TEACHING DURING A PANDEMIC: DESIGNING ASYNCHRONOUS ONLINE MATERIALS

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INTRODUCTION

Due to the onset of the 2020 pandemic, this institution took the decision to move all classes online for the spring 2020 semester. Adopting a hybrid approach, utilizing both synchronous and asynchronous lessons, the university aimed to mitigate issues students may encounter regarding internet access and excessive screen time, while providing multiple methods of interaction. Synchronous lessons were to be held on Zoom, a video conferencing application, and would closely resemble face-to-face classes: taking place in real time and allowing students to interact with their peers and the teacher. Asynchronous classes would involve classwork being placed on an online learning management system (I chose to utilize Google Classroom), with students given a set deadline by which to complete it. I therefore needed to adapt my teaching materials to fit this proposed new system.

THE COURSE

This paper describes the creation of an asynchronous lesson for "Olympic Games: History, Key Issues and Tokyo 2020". This elective course is taught to third and fourth year students based on content and language integrated learning (CLIL), "an educational approach in which various language-supportive methodologies are used which lead to a dual-focused form of instruction where attention is given to both language and content" (Coyle, et al., 2010, p. 3).

I designed the course myself, creating five independent units: Ancient Olympics, Modern Olympics, Olympic Controversies, Benefits and Costs of Hosting the Games, and Tokyo 2020. Considering the hybrid approach adopted for spring 2020, I needed to identify which of my existing lessons best suited the synchronous and asynchronous formats, as well as design new lessons if deemed necessary. Furthermore, I had to ensure that the four main language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing continued to be practiced in a balanced way, as prescribed by university policy regarding CLIL courses.

SELECTION CRITERIA FOR SYNCHRONOUS AND ASYNCHRONOUS LESSONS

When initially designing the course in 2019, one major focus was maximizing opportunities for collaborative learning, whereby students could learn from each other, developing not only their L2 ability, but also their social skills. With this in mind, I decided to prioritize lesson content that I believed the students were more likely to be familiar with for synchronous Zoom lessons, in which students would have greater opportunities to interact. Conversely, I decided that more foreign topics were better suited to asynchronous classes, as less benefit could be derived from having students discuss past experiences, or share knowledge, regarding unfamiliar subject matter.

THE LESSON ITSELF

The following sections detail the creation of an asynchronous lesson about the Paralympics, previously included as a subsection of classes on the summer and winter Olympics, but expanded into a standalone lesson for 2020. As with all content for the semester, the lesson materials were placed on Google Classroom. The Paralympics lesson consisted of just one Google Doc, including hyperlinks to videos and websites that the students would need to complete the lesson. With a plethora of material online for their various courses, I felt it was important to streamline the Google Classroom page as much as possible for the students.

CREATING INTEREST IN THE TOPIC

For asynchronous lessons in particular, the lesson opening is extremely important. With no teacher physically present to introduce the topic and generate interest, students' motivation to study could be affected. One option for beginning a lesson is to record a video using an application such as Loom, whereby the teacher can capture their screen, face and voice simultaneously, thus providing a similar opening to a face-to-face lesson. However, for this particular topic, I felt that providing students with short highlight videos of the two most recent Paralympic Games (Rio 2016 and PyeongChang 2018) would be ideal to stimulate their interest, as the videos showcased a number of dramatic moments in a wide variety of events. I provided links to the videos on the International Paralympic Committee's (IPC) official website and asked the students to briefly write their impressions of what they had watched, and their familiarity with the sports shown.

AUTHENTIC TEXT SELECTION AND LANGUAGE GRADING

The video activity was followed by an authentic text copied from the IPC's website. The advantage of using the IPC website was that it caters to an international audience, and therefore consideration is likely given to non-native English speakers when producing content (the site languages are limited to English and French). Defined as "ordinary texts not produced specifically for language teaching purposes" (Carter & Nunan, 2001, p. 88), authentic materials can motivate students because "they are proof that the language is used for real-life purposes by real people" (Nuttall, 1996, p. 172). However, issues regarding length and vocabulary were evident, and I therefore adapted the text to remove superfluous information, as well as simplify difficult structures (for example, the phrasal verb 'caught on' was replaced with 'became popular'). I also added footnotes for what I predicted would be unfamiliar concepts (such as 'a war veteran'). While these steps could be followed when designing any graded materials for L2 learners, they were particularly important for this asynchronous class, as students could not ask questions as they would in a face-to-face lesson. The final advantage of the IPC article was that it not only described the origins and history of the Paralympics, but also briefly summarized the two most recent competitions (Rio 2016; PyeongChang 2018), which tied in perfectly with the video the students had watched to begin the lesson.

FAMILIAR TASKS WITH EXPLICIT INSTRUCTIONS

After reading the article, the students were given two related activities to complete: comprehension checking, and matching selected vocabulary to definitions. Both activity types were familiar to the students, as they had completed similar exercises in previous synchronous classes on Zoom. For each activity, explicit written instructions were provided, and the first answer was completed as a model. Ensuring task familiarity was a deliberate ploy, not only to help the students complete the lesson successfully, but also to reduce stress they may experience related to lack of teacher and peer support.

FACILITATING ORAL COMMUNICATION AND PEER ENGAGEMENT

Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of asynchronous lessons is providing students with the opportunity to practice all four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. In this particular lesson, I still needed to incorporate an element of oral communication, and student to student engagement was also lacking. With these points in mind, the final lesson task involved video recording.

The students were first provided with a link to a website detailing the most successful Paralympians of all time. Their task was to read about the eleven athletes, and then record a sixty-second video using Flipgrid (a video discussion application), explaining which athlete they were most impressed by and why. In addition, the students were asked to record a short response to at least three of their classmates' videos, in order to provide an element of peer engagement. As with the comprehension and vocabulary tasks, the students had prior experience using Flipgrid, and I also recorded my own model video, detailing my thoughts on the British Paralympian, Mike Kenny.

This type of asynchronous oral communication has numerous advantages: practicing presentational speaking, promoting planning before speaking, allowing learners to review and conduct self-evaluation, and providing the opportunity to revise and re-record to produce a best version (Young & West, 2018). Furthermore, a number of studies have chronicled the impact of students recording and analyzing their speech asynchronously (Engin, 2014; Gromik, 2012; Lepore, 2014), reporting improved accuracy, fluency, and pronunciation. However, such recordings would need to be included consistently throughout an online curriculum for such benefits to be realized. With this in mind, I made asynchronous recording on Flipgrid a regular feature of the course.

While the use of Flipgrid suited this particular lesson, alternative means of providing speaking practice are possible. For example, students could record a video diary throughout the semester, where they talk about what they learned and the challenges they faced. Moreover, not every skill necessarily needs to be practiced within an asynchronous lesson: a teacher might allocate time at the beginning of the subsequent synchronous lesson for students to discuss pertinent sections of a self-study class.

CONCLUSION

This paper points to providing specifically tailored, multi-faceted materials for asynchronous classes. While explicit instructions and examples are key, I also assert that minimizing the number of unfamiliar tasks is paramount for students to be able to complete self-study materials successfully. Furthermore, asynchronous lessons should not necessarily restrict

how students learn: teachers must consider alternative approaches to providing essential learning components, such as oral communication and peer engagement, which may initially seem problematic online.

While many of the recommendations in this paper could potentially be applicable to other contexts, my lesson was purposefully designed with the university's specific guidelines in mind. However, I hope that the general principles detailed in this article resonate with other teachers, and that this paper provides some valuable insight into the preparation of asynchronous materials and the thought process behind them.

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