How to Increase Engagement in Online Synchronous Language Classrooms: Some Useful Tips

To engage learners is extremely a hard job even in a physical classroom, let alone in online synchronous lessons.

No matter how the basics are the same as in the physical classroom, engaging learners in synchronous online teaching requires you to adapt to it. I have adapted some of my techniques to engage my learners and I would like to share 6 useful tips to help you engage your learners fully.

Tip#1 Let them take the control

In controlled practice activities, I choose one student to do my job. I ask them to nominate one of their friends to give the answer. Here the trick is they need to ask others if they agree or disagree with the answer by giving their reasons. I give the remote control to the student teacher and they can reflect or write the correct answer on my shared screen.

If I have prepared an online activity such as a drag-and-drop activity, after giving them some time to complete the activity, I ask one of my students to check the answers by eliciting answers from others and asking others' opinions. I just step back and monitor. They do the activity and all the discussion. If they feel confused, I pop in and ask some guiding questions so that they can find the right answers.

Tip#2 Let them do personalisation

This is one of the most important features of a good lesson. If students can find a connection to their lives, their learning will be permanent because information that is made personally relevant is better stored and remembered.

Controlled practice activities provide lots of good prompts to help students to make personalisation. In a fill-in-the-gap activity, after eliciting the correct answer I always use the prompt to ask a question to them so that they can reflect and think about what the exact sentence or sentences mean. Let me give an example from one of the exercises in A1 level course book. Here what students are expected to do is to write the frequency adverb into the correct place.

am / for / never / class / I / late

After getting the correct answer, I ask 'How about you? Do you ever come to class late? Why?' In doing this, I take the opportunity to make the students think over the sentence, reflect on themselves and practice speaking.

Tip#3 Let them interact

Lecturing is boring even in a physical classroom so prepare your lessons so that students can interact- with you, the content and their peers.

As we do in traditional classroom environment, use think-pair-share activities. After giving some time to think over the questions, pair and send them to a breakout room where they can

share their ideas without the stress of making mistakes in front of their peers. Tell them to take notes of what their partners have shared. When they are back to the main room, ask students to report back using their notes. In this way, they listen to each other carefully, use different vocabulary and learn about their peers. After listening to their reports, ask them follow-up questions. If the student who reports back cannot answer your question or misses a detail, the other partner feels the need to interrupt. Thus, you create a real interaction.

Tip#4 Let them collaborate

Online platforms provide good opportunities to collaborate. Since everyone is using a device and have access to the internet, students can easily work on the same task simultaneously. Pair work is great when the pairs equally contribute to the work. Of course, for collaborative activities to target the aim, you need to first make sure your students know how to work in pairs

For the production activities, I ask my students to collaborate. After giving and checking the instructions, I send them to breakout rooms to get prepared for the task. For preparing slides or documents collaboratively, google docs and google slides work really well. They together organise their ideas, search the internet, find interesting visuals and prepare mini-presentations. Since they can work on the same document making changes and additions, they feel they are in control of what they do.