

Teaching languages ab initio online

The situation

Ulrike Bavendiek

Whereas learners at intermediate and advanced levels can greatly benefit from online resources, able to cope with much authentic input and to engage in extended, loosely structured tasks, beginners need much closer, fine-tuned scaffolding. It is time-consuming and difficult to organise the detailed sequences of activities and to offer the required amount of short texts, carefully selected to ensure the message oriented and comprehensible input that is essential for language learning. Contrary to other levels, most target language content on the internet is not accessible or of little use for beginners at A1 or A2 level. Regarding speaking and writing tasks, 'beginners can only produce very limited utterances, especially at the beginning of their studies, so they require a larger number of stimuli and more structured activities to extract the little language they can produce' (Rosell-Aguilar, 2005). Teaching presence, or 'the design, facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes' (Garrison et al., 2010, p. 32) is therefore particularly important for ab initio learners.

Beginners are also more likely to differ profoundly regarding the language learning skills and strategies they bring to the process. Some may need substantial guidance and feedback to develop efficient language learning habits or to use resources effectively for language learning (Brussino, G. and C. Gunn, 2008, p. 6), while others may be experienced and independent language learners.

Finally, beginners in many HE degree programmes are expected to progress extremely quickly and with a relatively low number of contact hours to B1 level, often losing their feeling of control over the learning process and consequently struggling with motivation and a sense of failure at different points during the semester. Students therefore need efficient and continuous support to cope with the affective and social, in addition to the cognitive demands of such courses. Strong bonds with their peers and a trusting relationship with the teacher as facilitator can build their confidence and cushion the extreme demands of such courses. Building such strong relationships online, however, is a new challenge for many of us.

References

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