

In the face of COVID19 and “socially distanced” learning: What can we learn from virtual learning as language teachers?

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I am Edmundo Cruz Luna, and I am a 3rd year visiting associate professor in the English Language and Literature department here at Kyudai, where I teach classes mostly on discourse and usage-based perspectives on linguistics and grammar, as well as classes on English conversation and composition. The students here have been (mostly) good and encouraging – but they have generally lacked a proactive stance on active participation, especially during my English conversation classes – classes where active participation between the instructor and students is vital to success. Now, during our socially distanced learning protocols, having the students actively participate in English conversation classes is much more of a formidable challenge. However, the virtual channel also opens up some potentially useful modes that can be used, despite the suboptimal opportunities for real-time, face-to-face interactions. Some of these modes include virtual “interviews” and multimedia presentations.

When students hear the word “interview”, many feel uneasy, especially since they usually think of job interview-type questions that they have to answer individually. The issue here is that most students are constrained by thinking that an “interview” is rigid in nature and that nothing can be flexible. An “interview” in an online context can simply be regarded as a type of one-on-one conversation. Depending on how many students are in the class, the numbers can be adjusted to fit the situation. What I would suggest is dividing students into 20-minute segments, which would mean three students at a minimum for every hour. I would put a cap at four students for every 20-minute segment, which would mean 12 students maximum for every hour. Thus, a class with 30 students could be handled in 2.5 hours – and this activity could be administered twice in one semester, just so students have ample opportunities to interact with their instructor conversationally. Also, the range of questions *could* be determined beforehand; on the other hand, this could be impromptu - this is all the instructor’s prerogative. So, this type of “interview” could be truly interactive and conversational. This, of course, is highly dependent on the students’ abilities themselves, and only the instructor really knows what they are capable of in a semester.

As for multimedia presentations suitable for conversation classes, the one piece of advice I can offer is that “flashiness” can only do so much – what really counts is the substance which underlies the presentation. As instructors, we must abandon the tendency to cram our slides with text; instead, our slides should be streamlined – and we have the capabilities to include multiple media modes, including videos and sound clips. Again, these clips should serve to augment language lessons rather than detract from them.

In sum, even during these socially-distanced times, we can still engage with our language students – and with our present technologies, we do have those capabilities – much more than what was possible a decade ago. It behooves us to engage in advancements in classroom technology, and to be adaptable. This is what we owe our students at the very minimum during this challenging time.