

Guiding principles in online ESL programming



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Introduction

The objective of this document is to provide support to ESL instructors and administrators undertaking to offer ESL programming online. This includes programming offered entirely online, and also applies equally to the online sections of a blended ESL offering. The intention of this document is to provide both specific guidelines and food for thought. Furthermore, this resource is intended to support instructional designers assisting in the online delivery of ESL programming for the first time, as it considers the specific requirements necessary for the teaching and learning of language.* This document is not intended to replace professional development in ESL e-learning; a reference guide is provided at the end to offer further opportunities for reading in this area.

The guiding principles in this document were informed by a review of the extensive literature on best practices for e-learning and draws upon some milestone documents, including the Quality Standards brochure from *eCampusAlberta*, and the Canadian Recommended E-learning Guidelines (CanREGs). By aligning this work, with widely accepted principles of second language teaching and learning, these guiding principles aim to provide a mechanism for supporting, planning and evaluating the development and delivery of online ESL programming.

*For a comprehensive set of expectations related to Best Practices in TESL, please refer to ATESL Best Practices for Adult ESL & LINC programming in Alberta. ATESL. (2009) www.atesl.ca

The document* is divided into the following sections:

Materials

Instructional Design (including learning activities, Development, Assessment, ESL pedagogical considerations)

Language Learning Outcomes

The Learner

The Instructor

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*For a more detailed consideration of ESL and e-learning please see report prepared for Alberta Employment and Immigration, *Environmental scan summary*

Materials

1. Orientation materials are given to learners before the online program begins; these materials explain the learning outcomes, expectations for participation and the time required to complete the course.
2. Orientation materials include links to all necessary information for course access and all online resources required to complete the course.
3. Orientation materials include a resource to support learners in password management, including password choice, security, procedures for changing a password, and strategies for resolving issues around forgotten passwords.
4. Technical requirements for the course, in terms of hardware and software required and details of the learning management system to be used are provided to learners.
5. Technical support is available ahead of the start of the course and orientation materials may include such elements as screen shots of online materials.
6. FAQs are provided to learners and are updated regularly using novel and authentically generated questions.
7. Materials contain a study guide and or tutorials, at an appropriate language level that support learners in topic areas such as, How to be an effective self-directed learner, time-management strategies, how to access and use reference materials, and how to avoid plagiarism.
8. The materials of the course clearly distinguish required content from supplementary content.
9. The language level of all materials, registration, orientation, learning activities, etc. takes into account the language level of the participants.
10. The materials use language that is clear and concise; a glossary of technical, e-learning terms is included for reference.
11. Learning materials are easy to update and contain reliable links.
12. The language of the materials is free from bias.

Instructional Design

13. The organization of the course content is visually and functionally consistent; each page in the online course has the same format and each module within the program is standardized in the way activities and assessments are presented and scaffolded.
14. The organization of the course makes it clear to the learners the importance of content sequence which can be either fixed or constructed such that different parts of the course can be completed in any order.

15. Course organization sequences content and learning activities to develop learners' expertise with the use of technology.
16. Course organization sequences content and learning activities to support learners' participation and engagement in the online community.
17. Learning materials and activities are easy to navigate and utilize consistent technical features, such as links to the home page, and back & forward navigation arrows.
18. Learning activities are varied in design and structure to accommodate a variety of different learning styles.
19. Learning activities present multiple opportunities to interact with the language.
20. Learning activities are intentional in their design to motivate and engage the learner.
21. Multimedia objects, such as pictures, video clips and audio clips are incorporated to reinforce learning, but are used judiciously so as not to overwhelm the learner.
22. Instructional design takes into account all issues related to copyright and FOIP.

Development

23. Sufficient time for the development of an online ESL program/course is budgeted for; this will likely be longer than the time allocated for the development of a face-to-face ESL offering.
24. Online ESL programming is piloted before being formally offered to ensure that the course offering is as effective as possible.
25. A well-tested ESL curriculum is a solid foundation for the development of an online ESL program offering.
26. Ongoing program evaluation is undertaken to evaluate student satisfaction and the impact of the course on language gain.

Assessment

27. Assessment criteria are clearly stated in course outline.
28. Assessment criteria are referenced to the Canadian Language Benchmarks, in order to provide a common frame of reference for all stakeholders.
29. Summative Assessments are available to learners that are competency-based, authentic and linked to the stated language outcomes.
30. Summative assessments are available to learners that are valid and reliable.
31. Multiple opportunities are available for formative assessment.
32. The technology is utilized in a way that enables learners to track their own progress through formative assessments.

ESL pedagogical considerations

33. Language learning activities are meaning-based and interactive.
34. Language learning activities offer multiple opportunities for learners to interact with each other, the language, and the instructor.
35. Language learning activities provide opportunities to build upon the language skills that learners bring to the course.
36. Language learning activities provide opportunities not only for communicating meaning but also to focus on grammatical structures.
37. Language learning activities provide opportunities for oral and written production of the language.
38. Language learning activities use authentic language at a level that is within the comprehension of learners
39. Language learning activities are developed with learner's needs for elaboration and simplification anticipated ahead of time.
40. Reading texts used online are offered with multiple annotations to support comprehension and vocabulary learning.
41. Listening activities are supported with subtitles, key words and, when appropriate, first language translation.
42. Writing activities are designed with awareness that online writing involves different priorities from more traditional types of writing.
43. Peer feedback through collaborative activities is a form of effective feedback for learners.
44. Opportunities for different types of feedback on errors are built into the course design.

Language Learning Outcomes

45. Language learning outcomes align closely to learners' needs for settlement, employment and further study.
46. Language learning outcomes are clearly stated, achievable and measurable.
47. Language learning outcomes are based on models of communicative competence.
48. Language learning outcomes provide essential content to connect classroom language to the wider community and workplace contexts.
49. Language learning outcomes are referenced to the Canadian Language Benchmarks, in order to provide a common frame of reference for stakeholders.
50. Language learning outcomes are the basis of the development of communicative activities

51. Language learning outcomes are established and subsequently link clearly to activities and assessments, in order to provide a clear understanding among learners of how elements of the course are integrated.

The Learner

52. Course pre-requisites ensure that learners who enter the program have a reasonable chance to achieve the learning outcomes.
53. The learner has increased control over the time, place, style and pace of their learning.
54. The learner can realistically complete the course and achieve the learning outcomes in the time available.
55. The learner has the technical skills to access course materials and to participate in course activities.
56. The learner has access to the required technology for the programming.
57. The learner is provided with adequate access to and assistance from the ESL instructor and technology support provider.
58. Learners are supported in the online learning environment by receiving protocols and cultural information about online interaction.
59. Learners have access to the same range of student supports such as advisement, counseling etc. as students who attend face-to-face classes.
60. Learners experience adequate return on the time and money invested in the online ESL programming by achieving their goals efficiently.
61. Learners have the opportunity to evaluate the online programming in terms of how well it met their learning needs and the technological components of the course.

The Instructor

62. The instructor receives a full orientation to the technology to be used and to the nature of the online learning context.
63. Instructor orientation includes an opportunity for mentoring by experts in e-learning.
64. The instructor provides opportunities for authentic language to be used and acquired by learners.
65. The instructor attends to the issue of student motivation by creating an interactive and engaging learning environment.

66. Instructors understand their role in creating online communities of learners and the importance of creating social presence.*¹
67. The instructor facilitates activities that enable learners to interact with the language, each other and the instructor.
68. Instructors provide a sense of connection among learners, and, a realness and sense of immediacy about the learning.
69. The instructor provides multiple examples, rubrics and model responses to support the learners.
70. Instructors monitor student participation, sustaining active engagement and drawing in reluctant participants.
71. The instructor is an effective moderator by establishing netiquette guidelines and raising awareness about cultural differences in online communication.
72. The instructor establishes clear and realistic time parameters for activities.
73. The instructor sets clear guidelines for collaborative activities.
74. The instructor provides feedback on language in a variety of ways that is frequent, precise and individualized.
75. The instructor is aware of the impact of his or her tone in providing online feedback, using learners' names and encouraging engagement.
76. The instructor is aware of the impact of teacher presence in discussion boards and other computer mediated communication in increasing the likelihood of students' focusing on accuracy in their language output.
77. Clear guidelines are provided to the instructor regarding the expectations for the frequency and timing of feedback to learners.
78. The instructor states clearly to learners turnaround times on emails, assignments etc.
79. The instructor offers a weekly summary of discussion board postings to reinforce learning and highlight exemplary postings by learners.
80. The instructor establishes virtual office hours for contact with learners.
81. The instructor is supported in becoming a member of an online teaching community for mutual support and professional growth.

¹ *Social presence can be defined as the ability of online learning participants to feel they are perceived as and can act as real people

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