

Connection and Correction in Online Language Practice

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I welcomed students to our conversation practice on Zoom, and a name popped up among the participants that made me giddy. It was a student I had been texting with for six weeks, trying to gauge whether she wanted to participate in our online groups. She had only been in my physical classroom for a couple of weeks before everything changed. Now that practicing online was the only option, I sensed that she wanted to keep learning, but something she couldn't (or wouldn't) name was standing in the way.

I welcomed her to the group enthusiastically, hoping it would be a positive experience. After the lesson, I had a few moments to connect with her alone and ask how she felt during her first online conversation practice. She said it was okay but... "It was so hard for me to decide to start English class at the learning center....and now...this is even harder."

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I get it. Our students, teachers, and volunteers did not choose this. This was not the model of language learning that we all had in mind. We cannot be physically near our students, reading every facial expression, and listening to the side conversations of peers. Therefore, as we gather online, we must do everything we can to foster connection with and among students in this virtual space.

Our first and most important job as teachers and tutors is to welcome our students and enthusiastically recognize the accomplishment of just showing up. This is how we will reduce the distance in distance learning.

CONNECT

We are all craving connection with others right now. For language learners, trust and connection are essential in order for them to take the social risks required to practice a new language. Our first job as teachers and tutors is to foster connections with and among our students.

- **Listen.** Pay attention to what students say and ask for clarification when you don't understand something. Glossing over misunderstandings does not help language learners. They need (and ask for) conversation partners to negotiate meaning with them to foster true dialog.
- **Participate.** Join the conversation as an *equal* participant. Students benefit from hearing teachers answer questions, summarize what others have said, and ask follow-up questions. This way they can practice listening to fluent English speakers and eventually emulate those speech patterns.

- **React.** Offer comments and questions in reaction to what students say. The goal is to have a conversation, not just to perform an answer to a question.
- **Facilitate.** Look for opportunities for students to react and respond to one another. Sometimes this means just leaving quiet space for students to think about what they want to say. At other times, prompts like “has that ever happened to you?” or “What do you think about what ___ said?” can encourage learners to listen and respond to one another in meaningful ways.

CORRECT

Once students are feeling comfortable talking in online platforms, we can begin to think about how to offer constructive feedback.

- **Listen.** Students want correction, but they need it in digestible bites they can practice. As you listen, choose one thing you will offer as a correction. Try to think about the thing that might interfere most with the student’s ability to communicate clearly.
- **React.** Let students finish expressing their thought and react to that thought before you provide correction. Remember, **connection is your first priority**. Also, it is hard for students to digest a correction when they are in the middle of thinking about how to express their ideas.
- **Correct and Model.** Name the correction concisely and then repeat their idea with the correct grammar or pronunciation as a model. *“We are talking about the past. Do you know the past tense for the verb ‘tell’? It’s ‘told’.* So you say *‘My parents **told** me not to go near the river.’”*
- **Rehearse.** Ask the student, “can you try that answer again?” Listen for the correction that you taught and provide feedback if necessary. Don’t bring up other corrections at this time.