

Dixie Dixit: New Trends with Technology
Tips for effective online learning:
An interview with Nicole Eustice, Part 2
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In the previous issue of the *MEXTESOL Journal*, we published the first part of an interview with Nicole Eustice, an online tutor and course designer on the Distance Education Program for Teacher Training at the American English Institute of the University of Oregon at Eugene. Nicole presented a talk at the International MEXTESOL Convention in Puebla, 2014.

In the first part of the interview, Nicole talked of the importance of giving clear instructions when working online, and how to promote interaction among the different participants on an online course. This second part of the interview will cover different kinds of groupings, as well as how to promote learner autonomy.

D.S. *Nicole, some of the tasks we did on the course were individual, some were group work, and some were pair work. How do you decide which activities are best suited for the different groupings? How do you form the groups or pairs? What do you consider?*

N.E. We seek variety to encourage motivation and positive attitude in any learning environment, and online should be no different. The level of intimacy in such interactions is the main factor we consider for activities. If the activity is lengthy and complex, it lends itself well to pair work where discussion can deepen as the pair gets to know each other more quickly. Of course, who to pair with whom will always be incredibly challenging online because unforeseeable factors can inhibit a partner's ability to contribute at any time. An exercise that provides a lot of structure and fairly predictable answers is good for a larger group, three-five participants. This ensures that at least a few will get involved and offer insights, and since there is not so much development expected, it is not onerous to read responses of more than one other person. In the case that you have a discussion topic that merits deeper development than you might get among all participants, it is useful to create a group of six-eight people for discussions. In this setting, it is easier for participants to keep track of who is saying what, and of course, there is not the sheer number of posts to read as in a full-class discussion (imagining a group of twenty-thirty).

Importantly in considering how to group is the nature of instructor interaction and feedback. Here we are discussing online learning in an asynchronous course such as the one mentioned through the University of Oregon. It is quite different to consider a MOOC (massive open online course) where hundreds to thousands of students will participate without any, or at best extremely limited individual guidance or interaction with the instructor(s). So, as an activity is planned, the amount and nature of feedback and interaction on your part is crucial to decisions about groupings versus individual work.

D.S. *In your talk at Puebla, you talked about how online discussion can lead to learner autonomy. How can the tutor promote this?*

As I mentioned above, at first, the tutor will need to be present as a role model, asking questions, building on comments, and offering further resources. It doesn't take long for participants, even if they are young and/or have lower proficiency levels, to follow the tutors' lead. It is not enough just to role model, however. Drawing attention to the usefulness of asking probing questions or examining new evidence/resources is an important facet of engendering greater autonomy. Backing up to consider English language learners specifically, we have to consider their need to interact meaningfully and authentically in the target language. If our goal is to encourage autonomy in this regard, and the context is distance learning, it is my experience that leaving options open to learners is necessary. While it is shown that choice is a necessary ingredient of increasing autonomy in language learning, it is also the case that there will be restrictions on the extent of choice in the context of learning (Little, 1996). At this stage, it is informative to consider a definition of learner autonomy (Little, 2000, as cited in Benson, 2007, p.23):

Autonomy in language learning depends on the development and exercise of a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action (see Little 1991: 4); autonomous learners assume responsibility for determining the purpose, content, rhythm and method of their learning, monitoring its progress and evaluating its outcomes (Holec, 1981, p. 3).

In the above, Little's approach from a psychological perspective is combined with Holec's classic definition of autonomy. What does this mean for the English language tutor online?

To give a specific example, we need to offer students choices to help engage their motivation and criticality. If they do not care about a topic, it is unlikely that they will think critically about it, or if they do, it will be *ad hoc* and thus lack full engagement and attention. Frequently, English language textbooks and curriculum bring irrelevant topics to discussion, such as global climate change or sibling personality based on birth order. This does language learners a disservice as the focus turns away from the purpose of a language course. Topics chosen should be highly relevant to the purpose of a course explicitly designed to improve language proficiency. So in the online environment, we should give students a list of topics related to language in some way. If it were a writing course, for instance, various concepts in writing, such as coherence/cohesion, or parallel structures could be listed in separate discussion threads. To increase interest and engagement, students could be asked to search for, choose, and share (or even analyze/compare) resources that propose to help students with these writing concepts. So, the students would search online for resources that explain the concepts and perhaps offer examples and/or tools to practice. They could share the resources found on the same topic in their small group discussion, developing some criteria with the help of the instructor to rank them as most helpful to least helpful, and then develop a wiki to showcase the resources and how to decide which are useful to the rest of the class. The main point I want to make is that topics in a language course should not vary so unpredictably away from the purpose of improving language proficiency. There are plenty of high-interest topics in linguistics and target culture/sociolinguistics that can help students think more carefully and reflectively about their own language learning process. If we use such topics, students learn through the materials how to observe

themselves and consider their progress, strengths, and weaknesses as language learners.

D.S. *Careful thought into what kind of interaction we expect from participants will help us decide what kind of grouping works best: individual work, pairs, small groups, or whole group discussions. Modeling and feedback from the tutor will help participants understand what kind of response is expected from them.*

Nicole also makes a very interesting point about the relevance of the topics we ask our students to discuss. The more relevant the topic is to the participant, the more willing s/he will be to engage with it.

I would like to thank Nicole Eustice for her interesting and useful tips on promoting online learning. I mentioned in the first part of the interview that I met Nicole through the Distance Education Program for Teacher Training with the program for Critical Thinking in Language Learning and Teaching. I had the opportunity to participate on this online course through the E-Teacher Scholarship thanks to the U.S. Embassy in Mexico and the Office of English Language Programs. A variety of distance courses are offered through the E-Teacher Scholarship for in-service teachers.

References

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