



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Five Ways to Make Your Online Foreign Language Content More Brain-Friendly

Between the threat of COVID, national unrest, and the stress of everyday life, students are experiencing an unprecedented amount of information overload and anxiety. Neuroscience has taught us that our brains do not function optimally in the presence of cortisol and other stress hormones. As instructors, one of our objectives is to present course material in ways that encourage the brain to relax in order to better absorb information. Teaching a foreign language online in an asynchronous environment creates opportunities for instructors to explore how to use a Learning Management System to make information easily digestible, thereby creating less stress on students' minds and bodies. Here are five simple strategies I use to make my online language learning classes easier on the brain.

Integrate Line Breaks Into Your Text

This tip came from a presenter at CanvasCon in 2020, and it was a big "ah-ha" moment for me. Language instructors tend to be wordy; after all, we're language lovers! But it's important to look at our online classes objectively to see where we may have put too much text and consider including line breaks.

Integrating simple line breaks into a web page that is text-heavy can have an immediate calming effect on the brain. This is because the brain likes information to be chunked down into bite-sized components. Too much information at one time can cause stress and hinder the acquisition of new material.

What you can do: Take a look at your online course, and find a page with lots of text—maybe too much for the brain to handle, if you consider it honestly. Could you add a line break or two in between ideas to help break the information into small chunks? Or, take it a step further. Would it be better to split up the material into more than one page? Is there something that you could remove entirely? We get so attached to our material, but not everything is necessary.

Provide Multiple Ways to Submit Assignments

We all have preferred methods of processing new information. With this in mind, I offer my students multiple ways to submit their work. For example, some students might prefer to write their vocabulary journals by hand and upload a screenshot, while others prefer to record a voice memo of the new word while using it in a sentence. Learning Management Systems like Canvas make it easy to provide multiple ways to submit an assignment. Giving students options goes a long way towards promoting a sense of ownership in the learning process while playing to their learning strengths.

What you can do: Find at least one assignment you can easily grade in more than one format and add an additional submission option. Be sure to let your students know that you offer this flexibility from time to time so they'll know to be on the lookout for additional options when they're completing assignments.

Encourage Your Students to Write Assignments by Hand

This might sound old-fashioned in an era of all things digital, but writing by hand is often better for learning, and research supports this.¹ With this in mind, I often encourage students to take pen to paper and write out their assignments, take a screenshot, and upload it for their assignment submissions.

What you can do: Writing by hand is an excellent way for students to build vocabulary. If you ask your students to keep a vocabulary journal, can you encourage them to try writing the words, translations, and other notes out by hand? Don't let it stop there. Feel free to encourage doodles and the use of colored pens to make their vocabulary journals more meaningful.

Create Consistency With Tables, Fonts, and Lists

Our brains tend to skip over information when it's not formatted in a consistent and predictable manner. This means that the more uniform you can make the elements in your online class, the easier they are on the brain. For example, if you use tables for lists of words and phrases, be sure that the border size is the same width for each table and your table headings have the same sized font throughout your course.

Keep information tables compact and relevant. The textbook I chose for my class provided monster-sized tables of vocabulary words. I soon realized there was no way my students were taking the time to read the words in the table, let alone commit them to memory! Be highly selective about the information you include. Less is more in terms of online content.

Bulleted and numbered lists also provide order and structure, making our online classes more brain-friendly. Lists tell students exactly what they need to focus on instead of asking them to read through dense pages of online text.

What you can do: Look at the aesthetics of your online course. Are there places where you could transform a paragraph of text into a bulleted list or shorten the length of a table by removing an extra item? Are your tables consistent in appearance?

Calm the Brain by Showing Your Face Regularly

If 2020 and Zoom culture have taught us anything, it's that we, as instructors, have to become more comfortable seeing ourselves on camera. When I first ran an asynchronous online language course in 2019, I relied on the videos that were included with the online textbook. But my students spoke up on evaluations, saying that they wanted to see more of their instructor. Seeing our faces and hearing our voices is an important part of building relationships and facilitating the learning process. We learn best when we feel comfortable and safe, and by providing students with consistent access to our faces and voices, we help create a reliable and welcoming space for learning.

Knowing this, I now include a lot more of myself in my online class, not only by integrating instructional videos, but by providing personalized videos when giving feedback on students' assignments. Seeing our faces, hearing our tone of voice, and knowing that we'll take time to speak to students directly can go further than a quick "Great job!" in the comment box.

What you can do: Where in your class can you integrate more of YOU? Can you pop in with a video message to your students more often or send a personalized video to a student each week? Not only will your student evaluations improve, but your sense of connection and satisfaction will, too.

Conclusion

Online instructors always feel the need to improve their online product; it's the nature of being a conscientious teacher. The above five simple strategies work together to provide a calmer, more consistent, and brain-friendlier online language learning environment. Once you start implementing brain-friendly teaching techniques into your classes, it will inspire you to incorporate more thoughtfulness into how you present

your information. So many cool bells and whistles exist that we can add to our online classes, but sometimes we just need to go back to the basics and back to how the brain works best.

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