

Adapting Language Courses for Asynchronous Remote Learning

If you teach a language course, you have designed a highly interactive class intended to develop not just students' academic language proficiency, but also students' interpersonal communicative skills. Adapting the kinds of learning experiences that are intended to build conversational fluency for a remote learning environment can seem particularly daunting, but even that can be done. In this short guide, you will find suggestions about the realities and challenges you should take into account as you make your initial decisions about moving to an asynchronous learning model; then you will find suggestions for adapting key aspects of a language course for asynchronous remote learning.

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Realities that should inform our pedagogical decisions

The realities that our students face in our current situation provide us with important reasons for choosing to move to an asynchronous model. These realities include the following.

Struggles with connectivity. Our students may be accessing our courses from their homes in cities, towns, and rural areas that may have limited access to high speed internet. It may be difficult initially to imagine that students today might not have instant access to our Blackboard sites or the internet. Consider for a moment one of the cities we would regard as being highly connected—New York City. It is surprising to learn that according to [a report published in 2018](#) by the Mayor's office in New York City, 31% of households in New York City do not have access to broadband internet. This may help you

consider struggles that students in impoverished areas of the state or rural areas may face in securing high speed internet.

Struggles with scheduling. While we hope that many of our students will be able to be on campus this coming academic year, we may face a situation in which some students are home or one in which students will be sent home before the planned return home in November. If our students are home, new schedules will take precedence as students now have to take on added tasks: finding employment with different schedules than the ones they may have planned on, caring for younger siblings, pitching in at home, running errands, and potentially caring for themselves or family members if they become ill.

Struggles with a home learning environment. If our students are living at home, they may share that home with family members who may not be able to maintain a quiet and ideal environment for learning. Our students may need to share devices with other family members. Our students may be interrupted at home in unpredictable ways. Our students may be ill. Our students may not have a welcoming home environment to come back to and may be staying in a temporary living situation or moving from one situation to another.

Adapting a language course for asynchronous remote learning

As you consider the potential struggles students face, you may become aware that asynchronous learning is preferable for your students so that they have the freedom to access your course when they can and balance their new schedules with their work in your course.

As you think about teaching language courses asynchronously, it is helpful to have a framework to consider the requirements that you make of your students so that you can begin making decisions about how those requirements can be adapted for remote asynchronous learning. Regardless of the language or level of that language you teach, there are likely two broad requirements that you make of the students in your class: you require them to develop cognitive academic language proficiency and you require them to develop basic interpersonal communication skills (Cummins, 2008).

1. **Cognitive academic language proficiency:** When you require students to learn vocabulary, language rules, sentence structure, characters or signs, and so on, you are asking students to learn concepts and ideas about a language: the result is that students develop conceptual understanding of how a language works that allows them to write and read in the language and to discuss how the language itself works. Generally speaking, such learning is relatively easy to adapt in an asynchronous learning environment and this guide will discuss that adaptation briefly.
2. **Basic interpersonal communication skills:** When you require students learn to use a language you ask students to attempt actual communication: the result is that students develop automatic skills at various levels of achievement and that they can observe, analyze, and adjust their attempts at those skills. While it may seem that this kind of learning is more difficult to adapt in an asynchronous learning environment, it can be done and this guide will suggest options for doing so.

Both these elements of language learning involve cycles of practice and feedback. Below you will find suggestions for how to ensure students get practice and feedback through asynchronous language learning.

Providing practice opportunities for cognitive academic language proficiency in an asynchronous remote learning environment

Practice to learn vocabulary in the target language

You likely already have worksheets, homework, and other assignments and assessments that help students learn vocabulary in the target language. If students have textbooks, workbooks, or other materials that they were using in your face-to-face class, simply ask them to continue to use those resources. Work that previously was turned in, can be submitted via Blackboard. For assignments that need to be handwritten, students can submit photographs of completed work.

Using the resources you already have is a good idea. If you want to supplement those resources you can consider that many textbooks have web resources for students that provide practice and quizzes for students that are aligned with textbook chapters. If you don't use a textbook, you may find online practice, quizzes, and games that align with vocabulary students are learning. Note that these supplemental steps are not necessary for your students to keep learning.

Practice to learn grammatical rules in the target language

You likely already have worksheets, homework, and other assignments and assessments that help students learn grammatical rules in the target language. If students have textbooks, workbooks, or other materials that they were using in your face-to-face class, simply ask them to continue to use those resources. Work that previously was turned in, can be submitted via Blackboard. For assignments that need to be handwritten, students can submit photographs of completed work.

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Practice to learn to read and write in the target language

You likely already have worksheets, homework, and other assignments and assessments that help students learn to read and write in the target language. If students have textbooks, workbooks, or other materials that they were using in your face-to-face class, simply ask them to continue to use those resources. Work that previously was turned in, can be submitted via Blackboard. For assignments that need to be handwritten, students can submit photographs of completed work.

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Providing practice opportunities for basic interpersonal communication skills in an asynchronous remote learning environment

When you teach a language class, you likely aim to conduct that class in the target language and to use class time to require students to practice the language. Students may respond to prompts from the instructor or be required to work in pairs or a small group to practice a range of exchanges in the target language from simple scripted interactions to more realistic conversations. When language

classes are conducted in a synchronous remote learning environment, instructors can replicate these practice opportunities fairly easily; when instructors transition to asynchronous remote learning, they can still provide these practice opportunities.

Students gain skills from practicing speaking and listening in two ways: they build automaticity and they also get feedback from themselves, their speaking partners, and their instructor. The key to effective asynchronous speaking and listening practice is to make sure that students practice for automaticity and get feedback.

Below are a number of options for providing students with effective practice for speaking and listening if you are teaching asynchronously. Following those options are suggestions for ensuring that students get feedback on their practice attempts.

Practice to develop speak skills

The simplest option: students practice and reflect

Although it may seem simplistic, you can ask students to spend a specific amount of time both scripted text and attempting novel utterances by themselves. Provide instructions that specify what is to be practiced and for how long students should practice. Then require students to log what they did and reflect on their performance.

For example, “Speaking practice this week is as follows. Two times this week, describe the members of your family with respect to their age, personality, and favorite foods. Each practice session should last 10 minutes. Use the first five minutes to work on this spoken description, stopping when you need to look up words or any grammatical structures you are unsure of. Use the second five minutes to practice as if you were speaking to a native speaker. In your Blackboard Journal, write down the date and the time of your practice and note one thing that is improving for you and one area where you are struggling.”

A more complex option: students record practice attempts, reflect, and get feedback

Students may feel more accountable and you will be able to monitor student progress and provide feedback if students’ attempts at speaking are either recorded for you, the instructor, or for their classmates.

Using a prompt similar to the example above, you can require students to record their speaking practice using VoiceThread which is supported by Blackboard (you will need to ask ITS to install it for you) which will allow you and other students to hear their practice attempts. There are many other ways for students to share their speaking practice with you and students are remarkably informed about these possibilities: SoundCloud, YouTube, and other platforms let students record and share privately but students can also email a recording from their phone or laptop or post that recording on a Blackboard Discussion Board. Require students to reflect on their work and also provide specific feedback on what they are doing well and one or two areas where they should focus their work to improve their progress.

A more complex option: students speak in your presence, get feedback, and reflect

Students may feel more accountable and you will be able to monitor student progress and provide feedback if students’ attempts at speaking are conducted in your presence.

Although you will not be holding a synchronous class meeting using Zoom if you are teaching asynchronously, this does not preclude you from setting up times for students to meet with you on Zoom and practice speaking in your presence. Survey the class to find a time or two that works for students and schedule them to spend 5 minutes with you, practicing speaking. If Zoom does not work for some students, arrange a phone call instead. Provide focused feedback to students on their speaking, but also require student reflection as discussed above to help students get the most from this practice.

Practice to develop listening skills

If you have students listen to recordings of native speakers, post these recordings on Blackboard and require students to respond as you have before. You may also find recordings of native speakers on YouTube and can post links to those recordings on Blackboard with instructions for how you want students to listen and respond. Remind students to listen more than once, to look up words and structures that are unfamiliar. Students can submit responses on Blackboard and you can provide feedback. Students can write reflections that help track the ways in which their listening skills are improving or still need to develop.

Practice to develop interaction skills

Interacting in the target language is crucial. There are several ways for you to ensure that students interact in an asynchronous remote language course.

The simplest option: students interact on the phone, reflect, and get feedback

Pair students up and have them settle on times that work to practice speaking in the target language on the phone or in a Zoom or Skype meeting. Provide instructions that specify what is to be practiced and for how long students should practice. Then require students to log what they did and reflect on their performance. Students may be able to record their practice session to get feedback from you.

For example, “Speaking practice this week is as follows. Two times this week, call up your speaking partner and take turns asking and answering the following questions about family members Each practice session should last about 10 minutes: one partner should ask and the other answer questions for the first 5 minutes and then you should switch. The first time you talk, use your book or other resources when you get stuck. The second time you talk, don’t use your book or other resources. Have one partner record the second conversation and post it in the Conversation Assignment in Blackboard. I will provide feedback to both partners. In your Blackboard Journal, write down the date and the time of both practice conversations and note one thing that is improving for you and one area where you are struggling for both practice sessions.”

A variation of this option is to create a Zoom meeting and invite students to join that meeting. You can then assign them to a Breakout Room where they can see each other and practice interacting. They can practice without you and then have you join them to listen in and provide feedback. Note again that this Zoom meeting is not part of a synchronous language course: rather find one or two times when students have access to the web and can do some practicing in your presence.

Another variation of this option is to find native speakers for students to interact with. There are likely university instructors abroad who are looking for these opportunities during the current crisis. You may find it cheering to collaborate with a colleague and pair American students with students in another country to interact through Zoom or Skype. Students do not need to record these sessions as

this might become overly complex. Students can be required to log and reflect on their progress in these interactions.

Another option: students interact on VoiceThread, reflect, and get feedback

You can assign a conversational prompt and require students to record conversational turns using VoiceThread which is supported by Blackboard (you will need to ask ITS to install it for you) which will allow you and other students to hear their practice attempts. Pair students up and require them to interact using VoiceThread. This may not capture the immediacy of the interactional options above but may work well for beginner courses. Provide clear instructions that specify how many turns students should take with their assigned conversation partner, provide feedback after the students do the assigned practice, and require reflection.

Key tips

- **Use resources you planned to use.** Don't feel that you need to radically change the way that students have been learning and practicing cognitive academic language. Most language teachers provide students with resources (textbooks, workbooks, worksheets) that they have chosen or created because time has shown these resources to be well-designed and effective. Continue to use them.
- **Provide feedback as you normally do.** In your face-to-face class, you collected student work, corrected it, and provided feedback. You can do the same thing now. Provide focused feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the performance. If the online learning environment is new for you, ask us for help in managing student work online and responding to it. You will find a way to effectively manage feedback to students.
- **Create a weekly rhythm for students.** When students are learning in an asynchronous remote environment, they need a predictable rhythm that serves to remind them to do their work and also allows them some flexibility as to when they do that work. For example, each week students might submit a homework assignment by Monday at 11:59 pm, take a short quiz by Wednesday at 11:59 pm, and watch and respond to a short set of video prompts by Friday at 11:59. Keeping to this weekly rhythm and providing feedback in a similarly predictable way will help students continue to learn.
- **Communicate with students regularly.** Using Blackboard announcements and email, reach out to students each week to remind them of the plan for the week (even when that plan is the same each week) and remind them of any upcoming larger projects or assignments that are due that week. These reminders make it more likely that students will engage in the practice experiences we create for them and help them feel connected and part of your course.

Challenges you may face—and how to respond

- **You may be faced with more student writing and work than you're used to seeing.** Students need to feel that you are reading their work, so be sure to respond with feedback that shows you have read or listened to and analyzed their progress. Sometimes you may want to give individual feedback to students, but sometimes (as in the case of student reflection or student recordings on a class VoiceThread assignment), rather than respond to each individual student, you can share with the class what common mistakes you are seeing and what trends in improvement you see in the

class as a whole. Each week highlight a wins (successes and leaps forward) from a few different students.

- **You may worry that you need to grade in order to motivate the kinds of practice experiences suggested above for basic interpersonal communication skills.** It is helpful to provide a simple point system that communicates to students that practice is essential to language learning but is also a place to experiment and take risks. If the stakes are too high, students either balk and not do practice or become stressed, resentful, and move robotically through the practice, limiting their own learning. If the prompts practice opportunities you've created have two or three parts, simply look for those parts and assign points if the components are there.

Camaraderie in an asynchronous remote learning environment

Even if you are not meeting your students during your regularly scheduled class time on Zoom, you can still have live meetings. Holding drop-in office hours using Zoom means that students can gather with you to talk, ask questions, check in, or share concerns. If your schedule permits, hold two office hour sessions on different days and at different times to be available to more students. This might be the time during which students can do some of their interactive practicing with you present.

Communicate frequently with students each week, reminding them about upcoming work and due dates. Post and email a guide for each week so students feel connected and clear about the rhythm of each week. Provide feedback to students about their work, both individually and as a class. Posting a video response to students about trends in students' work and thinking helps students feel that you are working along with them and following their progress, even in an asynchronous environment.

Reference

Cummins, J. (2008). BICS and CALP: Empirical and theoretical status of the distinction. In B. Street, & N. H. Hornberger (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of language and education, Volume 2: Literacy* (2nd ed, pp. 71-83). Springer.