

## Introduction

### Who is this book for?

This is a resource book for teachers interested in incorporating an aspect of interaction online in their language courses. This introduction addresses the notion and importance of interaction online as a component not only of online courses, but also of blended and face-to-face courses. The book contains more than 75 activities, which all involve online interaction, but are not just for fully-online courses. They can be used in online courses, but also in courses requiring an element of blended learning or part-time courses requiring the teacher to set some out-of-classroom work. This book could also be used on courses that are fully face-to-face, but where the teacher would like to ring the changes on traditional written homework.

*Interaction Online* will be useful to teachers in secondary, tertiary and adult sectors, both in private language institutions and in the state sector. The activities cover a range of levels with suggestions for adaptation, so they will be useful to a wide range of learners.

The book can be used in institutions that have platforms such as Blackboard or Moodle for learning support through to institutions which have no official platforms; in the latter case all activities may be used on easily available applications such as Facebook, Skype or chat rooms. The book thus has relevance to a wide range of teachers, learning situations and institutional settings.

### The changing educational landscape

In many language teaching situations worldwide, students are expected to do a proportion of their language learning work outside the classroom. While this has traditionally taken the form of homework, the situation now has changed considerably, due to five important trends:

- the ubiquity of the internet and mobile devices which can connect to the internet and which therefore afford the learner more chances to access English
- the spread of online learning, through completely online courses, apps or blended options
- the explosion of educational technology platforms and apps which are making it easier and cheaper to set up an online element of a language course
- the pressure on school budgets to increase student numbers without increasing face-to-face contact hours with a teacher, meaning that many courses are being offered with an online component
- an emphasis on lifelong learning and independent learning in education systems around the world, emphasized by the adoption of elements of documents such as the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR).

Work done outside the physical classroom can vary from courses taught completely online, to blended learning courses, to schools with part-time students who are expected to do around 10 hours work a week outside class hours.

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This online work has been heralded by and large as a ‘good thing’. Arguments in favour of online or blended courses often emphasize the benefits of students being able to learn when and where they want, and to control the pace of their own learning. Modern learning apps and platforms are getting more and more attractive and increasingly include elements of gamification, rewarding learners with points and badges for work accomplished. Manufacturers of these programmes argue that these features maintain, or increase motivation.

When it comes to all this change, teachers are often caught between the requirements to adapt constantly to the changing online scenario and to create lessons and materials for outside the classroom as well as face-to-face teaching. It is our hope that this book will remove some of that burden for them!

## **Interactive, interaction, interactivity**

It is relatively easy for teachers to point students to listening and reading texts, which abound online. There are also an enormous number of language practice activities for grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. While these are often of varying quality, publishers are beginning to put more and more professionally edited materials online as part of their course offerings.

Many of these resources claim to be interactive. The history of the term ‘interactive’ in education technology is an interesting one. Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, the term gained currency among developers, designers and marketers of educational technology programmes. Almost every technology and approach was labelled ‘interactive’. According to the Norwegian scholars Geir Haugsbakk and Yngve Nordkvelle:

‘Interactivity’ was obviously quite useful for marketing the new technology. The term had no commonly accepted meaning or definitions, but a whole range of positive connotations made it acceptable for most people. One of the prominent ideas was interactive technology establishing and supporting quite new ways of learning in contrast to the established ones. Interactive technology should open up student activity, user control and dialogue. The focus was put on learning rather than teaching. The concepts of ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’ were introduced as a dichotomy, to a large extent based on quite simple stereotypes of the two phenomena – teaching as something bad we had to get rid of and learning as something good that we have to promote. (Haugsbakk and Nordkvelle, 2007, p. 3)

This suggests that in technology, interactivity takes place between human and machine, rather than human and human. It also suggests that tech marketing promotes the simplistic idea that educational technology equates with learning, which involves interaction (human–machine) and is good, whereas the traditional face-to-face classroom equates with teaching which involves lecture-style transmission (teacher–student) and is bad.

However, Mark Callagher makes a distinction between the computer use of the word and the educational use which contrasts with this simplistic equation, recognizing that teaching, rather than being a one-way transmission model, involves far more complex interactions than are possible in human–machine interaction:

To interact, as defined by the Oxford Dictionary, is a verb meaning to ‘act so as to have a reciprocal effect’. In computer terms interactive refers to a two-way flow of information between the computer

and the user. This second meaning is very basic and to be expected in all spheres of computer use these days anyhow.

In educational theory interactivity has been defined more broadly as ‘communication, participation and feedback’ (Muirhead, 1999) or as ‘an interplay and exchange in which individuals and groups influence each other’ (Roblyer and Ekhaml, 2000). (Callagher, 2008, p. 8)

Some researchers have attempted to draw a terminological distinction between interaction (focusing on people’s behaviour) and interactivity (focusing on characteristics of technology) (see Wagner 1994, 1997). But, by and large, the word ‘interactive’ and its derivatives have been mostly appropriated to refer to how people relate to software.

Terminology notwithstanding, educational software from the 1980s and 1990s was interactive in a very weak way. The learner interacted with the program, normally through drag-and-drop exercises, gapfills and multiple choice quizzes. This human–machine interaction was very different from the human–human kind of interaction that was being promoted in communicative language classrooms across the world at the same time. It is this second form of interaction that we are concerned with here. We refer to this human–human interaction as ‘strong’ interaction, as distinguished from ‘weak’ interaction (human–machine interaction of the above kind).

## **The quality of interaction in online language courses**

We believe that, while education technology has made considerable advances since the 1990s, the same weak interaction in online courses prevails. While online courses and learning platforms may include tools that can facilitate strong interaction between participants, these are often underused. A discussion forum may end up being simply a virtual bulletin board for the instructor to post announcements. A chat room feature may be empty most of the time. And as the number of students enrolled in a single online class gets bigger and bigger, institutions may be tempted to include more and more ‘interactive’ quizzes, videos and audio clips, all of which feature automated marking and therefore need little attention from the teacher.

This is not necessarily inherently the fault of technology. If the explosion of social media has taught us one thing, it is that people enjoy strong interaction with each other through the use of technology. In this respect, technology can have a profound effect in assisting human interaction. But in online English language courses, or online elements of blended courses, learners are often forced to ‘go it alone’. This in part explains why online courses suffer so often from poor user motivation and high drop-out rates. It may also explain why the online element of blended courses is under-utilized. The recent trend in gamification of educational products, by adding points and badges for getting through the material, can only work for a limited time and for a certain kind of learner. Interacting with others is one of the reasons people enjoy language classes so much.

There is much research in the area of interaction and motivation on online courses which is applicable here. Rebecca Croxton offers a survey of the research on why students may drop out of online courses and finds that lack of interactivity is a prime factor. She argues, ‘When students have insufficient formal or informal interaction experiences in online courses, both learning and satisfaction may be compromised.’ (Croxton, 2014, p. 315)

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Other studies have found that decreased social interactivity can lead to lowered satisfaction among students and increased feelings of isolation, disillusionment, and greater risk of dropping out of the online learning environment (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk and Lee, 2007; Morris, Finnegan and Wu, 2005; Tello, 2007).

All this suggests that human-machine interactivity is not enough to maintain student satisfaction and engagement in online learning. There are also other important pedagogical reasons for incorporating human interaction into online learning.

### **Reasons for using interaction in online courses**

Callagher suggests that student-student interaction is not only motivating and engaging, but actually essential for learning to take place, and sees participation in online discussion as an opportunity for this:

When students participate in online discussions they are exposed to a broader range of views allowing them to develop more diverse perspectives and to collaborate in the construction of new meaning. (Callagher, 2008, p. 11)

This of course is true of face-to-face interaction in the classroom, but Callagher finds a special benefit of online discussion can be linked to its asynchronous nature:

The anytime aspect of online discussion allows learners to have time to think deeper about a topic and respond when they feel more informed or inspired. (Bender, 2003)

In addition, Chen and Looi (2007) find that ‘online discussion provides a permanent record of one’s thoughts for later students’ reflection and debate’.

Croxton and Callagher also make points about the benefits of the written nature of online discussion for shy or more reticent students, who like the opportunity to reflect before they write, and feel less intimidated than in a face-to-face discussion, and less dominated by more vocal students. In this situation, asynchronous online communication (that is not occurring in real time, as opposed to synchronous real time communication) is beneficial:

Communicating asynchronously via online bulletin boards can offer learners the opportunity to express their thoughts without restraint and students are more willing to ask questions and participate through discussion groups. In an extensive review of literature concerning social learning theory and web-based learning environments, Hill et al. (2009) found that because asynchronous social interaction in web-based learning environments is not as immediate as that found in a physical setting, some learners use this delay in responses to reflect before they write. (Croxtton, 2014, p. 316)

‘Students can feel more comfortable sharing comments in this format which they perceive to be less threatening than an intimidating face-to-face environment.’ (Ng and Cheung, 2007; Frazee, 2003) Shy and less vocal students felt strongly that there was more opportunity to share their opinions without being interrupted by dominant students.’ (Ng and Cheung, 2007; Bender, 2003). (Callagher, 2008, p. 11)

All of this suggests to us that having online, asynchronous interaction in a language course (fully online, part online or even face-to-face) is extremely beneficial for the learner’s self-confidence and motivation.

## Principles of interaction

This book is about redressing that balance of weak and strong interaction in online elements of language courses. It is about including more interaction between and among learners and the instructor, rather than between learners and the software. To this end, we think it might be best to outline some principles of what, in our mind, interaction means in an online course.

Interaction:

- is between human and human, not human and machine
- can involve voice or text
- can be synchronous or asynchronous
- should have a reason for communication, i.e. to share information, opinions, values or ideas
- should have a purpose and have closure in an end-point: communication should achieve something (the solution to a puzzle for example, or the creation of a text or artefact)
- should involve two-way participation: members should both take account of others' contributions and contribute themselves
- should involve all members of the group
- should involve topics that are interesting and motivating
- should include a range of topics and interaction-types to appeal to different learner preferences.

## Tools for online interaction

There are lots of technological tools that facilitate interaction, and new ones are coming out all the time. Other tools disappear and are replaced by new ones. However, we did not want this book to be an explanation or showcase of the latest tools, many of which may have become obsolete by the time you read this.

Instead, we choose to focus on two generic kinds of tool, discussion forums and instant messaging, that have not lost their popularity since they first appeared online over 30 years ago. We also include a third tool, audio/videoconferencing, that has only recently become more accessible and common in online courses.

### **Discussion forums or message boards**

A discussion forum tool allows participants to post a message and read other people's messages. This is usually done asynchronously (i.e. not in real time). Depending on the tool, a discussion forum may allow you to attach images, sounds, video and other files to it.

A good discussion forum will allow for threaded discussions, where the replies to one post are organized underneath it for ease of reading. An example is shown in Figure 0.1. Another useful feature to look out for in discussion forums is a 'quote' button, enabling you to copy and paste something said by another participant automatically and respond to it.

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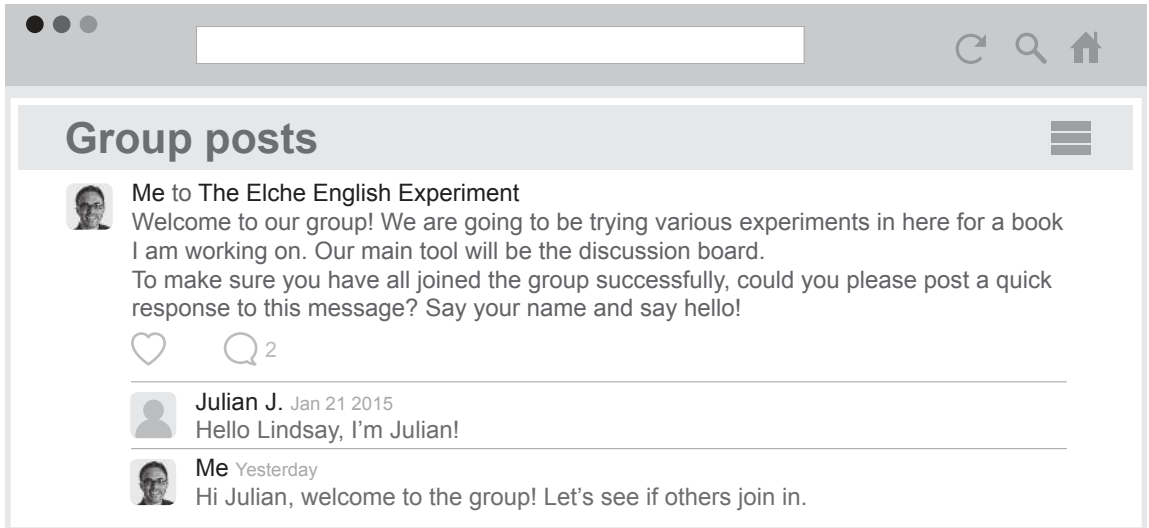


Figure 0.1: Sample discussion forum

**Instant message services or chats**

An instant message service (e.g. Figure 0.2) or chat service (e.g. Figure 0.3) allows the participants to type messages to each other in real time. Current tools allow participants to attach audio, image and video files to a message. Unlike discussion forums, chats and instant message services are mainly used for synchronous (i.e. real time and simultaneous) communication.



Figure 0.2: Sample text chat between students on an instant message forum

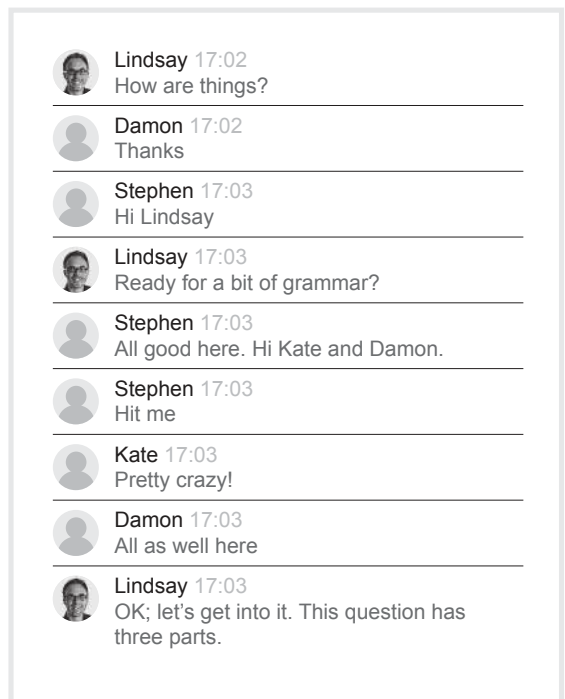


Figure 0.3: Sample text chat room

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### Audio or videoconferencing

As broadband and high-speed internet increases in spread, real-time audio and videoconferencing are becoming more and more common in online courses. An example is shown in Figure 0.4. The tools for these will vary in features but will allow multiple participants to speak (or speak and see each other) at once and are therefore used mostly for synchronous activity.

At the time of writing, many online language courses have at least two of these tools. Most teachers are familiar with communicating via all of these formats. We have decided to focus most of our activities on the first two tools, as these are the easiest to use and still extremely popular. Audio and videoconferencing, at the time of writing, still often suffer from connection speeds and time lag but are growing in popularity.



Figure 0.4: Videoconferencing

### Implications for teaching and learning

One of the most powerful reasons for including more and more automated exercises and interactive software in online elements of courses is that it saves teachers time and effort, thus allowing them to spend more time on creative lesson planning. It can also be economically advantageous. It is very tempting for educational institutions to increase the number of students on such a course. The machine can mark one or one thousand exercises and does not get tired, or charge more per hour.



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However, as we have seen, such policies will not help learning in the long run. What is more, an over-reliance on automated interaction may result in higher drop-out levels on online courses.

If you are a teacher or educational leader who wishes to have more effective online elements of your courses then the implications are clear: strong interaction between the participants on your courses is necessary. For this interaction to be successful, however, it takes work on the part of the teacher. It also takes time, and it is more successful with smaller groups. These three facts are well known to English teachers, as they are what has made successful face-to-face language classes for many years!

You also need ideas and examples of activities which promote strong interaction between learners online, and that are suitable for language classes. That is where this book can help. This book also offers you guidance on setting up and managing online interaction, using the student-produced texts for feedback, error correction and assessment, and designing your own online activities.

## **How this book is organized**

Callagher (2008) suggests that most use of online interaction has taken place in the tertiary sector, where in blended or online courses the discussion board or forum takes the place of a seminar. This means that these discussion forums are most extensively used, as their name suggests, for intellectual debate and argument. We wish to extend this use of discussion forums to include different interaction and activity types. We have divided the activities in this book according to different kinds of strong interaction, of which we identify five: personal, factual, creative, critical and fanciful.

### ***Personal interaction***

This kind of interaction involves an exchange of personal information. The classic ‘find someone who’ classroom activity is an example of this. Sharing photos or personal stories, and commenting or reacting to these are further examples familiar to anyone who has been on social media.

Activity types include:

- posting an image of something important to you
- questions and answers on a personal topic (e.g. your family, your town, your job)
- telling a personal story
- sharing your feelings
- informal chit-chat.

### ***Factual interaction***

This kind of interaction involves sharing information on a factual topic. Information gap and guessing games are examples of factual interaction.

Activity types include:

- asking questions about a photo of a real person or place
- sharing information about a famous person’s biography
- answering questions about a subject you know about
- interviewing an expert on a topic to find more information
- helping to identify a location on a map.



**Creative interaction**

This involves interaction between the participants in order to create a ‘product’: a story, poem, advert, etc.

Activity types include:

- collaborative story-writing
- imagining and sharing the ‘stories’ behind everyday things
- creating a collaborative poem.

**Critical interaction**

This kind of interaction involves an exchange of opinions on a topic or topics. Discussions, debates or role plays can all be occasions for critical interaction.

Activity types here include:

- debating the pros and cons of a topic
- considering causes and consequences
- ranking items or ideas
- playing devil’s advocate
- looking at a topic from a different point of view
- sharing your opinion on a topic.

**Fanciful interaction**

This type of interaction is often used on online games. It involves entering into an imaginary situation, perhaps (but not necessarily) taking on a role and interacting to solve a puzzle or share information.

Activity types include:

- role playing
- rewriting parts of a story
- brainstorming a solution to a fantasy problem.

These categories will appeal to different learners’ preferences for activities they enjoy and find motivating. Four dichotomies are involved:

- **affective vs cognitive:** some activities involve the affective and emotional side, the sharing of values and feelings, while others involve logic and argument.
- **fact vs fantasy:** some interactions involve real-life situations, while some involve fantasy situations.
- **exploratory vs solution-based activities:** this is essentially the distinction between activities that allow learners to use their imagination to create something new and original, and activities that challenge learners to find the right answer.
- **immediate vs reflective activities:** some activities, such as guessing games, are ‘quick-fire’, requiring an immediate response, while others, such as discussions or story creation, demand a more reflective delayed response time.

All the activities are closed-task, or convergent, that is, they have an end-point: the completion of a task, the solution of a puzzle, the guessing of a conundrum, or the creation of a poem or story. The reason behind this is that that sense of achievement resulting from successful completion of a task is very satisfying and leads to self-esteem and increased motivation. It is also important to have a fixed


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end-point in an online activity for practical reasons, so that the teacher knows when the activity is finished. This is more difficult to ascertain than in a classroom situation, where the teacher can see when an activity is finished or students have run out of things to say. Some activities make use of a ludic game-format, for example, guessing or puzzle solving; some require the completion of a task, resulting in for example, a group decision; and some require the collaborative creation of a product, for example a group advert or poem.

## **How the activities are organized**

The activities have a standard framework, making it easy for teachers to move from one activity to another:

- A box at the top of each activity which teachers can use to see at a glance whether the activity will be suitable for their class. The box specifies the following:
  - Outline: the kind of activity students will be involved in
  - Level
  - Learning focus: grammar, functions or vocabulary practised
  - Time required for the activity and any post-activity follow-up
  - Preparation: what needs to be done in advance of posting the activity online (not all activities require preparation).
- Procedure: step-by step instructions for how to use the activity.
- Tasks to be posted online. These consist of:
  - Stimulus: instructions for the first task learners are required to do
  - Interaction: instructions for online interaction between learners, based on their reactions to the first task
  - Some activities in Chapter 4: *Creative interaction* have an additional task which asks students to collaborate to create an output product, e.g. a story or poem.
- Variation: included in some activities if the activity lends itself to other contexts, topics or language focus. This will suggest ways in which the activity could be adapted.

Most of the activities require little preparation, and where role cards are needed, they are given on separate photocopiable pages at the end of the activity. Many of the activities, including those with role cards or instructions that teachers may wish to personalize, can also be downloaded from the dedicated website. Details of this can be found on the inside front cover. Material which is available to download is marked with the symbol .

## **Synchronous or asynchronous platforms?**

The activities are intended to be either synchronous, i.e. taking place in real time, or asynchronous, with a time delay. When trialling the activities with teachers in different classroom and online environments, we found that most of them can be carried out synchronously or asynchronously. Which mode you choose will partly depend on where in the lesson you wish to use the activity, and whether it is a lengthy activity requiring students to do their own research, for example, or one designed as a quick finish to a lesson. Some activities lend themselves better to one mode or the other and in these cases a note is included in the Outline.