

DigiLingua: Practical advice on teaching an online course



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Synchronous online course

Blended course

Asynchronous online course

Hybrid course/HyFlex course



Synchronous online course

In synchronous online courses, the teacher and students are present at the same time using a video conferencing tool (e.g. Zoom or Teams). Teaching takes place in real time and the course meetings are scheduled in advance.



Course planning

It is recommended to enter course events and assignments in the electronic platform. This allows the student and possible substitute teachers to stay on track of the course events. Agree with the coordinating teacher on the appropriate learning platform for the course. You can use your institution's learning platform or cloud service, or even Padlet.

Plan the content of the course keeping in mind what is meaningful in the context of an online course and what you have time for. Do not simply copy the programme of a face-to-face lesson. Think in advance about where and how the students can obtain the material during the lesson. Do the students know how to retrieve the material from the learning platform or cloud during the lesson, or should the material be sent to them in advance?

Course start

At the beginning of the course, you should go over the course objectives and skill level. You can also emphasise the student-oriented and voluntary nature of the studies: the assignments are not mandatory, the students assume responsibility for their own learning.

In an online learning environment, interaction is all the more important when there is no physical dimension. At the beginning of the course, agree on clear rules for interaction together with the students:

- Recommend keeping cameras on for at least part of the lesson. This makes everyone feel safer and interaction easier.
- Recommend keeping the microphones off, especially if there is noise in the background.
- Agree on turn-taking rules such as the use of the 'raise hand' function.
- Remember to mention that it is also more difficult for the teacher to interpret students' reactions during online lessons. Emphasise that it is especially important to speak up if something is wrong: they do not know what page you are on, they cannot see the video you are watching, they do not understand something, etc. Keep the students interested with the help of various exercises. Make also room for free-form discussion.

Online learning is more tiring for the students, remember the importance of breaks and rhythm. Keep the students interested with the help of various exercises.

It is a good idea to start a new course with a free-form icebreaker exercise. Often, the easiest way to do this is in breakout rooms. At the beginning of the course, in addition to the icebreaker exercises, you can assign the students with an exercise where they share their own goals for the course. Verbalising the goal increases motivation and commitment. Also, assign them with exercises, where the groups get mixed. This way, the students get to chat with as many classmates as possible. Remember to introduce yourself and tell the students something about yourself.

Here are some examples for you to try:

- “Raise your hand if.../Cover your camera if...” You can start by doing this with the whole group. Next, the students can continue the exercise in small groups.
- Interview your pair (the teacher gives examples of questions/topics) and then introduce your pair to the others.
- Write down four words, numbers or years that are meaningful to you. The others can guess their connection to you.
- Mystery object: the students discuss in small groups and try to guess the connection of the object to the teacher. Next time, they will bring their own object, which is important to them.
- Easy choice questions: coffee or tea, cats or dogs, etc.
- Talking about a photo/picture: what is happening in the photo/picture or what is strange about the photo/picture? How is the photo/picture connected to the teacher?

Course content

You can let the students into the Teams/Zoom room before the teacher. This way, the students can chat freely and build team spirit.

Verbalise your own actions and also take time for yourself: “Now, I’m sharing the screen, now I’m dividing you into small groups.” The students cannot see what the teacher is doing, and verbalising actions creates a sense of security. From time to time, make sure that they can see the material and hear the assignment.

Clear instructions are even more important in online courses than in face-to-face courses. Be clear and make sure that everyone understood what needs to be done. Do this, especially before putting the students in breakout rooms. Always check on the groups in the breakout rooms to see how things are going.

Responding online is slower: give students enough time to respond and speak.

Apply different methods to engage the students. You can make use of Zoom/Teams’ reaction functions, breakout room functions and various distance learning apps.

However, use distance learning apps in moderation, there is no need to use all of them. Easy applications include Mentimeter, Quizlet, Kahoot, Wordwall, Flīnga, Jamboard, AnswerGarden. You can use them to create surveys, quizzes, vocabulary cards, etc. You can also collect feedback or use them for revision by asking what the students remember, for example, about the use of the imperfect tense or how many food-related words they can remember.

Also, be discreet online. Students can be nervous about simply using Zoom/Teams. One way of giving feedback anonymously is gathering mistakes you picked up during work in small groups and bring them up with everyone.

Blended course

A blended course can consist of both face-to-face teaching and distance learning or a combination of synchronous and asynchronous online learning. The real-time teaching can be face-to-face or distance learning.



Course planning

Agree with the coordinating teacher on the appropriate learning platform for the course (e.g. Moodle, Google Classroom, itslearning).

Think about how you want to divide the content between the synchronous and asynchronous lessons or the distance learning and face-to-face lessons. Think in advance about how much time the students will spend on independent work. This should be mentioned in the course description.

Think in advance about where and how the students can obtain the material during the lesson. Do the students know how to retrieve the material from the learning platform or cloud during the lesson, or should the material be sent to them in advance? Think in advance about how long the materials will be visible to the students – until the end of the course or for longer?

Also think about what counts as course attendance. For example, is it enough to do the assignments alone or do they need to attend synchronous lessons? Pay particular attention to this in the case of study point courses.

Flipped learning works well in blended courses: learning about a new topic is done on a learning platform and shared time is spent applying the information and doing exercises. For example, you can make videos for the learning platform on new grammar topics and then practice the topics in a communicative and functional manner during synchronous lessons.

Course start

At the beginning of the course, you should go over the course objectives and skill level. You can also emphasise the student-oriented and voluntary nature of the studies: the assignments are not mandatory, the students assume responsibility for their own learning.

In an online learning environment, interaction is all the more important when there is no physical dimension. Pay attention to group formation and getting to know each other, as it is particularly important in distance learning. See tips under the synchronous online course section.

At the beginning of the course, agree on clear rules for interaction together with the students:

- Recommend keeping cameras on for at least part of the lesson. This makes everyone feel safer and interaction easier.
- Recommend keeping the microphones off, especially if there is noise in the background.
- Agree on turn-taking rules such as the use of the 'raise hand' function.
- Remember to mention that it is also more difficult for the teacher to interpret students' reactions during online lessons. Emphasise that it is especially important to speak up if something is wrong: they do not know what page you are on, they cannot see the video you are watching, they do not understand something, etc. Keep the students interested with the help of various exercises. Make room for free-form discussion.

Online learning is more tiring for the students, remember the importance of breaks and rhythm. Keep the students interested with the help of various exercises. Make room for free-form discussion.

Also agree on clear rules for the asynchronous periods:

- When and how can the teacher be contacted during the course?
- When is new material added to the learning platform and when is the deadline?
- At the beginning of the course, you can emphasise the importance of attendance and doing the given assignments.

Course content

As regards synchronous lessons, see the content of the synchronous online course.

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Photo: Unsplash / Lukas Blaskevicius

Asynchronous online course

The course does not have scheduled remote meetings, but students proceed with the online course material according to the structure planned by the teacher.



Course planning

Agree with the coordinating teacher on the appropriate learning platform for the course (e.g. Moodle, Google Classroom, itslearning).

Consider at least the following when planning the course (these should be included in the course description):

- what the working methods are and what kind of materials are used during the course
- an estimate of the student's weekly workload
- when is new material added to the learning platform and when is the deadline
- how and when the teacher can be contacted
- how many assignments must be completed for an approved attendance entry.

Course start

Provide students with clear instructions on course practices. The instructions should be available on the learning platform. Clearly state at the beginning of the course at the latest where the instructions can be found. Consider whether it would be a good idea to have one synchronous lesson at the beginning of the course for going over the practicalities. It is also ideal for group formation!

Make the start of the course as easy, simple and pleasant as possible for the students. In particular, the first assignments of the course should be simple and fun: introduce yourself briefly, share your goals, why you are taking the course, share three things about yourself.

Course content

Present the course content in the most visual and simple form as possible. Try to limit the number of needed clicks. If you intend to reveal new materials in stages, be sure to provide some kind of an overview of the course content already at the beginning. A file for frequently asked questions (FAQ) on the learning platform can save you many messages.

You should break down the course content into as small components as possible. Also use video and audio files to present contents. Videos do not need to be strictly professional: a chatty style of speaking relaxes the students. Keep videos short (up to 10 minutes).

Keep the students' assignments technically simple. Also create a routine and feeling of familiarity on the learning platform: how about creating a short quiz at the end of each topic or always starting the orientation of a new topic with a word cloud?

Use various assignment types: the students can also make videos and record audio in addition to writing. It is good to have a deadline for the assignments. This introduces structure to the course and maintains the students' motivation. It also helps in planning the teacher's the work load.

Provide feedback on assignments at an agreed time. You can also give feedback in the form of a video or audio file. It feels more personal to the student and often saves the teacher's time.

Do you want to build team spirit among the course participants? Create a discussion forum for the course. Encourage students to answer and comment on each other's questions. Select topics that are of real interest to the students (culture of the language to be studied, topical news, language learning). At the beginning of the course, ask everyone to introduce themselves on the discussion forum. Create assignments that the students can do together or where peer feedback is requested.

Help the students make progress. Create tips on how to study, where to find additional material and help. Think about how to encourage the students to make progress. Consider whether you should send reminders and an informal feedback survey during the course. Encourage student self-reflection: what did I learn this time?



Photo: Unsplash / Jenny Ueberberg

Hybrid course/ HyFlex course

In a hybrid course, some students participate remotely while others are physically present in the classroom. Teaching and guidance take place using distance learning and contact teaching at the same time.



Course planning

Think through the technical implementation of the lessons, check the availability of the equipment at the teaching site and test the equipment in advance.

It is recommended to enter course events and assignments in the electronic platform. This allows the student and possible substitute teachers to stay on track of the course events. Agree with the coordinating teacher on the appropriate learning platform for the course. You can use your institution's learning platform or cloud service, or even Padlet.

Plan the content of the course keeping in mind what is meaningful in the context of a hybrid course/HyFlex course and what you have time for. Do not simply copy the programme of a face-to-face or distance lesson.

Think in advance about where and how the remote students can obtain the material during the lesson. It is recommended to use teaching materials that are already in digital format. Do the students know how to retrieve the material from the learning platform or cloud during the lesson, or should the material be sent to them in advance?

Course start

At the beginning of the course, you should go over the course objectives and skill level. You can also emphasise the student-oriented and voluntary nature of the studies: the assignments are not mandatory, the students assume responsibility for their learning.

In an online learning environment, interaction is all the more important when there is no physical dimension. Pay attention to group formation and getting to know each other, as it is particularly important in distance learning. See tips under the synchronous online course section.

At the beginning of the course, agree on clear rules for interaction together with the students:

- Recommend keeping cameras on for at least part of the lesson. This makes everyone feel safer and interaction easier.
- Recommend keeping the microphones off, especially if there is noise in the background.
- Agree on how and when the students take the floor: freely when they feel like it, when the teacher gives them the floor or is the hand raising function used.
- Remember to mention that it is also more difficult for the teacher to interpret students' reactions during online lessons. Emphasise that it is especially important to speak up if something is wrong: they do not know what page you are on, they cannot see the video you are watching, they do not understand something, etc. Keep the students interested with the help of various exercises. Make room for free-form discussion.

Course content

Make sure that the technology works:

- Adjust sounds on the computer so that they do not disturb the students.
- Remember to repeat any questions and comments of the face-to-face participants to the remote participants or make sure that the remote participants are able to hear them.
- Use a “blackboard” that everyone can see: e.g. a shared Google Docs file.
- Prepare in advance for a situation where there is only one student online/in the classroom. Are group assignments still possible?

Do not forget the remote students. You can always start the lesson by addressing the remote students: say hello and ask how they are doing. Verbalise your actions, especially to the remote students, throughout the lesson and keep asking if everything is all right.

You can promote group formation of the whole group with, for example, games in which everyone participates (Kahoot, Wordwall). Try to ensure that the students see each other at least occasionally.

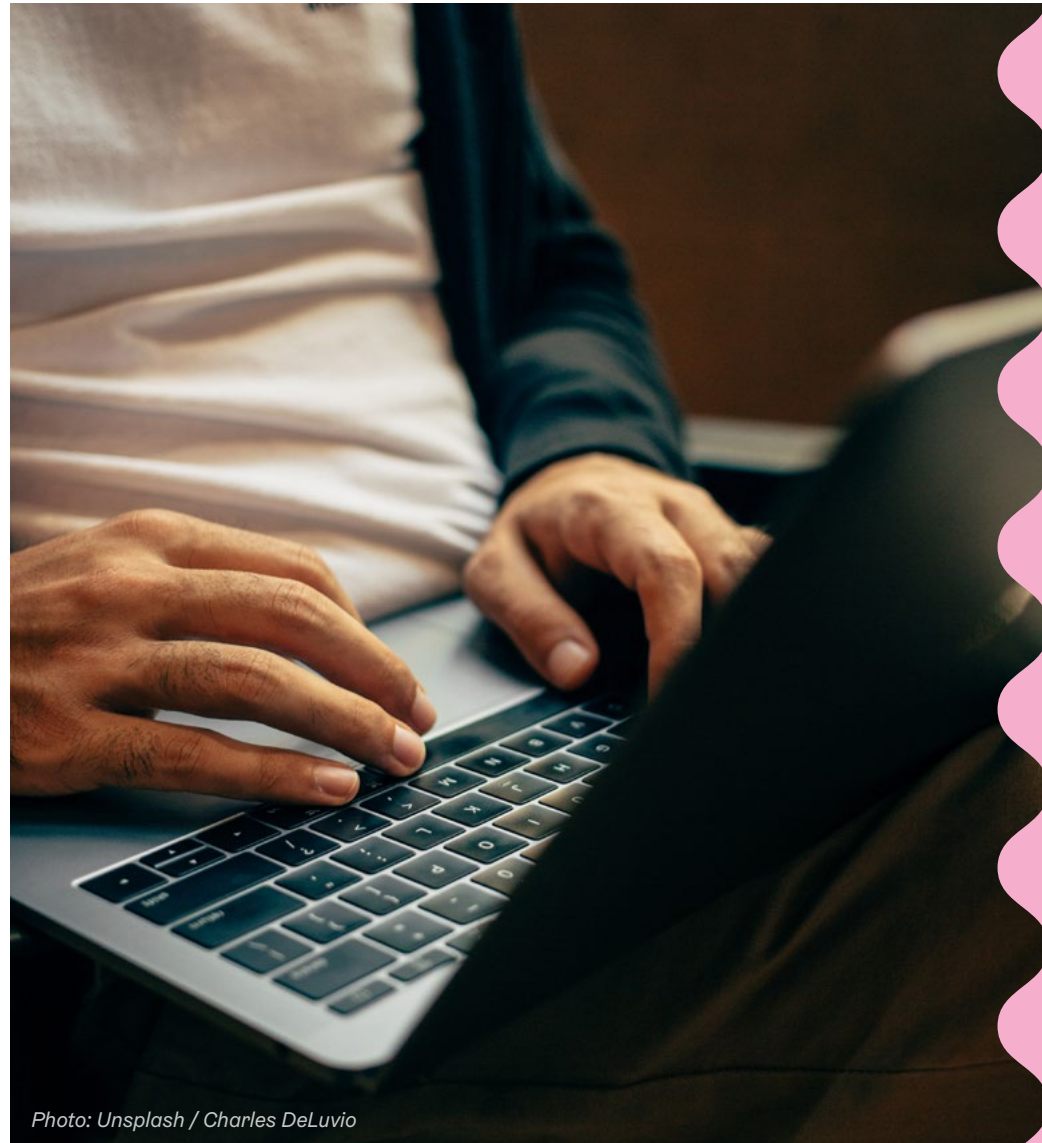


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