

Instructive Guidelines for Developing Online EFL Courses

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Abstract:

Designing an online course is a two-façade project; it requires technical and pedagogical considerations to make the instruction comprehensive and applicable. Combining technology and pedagogy creates a fresh and innovative learning experience; however, a mere combination of the two without considering what an online course needs to integrate as components ends up in a disappointing fiasco. This paper draws course designers' attention to the principles of planning, designing, managing and assessing an online course. It concludes that going online in teaching is initially a promising decision as it meets the expectations of the new generation of learners. Yet, this decision could not be promising as it initially suggested if the teacher does not consider such components as compelling content, manageable layout, applicable platform, and diverse course loggers.

ملخص:

يعتبر تصميم درس على الخط مشروعا ذا واجهتين: واجهة تقنية وأخرى بيداغوجية وذلك لضمان عملية تعليمية شاملة و قابلا للتطبيق. إن هذا الدمج يجعل من تعليم اللغة الانجليزية تجربة مبتكرة و جديدة ولكن مجرد نقل التعليم من إطاره التقليدي إلى إطار افتراضي بدون اعتبار المقومات اللازمة لذلك حتما ينتهي بفشل محيب. لذلك فهذا المقال يسلط الضوء على الأسس اللازمة لتخطيط وتصميم درس على الخط بالإضافة إلى طرق تسييره و تقييمه. توصل هذا المقال إلى أن الاتجاه نحو الدروس على الخط يعتبر في بادئ الأمر قرارا واعدا لأنه يتماشى مع توقعات جيل التكنولوجيا ولكنه يجب أن يدعم معرفة شاملة حول عناصر الدرس على الخط و خاصة المحتوى اللغوي المناسب، البنية و الأرضية الالكترونية الملائمة لطبيعة الدرس بالإضافة إلى اعتبار أساليب المتعلمين المتباينة.

Introduction

Online course delivery has taken over the area of EFL/ESL instruction in the recent decades to keep pace with the increasing progress of the modern pedagogy. The growing number of websites, blogs, encyclopaedias and interactive sites that target EFL learners and teachers alike creates certain e-traffic that sometimes hinders more than it helps easy learning, especially with the abundance of non-authentic uploaded materials and the professionally uncontrolled content due to the accessibility and availability of the internet tools and applications worldwide. Although they are pedagogically and technically revised, some online EFL/ESL courses have a limited or unauthorised access that requires a subscription and fees which are not handy for many students. Some learning platforms give more attention to the technical aspect of the course and care less about its pedagogical coverage. Therefore, being acquainted with the regulations that determine the dos and the don'ts of designing an online course becomes of a high priority for teachers as they are supposed to meet the expectations of their learners who are undoubtedly experienced net users which allows them to distinguish between a well-devised and designed course from the ill-developed one.

1. The components of online courses

The increasing development in the field of web-design has made it handy and easy-to- apply with the availability of a wide range of free templates and samples of different functions and in different disciplines (education, business, art, leisure and sport). However, all learning websites share some common features and components, both technical and pedagogical. Pacheco (2005: 11-12) draws seven basic components, to create an online course. These components are: (1) general information, (2) course information, (3) schedule, (4) resources, (5) Multimedia presentation of content, (6) virtual classroom, and (7) assessment and testing space.

In 'general information' component, learners are acquainted with the general layout of the course. It should contain the course name, learners' level, course hours, instructor contacts, and course prerequisites. While the course description, objectives, types of

activities, course requirements, testing and evaluation policies are parts of the course information component. As online learning takes some of the attributes of the traditional classes, scheduling the course is a must-have component in an online instruction. Creating a calendar allows the teacher to set the timeline for the lessons, activities, tests and exams. It may include the number of sessions and weeks of study with the number of breaks and vacations. These three components of the general information, course information, and course schedule represent the core of the online course as the learners loggers are supposed to be informed with the general map of the course before introducing them to the content and activities.

The resources component provides learners with all learning materials that are either web pages format or downloadable files. Learning resources include lecture notes, podcasts, handouts, e-books, audio and video materials, and the related websites links. To support the course resources, integrating multimedia presentations offers variety and richness to motivate learners and give them more learning options. This may include namely pictures, maps, graphs, figures, audio clips, videos and films. Indeed, multimedia presentation is an online course is not sufficient to create an interactive environment unless it is supported with discussion forums, chat rooms, e-mail communications, and links to share the material via the social network sites. The objective is to create the basics for the virtual classroom in which learners log in to communicate, interact, comment and share with the peers and the tutor alike. The online course provides learners with a space to participate and engage in individual and group tasks.

The last component in an online course is the assessment and testing space. For many learning websites, this component is optional especially in the case of blended learning. It aims to deliver the course online tests, assignments and examinations. It also determines the criteria for the course grades and provides a space for learners to track their learning progress and achievement through self-assessment.

2. Planning and designing online courses

The first steps for EFL teachers to deliver online courses need careful decision-making and planning the different elements involved in the course particularly the structure of the platform, the interface and the sequence of units besides interaction and communication channels.

Maeroff (2003: 34) mentions the following elements that should be included in the design of an online course.

The layout, illustration, and colours [...], the ways that links are displayed, the manner that lessons incorporate sound and video, the arrangement by which students move through the lesson, the instruction they receive for navigating the site, the decision about how to incorporate electronic bulletin boards and chat rooms.

In the same vein, McCormack and Jones (1998: 53) claim that planning helps the teacher to establish his/her goals and set approaches to achieve them. To do so, Campbell, Perlman, & Hadley (2001: 237) believe that course designers need to ask some questions to guide them, which are mainly related to content, students, teachers, technology, and management.

- Content: what are the purposes, grade levels, and the content area of the course?
- Students: how many students will register and what are their prerequisites?
- Teachers: what training is needed for the teacher? Will there be instructional support?
- Technology: what hardware and software are available? Will internet access be available for learners out of class?
- Management: are there partners to financially support the online course project?

The answers to these questions determine the course planning, design structure, layout and appearance.

2.1. Planning phase

McCormack and Jones (1998) and Duggeleby (2001) consider planning as the fundamental step to build an online course. The teacher first needs to ensure the availability of necessary technological equipments in his/her institution, and if the institution supports and invests in online instruction. McCormack and Jones (1998) point out that checking the availability of equipments leads the teacher to begin the actual planning of the course which consists of developing a list of

learning objectives, identifying the ways to achieve them, and then prioritising the list.

Learning objectives for an online course resembles the objectives of a traditional course in which developing learners' skills, and competences is the ultimate goal of the teacher. Using technology to create an online course should not be regarded as an objective in itself, but as a vehicle to address the genuine learning objectives, being them linguistic, communicative or/and pragmatic. Achieving these objectives necessitates opting for diverse web applications to meet the different learning styles of students. McCormack and Jones (*ibid.*) express best this idea by giving an example of a three-pronged approach. They state:

For example, if your goal is to increase interaction between students and teachers, you can choose a three pronged approach: set up a mailing list for general discussions and announcements, use an anonymous forms page as a feedback mechanism, and employ an interactive chat tool to maintain a virtual office. Each of these approaches has different characteristics that will make them suitable for different students and purposes. (P. 58)

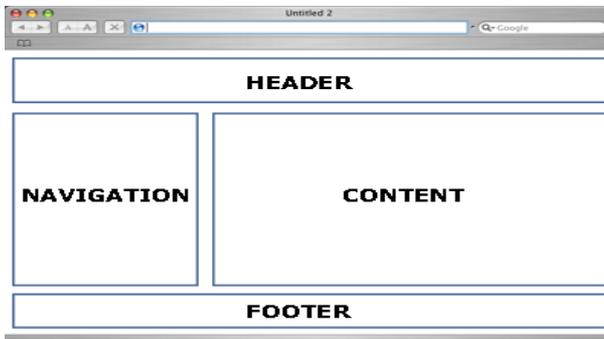
Varying the instructional media and channels decreases the chance of failing to meet the needs of learners and their expectations. Once the objectives are set and the approaches are designed, ranking the priorities of objectives comes next. The teacher ranks each objective on the basis of "its cost-to- benefit ratio" (McCormack and Jones 1998: 61). This means that the objective that is beneficial for learners and it is not time and resource consuming should be prioritized in the list of learning goals.

The planning phase, as Duggleby (2001: 55) suggests, requires some basic prerequisites that teachers need to have. She recommends teachers to equip themselves with the basic Internet skills as browsing and e-mailing. She also suggests that teachers learn the fundamentals of a good web page and site design and learn from other comparable online courses. Contacting experts is also recommended to make the course development viable. The experts' assistance minimises the content design time and provides a well-organised content material that "incorporated real-life application and best practices into the

classroom” (Shank 2007: 228). The expert’s assistance provides the course designer with feasible and friendly-user internet applications that fit the classroom context. The expert also helps the teacher opts for the most manageable and functional online learning platforms.

2.2. Designing phase

Though designing a particular learning website remains “a matter of taste and purpose” (McCormack and Jones 1998: 78), the design process requires different interrelated skills of different fields as computing, graphic design, typography, and multimedia. As the designing phase is intricate, and effortful, Duggleby (2001: 59) calls teachers and course designers to consider some issues before starting the phase. The chief issue is the type of delivering the course i.e. online or blended course. Once the decision is made, selecting the course materials and the learners’ working methods and mediums will be done accordingly. In fact, a good design attracts learners’ attention and retains their interest. That is why online course designers need to pay attention to the structure, presentation, and organisation of the website. Designing templates for an online course may take different models according to the purpose of the course. A model template may look as follows.



Graph 1. A template of an online course homepage

This template contains four sections: Header, navigation, content and footer. In the Header, the teacher designer may locate the page title, the logo image and the slogan of the course. The navigation bar as the name suggests helps loggers to browse the page across the different categories as courses, tests, exercises, workshops, links, and other

related components. As a support to the navigation bar, the content section displays the information related to the browsed category in the navigation bar. This page area may preview the content of each category or display the full information, sometimes, the content area contains links to the other sub-categories. A content area may look as follows.



Graph 2. A screenshot of a content area in a webpage

The footer space is often located in the bottom of the page in which further details about the course and the designer are displayed. For instance, contact details (email, phone number, address, social media accounts and FAQs) are generally arranged in the footer. In some advanced and well elaborated online courses, the footer provides visitors with a sitemap, newsletters, guestbook, privacy policy and advertising area. The below screenshot is an example of the footer



bold 3. A screenshot of footer in an online course
Source: <http://www.english-hilfen.de/kontakt.htm>

3. Online course framework

Khan (2001: 78) suggests a framework for any online course in which he introduces different dimensions and sub-dimensions that should be included when designing a website. It consists of seven dimensions: (1) pedagogical, (2) technological, (3) interface design, (4) evaluation, (5) management, (6) resource support, and (7) ethical.

To begin with, the pedagogical instruction addresses issues related to the course objectives, design approach, organisation of the course, teaching methods and strategies, and instructional media. The technological dimension is mainly concerned with technological aspects such as infrastructure, hardware, and software. For instance, the teacher has to make sure that learners know how to install and use hardware equipments and software programmes. As far as the interface design dimension is concerned, it consists of page and site design that represent the physical appearance of the website, content design which deals with the quality of the course subject matter (text density, editing and proofreading), navigation space that provides the site map to guide the learners' browsing with ease and reasonable speed and usability testing that involves users to evaluate the effectiveness of the course design and improve its interface design. Evaluation dimension gives learners the space to demonstrate what they have learned in the course. It also offers learners an instant space to give their feedback and evaluation of the course for further better improvement.

Unlike the above dimensions in which the teacher designer may take in charge all the procedures, management dimension is mainly a collaborative effort of both the teacher and the computer experts to handle the web-related operations as distribution of information, course content management (updating, reprinting, copyright, security procedures, etc), budgeting, and evaluation policies (submissions, online quizzes and tests). Resource support dimension is basically a human-based support whose function is to assist learners “who may have a particularly high degree of anxiety at the beginning of the course” (Moore and Kearsley, 1996. Cited in Khan 2001: 88). Providing psychological, instructional and technical guidance for learners to cope with their uncomfortable feeling and unfamiliarity with online learning is necessary to overcome their learning obstacles and be effective online learners. The last dimension is ethical. It chiefly considers the issues of social and cultural diversity, etiquettes (rules for appropriate behaviour especially in discussion forums and chat rooms) and the legal issues (privacy, plagiarism, and copyright). Setting clear instructions about these issues at the beginning of the course may reduce the cultural and communication misunderstanding among learners.

These dimensions of the online course framework form the general policies and regulations that control and govern the learning process. Therefore, any mishandling or mistreatment of one of these issues may result in failure of the learning experience.

4. Guidelines for developing an online EFL course

Any teacher who decides to develop an online course may become puzzled and reluctant about the requirements and the steps needed to design and deliver his/her course because of the intricacy of the procedures and the interwoven priorities in taking such an action. Therefore, the following guidelines might be of a great help for teachers who desired to updated their classes and keep pace with their learners in the internet era.

4.1. Familiarising teachers with the online instructional basics

Getting into a new teaching atmosphere without sufficient knowledge and training is undoubtedly risky; therefore, acquainting teachers with the principles of online teaching needs to be a

prerequisite to begin the instruction on the web. Web designers often stress the idea of simple and friendly-user environment that uses simple and clear design that attracts the user through the safe choice of colors, shapes, sizes and fonts. Moreover, avoiding overloaded content makes browsing the course easy and purposeful. It is also advised to set a well-scheduled program that identifies the session timing, tasks, assignments and other class activities by inserting a calendar in the master page to stick to the schedule. Furthermore, creating a class e-mail account allows all students to receive notes, feedback, changes in the program and assignments' deadlines at once. All the above tips need to be applied in parallel with networking, web surfing, security and updating skills.

4.2. **Setting Clear Objectives for the Target Needs**

An EFL online course with an objective-driven content begins its design with a clear and detailed statement of objectives that aim to bridge the learners' needs to their objectives. Therefore, at the end of the instruction, students will be able to be evaluated on the basis of the previously set objectives. Therefore, it is highly recommended that the more concrete and specific objectives are, the more students make sense of learning. Löfström, Kanerva, Tuuttila, Lehtinen and Nevgi (2006) point out that the goal-oriented input in a online instruction makes learning meaningful as learners are engaged effectively in the process of knowledge and skills acquisition. Measuring the achievement of objectives is done via electronic journals, diaries, and other interactive media as chatrooms and discussion forums besides social networking (facebook and twitter) that can be created for such purpose.

4.3. **Selecting an appropriate web environment**

The internet now accommodates users with a host of interactive and applicable online environments and formats; however, the appropriate selection ensures the quality of learning and raises learners' enthusiasm and involvement. Teachers, therefore, ought to check the availability of animation, audio-visual materials and hypertext and hypermedia structures besides other **web potentials in the selected format to ease information processing and knowledge construction.**

As far as EFL course is concerned, the web environment offers rich multimedia and interactive materials that target the macro language skills, culture, vocabulary and pronunciation. Hence, the teacher ascertains that the chosen platform should provide the uploading options so that the teacher and the learners alike upload any relevant learning material (podcasts, videos, e-books and worksheets) that support the course and its objectives. This screenshot shows an example of a course webp.



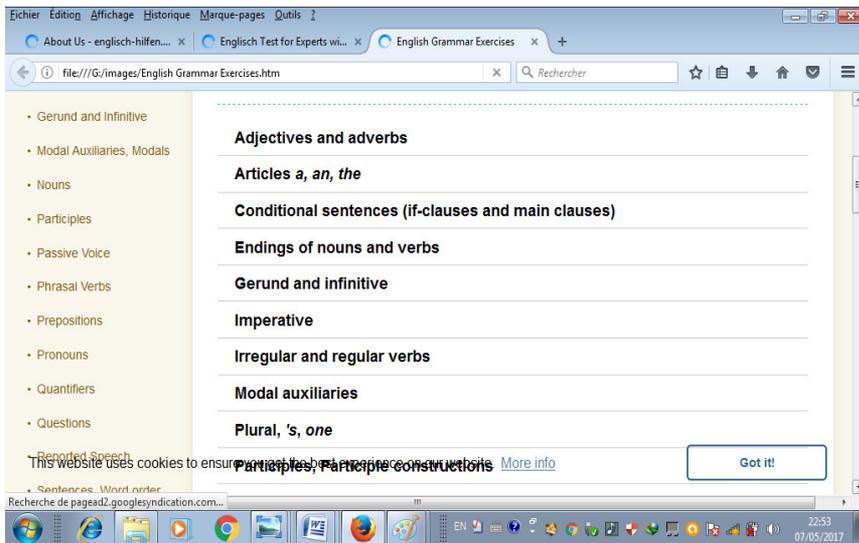
bold 4. Homepage of the British Council' LearnEnglish website,

Some platforms provide drilling and exercising formats to practice grammar or vocabulary. Since the teacher is the only partner in the designing of online courses, the administration must also have roles to play in the entire enterprise through arranging schedules, sufficient internet equipments and learning manuals for both teachers and learners.

4.4. Designing Compelling Content

Deciding upon the content of instruction is one of the most critical decision making in the online course design. What makes the content compelling is its suitability to the learners' level, **interest and objectives**. The massive progress in the Internet publications and uploading of materials from institutions and individuals offer EFL teachers and learners a treasure of learning materials some of which are freely accessed. However, it is not always safe and fitting to integrate

whatever content appeals compelling unless it is well studied and analysed in terms of its language and knowledge features that fit the need and level of learners. When selecting the content for the course, a special attention should be given to its level of complexity and clarity of information in order not to hinder the easy processing and constructing of knowledge and skills. The organisation of content materials needs to be in crisp and clear sections that can be divided thematically or chronically. The webpage below exemplifies the idea of thematic organisation of the course.



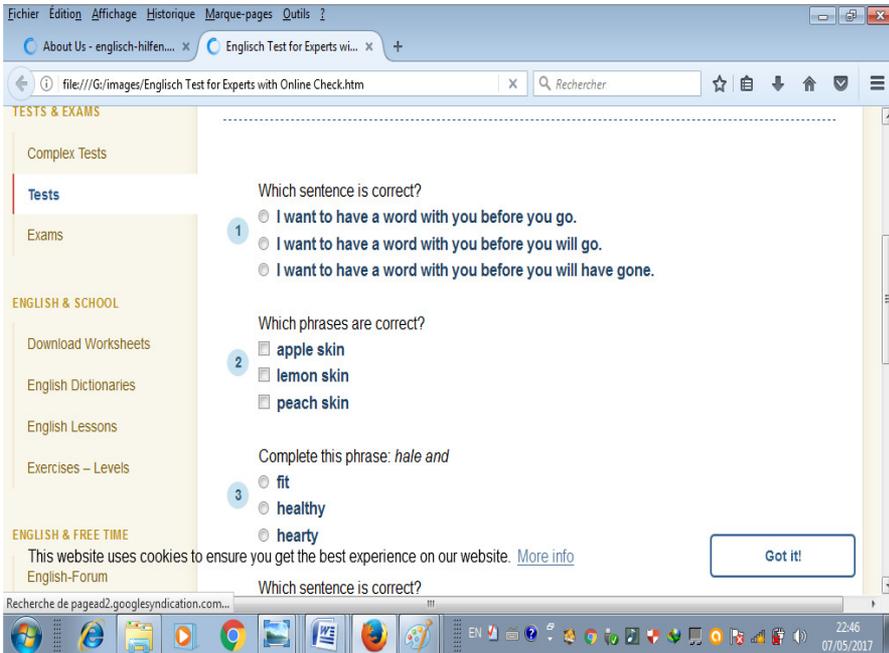
bold 5. Thematic organization of online course content

Source: http://www.englisch-hilfen.de/en/exercises_list/alle_grammar.htm

As the screenshot shows, this online grammar course is arranged thematically into lessons and sequences that follow the content of the course as students can easily practice and monitor their learning progress.

Bender (2003: 43) recommends that “the instructor posts short, succinct, snappy lectures, more appropriately called “mini-lectures” attached to the main homepage or the discussion forum. It is also worth mentioning that the course content should be regularly updated, edited

and adjusted to break the traditional monotony of textbooks and syllabi that do not go through updating procedures during the life span of the course. The following screen shot represents an example of a compelling content of a website for EFL learners who learn grammar basics through MCQ tests (Multiple Choice Questions).



Graph 6. A screenshot of an MCQ test in an online course

Source: <http://www.english-hilfen.de/kontakt.htm>

The displayed content in this screenshot corresponds with the objectives of the course and meets the needs of learners. The example in the screenshot is an (MCQ) test on sentences, phrases and clauses.

4.5. Assessing the Course for Future Adjustments

Course assessment and evaluation is often carried out to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the course and provide feedback for further adjustment and improvement. In an online course, the feedback is often instant via different software provided by the internet services which allow teachers to synchronically send comments, remarks and recommendation via e-mails, bulletin boards and class blogs.

Practically, the internet suggests ideal applications to carry out both summative and formative assessment of the course in a form of newsletters, online surveys and questionnaires administered to all partners in the course enterprise (teachers, learners, administrators) and the results are automatically and statistically displayed in percentages, graphic representations and/or diagrams. What is pronounced about the online assessment is that the obtained feedback from learners can be automatically stored and retrieved when necessary to make archives and records for future improvements of the course.

4.6. Respecting diverse learners and their learning styles

As in traditional classes, learners bring their background and experience to the online class. They come with different technical and linguistic knowledge which makes every session a unique experience because of the versatile styles of learning and diverse skills shown during the instruction procedures (Chickering & Gamson 1987, cited in Graham, Cagilty, Craner, Lim, & Duffy 2000). In an online course implementing various web applications guarantees that learners are given equal opportunities and they are evenly addressed. To illustrate, learners learn grammar rules in different ways; therefore, they need to have different formats of grammar lessons and tests. In this context, Tercanlioglu (2001) suggested a list of websites for learning grammar online as <http://www.chompchomp.com/>, <http://www.English4us.com/>, <http://www.bettergrammar.org/>, etc because of their relevance in adapting to different learning styles. Extrovert learners for instance feel at ease with sharing and interacting via social media and chatrooms, while introvert learners prefer individual contacts via private e-mails and other communication accounts. So, teachers of an online course ought to consider the versatility of the internet tools to accommodate them to their learners.

Conclusion

Designing an online EFL course requires setting clear and meaningful objectives that determine the entire map of the course. Moreover, it necessitates a better understanding of the theory, methodology and practice of teaching online courses as they differ from traditional courses in nature, delivery and performance. This cannot be well

accomplished unless teachers are properly acquainted with the suitable web environments and tools in which the compelling content is to be implemented. Keeping constant feedback and regular assessment of the instruction maximises the chances of meeting the expectations of the diverse learners who attend to the course. To be brief, developing an online course in EFL context requires more than knowledge of the internet applications; it has to be a matter of addressing the right needs of learners and their deficiencies of learning as the ultimate objective is developing their linguistic and communicative competence in the first place. Teachers, then, need to consider technology as an asset and a updated platform to pedagogy and not an end target in itself.

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