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Ways of making online teaching more successful: An autoethnographic study

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ABSTRACT

This article is the author's professional reflectivity as a TESOL lecturer at an Australian University over the past sixteen years. Observing and responding to students' interests, concerns, and challenges has allowed this work to take shape. It signifies a range of issues that shape student learning with a strong focus on problematic features of online education practices. These issues include the absence of non-verbal cues, responsive latency, the pressure of teacher multiple-roles, and digital learning boredom. Thanks to collected data from *student feedback*, *conversation with colleagues*, and *field notes*, the author has put together a set of principles and strategies for making teaching and learning in the virtual space a more rewarding experience for both teachers and students. The strategies include making learning content interesting and useful, personalised communication, clear participation protocols, mediation of student workload and participation, scaffolding online learning, organising choices, diversifying approaches to tasks, encouraging student voices, and collaboration with non-teaching staff.

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1. Introduction: the rise of online learning

Online learning has been increasing rapidly. During the pandemic alone, 1.37 billion students and 60 million teachers moved from the classroom to the computer screen (UNESCO, 2020). Ever since, online learning platforms have been reported to rise consistently (Cooke, 2022). Unlike many animals that can migrate across enormous distances innately without a compass, humans need to be taught to do so. Yet, not everyone has the skills ready for the task. The sudden change has seriously troubled the nature of interaction, collaboration, access to instruction, and the whole social environment. If online education was a choice before the pandemic, that is not quite the case anymore. When classes do not physically meet on a routine basis, there emerges unpredictable delays in student learning, a constant sense of quietness, that may not be easily interpreted. The article addresses this realistic concern by unpacking what has been happening at an Australian university when students do not seem to engage sufficiently during their course of study in a TESOL program.

Scope of the article

Drawn extensively from the research discourse on the occurrence and absence of learner participation together with the author's observation and self reflection, the article outlines how poor

engagement and repetitive boredom pervades the digital educational environment. The work falls into two sections. The first section explains why such problem occurs due to some inherent undesirable features of virtual learning settings. The second section shares the author's experiences in coping with those features by offering a range of strategies and activities that teachers can try and draw lessons from their own context.

2. Methodology

The study employs the autoethnographic approach to research, which combines autobiography and ethnography. It involves the researcher reflecting on their personal experiences, observations, and cultural context to understand a particular phenomenon or culture. In this type of study, the researcher becomes a participant-observer, using their own experiences as a primary source of data (Chang, 2008). Autoethnography aims to provide insights into individual experiences while also shedding light on broader social, cultural, or political aspects. The approach has been employed across many disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, education, and cultural studies. Denzin (2013) highlights the importance of reflexivity and subjectivity in conducting autoethnographic research. Reed-Danahay (2011) advocates the intersection of autoethnography and personal narratives, emphasising how autoethnography can contribute to rewriting our understanding of the self and society. The procedure for this study, which is inspired by ideas from Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011), follows four distinctive steps as explained below:

- Defining the concern, in this case challenges to online pedagogy and learning, and the need to explore it through a self-reflective approach
- Engaging in introspection through self-reflect on your personal experiences, knowledge, conceptualisation and ways of responding to many difficulties in student learning
- Gathering data through field notes (that is, working journal), student feedback, informal conversation with both colleagues and students.
- Analysing the data, which includes searching for patterns, themes, and connections between experiences and broader educational phenomena. Through coding, thematic analysis, and narrative analysis, data are organised to derive meaning and insights.

2.2. Research participants

The participants of this project cannot be easily defined because they are teacher and student individuals whom the author have encountered on numerous occasions during the past sixteen years of teaching and research at an Australian university. The data in the study are the most updated body of information, simply because sixteen years ago, online education was less trendy than it is today, especially after the global pandemic has struck the industry to the extent that has dramatically reshaped the landscape of education.

2.3. Data collection method

Tools for data gathering include mainly the researcher's work journal, student feedback in the institutional system, and informal conversations with colleagues in the same university. No audio or video recording was made and there was no formal interviews with participants. All data were gathered to serve the author's reflective practice towards teaching improvement only. It was not until the recent time that the author makes the decision to write up what he has learned over the year. In other words, this project was not designed as a systematic project to begin with but only take shape as a study for the purpose to sharing ideas in this article.

3. Data and findings from teacher and student voices

Data have been gathered over an extended period of over a decade from the author's field notes, colleagues' thoughts, and student feedback. The researcher's fieldnotes based on conversations with colleagues reflect the challenge of coping with online communication among many TESOL lecturers.

Together, data reveal low-frequency communication between students and lecturers, the lack of social touch during every lesson in the virtual space, technology-related difficulties, and the challenge in keeping track of students' learning progress. Below are some typical reflections from colleagues in the same program as documented from informal interviews:

> I cannot see what my students are working on. There is no way to tell if they are satisfied, upset, confused, or diligent. I can only send messages, announcements, and suggestions on the forum space, but when there is no response, I keep wondering what is going wrong.
>
> I try to be cheerful during virtual lessons by occasionally telling personal anecdotes or cracking a joke, but no one laughs or says much. I don't get to see facial expressions as my students tend to show profile images of pets or flowers while most of them keep silent. Tutorials become lectures, and jokes become dry. I wish I knew how to manage these problems.
>
> Sometimes, I find myself saying hopeless things that I normally would not say in a real classroom, such as: Can you hear me? Excuse me, your microphone is mute. Oh, your voice is breaking up. I'm afraid my network is not functioning. Mike, are you there? What is that noise, somebody please mute your mic for a sec? Sorry, my break-out function doesn't work.
>
> I think we have done quite a good job of going online. I try to keep my lecture to maximum one hour with a break in the middle so that my students won't feel tired. However, it is hard to follow student progress when I don't hear from them and don't meet them in person in the classroom.
>
> In per-semester feedback at the university where the researcher works, students often request more face-to-face classes after they experience emotional disengagement and social miscommunication in online settings. Informal conversations with students demonstrate several noteworthy scenarios which reveal what many students do and how they feel when lecturers do not hear from them. This body of data reveals the limitation of social rapport, the dullness of the self-study process, the pressure from lonely performance of academic assignment tasks, and the discontinuity of vereyday learning engagement. Below are students' most representative reflections from coursework feedback and informal conversations with the author:
>
> I try to call, message, and video-chat with my friends when I cannot see them, and part of the discussion is about how to cope with learning difficulties. It is hard to be disconnected from your social circle.
>
> Staying home is good too, as I can attend to my hobbies. But I no longer have the excitement of going to school, move around, eat, laugh and network with people.
>
> My learning world now has only one focus: assignment. Every morning, I wake up, shower, get dressed, and go back to my room for assignments. Studying online feels like constant homework. My productivity is not diverse anymore, so I easily get bored, tired, and lose curiosity.
>
> The best moment of online classes is when I show up early on Zoom and chat with my classmates. But when the teacher shows up, the climate becomes tedious and unexciting. I sometimes disable my camera and microphone to step out of the house and breathe fresh air.

The actual bodies of data is infact far larger than what is presented above. They have assembled and processed through thematic coding and analysis. Below are the findings that arrived from such a process. They cover problematic areas of virtual teaching and learning namely the absence of non-verbal cues, latency in student response and participation, the pressure on teachers to perform multiple new roles, and digital boredom.

4. Discussion of findings: some unattractive characteristics of online learning

Data from this project reveal some inherent conditions of online learning that are likely to diminish learner engagement. An extended body of literature indicates that online education is more physically isolating and resisant to interaction, engagement, and bonding (Dyrud, 2000; Angelino, Williams & Natvig, 2007; Glazier, 2016). The discourse also highlights that e-learning seems easier for independent learners with a strong sense of self-efficacy who know how to manage their responsibilities (Diaz & Cartnal, 1999; Blocher et al., 2002; Bell & Akroyd, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Let us look at a few features that make e-learning more demanding than conventional classrooms. Containing many challenges, however, does not necessarily mean low effectiveness but simply implies that digital education requires different skills from face-to-face education. As far as efficacy is concerned, research shows that both modes of learning can reach equally ideal outcomes (Robertson, Grant & Jackson, 2005; Maki & Maki, 2007). Although the literature has identified a wide range of benefits of e-learning such as increasing access to education and expanding students' global experiences, among many others (Bell & Federman, 2013; Dixson, 2015), researchers can hardly find any evidence to suggest that online learning enhances verbal participation. Instead, digital learning is known for triggering a lack of speech. In this regard, there are at least four areas of challenge that frequently provokes silence. They include the absence of non-verbal cues, the inherent delay in student participation, the pressure on teachers to perform multiple new roles, and the occurrence of digital boredom.

The absence of non-verbal cues

From the researcher's observation, body language on the screen does not work in the same way as in real life. In the physical world, someone being stared at for a few seconds will notice and attend to what is going on. In a virtual class, however, someone being intensely observed for an hour would have absolutely no idea. Such obscurity of non-verbal cues prevents teachers from recognising nuances of student behaviour such as levels of interest or boredom. One cannot tell if students are taking notes or simply listening. Posture, eye contact, and facial expression are not easy to read. Disenabled cameras and muted microphones make it impossible to notice student attention.

Many subtle gestures that enrich communication now vanish: a giggle of amusement, a throat-clearing sound for attention, a humming tone for a speaking turn, hand clapping for support, or a marvelling 'wow' to show surprise. Other sounds associated with the human mood are also absent: the rustling sound of turned pages, a marker running on the whiteboard, a breeze blowing through the open window signalling pleasant weather. All these problems contribute to what Mico-Wentworth (2014) refers to as a 'lack of presence' (p. 3). The gathering of people in a virtual room often looks like a GIF image with only basic animations. Some students take advantage of this feature to get out of fully attending the class. I had a student who used a screenshot of him sitting in front of the screen listening attentively to my lecture as his profile image. Not until I called on him to answer a question did I realise I was merely communi- cating with a portrait while the real person was elsewhere, probably eating breakfast or watching a movie.

Online communication is also subject to less intimacy. The teacher cannot walk around and exhibit personal chemistry. Dramatic improvisation seems hard to achieve. For example, students cannot exchange looks of mutual understanding or bewilderment; they can neither whisper private, playful thoughts to adjacent peers nor celebrate awesome ideas with a cool high five. I have seen some of the most humorous teachers make the most hilarious puns during a virtual class, yet nobody seemed to laugh, except one or two who gave a faint smile or smirk. When all bodily cues disappear, the social atmosphere is stamped with a plainness that one must learn to accept and get used to.

Without physical expressions, the interpretation of online silence becomes so difficult that some teachers cannot help developing a negative impression about it. Because of this, online silence is often internalised by teachers as poor engagement, lack of personal connection (Mico-Wentworth, 2014), and a cause of misunderstanding (Agyekum, 2002; Betts, 2009). According to social pres- ence theory, online communication has a depersonalising nature whereby ndividuals struggle to build personal relationships with each other (Dania and Griffin, 2021). This hypothesis, however, does not have to be true in all kinds of digital education but is conditional according to contexts and teaching abilities.

In practice, both support and disapproval towards online education continue to exist side by side. While some scholars perceive computer-mediated communication as inferior to face-to-face communication (Walther, 2011; Keller, 2013), others point out the benefits of virtual settings as supporting conventional classes (Furlich, 2013); a catalyst for further education research (Betts, 2011); a way of renewing social presence (Turner, 2011; Walther, 2011); increased connection (Gautreau, 2012); and a tool for learning absorption, reflection, and respect (Fivush, 2010), among others. Along this line, Zembylas and Vrasidas (2007), who research different meanings of online silence, discover that not all instances of silence carry an undesirable connotation. There are, in every class, students who employ silence strategically, alternating between participating and observing according to their

changing needs. To sum up, a major difficulty confronting most teachers is the capability to decipher when student silence is an integral part of task performance and when that is not the case.

Latency in Student Response and Participation

Data allow the researcher to look at responsiveness norms in the TESOL course of study at his university. Jumping out from the sub-theme during thematic analysis is the question of how much silent time students in a specific context expect to have when responding to tasks, such as forum posting or assignment submission. Latency is then identified as the time students take that stretches beyond such expectations and causes anxiety to the teacher for not knowing why students are so slow. For example, a large-scale project by Kalman et al. (2007), which explores long response latencies during email communi- cation, recognises online silence as a violation of the average waiting norm.

Arguably, the length of waiting in asynchronous discussion is highly context-dependent, being contingent upon the preparation time needed and on the respective deadline or the challenge level of every task. Based on such needs, silence can be reasonable or unreasonable. Zembylas and Vrasidas (2007) through ethnographic observation point out that silence can be a built-in part of social presence rather than a lack of it. In synchronous discussion, however, it is noticed that non-participation or a delay in communication might arise from students' insecurity or misunderstanding for not receiving as clear visual clues as they would find in traditional classes (Vonderwell & Zachariah, 2005). For this reason, if materials originally developed for face-to-face settings are now placed on virtual platforms, they must be modified to suit the online dynamics. For example, task requirements must be elaborated in detailed written instructions for students to read whenever they want. Students must be given time to develop a strong relationship with learning materials, as recommended by Querol-Julián and Arteaga-Martínez (2019) through research on student learning needs.

The pressure on teachers to perform multiple new roles

Compared with face-to-face settings, the current online modules taught by the author have witnessed more learner reliance on the teacher. This is because teaching in digital space pressurises the instructor to expand their roles, serving not just as a pedagogist but also as an administrator, a technician, a digital task designer, and a counsellor. This insight goes well with what has been as drawn from studies of many e-learning programmes (Bawane & Spector, 2009; Baran & Correia, 2014), a community leader, and, ideally, an online entertainer. All these responsibilities demand considerable amounts of extra hours, enthusiasm, thoughts, and management skills. If some of these roles remain unfulfilled, students might struggle to learn and become less responsive. One common example of such extended commitment is when the teacher needs to make a video recording of a lecture. If the lecture is supposed to last an hour, the recording task with its preparations and rehearsal (including lesson planning, visual illustrations, and multiple recordings to repair errors) might take several days. Depending on their individual experience and skills, teacher workload may increase enormously to facilitate easy learning and to keep student satisfac- tion from dropping.

Data from the current study show that many teachers suffer from low tolerance of students' withdrawal from class participation. By the same token, the relevant discourse has recorded similar phenomena whereby teachers do not feel satisfied with the degree of engagement in their virtual classes (Kozar, 2016; Querol-Julián & Arteaga-Martínez, 2019). In many cases, learner silence does not mean a refusal to participate but comes from a struggle in trying to cope with course requirements without timely support. The discourse has documented scenarios where teachers who lack technological skills and online teaching experience fail to cope with silence in learning and teaching (Lenkaitis, 2020; Cheung, 2021). McBrien, Cheng, and Jones (2009) contend that activities displayed on a computer screen are qualitatively different from physical experiences, demanding different abilities from both teachers and students.

Digital learning boredom

A case study by Cheung (2021) on secondary ESL teachers in Hong Kong shows that student silence stems from didactic teaching approaches, heavy syllabuses, and unresolved technological issues. A large-scale study by Derakhshan et al. (2021) of Iranian Zoom classes reveals student frustration with the poor flow of communication due to the abrupt transition from face-to-face to digital learning during the pandemic. Although in some Asian cultures, it is advised that learning must

persist in the face of boredom (Hess & Azuma, 1991), dullness does not have to be accepted as an inherent, natural part of education but can be confronted.

While some students can tolerate monotony and willingly carry on, others switch off from learning when they experience discomfort in it. A study by Sharp et al. (2019) of 179 university students in the UK confirms that academic boredom can cause irritation and depression, in the end damaging motivation, effort, and learning outcome. While online silence has been acknowledged as reflective practice (Hu, 2021), research by Derakhshan et al. (2021) and Wang, Derakhshan, and Zhang (2021) indicates that low engagement in many cases demonstrates learner resistance to unbearable dreariness.

Low engagement is also caused by the heavily theoretical nature of online materials and the distracting conditions of students' at-home environments during virtual classes. Research by Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) reveals that individual learning sites with intrusion from housemates, children, or pets can interfere with student concentration and induce low participation. Dullness also arises from the lack of authentic dialogue during asynchronous discussions. Many teachers employ a question-reply pattern that tends to make learning mechanical rather than creating a vibrant dialogue environment (Anderson, 2004). Because of this, students become more responsive than proactive, when they are compelled to cope with teacher initiative rather than learning to think independently and formulate their inquiries

5. Strategies for making online learning more engaging

This section presents a range of pedagogy strategies for maximising students' engagement in online learning.

To minimise negative silence requires replacing it with either productive silence or participation. Productive silence includes activities such as preparation for contribution, vicarious learning, reflection, and mental engagement. Participation includes activities such as gathering resources, reading academic works, sharing thoughts on discussion forums, engaging in academic dialogue, and responding to peer postings. The rest of this chapter shares a set of ten strategies drawn from data, namely:

1. making learning content interesting and useful
2. personalised communication
3. clear participation protocols
4. mediation of student workload and participation
5. scaffolding online learning
6. *Shared responsibilities and distributed roles*
7. organising choices
8. diversifying approaches to tasks
9. encouraging student voices
10. collaboration with non-teaching staff

The strategies above are developed from three main sources: suggestions from students, methods experimented with by researchers, and my observation of innovative online teaching practice. Below is an explanation of how each strategy can be deployed to take students out of resistant silence and move them towards productive learning.

Strategy 1 - Making Learning Content Interesting and Useful

One way to bring enjoyment is by focusing on quality rather than quantity. Some lecturers provide students with extensive theoretical content without allowing them time and space to digest it through reading engagement, reflection, applying, and preparing for in-depth discussions. Empirical evidence supports the relationship between the quantity of input and receptivity: if the former is excessive, the latter will drop. When course materials seem cumbersome, students not only panic but also withdraw from participation. Those who are subject to overloading content easily lose learning interest.

One typical example of uninspiring transmission of knowledge would be the use of PowerPoint slides with masses of text to be read out loud by the teacher. Many students find this delivery approach pointless as it neglects both cognitive processing and emotional engagement. Among ways of remedying such boredom are the use of functional visuals to represent words, colourful words for emphasis, long sentences being replaced by keywords, theory connected to practice, teacher sharing of personal anecdotes, humour, thinking space, as well as experiential and personalised learning. All these require imagination, creativity, passion for new ideas, and the avoidance of routine, boring tasks. Along this line, a survey conducted by North and Pillay (2002) on English teachers in a secondary school setting reports the common practice of giving students the same task repeatedly out of habit rather than usefulness. There was a time when people in some countries, such as Japan and Korea, were concerned that someday language instruction robots might replace English teachers. This scenario, however, does not need to happen at all, simply because some teachers have already acted like robots in their work.

Strategy 2 - Personalising communication

Efforts to initiate bonding with students can be made at an early stage when administrative staff begin to communicate with students to bring them into a study programme . The teacher can make a welcome video to establish a sense of community. I know a lecturer who, being also a musician, created a song and performed it in the first video of a course to boost learning morale and make a personal connection. After watching it, students looked forward to meeting this interesting teacher and being inspired further. Another lecturer introduced her lesson recording by dancing to the soundtrack of rock music, not hesitating to 'embarrass' herself for a more humanistic style of inspiration. In another incident, two colleagues paired up and improvised a series of video recordings in which their dialogue involved humour and anecdotal examples for every weekly topic. Students find these pedagogical varieties refreshing and memorable as they confront routine and breathe new energy into e-learning.

Throughout a course of study, communication every week is essential to maintain a helpful learning culture. Such communication involves, for example, answering students' online questions, summarising and commenting on weekly posts, acknowledging student effort and progress, offering add- itional resources in response to arising interests, providing feedback, organis- ing reading groups, and so on. There is a logical relationship between teacher care and student engagement in online settings. That is, the more support students receive, the more willing they are to contribute to the learning process. Without such a connection, the online climate would be filled with unproductive silence. Even after graduation, staying in touch with alumni is a way of showing care and keeping track of how effective education has been in assisting students' career paths.

Teacher presence with a social meaning

Some teachers do not seem to be concerned with the social dimension of student learning. In one incident, I overheard a lecturer informing the class, accentuating every word: 'Do not bother me on the weekend with email inquiries.' Although not being available during holidays is understandable, drawing a resolute boundary to keep students away might turn the teacher into an unsympathetic character who exerts a negative impact on students' learning inspiration. As I later learned at student events, some internalise a mental wall between them and their lecturer, viewing the latter as a functional authority rather than a social human being. Although the purpose of the rule was to keep some of their time free for other work commitments, this could lead to such lecturers having no relationship with their students beyond an instrumental one. One student shared: 'I cannot connect with my teachers, who are always too busy with other things.' Another explained: 'I'm basically teaching myself. There is not much opportunity for lecturers to answer my burning questions.'

Building a social environment is not just about having students talk to each other during the lesson, but involvement might need to go the extra mile. For example, at Monash University, my colleagues and I sometimes organise additional meetings with students who share an interest in a similar research topic or a discussion issue, which could be within the course or even beyond it and into a future career pathway. We build an optional dialogue, not only to show care but also as a way of staying in touch both within and beyond the course. Students enjoy this process as they feel that they are not simply learning from the course content but also from real life in a climate of social trust and individualised mentoring.

Strategy 3 - Clear participation protocols

Participation protocols refer to a well-articulated task procedure that guides students through contribution. This would include a clearly stated topic or set of questions, the aim of contribution (e.g., for grades or shared perspectives), requirements or expectations (e.g., an opinion, an experience, a critical comment), rules for interaction (e.g., exchanging individual voices, reporting the outcome of group discussion), the size of contribution (e.g., time duration or word count), a deadline, stages of development (e.g., work in progress, summary of output), and a follow-up plan (e.g., peer response, teacher feedback students may not contribute when they feel uncertain about the requirement and method of participation. A Compared with discussion events without clear expectations, protocol-based tasks significantly increase student engagement.

Protocols also entail the management of online courses to ensure that every course is explicitly mapped out and logically sequenced, with clarity about student workload and responsibility. In practice, if the teacher seems too busy to respond to postings, it would be helpful to let the class know how often to expect feedback. The depth of communication at both task and course levels exerts a bearing on students' learning success. Along this line, teachers need to make conscious efforts to involve less engaged students and respond to their learning problem when it arises. To make this possible, on the learning website there needs to be a suggestion box for students to express their needs, share problems, and raise questions when their study requires individu- alised support.

Strategy 4 - Mediation of student workload and participation

Teachers need to mediate the learning process by making it manageable for all students. Along this line, the negotiation between workload and participation is important to consider. Some inexperienced teachers tend to expect too much from students in both quantity and quality of their contributions, not realising that when the former is too ambitious, the latter will decrease. According to cognitive load theory, there is a need to distinguish between information overload and cognitive overload (Paas & van Merrienboer, 1994). While students can cope with the former by selecting what they wish to learn the most, it is the latter that can damage their learning system if students are forced to contribute past the load that their brain can process. Once the quantity of study is reasonable, learner participation can be further facilitated by giving frequent responses to students' posts. Many students feel that their voice is unheard or even silenced when their writing seems to fall into oblivion. To remedy this, teachers need to make comments on student contribution content and organise for peers to provide feedback to each other. It would also be helpful if the teacher provided a summary of the discussion thread after it has evolved to a meaningful extent to bring students' ideas together in some connection.

Strategy 5 - Scaffolding online learning

Unlike scaffolding in a conventional classroom where teacher support is mainly academic work, scaffolding in a virtual setting requires academic, administrative, and technical assistance to ease learning challenges. Scaffolding improves student life as it helps elevate standards, communicate expectations, and facilitate student agency. Students also need help to develop original ideas, without which they would not be able to participate. The relevant discourse has acknowledged student familiarity with learning content as an easier way to become verbally open. Duran's (2020) study, for example, reveals that a combination of a positive social rapport and an interesting topic can help students connect easily and can make online discussions feel like real-world conversations.

Strategy 6 - Shared responsibilities and distributed roles

Students in small groups can be given a problem to solve together and prepare to report their collective solution to the rest of the class. When a group leader is assigned to report the outcome, participation is bound to happen. Research by Zhou (2021) on student experience also indicates that reticence often results from a lack of rehearsal or preparation. In addition to this, the teacher can allocate leadership roles to class members. In every break-out room, learners take turns at leading the conversation and verbally reporting its outcome to the rest of the class. Such peer-facilitated dialogues allow a stress-free atmosphere for genuine exchanges of ideas. A study by Rourke and Anderson (2002) on Canadian university students' experience with peer-led online discussion groups shows that this model is favourably received by students for being well- structured, mutually responsive, and enjoyable.

Strategy 7 - Organising choices

Allowing students to select their favourite modes of contribution is another useful strategy to adopt. For example, a balance must be created between task-oriented activities and self-generated topics, also known as controlled and free debates. The former refers to teacher-led activity, such as a question or an issue raised by the teacher to start a forum thread. The latter means students select issues of personal interest from course readings, from which a thread is initiated by students. While some students are contented with teacher management and guidance in course requirements, others only find satisfaction in autonomy and in connecting lesson content with their thinking. The second type of student needs a different kind of support from the teacher, which goes beyond management and more into inspiration.

Choices of technology are also important in online education. Students can be allowed to select their favourite digital tools. For example, when it comes to sharing a group document, some students feel comfortable accessing it on Moodle space, others want the document emailed to them, while some prefer to use Google Docs. Consider what works best for everyone rather than holding on to what the teacher feels most familiar with. Sometimes, when students voice different preferences, the same documents can be shared at multiple locations, or the class may vote for the best location and method to edit a document. Another example would be the choice of tools for group presentations, which can be PowerPoint, Prezi, Keynote, Slides, Slidebean, Zoho Show, Google Slides, Canva, and Visme, or beyond these templates, such as video recordings and poster expositions. Research by Quinton (2010), Dahlstrom et al. (2011), and Burton et al. (2015) reveals that students are involved in a task more effectively when they can rely on tools that suit their tastes.

Strategy 8 - Diversifying approaches to tasks

Discussion methods can be varied to cater to different learning styles. This is made possible through diverse grouping, locations, durations, challenges, topic contents, formats, and leaders. The overuse of any single discussion method might favour some students and discourage others. For example, it is observed that brainstorming, while supporting a democratic climate of idea sharing, may marginalise learners with a reflective style who often prefer in-depth scrutiny of issues that require more thinking time than spontaneous contribution. Some scholars find brainstorming demotivating to highly introverted and creative students (see, for example, Smith, 1995; Hermasari, 2018). This is because this strategy tends to yield a superficial collection of themes with little analysis. To improve the situation, the teacher might create a follow-up task that arranges for every small group to unpack a theme of their own choice. Another task type, as recommended by Takagi (2013), is brain writing, that is, brainstorming ideas in written form. Working at their own pace, learners not only develop themes but can also unpack them with more content or arguments.

Strategy 9 - Encouraging student voices

Student voice can be spontaneous or prepared before class time. Sometimes, instructors must withdraw from their teaching role and authority and invite every student to plan a three-minute presentation of their views on selected issues. The ideology of learners as co-creators of knowledge, which has been increasingly promoted in education (Bates, 2004; Rovai, 2004), needs to be experienced in an online learning environment as much as in the physical classroom. Contributions can be organised through individual consultation with the teacher to enhance shared ideas' quality and ensure learning commitment. It is also essential that the teacher keeps track of student contributions to provide a summary and comments on them. When students' ideas are fully acknowledged and become part of the lesson, the experience becomes more pleasant and meaningful and allows momentum for more interaction in future lessons.

Strategy 10 - Collaboration with non-teaching staff

Involving students in proactive online learning should not be the sole responsibility of teachers. In an ideal online and blended programme, the role of support staff and online learning design is equally essential to that of the teacher. At Monash University, ICT support staff also conduct research, as they are not only administrators. Every semester, online designers find ways to present materials in more attractive and user-friendly ways. They hold meetings with lecturers to hear suggestions before the updated looks are launched and gather end-of-semester feedback from lecturers again to see what else can be improved. One example of such research outcomes includes being allowed to personalise the

online learning space by creating customised icons, choosing a favourite background colour, and selecting any template from options pro- vided by the ICT team. There is a continuous dialogue between lecturers and technicians in making student learning easier.

6. Concluding Insights

Sometimes, a teacher who may be a highly articulate person might create the impression of absence when they fail to respond to students' evolving needs. Some examples of teacher silence include not making students feel welcome at the beginning of a course, not showing enthusiasm throughout the course, not answering student questions promptly, not providing helpful feedback to assignment tasks, not keeping track of student progress, not supporting students adequately when they are lost, performing a teaching role without much of a social role, criticising more than praising students' work, sending reminders and warnings more than expressing love and care, responding superficially to student postings, acting out that they are too busy or tired, and (this is the worst on the list) indicating that students must not bother them. Behaving in any of these ways would amount to pushing students away. When a teacher fails to be a lovely, helpful mentor in students' eyes, that teacher disappears in their thinking and reaction. Consequently, students resort to silence as a form of resistance to the invisible teacher.

Like face-to-face silence, online silence is culture-bound. Learners from cultures where silence is an integral part of everyday communication might continue to respect silence in a virtual environment as a tool for deep thinking, attentive listening, reflection, respect, and harmony. Meanwhile, those from a culture where silence does not have a great significance but words tend to dominate in showing connection and enthusiasm might wish to maintain more verbal connection with the class.

It is observed that teachers with extended experience with virtual classrooms tend to tolerate and manage silence more efficiently than those who are relatively new in this area. The less familiar they are with online education strategies, the more they connect silence with negative connotations (Plank, 1994). To navigate digital teaching and learning well already requires a specific set of pedagogical skills such as knowing students as individuals, establishing rules of communication, and following up on student work. To a great extent, teacher imagination and diverse strategies play an essential role in responding to learning challenges among students who suffer from not communicating as comfortably as they would in a traditional classroom.

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