Educator Story:

Moving ELT courses online to keep learning moving forward

Key Findings

The University of Toledo has an intensive English Language Learning program where they help non-native speakers of English achieve success both academically and professionally. Due to the necessity of quickly moving courses online, the American Language Institute instructor, Dr. Ting Li, has shared some of her best practices to help make the transition a smoother process for both teachers and students.

- **Get the entire faculty together to complete intensive online training both in person (if possible) and virtually**
- **Create a supportive and collaborative work environment**
- **Have a leader that trusts fully in the facility's abilities which breeds confidence and a willingness to ask for assistance**
- **Offer consistent online structure and links to avoid confusion for students**
- **Be adaptable to the modern technological age and see it as an opportunity to engage students and reduce administrative burden**

About the Courses

The American Language Institute is located in Toledo, Ohio and is attached to the University of Toledo, a 4-year university. They provide English courses and resources for those students that want to improve their English as well as for those required to take the International Student English (ISE) Exam.

There are 5 course levels offered at ALI including basic (A2/GSE 36 -42), low intermediate (A2+ to B1/GSE 43 -50), high intermediate (B1+/GSE 51-57), low advanced (B1+ to B2/GSE 58-68) and high advanced (B2+/GSE 69-76). Students are able to test into levels after a one-hour online placement test, where they continue to take progress tests until they test out.

Each of their semesters are split into 2 terms with a week break in between for orientation. During this break in early March 2020, the staff learned they would be moving courses fully online. While they had previously looked into online courses, had been utilizing Blackboard and Pearson's fully integrated MyEnglishLab (MEL), conducting classes completely online through Blackboard Collaborate Ultra was something new staff would have to navigate together.

The online courses are structured as before, even down to the original class schedule, the only difference being the classes are online, instead of face-to-face. In the morning they offer reading and writing, mid-day they offer grammar and in the afternoon they offer speaking and listening classes. Assessments are offered both on Blackboard and MEL, where instructors are able to create and assign their own tests, quizzes and exams. MEL is also used for homework and assignments.

Training

In order to facilitate a smooth transitioning process, getting students registered online and teachers familiar with working solely online, the process was split into two phases. The first phase was helping the students get registered for their course(s). This was especially important at ALI, as English is not the student's first language and they had previously been able to register in person, so assistance was needed. In order to ensure they understood the registering process as well as had the appropriate supplies and technology, Ting put together a phone call script for the group to follow in order to ask consistent questions of all students.

The second phase was intensive online teacher training, which was split into three sessions.
The first session was a campus-wide training where instructors learned general information regarding Blackboard Collaborate Ultra. Second was an online Web-EX run-through so they could experience what the students were going to encounter online. They spoke about all the changes when transitioning online, their plan of communication between the instructors themselves as well as instructors and students. This session was focused on English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners, so they had an instructor familiar with Blackboard Collaborate Ultra give a demonstration about specific features to help and encourage students to interact because *"interaction is so important in EAL learning."* The last session involved bringing instructors to the university computer lab to design their own Blackboard site and develop consistent links and link names to avoid confusion for students.

Instructor's Experience

While the faculty at ALI had experience with online teaching prior, transitioning to being fully online was something new for the majority of them. Ting stressed the importance of developing a supportive team with a strong, yet understanding, leader. She believes a strong leader does not micromanage, but instead offers enough support to allow instructors to do their job. She also found giving them your full trust "*is extremely important, trusting each other, being each other's backup and supporting each other. This is the time to test our ethics as educators."* In addition, she believes this supportive and mutually respectful atmosphere encourages instructors to ask questions of their colleagues.

Not all instructors have the same level of confidence when it comes to offering fully online courses. This may be related to technology skills and/or the idea of change. Ting found that being a co-instructor in each classroom, and therefore readily available to hop online to give technological support, was appreciated by instructors. In addition, understanding instructors may need time to adapt breeds a supportive environment, without adding unnecessary pressure. It's about being there for them through all means necessary, including emails and texts, what she calls *"personal care"*, while giving them time to learn and build confidence.

Collaboration is another important element Ting stressed. Another way she encouraged instructors to work together and support one another was making a google document all instructors could contribute to. It

included resources to help those that may need extra assistance with topics such as reading/writing, grammar, and speaking/listening virtual teaching, pedagogies, good practices and recommendations.

Ting noted how modern students are very technologically focused and advanced. She believes that instead of ignoring technology, instructors should use it to engage students,

> *"We have to have an open mind. This is the information age and you can't block them and if you can't block them, you have to embrace them. That's the attitude to have."*

She also finds building a community for the students and offering familiar structure is very important, which engages students, especially those EAL students where hearing and seeing the instructors, and one another, is of the utmost importance.

In addition, she believes technology strongly supports teaching and learning. For example, MEL will give automatic correction of pronunciation, which both helps the students and saves the instructor time. It further reduces administrative burden when it comes to grading.

> *"Think about online testing and how much time you will save. The questions will be automatically graded. You don't have to spend time checking answers. It's like you have a teaching assistant."*

Strategies for Effective Online Teaching and Keeping Students Motivated

In line with Ting's suggestions, Pearson has strategies for effective online teaching and being an effective leader in the virtual world. Some of these online teaching strategies include becoming familiar with technology you'll be utilizing, remaining flexible, creating and maintaining a strong presence, promoting communication, having a good balance of an active leader and active observer. Also, similar to Ting's experiences, when being a leader, it is important to focus on motivation rather than micromanaging, encouraging a trusting environment and providing opportunities for coordination.

When keeping students motivated, Pearson recommends establishing a sense of community, helping students feel like they can succeed, establishing ways to monitor progress, rewarding and celebrating success and relating class to students' lives.

Conclusion

Ting has taken this opportunity to transition fully online in stride. She believes this challenge is really a positive change when it comes to incorporating technology into education because online schooling is *"really good for learning."* In her opinion, this is where education has been heading,

> *"The silver lining is that the whole world is now getting used to teaching and learning virtually, and people are more open to this route of online education…This is the future, especially for the generation of students we are teaching."*

While this change may have been abrupt for some, if you create a supportive, collaborative and mutually respectful work atmosphere, instructors will build confidence and be willing to ask questions, be able offer the same quality classes, engage students, and see the benefits of reduced administrative burden it affords.

Additional Resources

- **9 strategies for effective online teaching:** https://www.pearsoned.com/9-strategies-for-effective-online-teaching/
- **5 tips for being a leader in the virtual world:** https://www.pearsoned.com/5-tips-leader-virtual-world/
- **5 tips to keep learners motivated and engaged when teaching online:** https://www.pearsoned.com/5-tips-to-keep-learners-motivated-and-engaged-when-teaching-online/
- **6 tips for taking care of yourself during this stressful time:** https://www.pearsoned.com/wellness-6-tips-taking-care-stressful-time/
- **Online Teaching and Learning: Frequently Asked Questions:** https://www.longmanhomeusa.com/faq/
- **Pearson English Blog:** https://www.english.com/blog/