

“Large [Online] Group Lectures... What’s the Point?” Building Relationships in Online Teaching

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While language teachers in higher education have been using online learning platforms and digital education tools for years, the use of technology increased dramatically at the outset of COVID-19 when all teaching and learning was suddenly transferred to an online environment. While the world has, to some extent, gone back to its pre-COVID normal, some of the changes it brought to education have remained. Among them is online learning, which has – thanks to the flexibility and accessibility it affords both teachers and students – become a popular and much-used method for teaching and learning (Almahasees et al., 2021; Elshami et al., 2021).

However, many language centre teachers, ourselves included, found several challenges with online and hybrid teaching. During the pandemic, we experienced the difficulties of connecting with our students via the screen, facilitating interaction between the students and engaging the students in online learning. We noticed that activities and communication which feel natural and easily occur in the classroom – for example, greeting our students as they arrive or students chatting with each other while waiting to be let inside the classroom – can sometimes become awkward and challenging to recreate online. We also noticed that students asked us fewer questions and sought assistance less frequently. The same issues are mentioned in studies, such as the one by Wut and Xu (2021), where the authors concluded that due to the physical barriers of online classrooms, students have fewer opportunities to interact with each other and the teacher. Students may also feel reluctant to raise questions or openly share their views and as a result, may feel less engaged in online or hybrid settings.

Because of these challenges with online learning, we believe it is essential for language teachers to facilitate interaction and engagement and to assist in building group cohesion and solid relationships. Not only do strong relationships increase enjoyment for teachers and students alike, but research also indicates several other benefits of positive student-student and teacher-student relationships. It has been shown that sense of community is significantly associated with perceived learning (Garrison, 2007). Interaction between students can furthermore promote students’ educational success, achievement of goals, as well as critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Anwar, 2016). Teacher-student relations can assist in sustaining a supportive

learning environment (Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017) and improving students' performance (Busteed, 2022; Elshami et al., 2021). Interaction between the teacher and student and teachers' social presence can moreover elevate student satisfaction (Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017), motivation (Wu et al., 2010) and confidence (Misra & Mazelfi, 2021) and contribute important support for students' learning outcomes (Swan, 2002).

In this commentary, we will introduce and discuss the key findings of a study we conducted as part of the 2digi2 project¹, focusing on the relationship building aspect of online, synchronous learning. With the help of two questionnaires, we asked students and teachers to explain what kind of activities, forms of communication, learning platforms and tools can help build functional, positive relationships (student-student and teacher-student) in digital learning environments. The answers show that certain features are crucial when it comes to aiding relationship building.

Student Survey

The main finding of the student survey was that an overwhelming majority agreed that having positive group chemistry and working in small groups or teams helped the respondents build good relationships with their peers during online meetings. Other important factors mentioned by the respondents were engaging in casual small talk with peers, introducing oneself, getting to know one another, and seeing one's peers on one's screen.

For building a good relationship with the teacher, the students strongly emphasized the importance of the teacher introducing themselves to the students, caring about the students' wellbeing, being available and happy to help students outside the lessons, giving the students personalized feedback and sharing personal stories, opinions and feelings.

The survey also demonstrated what students find challenging about building relationships with peers and the teacher in an online setting. Table 1 below shows the major roadblocks that could be detected from the students' responses, illustrated by a few comments.

¹ The 2digi2 project, instigated by FINELC (The Network of Finnish University Language Centres) in January 2022, includes participants from university language centres across Finland. Other aspects of online learning included in the project are special needs, learning objectives and generic skills.

Table 1

Roadblocks to Building Relationships in Online Learning

The nature of online communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Communicating online is super clumsy and it is easy to open your microphones at the same time. That leads to awkward situations.” • “I think teachers have to accept that the silence between asking a question and getting [a] response is longer on zoom, because students have to unmute themselves before they answer and it just takes some more time for people to answer.”
The reluctance or refusal to have cameras on	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Classes where no one had their video on [when] on Zoom so you couldn’t see anyone besides the teacher. Those kinds of situations felt very passive. Everyone sort of just logged on to watch the lecture and then disappeared when the lecture was over. You never saw anyone’s face.”
Big group sizes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Large [online] group lectures... what’s the point? Better to have a recorded lecture!” • “When we divide to small group (at least 4 ppl), and everyone will be join the discussion and sharing. It’s really help me to focus on and learn a lot.”
Students feeling like the teacher is not interested (in them, their learning process)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “If I sense that the teacher is maybe not really engaged in their own teaching and are perhaps a little bit unsympathetic towards the students’ workload or health, it gives me a more negative view of the teacher.” • “During the classes it is nice to see the teacher asking and checking if everything is doing okay for everyone.”
Teachers showing a bad attitude to or disinterest in online learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “If the teacher is complaining about the online teaching, bad attitude.”
Teacher appearing uncommunicative or un-supportive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “If the teacher does not reply to your email for instance, it makes you feel that they do not care or are willing to help you.”

The biggest barriers for building relationships were big group sizes and the nature of online communication, which was, by many respondents, found awkward. Some pointed out how online conversations often run less smoothly and/or are less organic than when meeting face-to-face. Another hindrance relates to the technical nature of online education: for some, the problem was the poor quality of the internet connection; for others, it was the teacher’s visible discomfort, inexperience and, in some cases, incompetence, in teaching online. The reluctance or refusal of some students to have their cameras on was also experienced as extremely challenging for establishing relationships.

In establishing a good relationship between the teacher and students, a major deterrent appeared to be when students felt like the teacher was not interested – in the students, in their learning process, in engaging with the students or in teaching, especially online. The answers also display the importance of the teacher establishing a (social) presence in the online classroom and being responsive. Many students are reluctant to ask teachers for help in online environments,

which is why it becomes crucial for teachers to early on and firmly demonstrate that they are available to the students, that they are happy to assist, and that they truly care about the students' wellbeing. What further seemed to widen the gap in an online environment was when the teacher appeared to the student as uncommunicative.

All in all, the results indicate students' desire to see and get to know the teacher and other course participants, to engage in small talk and small group activities, to have a teacher who is present, available and shows they care, and, ultimately, to establish a positive group chemistry. Building relationships online becomes easier if these wishes are met.

Teacher Survey

The aim of the teacher questionnaire was to discover if and how language centre teachers accommodate the students' wishes. The questions that delivered the most answers, with the most detail, dealt with the following topics: showing students that they (i.e., the teachers) care, building a positive atmosphere, encouraging students to have their cameras on, creating opportunities for students to get to know each other, and sharing personal stories, opinions and feelings.

As ways of showing the students that the teachers care about their wellbeing, teachers frequently mentioned verbally checking in with the students, being good listeners, addressing as many students as possible during every class, and making sure everyone is up to speed with tasks. Respondents also described how they try to design the course workload and the assignments in a way that enabled students to complete the course without overexerting themselves, offer flexibility with deadlines and with methods of completing tasks, as well as let the students know and feel that they are available for help.

As methods of creating opportunities for students to get to know each other, a majority of the answers referred to offering small group or pair work opportunities. Some also pointed out the importance of proper student introductions at the beginning of the course. What was truly notable was the consensus among teachers on how a teacher can assist in building positive group chemistry. The themes and methods that repeatedly came up in the responses as important were creating an accepting and encouraging environment, the teacher being open and approachable, and by affirming that making mistakes is allowed.

The teachers' answers to what they share of themselves with the students demonstrated a wide spectrum. Some teachers said that the only things they share with their students are their name and their face. A few teachers also shared their professional CV, while others openly share personal stories and anecdotes and, in their class introduction, also talk about their families, perhaps where and how they live, and so on.

As methods for encouraging students to have their cameras on, many teachers try to reason the need for seeing each other and remind the students that communicating is not just words, but non-verbal communication, too. It is also a two-way street: it is as important for the teacher to see the student as vice versa. Several teachers request the use of cameras in small groups but are more lenient with bigger groups and a select few teachers do not require, or even request, the students to have their cameras on.

Discussion

Although there was some variation between what students and teachers considered essential in creating good relationships, the answers also showed remarkable similarities. We consider these nodes to be of great importance and view them as excellent building blocks in creating a teachers' tool kit for assisting in building strong relationships – something we hope all teachers wish to do.

Both students and teachers mentioned the benefits of students working in small groups (three to four students), allowing students to get to know each other, increasing their interaction with one another, and lowering their threshold for communicating in a foreign language. What was noteworthy in our survey results, though, was that the students wished for the same small group to remain throughout the course, whereas the teachers highlighted the benefits of frequently changing pairs/groups. To students, having the same group throughout the course seemed to increase the benefits of the method.

Another often mentioned successful habit for relationship-building was the teacher's work towards creating a welcoming, safe and relaxed atmosphere, as well as the teachers being available, responsive and offering opportunities to meet outside of class hours. Many students and teachers also emphasized the importance of communication style. The students hoped that there would be room in the classes for informal, chitchat discussions and several students appreciated when the teacher used humour in their communication.

According to our surveys, the most important building block in developing good relationships in online learning situations is that participants are all able to both see and hear each other. A study by Richardson and Lowenthal (2017) also highlights the importance of being able to see body language, mentioning, for example, how camera proximity, gazes, smiling, facial expressions and the use of humour can increase social presence. It is worth noting, though, that the use of cameras is always an individual's decision and that even the teachers who reasoned with the students and pleaded for the use of cameras often felt like they failed. A method we suggest trying at the very beginning of the course is having students discuss and establish, in their small groups, the "rules" of communication for their small group work. We also advocate for the teachers to introduce some key features of the online meeting platform they are using, such as the user hiding their own face from the screen.

An often-overlooked aspect of relationship-building is the importance of encouragement. This can be either verbal or non-verbal in nature, and often gestures such as nods or sounds of approval go a long way. While this situational, spontaneous feedback does not diminish the value of more thorough, methodical feedback, the students' survey answers showed their appreciation for the teacher's feedback both during and after class, and on bigger assignments as well as smaller, shorter in-class ones. "Good job, everyone" at the end of a task can work wonders. Elshami et al. (2021) mention how feedback from the teacher can be used to compensate for the lack of face-to-face interaction as well increase students' engagement in online learning.

A topic where the teachers' and students' answers most notably differed was in the level and depth of the teachers introducing themselves to the students. While both considered it important for the introductions to take place, the students very frequently mentioned their appreciation

for teachers who were willing to share personal details about their lives, whereas many teachers were only willing to disclose professional aspects of themselves with their students. While the teachers must, of course, decide what and how much of themselves they are comfortable sharing, we hope they keep in mind the students' wish to get to know them as people, not just as teachers.

Finally, a seemingly obvious, yet perhaps often ignored roadblock in building good relationships in online learning, as often repeated in students' answers, was teachers' evident discomfort in and with online teaching. The students called for teachers to build tolerance for uncomfortable silences, which are unavoidable in remote teaching, and to allow for the few extra seconds it takes to operate online: for students to unmute and mute their microphones, to wait and see whose turn it is to speak and so on. Some teachers felt that openly expressing their feelings about online classes humanized them, whereas, according to the student surveys, the teacher showing frustration with online teaching was viewed as a major deterrent in the students' learning.

Conclusion

The student questionnaire confirmed our beliefs about how certain methods can assist in building functional relationships between the students, as well as the teacher and students. Here are some suggestions for us language teachers on how to accomplish this:

- Include small group activities
- Create a welcoming atmosphere
- Allow time for small talk
- Let the students know you as a person, not just as a teacher
- Encourage the use of cameras
- Be approachable and responsive

Finally, it is very important for us teachers to be comfortable with online teaching, which requires adjusting to the distinct nature of this type of communication and helping the students do the same. We also need to appreciate and be able to utilize all the opportunities the online environment offers, including those that help us build good relationships with and among our students. Otherwise, all we end up doing is teaching large online group lectures – and what's the point in that?

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