Strategies for Reducing Cognitive Overload in the Online Language Learning Classroom

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Abstract

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, foreign language courses were among the many types of classes that teachers adapted to online learning environments. Online instruction can impede learning and lower student outcomes for a variety of reasons, one of which is cognitive overload. Cognitive overload occurs when learners are given more information or tasks to process than they are capable of managing. Cognitive overload can occur during face-to-face instruction but runs a high risk of occurring in online language learning situations because of the additional complexities associated with processing a foreign language and participating in an online class. This paper briefly outlines why online language classes can be prone to causing cognitive overload among learners. Next, strategies that were used to reduce the risk of cognitive overload among English learners in first-year language courses at a university in Japan are discussed; namely, pre-task activities, allowing the use of students' first language, and collaborative learning. To attempt to gain an idea of the effectiveness of these approaches, the average grades from online courses of the fall 2020 semester are compared to the average grades from mostly face-to-face courses of the fall 2021 semester.

Keywords: cognitive load, online learning, pre-task activities, collaborative learning, first-language usage