
Prioritising the Multilingual International Student (Experience) in Online Courses

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Setting the Context

Multilingual international students are often called “ESL students” as they use English as an additional language.

The Face-to-Face Classroom Experience

For many international students, the face-to-face classroom experience may be the primary source of skill development in multiple domains of experience. Meaningful social interaction is tied to linguistic, social, cross-cultural, academic, and professional growth.

How may the switch to online learning impact this potential?

Multilingual international students' needs and expectations often differ relative to their domestic peers. As Lawrence (2014) has argued, “unless **social interaction and social presence are methodically cultivated**... there are often reduced opportunities for interaction, learning, feedback, technical support that result in disengagement” (p. 129).

Disengagement with learning can also stem from students' attitudes to technology and to online learning, digital literacy on the part of students and instructors, reliable access to the internet, and equally important, **a sense of community, built and maintained by all participating members** (Lawrence, 2014).

Fostering social interaction online requires instructors to perform **the dual role of instructor-participant** and to possess **both practical and research knowledge** of technology-based teaching.



Empathy in (Online) Teaching

An empathic style to teaching multilingual international students becomes even more critical when teaching online *and* under atypical circumstances.



For empathy to make a difference, Jordan and Schwartz (2018) argue that **“the student must sense that the professor has been touched, impacted, or influenced, even slightly, by the student’s situation”** (p. 27). When doing so, students are likely to feel less alone and to experience deeper connections with their instructors.

Developing a Sense of Community

In order to achieve a sense of community, Lawrence (2014) suggests that “opportunities for **spontaneous interaction** are also crucial in group bonding” (p. 132), in addition to interpersonal contact which stems from group work.

Multilingual students may feel more motivated to participate in their learning environments if their relationships with their peers are characterised by **quality and familiarity**, and if group cohesion is present (Tavares, 2019).



Experiencing a Sense of Connectedness in Virtual Interaction

Some Practical Strategies



Some Practical Strategies (1)

Assign time **early in the course** for students to post information about themselves, their goals, expectations, and needs in a community-like style (Lawrence, 2014). This can take a multimodal approach (e.g., text, imagery, video, audio) to reflect students' individual preferences when it comes to self-presentation.

Some Practical Strategies (2)

Provide tools for synchronous and informal interaction between students **outside the course**, through which the students can interact freely (Lehman & Conceição, 2010).

Some Practical Strategies (3)

“Monitor learner interaction at the start of a program to gauge progress, to model online interaction and community development, and to check in with learners”
(Lawrence, 2014, pp. 138-139).

Some Practical Strategies (4)

Devise interactive activities **in small groups** to help gradually build and foster group cohesion (Lawrence, 2014).

Some Practical Strategies (5)

Implement pair or group activities whose conclusion/solution depends on **an exchange of personal knowledge and experience** between international students.

Some Practical Strategies (6)

Diversify the kind of interactive activities online (e.g., synchronous, asynchronous, audio, video, imagery, writing) so that the mode of interaction is not repetitive.

Some Practical Strategies (7)

Spend the first lecture **preparing and teaching** international (and domestic) students on how to learn online: expectations around participation and communication, peer interaction, student-instructor interaction, assignments, email etiquette, etc.

Some Practical Strategies (8)

Simplify the language of instruction, providing examples of the target content whenever possible. Highlight key information (e.g., instructions, deadlines) and avoid complex cultural remarks, such as jokes and slang, that may confuse a student (Tavares, 2020).

Conclusion

Courses whose design attends to the needs of multilingual international students is **more inclusive** to domestic *and* international students alike.



Thank you!

Comments and questions may be directed to
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References

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