



# Teaching Languages Online

**Carla Meskill and Natasha Anthony**

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Carla Meskill and Natasha Anthony



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## Teaching languages online



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# Teaching languages well online: the essentials

- This initial chapter discusses the fundamental concepts involved in online language teaching and introduces the approach and format for the proceeding chapters.
- With the focus in this and subsequent chapters being on active teaching in online venues, foundations of task design and their orchestration via instructional conversations are established.
- The chapter supplies definitions for the four online language learning environments and their affordances.
- Fundamentals of designing task toolkits for online language teaching are outlined and illustrated.

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# Teaching languages well online: the essentials

There is no question that teaching and learning languages online is growing in popularity. The reasons for this growth are many. Chief among them is the matter of convenience. Rather than traveling distances short and long to participate in face-to-face (f2f) courses, people wishing to study a new language have only to turn to their computer screens any hour of the day or night and access instruction. The forms that this instruction takes are many and varied; some depending on instructors, some depending on stand-alone instructional materials, and many both. Moreover, many language educators who teach in the traditional f2f classroom are making good use of online tools and materials as complements to their courses, places where students can practice and study outside of class time. In short, the amount of instructional activity taking place in cyberspace is enormous and, as we hope you will find in this text, enormously exciting.

Those who are skeptical about online learning tend to point to the loss of the fast-paced, stimulating interaction that takes place in live language classrooms. It is true that the timing and with it the dynamics of interactions is radically different, however, as we explore throughout this text, there are numerous affordances that can, when exploited by excellent instruction, mitigate the absence of live interaction. Indeed, since we first began teaching online several years ago, students report that where they once enjoyed the pacing and adrenaline of live classes, they find the timing element in online forums more to their liking. This is especially true for learners who are less outgoing in live contexts; the luxury of time and quasi-anonymity work in their favor. Language learners who might otherwise not react well under the pressure of real-time comprehension and production particularly enjoy online language learning.

## What this book is about

This text lays out methods and their rationale for optimal uses of online environments for effective language teaching. It primarily addresses professional language educators, those new to the field, those with experience in traditional classrooms, and those who teach partly or fully online. Our three foundational premises are as follows:

- Language learning is made up of primarily social/instructional processes.
- Online environments can be used well socially and instructionally.
- Teaching well in online environments requires skilled instruction.

We therefore focus on the kinds of teacher instructional moves in conversation with students, what we call, along with Tharp and Gallimore (1991), ‘instructional conversations’ that in our

work are proving highly effective for teaching language in online environments. Before expanding further on these three foundational premises for our approach to online language teaching, we will address some essential practical matters that concern the mechanics and logistics of online teaching: time, management, learning goals and assessment.

## Time

Online teaching and learning can take place as it does in a f2f classroom *synchronously*, that is in real time, or *asynchronously*, whenever its participants choose to interact. Both of these teaching modes require conceptualizations of time that are quite different from traditional meet-four-times-a-week planning and participation structures. In the short term, the design and planning of online elements is time consuming. In the long term, however, the fact of having all materials and structures in a single place is a time saver. In regard to the actual teaching/contact time with students, online teaching is often viewed as requiring more time than face-to-face as instead of having contact with students three to four times per week, one is having contact every day. And, as mentioned earlier, students who would otherwise shy away from actively participating in f2f contexts are more than likely contributing more and more often for reasons we will discuss shortly. This in turn compels instructors to be more actively and continuously responsive throughout the term. While instructors are quick to point out these time investments, they are also quick to qualify these by citing other areas where enormous amounts of time are saved. We mentioned having all one's course materials in one place. In addition, there is the matter of convenience. Many online instructors log onto their courses when it suits their schedules; not at 11:00 a.m. every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday but rather some days evenings, some mornings as their schedules permit. Traveling to and from a physical classroom, parking, meals away from home, even clothing and childcare can all be factored in to counterbalance the time investment in online education. Most instructors who calculate and consider the shifts in how their time is spent testify to the increase in the quality time they can spend teaching well in exchange for time spent on activity extraneous to actual instruction.

Students also enjoy the time savings of doing online learning. For many contemporary students, the time and logistics of traveling to a physical classroom according to a set schedule can be challenging. Students who work and who have families can study anytime and anywhere that suits their busy schedules. There are the larger life time issues and then there is the matter of instructional time itself.

## Instructional time

In addition to available time (above), this text is particularly interested in instructional time; that is, the time that both instructors and learners have to carefully consider the form and

content of their online postings in online venues. For learners, it is within this thinking, comprehending and composing time that active language learning is taking place. For instructors, it is within this thinking, comprehending and composing time that optimal instructional conversation moves can be devised given the current status of the class discussion. Both students and their teachers can, moreover, use this time to access any and all information they need to comprehend, compose and instruct. For students, the most obvious example might be taking advantage of online resources such as dictionaries, thesauruses and even native speaker friends in composing their posts. For instructors, they can access and in turn make use of background cultural information and artifacts, visuals, animated grammar explications and the like to amplify their instructional conversation moves.

## Task design

Like in the traditional f2f language classroom, a major part of instructional routines involves tasks in which learners engage with the aim of their practicing and thus learning target language forms and functions. A language learning task can be thought of as a structured activity that has clear instructional objectives, content and context that is culturally authentic and appropriate, and specified procedures for its undertaking. Tasks are, then, activities in which learners engage for the purpose of mastering aspects of the target language under study. They range in complexity from brief language workouts (e.g. listen and repeat, listen or read and perform a grammatical transformation) to more complex activities such as role play simulations, group decision-making or sustained interactions with native speakers for problem solving. The essential element that defines language learning tasks is the purpose, objective or outcome of the task, an element that we will stress throughout this text. It is through a consistent focus on task objectives that teachers make productive use of instructional conversation moves to guide and enhance the learning.

<b>Sample Language Learning Task Template</b>	
Topic:	
Duration:	
Skills focus:	
Overall instructional aims:	
Task structure:	
	Task toolkit
	Roles for learners
	Setting the scene
	Action expectations
	Action monitoring → instructional conversation (feedback)
Expected outcomes	

**Figure 1** Sample language learning task template

The *task toolkit* is a convention that we use throughout this text. It is the set of language elements that make up the focus of a given language task. One advantage of online instruction in this regard is that these toolkits can be collected and managed in a course task

repository and reused as needed. The information in the task toolkit should be as simple and direct as possible as it is to these language elements that instructors and students refer as they undertake and evaluate the processes and outcomes of the given task. Our convention is to place this boxed text in the upper right-hand corner of all screens as a consistent anchoring and referencing tool (Figure 2).

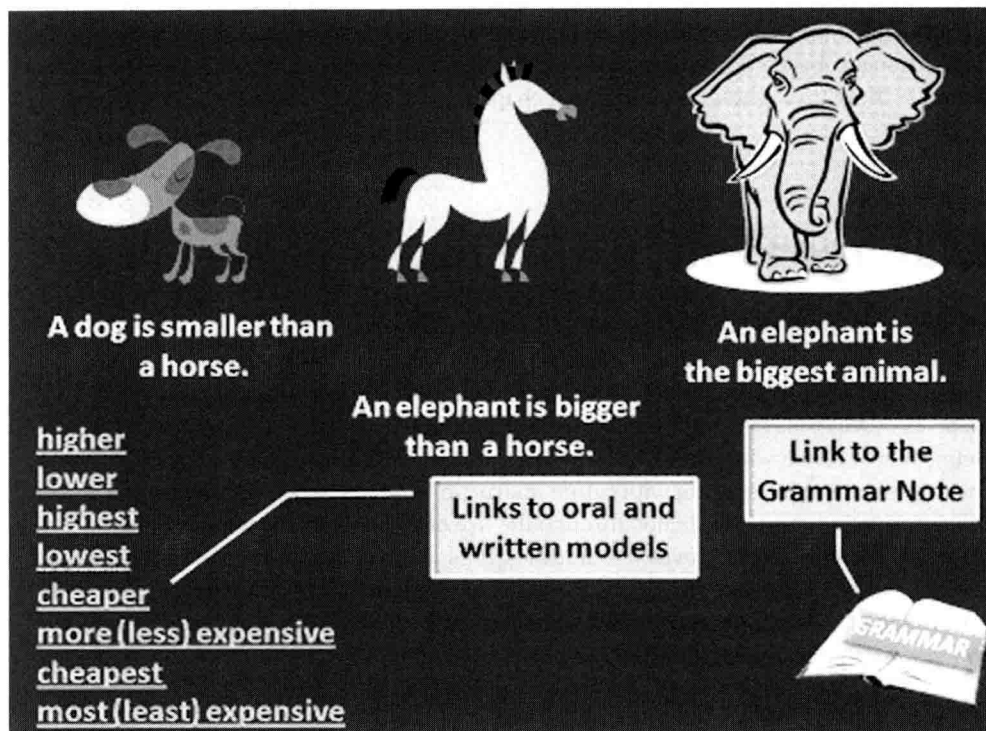


Figure 2 Sample task toolkit

*Roles for learners* can be specified much as they are in the live classroom. In online environments, however, one can also provide links to background language and cultural information concerning the roles that learners are assigned. If, for example, a student is assigned the role of a bank manager in a bank robbery role play, links to target culture sites and information (video clips are particularly useful in understanding target culture social roles) can be included in the description of the particular assigned role. In this way also learners can have background about one another's roles so as to better attune their communication patterns with one another.

Similarly, in *setting the scene* for a language learning task, students and instructors have at their fingertips massive amounts of background information in multimodal forms. Taking the bank robbery role play task as an example, learners can see and explore banks and banking routines in the target culture as part of preparing to undertake the task.

*Action expectations* and *action monitoring* constitute the heart of powerful instructional conversations. As you will see throughout the text, this aspect of language learning tasks is

where we believe the real teaching and learning occur. Learners are expected to comprehend and produce specified language correctly (action expectations) and instructors monitor accordingly. In monitoring these task-guided conversations, instructors seek out teachable moments – moments where learners need a push, a reminder, reference to the task goals and/or task toolkit, or probes of their understanding of target culture and context. These teachable moments represent rich opportunities in online environments in terms of time and available resources, as we discussed above. We will discuss the goals and anatomy of instructional conversations more thoroughly at the end of this chapter and, subsequently, illustrate these throughout the remaining chapters.

## Management

Managing ten to thirty students three or four times per week in traditional classroom settings is onerous. How does one manage the learning in online environments? As mentioned earlier, the sheer fact of having all of one's materials, all student work, all archives of what has taken place in one online location is a great time saver in the long term. Being able to revisit what has already occurred in class over time can be a powerful management tool in assisting with future instructional planning as well. Managing all of this information can be facilitated through the use of a Course Management System (CMS) whereby special tools are provided to track learners, their assignments, their participation structures, their contributions. Thus, the kinds of continually and automatically updated information about online learning activity can greatly ease the overall management of coursework that takes place online.

An element of management that can in large part determine the level of success for an online course or online component of a course is the setting of norms and expectations. Because learners are structuring their own time in these online venues, the amount and quality of their participation for optimal learning, and optimal grades, need to be clearly specified and pointed to throughout the term. Actual models and exemplars of optimal participation structures can be provided so that learners are 100% clear on the mode, purpose and level of quality expected. Reminders of these expectations can be visually present and pointed to throughout the term.

In addition to management, one of the most critical features of online instruction as reported in research studies is the online behaviors of the instructor. When students log on to their course site, they immediately seek out information on the instructor's recent participation. Likewise, anecdotal and formal research accounts point out that students attend most to the posts of instructors and less to the posts of other students. In short, being present and active in the online venue is a critical factor for successful instruction. This means logging on and actively instructing on a consistent, continual basis. Many an online student has reported feeling 'abandoned' when instructors take a day off. Thus, part of the online instructional equation is to 'be present' even if it means announcing that you will be offline for the weekend.

# Content/Sequencing

In structuring online content and activities, instructors can use a variety of approaches, just like in traditional f2f classes. If the course is structured around the content and sequence of a textbook, support materials and activities can be likewise sequenced. One of the most common uses of an online portion of a language course is to use online discussion spaces as a place for learners to engage in complementary tasks and activities that align with textbook units. In this way online portions are used to support and amplify the content under study. A fully online course can be structured in a like manner. In many cases language textbook publishers provide online supplementary and support activities that can be incorporated and used to structure the online portion of a language course.

The breadth of any language course is, of course, dependent on its length of study and goals. The depth, however, when undertaken all or in part on the internet, is potentially limitless. Reference, background and expansion materials abound. Making good, sound use of these limitless content possibilities starts with examining the purposes and goals of the tasks and activities that make up the course. Websites from the target language and culture can be effectively repurposed and mined for use by learners as the basis of communicative language learning tasks. Examples of ways to make use of these resources appear throughout the following chapters.

## Assessment

### *Micro-level*

Because language learning is a dynamic and multifaceted enterprise, one that is influenced by any number of individual and contextual factors, in this text we advocate the centrality of ongoing formative assessment of student learning. In this view, the two – instruction and assessment – are viewed as interdependent. As an instructor is evaluating learner comprehension and performance, it is on this evaluation that she bases the construction of her subsequent instructional moves, her instruction in essence. This marriage of instruction/assessment happens in instructional conversations where opportunities for authentic interaction in the target language are orchestrated and overseen by an instructor with specific plans and goals. Her responses to learners as they undertake her activities are responsive to her assessment of learner performance and, thereby, learner readiness in a given teachable moment. This is instruction that pushes a learner along his or her developmental trajectory towards mastery of the focal target language (Meskill, 2009).

Task → learner post → instructor assessment → instructional conversation move → learner post

## Macro-level

Online venues are excellent ones for tracking learner progress. Whether you use a free and open communication forum or a sophisticated CMS, you will have digital records of student performance. These can be in the form of graded exercises, essays and other kinds of individual assignments. Assessments can also be made of the threaded discourse contributions learners have made while undertaking tasks and while responding to instructor prompts and guidance. These kinds of running records of learner growth and development in the new language take assessment to a new and quite powerful level as they supply archived information upon which to base subsequent instruction, something the most expert teacher would have difficulty tracking in f2f venues. These digital records, moreover, can serve as a guide for learners themselves to gain a sense of their strengths, weaknesses and overall progress. Collecting exemplary moments in class discussions and learning tasks and assembling these in a student-generated electronic portfolio is an excellent instructional strategy both in terms of student learning and in conserving instructor time for actual teaching.

## The four environments

When setting out to learn on the internet, we can simply interact with the materials and resources available via searching and referencing information. We can also make use of widely available digital learning objects (DLOs). These are materials that are explicitly instructional and, in most cases, interactive: games, tutorials, fill in the blank, videos, teaching animations, drills, simulations and the like. What marks these as DLOs is their *instructional* purpose. Numerous online DLO repositories curate collections of these objects for more streamlined access by educators (<http://merlot.org>, for example). These kinds of learning objects can be assigned to learners for independent work. They can also be incorporated into online coursework whereby students are assigned collaborative tasks that make use of these learning objects thereby serving as springboards or catalysts for instructional interactions between and among learners and instructors.

In addition to online materials in the form of digital learning objects, there are four venues for teaching and learning online, each with its distinct characteristics and affordances (Figure 3): written asynchronous, written synchronous, oral asynchronous and oral synchronous.

**Written asynchronous environments** are likely the most familiar to anyone who uses telecommunications. Email is the quintessential written asynchronous venue whereby messages are composed and comprehended outside of real time, much as a letter or postcard sent via land mail. In written asynchronous learning environments, learners read and respond to posts made by their instructor and their fellow students when it is convenient to do so. For online instruction, this mode or venue is by far the most popular. This is in great part due to the fact that instruction can be accessed and engaged at any time



from any location. It is for this reason, written asynchronous is the most widely used mode of online instructional delivery by educational institutions around the world. Indeed, the majority of Learning Management Systems (LMS) – software whereby one can build and orchestrate instruction – are designed for the written asynchronous mode of instruction.

**Written synchronous environments** can be readily compared to Instant Messaging (IM) or texting. Interlocutors compose and comprehend messages in real time. The resulting posts are naturally shorter, less thoughtfully composed and more conversation-like in their form and content. As we will see, written synchronous communication often accompanies oral synchronous communication whereby side conversations take place via text while the main focus of a learning session is oral and synchronous. Written synchronous messaging can also take place in learning environments that are otherwise written asynchronous. Most LMSs have a chat-like feature that can be used by prior arrangement for real-time interactions.

#### **Affordances of asynchronous online teaching and learning environments**

- convenience
- connectivity
- membership (playing field is leveled)
- authentic audiences
- tailored audiences
- strategies to compensate for lack of non-verbal info
- richness of information (links, multimedia)
- time to focus and review
- time to compose, resources to compose
- time and opportunity to reflect
- opportunity to witness and track learning
- opportunity to demonstrate learning

#### **Affordances of synchronous online teaching and learning environments**

- convenience
- connectivity
- membership (playing field is leveled)
- authentic audiences
- tailored audiences
- richness of information (links, multimedia)
- opportunity to witness and track learning in real time
- opportunity to demonstrate learning in real time

**Figure 3** Affordances of online teaching and learning environments

**Oral asynchronous environments** are popular for informal learning on the web. Similar to blogs, posters can record and post their thoughts, questions and responses to others via audio. Similarly, recorded audio posts can be inserted into just about any online environment, page or document for instructional purposes. Audio responses to written compositions, for example, can be inserted as a means of feedback. Recorded audio commentary can also