructions on how to complete the assignment.2. Create a forum for the assignment in the CMS for each group and a Drop Box for the assignment submission.3. Create a forum for the reflection posts in the CMS Discussion Board.4. Prepare an example document for an online source or website article that exemplifies the requirements learners must meet to successfully complete the assignment. It should include the source location (URL), article name or title, and an explanation of why it meets the stated requirements. Learners should be able to use this example as a reference of what to look for when creating their own materials, not just for this assignment, but as a standard process. Ensure your educational institute has copyright permissions to utilize the site for educational purposes.5. Create the assignment in the appropriate CMS section and post the instructions.<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Each learner group needs to establish group norms for communicating, collaborating on the assignment, and individual responsibilities.b. Learners download and view the attached document which contains an example of the information each submission should have.c. Utilizing any available online resource, as a group, search for and find one source on each of the following subject areas:<ol style="list-style-type: none">1) Women’s rights in Saudi Arabia.2) Egyptian Parliamentary elections.3) Iranian nuclear program and the UN dilemma.4) Syrian opposition groups’ right to bear arms.d. Sources must be in the target language and be the appropriate language level.e. Each learner in a group must provide one source. Include the learner name, the source

location (URL), article name or title, and an explanation of why it meets the stated requirements. Use the attached document as a reference.

- f. The group will compile the four sources into one document and review the information. Upon consensus of all group members that the paper meets the assignment requirements, post the compiled document (with appropriate naming conventions) in the Drop Box.
 - g. Learners post a reflection of their experience in the Discussion Board and respond to a minimum of one other learner's post.
 - 1) Post and response should be a minimum of 100 words and focus on the usefulness of the activity or collaboration process.
 - 2) If language capability is advanced enough, encourage learners to post and respond in the target language.
 - h. Facilitator provides feedback and evaluation of the assignment.
6. Criteria for evaluation of the submission:
- a. The sources' locations/URLs selected by the group are from the authorized list of approved sources.
 - b. The justifications provided by the learners should be in accordance with the appropriate language level characteristics.

Process:

1. Post an announcement for the activity in the Announcements section.
2. Post the task instructions in the Assignments section and attach the example document.
3. Learners will access the assignment instructions and download the attachment.
4. Learner groups will complete the assignment and submit the document in the Drop Box.
5. Learners post their reflection about the assignment in the Discussion Board and respond to a minimum of one other learner's post.
6. Provide feedback and evaluation of the assignment in the CMS Gradebook.

Facilitator Notes:

1. Cover copyright legality and Fair Use policy with learners.
-

6. Conclusion

Successful pedagogical strategies improve online collaborations and interactions in teaching and learning, resulting in higher levels of student satisfaction and self-perceived learning (Schroeder-Moreno, 2010). Integrating an online component into a FTF education program fulfills the critical requirement for interaction among learners as a means to develop specific skills. Learners are more responsive to course content and exhibit greater motivation when there is a demonstrated applicability of the material to their daily activities or work-related environment. The type of collaborative learning process described in this article provides a realistic application for knowledge development and can be created for, and applied to, pedagogical approaches as well.

As reported by Nandi, Hamilton, and Harland (2012), students' perceptions of the effectiveness of AOD varied widely based on several factors, including relevance of the content theme, participation levels, and student demography. In my experience, this finding is especially relevant in the FTF foreign language classroom. In some cases, learners may exhibit an initial resistance to the use of AOD to complete homework assignments, usually based on previous negative experience with AOD. When participating in or utilizing a learning activity, a fundamental consideration on the part of the learner is the perception that task completion will contribute to achieving a specific goal. This type of work is most

effective when engaged in by learners who have been exposed to a positive collaborative experience and understand the process. A well-designed, collaborative activity, conducted in an asynchronous medium, extends the learning environment outside the classroom, and can formulate or reinforce a sense of common purpose among learners. In addition to reinforcing knowledge acquisition, peripheral benefits of introducing the collaboration process are the real-world application for learners, increased learner satisfaction, improved critical thinking skills, and increased learner autonomy.

References

- Aljumah, F. (2012). Saudi learner perceptions and attitudes towards the use of blogs in teaching English writing course for EFL majors at Qassim university. *English Language Teaching*, 5(1), 100. doi:10.5539/elt.v5n1p100
- Artino, A. J., & McCoach, D. B. (2008). Development and initial validation of the online learning value and self-efficacy scale. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 38(3), 279-303
- Capdeferro, N., & Romero, M. (2012). Are online learners frustrated with collaborative learning experiences? *International Review of Research in Open & Distance Learning*, 13(2), 26-44.
- Chen, K., & Jang, S. (2010). Motivation in online learning: Testing a model of self-determination theory. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 26(4), 741-752. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2010.01.011
- Darabi, A. A., Arrastia, M. C., Nelson, D. W., Cornille, T. T., & Liang, X. X. (2011). Cognitive presence in asynchronous online learning: A comparison of four discussion strategies. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 27(3), 216-227. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2729.2010.00392
- Dornyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational strategies in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Foroutan, M., Noordin, N., & Bin Hamzah, M. (2013). Weblog promotes ESL learners' writing autonomy. *Journal of Language Teaching & Research*, 4(5), 994-1002. doi:10.4304/jltr.4.5.994-1002
- Gardner, J. (2001). Integrative motivation and second-language acquisition. In Dornyei, Z. & Schmidt, R. (Eds.), *Motivation and Second Language Acquisition* (pp. 1-20). Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press. HI: University of Hawaii Press.
- Krish, P., Hussin, S., & Sivapunniam, N. (2011). Language learning and language acquisition in online forums. *3L: Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 17(2), 91-100.
- Moore, M. G. (1989). Three types of interaction. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 3(2), 1-6.
- Lai, K. (2012). Assessing participation skills: Online discussions with peers. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 37(8), 933-947. doi:10.1080/02602938.2011.590878
- Mitchell R., & Myles, F. (2004). *Second language learning theories*. (2nd ed.). London: Arnold.
- Nandi, D., Hamilton, M., & Harland, J. (2012). Evaluating the quality of interaction in asynchronous discussion forums in fully online courses. *Distance Education*, 33(1), 5-30. doi:10.1080/01587919.2012.667957
- Ray, A. W., Prosch, M. M., & Roberts, D. F. (2007). Performance and perceptions in an online, distributed environment: Effects of collaborative versus individual activities. *Journal of Emerging Technologies in Accounting*, 4(199-213).
- Schroeder-Moreno, M. (2010). Enhancing active and interactive learning online - lessons learned from an online introductory Agroecology course. *NACTA Journal*, 54(1), 21-30.
- Thompson, L., & Ku, H. (2006). A case study of online collaborative learning. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 7(4), 361-375.
- Watkins, R. (2005). *75 e-learning activities: Making online learning interactive*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.
- Zhu, C., Valcke, M., & Schellens, T. (2010). A cross-cultural study of teacher perspectives on teacher roles and adoption of online collaborative learning in higher education. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 33(2), 147-165. doi:10.1080/02619761003631849