Balancing Online Classes, Fun, and Kinesthetic Intelligence for Beginning Learners

by AHMED MOHAMED GENDY

When I began teaching young learners online, I thought it would be difficult because I was used to teaching learners who were older and because we were switching to a virtual platform.

As soon as I looked at one of the teachers' guides, I thought it was impossible to carry out some of the steps in a virtual class, and I noticed especially that the lessons were missing a kinesthetic part, which could motivate many students. My class has about 35 students, and they are on their first track of learning English, as it is taught from grade four in Saudi Arabia. They are young learners whose concentration span is not long, and there should be something that can trigger their attention after a while to keep them enthusiastic and support their language acquisition.

I decided to be my own teacher's guide, and I came up with at least three activities that combine language learning, fun, and movement. The concepts are similar in all three activities, but that can be helpful to young learners because they become used to the activities and can then focus on the lesson and the language being taught.

The first activity involves teaching colours. After introducing and teaching the necessary vocabulary, I told students, "Bring something red to the camera." My instruction was in English, and I waited to see whether the children would understand it. As soon as one student brought something red and showed it on the screen, I praised that student to reinforce the concept and motivate others. They started to do what that first student had done. During the activity, students went away searching for colours—things in their homes that were the target colours—and brought a wide variety of items. That led us to introduce more vocabulary, which students were interested in because they were showing the objects or looking at things their classmates were showing.

This is a fairly simple activity that most teachers could use in a virtual format. I suggest that, from time to time, teachers ask students to use the new vocabulary in sentences of their own to enrich their vocabulary and to contextualize language. It is easier to realize the meanings of realia within context. In our case, everyone wanted to show items to me and others in the class. I called this experience "the colours game." Due to the strong motivation that was created, students asked me in each class session whether we would play the colours game.

The second activity is related to teaching shapes. As in the previous activity, I asked students to bring something of a particular shape—diamond or circle or rectangle, for example—and they went off to look for things and came back as fast as possible. Pupils asked, "Do you see my square on the screen?" Some students made shapes with their hands or on paper, which was fantastic. Not only were students learning the vocabulary for shapes, but they were being creative in how they responded.

Also, they were learning to understand and/or to say various expressions, such as "Bring me [something that is blue]" and "Show me [a square]" and "Do/Can you see [my triangle]?" Teachers

might have to teach these expressions to students before starting the activities. That way, there is no need to stop the flow of the activity in order to teach the instructions and expressions.

The third activity involves teaching the question starter, "How many … ?" I asked students to count the doors, windows, and even stairs at home. Then they came to the camera and asked or answered questions starting with "How many … ."

A key factor that enabled me to motivate students was the camera. Whenever I asked students to turn on their camera, it meant that the lesson would be interesting.

Guess what I did if some students didn't have a camera? I asked students who didn't have a camera to bring an item of a certain colour, for instance, and then asked other students to guess the colour they had until I made sure they were fully engaged.

The following is a sample conversation between me and two students; Student A does not have a camera, and Student B has one.

I say to Student A, "Please bring something to the screen."

Student A says, "I have something."

I ask Student B, "What colour does Student A have?" (Or Student A can ask, "What colour do I have?")

Student B says, "Black."

I ask Student A, "Is it black?" (To increase participation, a third student could ask this.)

Student A could say, "Yes, it is" or "No, it isn't." If it is "No," the process can be repeated. Eventually I ask other students to show their black items and ask Student A if his or her item is the same colour as the items on the screen.

This part of the activity has nothing much to do with movement, but I mention it so that teachers who have students with no cameras can benefit.

This box is made up of rectangles and squares.

Green pillows

One more idea, using the same teaching concept, comes to mind. When we were studying animals, I set up a guessing game. I asked students if they had their cell phones with them. Some of them did. I asked them to find an audio file of an animal and play the audio so that other students could guess which animal it was. Questions had to be in English, such as, "Is it an elephant?" The answer could be, "Yes, it is" or "No, it isn't." Sometimes we could not hear the sounds from the cell phones, so a few creative students and some of those who did not have phones copied animal sounds from other resources and the others had to guess the animals' names. We all enjoyed the lesson. If students have cameras, it is also possible for them to mime animals' shapes and movements so as to reinforce outcomes and have more fun.

It is often easy to think of ways to keep students engaged, but doing so requires good planning and a willingness to enjoy teaching the lesson. In these activities, students turn objects in their homes into resources for learning, and I believe that helps the lessons become meaningful and memorable for them. A student who shows the class a square red pillow, for example, is likely to remember that experience, along with the words *square*, *red*, and *pillow*. Teachers and students can use their creativity to find other ways to bring available realia into the virtual classroom and combine fun, learning, and movement into a memorable lesson for all.

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