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Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Boosting Student Engagement

ANNA KOLESNIKOVA

1. Introduction
The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped education in previously unimaginable ways. After the initial shock caused by the sudden change to emergency distance learning, both teachers and students concluded that online instruction might have certain advantages: a lack of a commute, the ability to attend classes from the comfort of one’s home, and access to class recordings and additional materials. But most importantly, the shift from traditional face-to-face settings to the online mode has enriched teaching with new ways to increase student engagement. Emergency remote teaching pushed teachers to master a useful skill to keep their students focused on the lesson amidst digital distractions behind the screen and despite emotional issues surrounding the pandemic and the switch to an unfamiliar learning mode. While distractions existed in the face-to-face classroom even before the pandemic, many teachers who are new to teaching online have been challenged to find ways of engaging students when the students are not sitting in front of them and may be behind a blank screen and a muted microphone.

Engagement is defined by action and active involvement in the process of learning (Mercer 2019) and it has always been an inherent part of language learning and language research (Hiver et al. 2021). Language teaching constantly engages learners into action through communicative tasks, ongoing feedback, and frequent peer interactions in partner work. Language teachers further spark their learners’ interest by teaching target language culture, using authentic materials, and even connecting them with native speakers to provide a link between the classroom and the real world. The pandemic imposed a considerable challenge on teachers: they had to transform these traditional activities into the online format to maintain the same degree of engagement while simultaneously dealing with additional factors that hinder engagement. Educators learned new techniques of creating engaging activities using videoconferencing platforms, interactive tools, and a myriad of individual techniques in order to keep their learners engaged in lessons during a crisis despite
stress, a possible aversion to remote learning, ubiquitous Zoom fatigue, and constant digital distractions.

Many institutions plan a return to traditional face-to-face classrooms for the Fall of 2021. But there is no doubt that remote teaching has earned a place in education: as a safe go-to option in emergency situations, as an alternative to snow and sick days, and as a flexible option to acknowledge students’ preferences in tranquil times (Superville 2020). It is important for educators to feel comfortable and prepared to switch between face-to-face and online modalities, if needed, and be skilled in best practices of online learning. Makeshift techniques of pandemic teaching should give way to a more systematic use of tools and methods to deliver engaging and high-quality instruction in future remote learning, be it to weather the next crisis, offer more flexibility, or to engage students whose phones and other devices offer close and powerful distractions.

This article presents an overview of lessons learned from the pandemic that show ways to boost learners’ engagement in online classes. To an extent, these lessons can transfer to post-pandemic teaching and be applied in Russian language classrooms to better engage students. The techniques described best fit lessons with young adults in formal language classes at the post-secondary level but can also be applied to a wide variety of teaching settings, such as online tutoring, community classes, and teaching heritage learners.

2. Principles of engagement learned during the pandemic
The coronavirus pandemic has changed education in many ways. Previously little-known terms such as online/distance/remote learning, hybrid and hyflex learning, and synchronous and asynchronous learning have entered instructors’ active vocabulary. Educators have delved into instructional design to adapt their existing courses into a new digital environment. Without face-to-face contact in a physical classroom, learner engagement has become even more important in designing an effective online course, and now teachers must consider the format of the class in many more possible iterations than before. The format may even change during a given semester, which means that having multiple ways of engaging students that work well in a variety of formats has become that much more important.

This article discusses ways to improve learner engagement by presenting lessons from the pandemic that fall into four main categories: 1) keeping students on track with course progress; 2) course design
approaches that increase engagement; 3) engagement through interactive techniques; and 4) emergency-specific techniques.

2.1. Keeping students on track with course progress
One of many things that educators learned during the pandemic was the importance of clearly-defined course policies and procedures for helping students to stay on track with course progress. An online class environment, especially one hurriedly created, can overwhelm students with new procedures. The consistency of course design (whether at the institutional or individual course level) can greatly contribute to student engagement if class procedures are clearly structured and students receive initial training in following these procedures (see Gacs, Goertler, and Spasova 2020, 386).

2.1.1. Learning Management Systems (LMSs)
Before the pandemic, LMSs were already used at educational institutions, but not always to their fullest capacity, primarily to establish consistent structure and functionality across courses and disciplines (McDaniel et al. 2020). The pandemic emphasized the benefits of using LMSs to create interactivity and approximate traditional classroom procedures. Most LMSs include a set of often-used online templates for quizzes and surveys, including multiple choice, fill-in-the-blanks, matching, and essay. Even in traditional settings, using an LMS adds consistency to course design, and in online settings, using the LMS’s functionality to the fullest helps promote students’ engagement with the course and its content during online classes, for assignment submissions and feedback, as well as for examinations.

2.1.2. Consistency of course procedures
In traditional face-to-face classrooms, teachers can collect and return homework, distribute necessary handouts, easily assign pairs and groups, and administer written and oral exams. These attributes of the traditional classroom form routines that engage students because the class procedures are familiar. Online courses need to provide the same level of consistency and clarity. A course syllabus can specify guidelines for the mode of access to online classes (e.g., with cameras on/off, permission to access class from various gadgets), participation (e.g., what behaviors earn or decrease participation credit, group work rules), the format of assignments (e.g., guidelines for scanned or recorded assignments), and communication with the teacher and classmates (e.g., link to office hours, rules for using Zoom chats for communication).
Engagement in an online class can be more difficult than in a traditional class where teachers can more easily keep track of students. Online, the physical proximity of the teacher and the students is replaced by a microphone and a webcam feed that sometimes stays turned off. To avoid situations when students drift into digital distractions behind the screen, teachers can employ simple techniques, such as simply calling on students whose cameras are turned off to keep learners engaged in front of the screen. Teachers can consider implementing policies for what happens if a student fails to react to the teacher’s questions on more than one occasion. Thinking these rules through at the course design stage, providing clear instructions to learners at the beginning of the course, and keeping this structure intact throughout the semester can create helpful routines.

It is also equally important to include activities that require learners to practice these procedures early on in the course to address and prevent future technological difficulties. For instance, time should be set aside in the first week of instruction for students to practice submitting various forms of assignments (e.g., scanned written notes, audio or image files). Students should practice submitting various types of files by using appropriate tools and according to the expectations set out by the instructor.

2.2. Course design approaches that increase engagement
As the COVID-19 pandemic pushed us into distance modes of teaching, educators faced challenges achieving their curriculum goals, including transforming existing lesson plans into engaging online lessons. The section below discusses ways to apply existing approaches and strategies to online learning to improve students’ engagement through course design.

2.2.1. The flipped classroom
The flipped classroom approach, which uses instructional videos as homework to introduce most theoretical aspects of a course and devotes class time to applying this theoretical knowledge, existed long before the pandemic. The flipped approach lends itself well to online teaching. Besides the obvious advantage of having more time in class for communicative activities, a flipped classroom provides a simple solution to two significant problems that affect both equity and engagement in online classes: learners who frequently experience technical problems will not miss the teacher’s explanations, and struggling students (or those who had reasons to miss class) get a chance to spend more time with course content outside of class and thus be more engaged. Moving the teacher’s explanations to an asynchronous mode of work makes flipped classroom methods contingent
on the learners’ ability to work independently. With many distractions available to students, it is good practice to include some kind of check on the material, such as a short quiz after the instructional video, to check understanding, or a requirement to submit written notes to ensure that students have completed the tutorial. Such checks allow teachers to identify problem areas so that lesson plans can be adjusted.

2.2.2. Microlearning
In large part influenced by the prevalence of mobile devices, the idea of how to engage with texts has changed in recent years. Most of our students represent Generation Z, the newest generation of digital natives. Similar to Millennials, Gen Zers tend to prefer shorter segments of learning (Mosca, Curtis, and Savoth 2019), and this will likely continue to accelerate even after the COVID crisis has passed. Today’s students are more likely to be used to swiping through a large number of text and video posts in a short amount of time on popular social media platforms, like Twitter and TikTok. Educators can mimic this experience by turning to microlearning, a strategy that presents content in a series of short learning activities (Alqurashi 2017) to reflect new ways of learning and socializing that are characteristic for this new generation of learners. According to the principles of microlearning, students perform better when content is presented in a series of small segments with short evaluations after each segment (Giurgiu 2017). Microlearning targets segmenting content into bite-sized chunks that reflect a growing preference among students for shorter learning segments and can lead to more consistent engagement.

2.3. Engagement through interactive techniques
The pandemic led to a surge of new online tools and platforms for interactive learning, all of which have potential for increasing student engagement. While it is tempting to explore all of the new and exciting interactive tools that have emerged in the past year, it is crucial to limit their number for the sake of establishing consistent and familiar routines. The techniques described below refer to online teaching, but they will also be helpful going forward into post-pandemic teaching for hybrid courses, for situations that call for a temporary switch to remote classes or for occasions when students cannot be present in class (due to travel or sickness, for example), but are allowed to attend class virtually.

2.3.1. Videoconferencing platforms
One of the most crucial elements of the foreign language classroom is
interactivity. In face-to-face classes, paired and group work ensures that students are actively using the language, while immediate teacher feedback provides important formative assessment to learners. At first, the shift to online learning meant losing many physical components of the traditional classroom. During the pandemic, videoconferencing platforms, such as Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams helped recreate some of the elements of the traditional classroom. The leading platforms share similar sets of features: they enable participants to hear and view each other, allow screen sharing, provide cloud storage and meeting recording options, and they incorporate built-in tools for interaction among students and the course content like chats, polls, Breakout Rooms, control of other people’s screens, control of the background and layout of the screen, and screen annotation (which allows all participants to draw, type or use stamps on the screen simultaneously).

2.3.1.1. Screen sharing and annotation
Educators choose between platforms based on their unique interactive features, but it is the tools common to all platforms that shape the best practices of online teaching. The most used feature—screen sharing—allows instructors and students to present any content directly from their personal computer screen. The benefits of screen sharing during online courses is obvious and it is widely used by educators. However, there is one additional benefit to screen sharing that might be overlooked: screen sharing can be a very useful tool to better organize teaching in the hyflex classroom. Hyflex classes include both face-to-face and synchronous online instruction (students in a physical classroom and students attending via Zoom or a similar platform) at the same time. The use of a traditional dry erase board can be problematic in such classes due to camera and microphone limitations. To enable both face-to-face and online learners to easily see the same presentation or digital whiteboard in good resolution, teachers can simultaneously start the screen share for the online learners and the screen projection for the face-to-face ones.

Annotation tools are also useful in a variety of ways. The teacher can share their screen with a picture, text, or presentation, and learners can type or draw on these projections (see an example in Figure 1).
Figure 1. Students draw on a shared slide on Zoom in response to the teacher’s prompt to find examples of the Prepositional case.

The annotation can also be used for students to vote on a specific answer before the teacher reveals the correct answer or as an integrated polling feature for polls that do not require statistical results (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Students anonymously vote on the screen by using stamps from the Zoom annotation toolbar.

The annotation on the screen engages all students in class at the same time and such direct engagement can help keep learners focused on
the lesson. Some of these tools may be ones that teachers use even after they return to face-to-face classrooms.

2.3.1.2. Breakout Rooms
Breakout Rooms are another widely used videoconferencing tool that allows the meeting host to divide the participants into groups, recreating traditional partner and group activities online. Like in the traditional classroom, the teacher can divide students into teams of certain sizes either at random or teachers can give rooms names relevant to class tasks and let students select where they would like to complete the activity. For example, for text discussions, one group can be named “I liked this story” and another one “I didn’t like this story” for students to join a specific group and contribute to the discussion.

Breakout Rooms are a great tool for student collaboration during online lessons (Chandler 2016), but they lack teacher control compared to partner and group work in face-to-face classrooms. Once students join the Breakout Rooms, the teacher cannot observe what is happening there unless the teacher joins a specific room. Common problems with Breakout Rooms observed in practice are students misinterpreting the task, teachers’ miscalculations of the time needed to complete the task, use of L1, and extraneous conversations. To alleviate the first two problems, teachers can give students control to move in and out of Breakout Rooms as well as making a list with important information and procedures for their work while in Breakout Rooms (Chandler 2016). To reduce the use of L1 and extraneous conversations, teachers can enhance teacher presence by sending regular broadcast messages to groups reminding them to stay on task, joining rooms at random to check on students, and by assigning one student per group to be a moderator who is responsible for following the teacher’s directions.

Like screen sharing, Breakout Rooms are essential in hyflex classrooms. When face-to-face students work with partners on a task, the teacher can send the online learners into Breakout Rooms. Depending on the task, teachers may have online and face-to-face work together in Breakout Rooms, increasing classroom community.

2.3.2. Interactive platforms and tools
A certain set of basic interactive features in LMSs and videoconferencing platforms could be sufficient to successfully engage learners in online classrooms. There are many other online tools and platforms that offer a range of additional interactive tasks and attractive interfaces. In contrast
to LMSs, online platforms, such as Nearpod, Quizizz, LearningApps.org, H5P, Kahoot, Menti, and Quizlet, offer appealing designs and additional quizzing features that enhance interactivity and engagement in synchronous and asynchronous activities in language classrooms. New platforms appear regularly, offering exciting new features, but it is still important to not overwhelm students, so teachers have to make their use of these tools intentional and consistent throughout the course.

2.3.2.1. Quizzes and polls
Some teachers increase student engagement using quizzes and polls that are integrated into the synchronous online classroom, for which there are many available formats. Learners can collaborate on completing elaborate tasks, such as answering questions embedded in a video, crossword puzzles, or putting story elements in the correct order. Combining quizzing with other interactive features, such as screen sharing, screen control, and screen annotation, allows multiple participants to engage with the same task simultaneously. Finally, accessing quizzes, polls, and surveys on smartphones can create real-time competition or an engaging brainstorming session. The gamification of language tasks, sometimes coupled with elements of friendly competition, instantly engages learners and promotes camaraderie. The team-building factor of online quizzing is important for any type of a learning environment, but especially for online and hyflex classrooms. Hyflex courses can sometimes have an inherent imbalance because the presence of face-to-face and online learners in the same class can put either group at a disadvantage: either face-to-face students must work on their laptops in class to access online content, or online students are limited to submitting their responses via chat. To alleviate this imbalance and engage both online and face-to-face students at the same time, teachers of hyflex classes can integrate quizzing or polling via smartphones to simultaneously engage learners in class and online in the same activity. Such tools can be used for vocabulary checks, brainstorming, grammar review, and answering questions. Figure 3 demonstrates an activity that lets hyflex students respond to teachers’ prompts via smartphones: a teacher in the hyflex setting used a Menti quizzing tool to collect responses from the learners in class and online simultaneously. The teacher used Zoom annotation to fix minor mistakes and projected the responses on the screen and through screen sharing. In the follow-up task, learners “gossip” with partners about what their classmates did on the weekend.
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Figure 3. An example of a Menti-based quiz in a hyflex classroom.

Integrating activities on smartphones into lesson plans engage learners in language learning through appealing formats. These activities and competitions using smartphones can remain useful in traditional face-to-face classrooms in the post-pandemic world to engage students by occasionally breaking traditional routines.

2.3.2.2. Interactive documents
Many language teachers have traditionally used printed materials to supplement the textbook. In the pre-COVID classroom, distributing printouts and working on these tasks was straightforward, but online the traditional printed worksheet quickly becomes problematic, because learners cannot always easily annotate or turn in the materials received from the teacher. Fortunately, there are several different ways to make interactive documents that can be annotated by students with some LMSs, Adobe Reader, Google Slides, Google Docs, Kami, TeacherMade, or liveworksheets.com. Some of these online platforms require some training, but they allow teachers to easily create and distribute interactive documents and provide learners with a set of user-friendly annotation tools that make completion and submission of the activities easy (Figure 4).
Integrating interactive worksheets into synchronous online lessons requires learners to engage with each other and with the screen (they need to type in answers) in a more convenient and faster way than printed worksheets. Face-to-face teachers may also want to incorporate some of these tools to facilitate students’ typing skills or streamline assignment submission once they are back in the physical classroom.

Similarly, teachers can create interactive documents using tools such as PowerPoint or Google Slides and then have students manipulate them. The use of traditional presentation formats allows teachers to proceed through the lesson presentation and invite students to collaborate on specific slides in real time. Figure 5 shows a screenshot of a synchronous activity using online PowerPoint for group work. Students work in four Breakout Rooms on Zoom to simultaneously add their typed responses to the slides with prompts. The content slide was duplicated for each group and marked with the group number for easy navigation. These slides (7-10) are embedded into the teacher’s main presentation for this lesson. All changes appear on the PowerPoint in real time and the teacher can observe changes appearing on the slides while students work in Breakout Rooms.

**Figure 4:** Students can use text boxes and free drawing to annotate an interactive PDF created with Kami.
Students can draw, add pictures and text, record audio, and move elements. Teachers can follow each group’s progress on the screen and can support groups by immediately joining a specific room if students seem to be off task or not completing the task correctly. Another benefit of using a presentation in this way is that all learner-created content is saved in the same presentation as the teacher’s explanations and examples for later reference. This same technique can also be used in face-to-face classes post-COVID, with students participating by using mobile devices or computers.

2.3.2.3. Interactive online boards
Interactive online whiteboards like Miro, Jamboard, and Padlet can be valuable tools for student engagement in group projects because they afford unlimited space, integration of plugins and media links, as well as collaboration online and offline. Unlike annotation or whiteboards in Zoom or other videoconferencing applications, these boards are not limited to the synchronous session and are accessible from anywhere in the world. This makes interactive boards and their embedded messaging tools ideal for connecting students with native speakers to communicate or collaborate on projects, a practice which can be integrated back into post-pandemic face-to-face teaching. Teachers can use the interactive online boards for synchronous and asynchronous tasks, ranging from short projects (brainstorming, word maps, writing a story together, etc.)
to lengthy multi-step projects with simulations and real-life applications. Interactive online boards fit well within this framework, because they allow for organizing multiple perspectives and multiple data formats into a multimedia presentation that can be saved, shared, and re-used in different educational contexts.

2.4. Emergency-specific techniques
The pandemic highlighted the need to engage students in learning amidst stress and uncertainty. In the U.S., enthusiastic K-12 teachers put stickers on their faces, integrated Bitmoji digital stickers into materials, and sent virtual gifts to their students to improve class participation. Caring college instructors likewise sent encouraging messages and provided various kinds of support to keep their students from dropping out. This section describes techniques to engage learners by lowering stress and increasing mental comfort.

2.4.1. Prioritizing content
It became apparent for many instructors that the pace of online instruction is somewhat slower than in face-to-face classes (Moorhouse, Li, and Walsh 2021). Planning an online course in crisis situations needs to start by prioritizing content that students must master at their course level. The decision to cut or keep specific topics in existing Russian language curricula should be based on national and international language proficiency guidelines (ACTFL language proficiency levels, TORFL, CERFL). Once the main priorities of a course have been identified, the instructor can move those topics toward the beginning of the semester, leaving leeway at the end of the term in case course outcomes need to be adjusted. This clustering of important topics alleviates possible delays brought on by the slower pace of online learning and/or issues relating to the crisis. If online instruction is able to proceed at a pace similar to that of traditional lessons, the topics that were previously set aside can be reintroduced into the curriculum at the end of the semester. In this way, instructors may be able to help to lower student stress at the end of the semester by managing and adjusting expectations.

2.4.2. Building a community of learners
Language, more than other subjects, requires learners to regularly communicate and collaborate with each other. Collaboration can be equally challenging and stimulating for Gen Z students, who are called the “loneliest” generation (Manning-Schaffel 2018). Students who feel lonely
might be excited about working with peers, but they also might feel self-conscious when talking to someone less familiar. Feeling uncomfortable around peers can also lead to increased anxiety during partner work, especially online. In contrast to the traditional classroom, students’ work in Breakout Rooms is more awkward because students are usually assigned to rooms randomly and stay with their partner one-on-one in this virtual space. The time after the task is done and before the teacher closes the rooms can be uncomfortable. And it can be equally awkward for a student to return to the main room early and find him or herself one-on-one with the teacher.

Teachers can help learners feel comfortable around peers and develop a positive mental attitude toward class and themselves by creating a strong community within each group and promoting team building. This sense of belonging to a community of language learners becomes even more important for online classes, where students only sporadically see or hear each other. For instance, conducting regular team-building activities, involving learners in group activities in Breakout Rooms, pairing them up for speaking practice, assigning group projects, as well as designating some homework assignments as partner assignments, can help build a stronger online community.

2.4.3. Showing care
Demonstrating a caring attitude toward students is especially important during emergency remote teaching. To make students feel that the teacher cares, teachers’ attention to their students can extend beyond the classroom. Before the course starts, teachers can create a welcome video or a welcome letter in which they verbally express their care and instill learners with confidence that the teacher is cognizant of and willing to be flexible with regard to situations when learners’ progress in class is affected by pandemic or related stress. During the semester, teachers can check in on students, perhaps via email, letting them know in what ways the teacher is available for help when students struggle with course content or stress.

3. Conclusion
The pandemic tested educators’ ability to adjust to a sudden change in course delivery. Rising to this challenge rewarded us with some profound lessons that can be taken back into the face-to-face world. This article presented an overview of techniques for boosting engagement that we learned during the pandemic. This engagement can further be improved by designing content tailored to the needs of Gen Z learners – shorter
segments, frequent evaluation, and appealing design. During online classes, teachers can use a variety of interactive features, tools, and platforms to keep their learners’ attention on the screen. Finally, learners will appreciate the teacher’s expressions of care that might help them through the stress of online learning.

The pandemic-induced shift of instructional format confirmed what many have known for years: that instructional success depends in many ways on how well teachers can keep their learners engaged. Many of the new lessons of engagement that we have learned during the COVID crisis can continue to enhance our courses even after we move back to teaching in familiar modes.

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