

Online university teaching in South Korea: 7 practical steps

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ABSTRACT: Online teaching at the university level has become the norm in South Korea due to the current coronavirus pandemic. However, most university instructors have not had sufficient training for teaching in the online environment. This paper proposes seven practical steps for instructors to systematically implement in order to have successful online classes at the university level, with particular attention to the needs of South Korean students.

KEYWORDS: Educational technology, e-learning, South Korea, online education, teaching strategies, university teaching

I. INTRODUCTION

With the current Covid-19 crisis, university teachers around the world are being thrown into the challenging world of online education; however, South Korea is no stranger to e-learning. Starting in 1996, Korea began rolling out plans to offer cyber courses for high education, and Korea has demonstrated a strong commitment to online education (Toshiyuki, Kim, & Lee, 2000). Despite this, Leem and Lim (2007) found that online education in Korea still leaves much to be desired, with teachers and students in need of stronger support systems for improving e-learning.

In Korea's rush to develop online education, Motlik (2008) notes that western models have been applied without strong enough consideration for Korea's specific context. Additionally, Lee, Chun, Im and Heo (2003) purported that one of the biggest challenges for Korean online education is the lack of a strong support system that helps online learners manage their learning. Furthermore, because of Korea's collectivist culture, online students in Korea may need more structure and guidance for accomplishing online tasks (Olaniran, 2007).

Lee (2001) has criticized online education in Korea for its failure to attend to different learning styles, instead employing a system that assumes one style would fit all. Kim (1999) also mentioned that Korea's online courses should take more consideration of the specific needs of adult learners and added that feedback to students in online courses was too slow. Moreover, Kim purports that Korean students are likely to be passive learners, such that even if online instructors try to make use of online discussions, Korean students tend to remain inactive.

Another issue that cannot be ignored is that most instructors at the tertiary level have not taken courses on teaching (Bender, 2003), much less online teaching. The majority of professors are focused on their specific content area and may be deemed it an unnecessary bother to attend to students' emotions and affective experiences online; however, if these areas are ignored by online instructors, content may be likewise ignored by online students.

Some teachers may take the stance that online education is a temporary nuisance caused by the current pandemic and that great strides do not, therefore, need to be made to improve it; still others may contend that focusing on learner satisfaction while teaching online is a waste of time. However, learner satisfaction has been found to be correlated to students' motivation to continue learning (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007) and therefore should not be ignored. Thus, this paper intends to impart a set of recommendations that, if followed, allow for the uptake of content knowledge in online university courses while simultaneously meeting the students' needs in a way that is pedagogically sound and considers the unique needs of adult Korean learners in particular.

II. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ONLINE UNIVERSITY TEACHERS IN KOREA

1. First, show care.

In online classes, a common problem for students is a feeling of isolation. To overcome this, online instructors need to take special care to make students feel seen. Young (2006) found that effective online instructors must communicate with learners in a personal manner that shows they care. One simple and practical way to do this is to use students' names in online postings (Bender, 2003).

Another method through which an online instructor can show care and concern for students is through feedback. Jung (2002) states that adults, in particular, need increased levels of feedback in online courses. Bender (2003) adds that in addition to frequency of feedback to maintain high levels of motivation among students, feedback should first aim to be encouraging in nature before any criticisms are bestowed to learners. Because cues in offline communications, such as facial expressions and tone of voice, are absent in online interactions, online instructors also must be aware that their suggestions for improvement on student work may come across far harsher than they intended.

While using students' names on discussion boards is quite easy when posting a reply, providing personalized feedback to every student can be a daunting task. However, it is quite manageable for an online instructor to choose stellar work of a few students and praise these examples. This shows students that the teacher is indeed involved and attending to what is happening during a course. Additionally, in doing so the online instructor can recognize the contributions of various perspectives among students, which is a quality that Korean students value in online instructors (Lee, 2011).

2. Start off right!

Bender (2003) stresses the importance of making contact with each student individually at the start of the semester. She suggests that this can be done in person, such as at an orientation, or by phone call and notes that students appreciate the gesture, and it helps them see the instructor as a "real person." In-person orientations are likely not being held during the pandemic, so a phone call may be in order instead. However, this may not always be practical. For example, many online university classes are taught in English or another foreign language by foreign instructors, and in those instances, students may be uncomfortable speaking on the phone in a foreign language. Thus, another option is to individually contact students by text message or using a chatting application such as Kakao, with which students may feel more comfortable.

In a course with online discussions taking a primary role, Bender (2003) also recommends having the first discussion thread of the semester being informal so that it entices students to participate because classes that do not start with strong student engagement seldom are revived later in the semester. This is the equivalent of an ice-breaker, which is used typically in the first class in an offline setting. Bender (2003) also stresses the importance of connecting with students by sharing something personal. This could be as simple as divulging a silly secret (in a discussion thread) or sharing an anecdote or picture of your pet.

In an online class, it is particularly important to communicate expectations clearly to students in terms of how much of a time commitment is expected as well as the *kind* of participation that students should have to be successful (Bender, 2003). Thus, the syllabus should indicate to students the number of times they are expected to log on to the course website, how many times they should post, where and how to submit assignments, when to check messages, and so on.

Likewise, the online instructor should have a set schedule for disseminating info so students know what to expect of you as well). For example, each Monday morning the instructor can send out an SMS to students with a brief message to alert students of what should be done that week. If students can expect these weekly reminders at a predictable time, it is more likely that they will keep up with course assignments.

3. Put students into smaller study groups.

There are several reasons for making use of groups in online courses. First, Boettcher and Conrad (2016) notes the importance of a safe and encouraging learning environment where students can readily admit if they are confused; otherwise, knowledge is unlikely to blossom among students. However, Korean students are very reticent to admit their confusion or ask questions in front of a large group of their peers; hence, having smaller groups can be more conducive to creating a supportive learning environment.

In addition, in an online course, particularly in the case of large courses, students may feel isolated, somewhat invisible, and even disconnected from the professor and their peers; thus, one way to deal with this is to incorporate team tasks where learners can share their knowledge and feel a greater social presence (Joo, Lim, & Kim, 2011). For example, the teacher can split students up into smaller groups where learners can feel more comfortable communicating, have increased interactions, and enjoy a greater sense of camaraderie with others.

Bender (2003) suggests these smaller groups not have more than four or five students so that it still feels intimate. These groups can be used for online discussions, with each group having separate discussion boards or rooms. Alternatively, online teachers can set up small groups to have synchronous online conversations. One feasible way to manage these groups is using Kakao. The teacher can make a separate chat room for each group, and the teacher should choose a leader for each group, rotating the groups and the leaders through the semester so that different students get a chance at leading (Bender, 2003).

The teacher should decide in advance the time period for each group and choose leaders who will be up to the task. If the teacher does not know the students prior to the start of the semester and thus cannot make a well-informed decision regarding leaders, then it is recommendable for the first period for groupings to only last a few weeks. During that first period, the online teacher should carefully observe students' interactions and

activity online and choose motivated and proficient leaders for subsequent periods. In this way, the first few weeks of the semester may be an experiment, after which the instructor can more adeptly select leaders after having observed students.

4. Incorporate predictability, chunking, and personality into the lecture.

Bender recommends “short, succinct, snappy lectures” (2003, p. 43), stating that if video lectures are long, students might instead think it better to simply get the same information from a book. Additionally, she says that the time spent on watching a lecture can take away from the time students will spend interacting online. Although online instructors may be aware of this, universities in Korea require a certain number of minutes for a video lecture, usually at least an hour long, for each online course. In such unavoidable circumstance, Bender recommends to chunk longer lectures into mini-lectures.

For example, if 50 minutes is required for a weekly video lecture, then the instructor can have various predictable segments or chunks that appear in each lecture, such as an introduction, brief lecture, on-screen task or quiz, review, and homework reminders. When students know that there is a predictable format to the lectures, their cognitive load is lessened so that they can more easily follow along and focus more on the content of the course.

In addition to having well-planned video lectures, Anderson and Adams (1992) state that there are “field-dependent learners,” denoting students who place almost as much importance on the personality or teaching style of the instructor as on the content of the course. As for style, this includes whether the instructor is seen to be strict, abrasive, supportive, kind, encouraging, formal, or informal. Thus, when making videos, the online teacher should make extra effort to appear effusive and lively because if learners are put off by the on-screen personality of the instructor, they will likely disregard or simply not watch further lectures.

Finally, whereas students in an offline class are fully aware that they need to appear to be paying attention and thus take appropriate actions, such as taking notes and responding in turn during a lecture, in online classes this is not the case. Thus, Bender (2003) suggests that students need help in knowing what to prioritize because they may not be able to do so on their own when they are bombarded with content. This can be achieved by assigning pre-lecture and post-lecture questions to students that they can discuss in their smaller study groups (e.g., on Kakao) or by posting on the discussion board for the course.

5. In online discussions, lead by example.

It has been shown in numerous studies that interaction is vital to success and satisfaction in online learning (Beaudoin, 2001; Koloff, 2011; Swan, 2002). Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) noted that in online learning environments, social presence accounted for 60% of learner satisfaction. At the same time, teaching presence has been found to have a strong effect on both social and cognitive presence among Korean online students at the university level (Joo, Lim, & Kim, 2011).

Accordingly, to encourage interaction and increase social presence, online instructors should make use of online discussions. However, simply posting topics for discussion is not enough. Some teachers find that students are hesitant to post online because they fear they need to write perfect compositions (Bender, 2003). Naturally, this fear toward writing can be even more compounded if students are writing in a foreign language, as is the case for EFL courses in Korea as well as in many content courses that are taught at Korean universities in languages other than Korean.

Overcoming this issue is quite simple; the teacher should simply lead by example. For discussions, the teacher can be the first to reply with her own sample answer (Bender, 2003; Young, 2006). This allays students’ anxiety greatly, as it is a clear indication of the length of the reply that is expected as well as the style of language that should be used. Accordingly, while not sacrificing the *content* of a post, online instructors should attempt to communicate in a friendly tone and with more informal language so that students feel more comfortable posting online as well. Furthermore, instructors may want to seriously consider taking advantage of appropriate emojis because, as Rohfeld and Hiemstra(1995) purport, without visual cues, students may be confused in online forums, and that could lead to low participation rates.

Although the teacher should lead by example with online postings, the teacher should *not* be overly involved in discussions, as this can actually dissuade students from participating. Instead, the teacher should monitor the discussions and step in when needed (Muilenburg & Berge, 2000), such as when students are getting off track or are unable to take the conversation in the direction it was intended by design.

6. Have multiple discussions, but limit requirements.

Bender (2003) suggests it may be excessive and unnatural to expect all students to reply in each discussion thread. If we consider the typical offline classroom where in-person discussions occur, it would be quite unusual for all students to participate in every ongoing conversation in a classroom. Thus, in an online setting, it can be helpful instead to allow students to respond to discussion threads of most interest or relevance to them rather than requiring a response to every discussion thread. This is also a way to allow for greater

personalization of the content; furthermore, students can have more interactions with their classmates with whom they have commonalities rather than posting something in a thread out of mere obligation.

The clarity of questions is also key, as students will likely be too embarrassed to attempt to attempt answering ambiguous questions, out of fear of looking inept in their response. At the same time, teachers should avoid posting topics or questions that are too open-ended (Bender, 2003). Thus, it is advisable to avoid questions to which there is a specific, factual answer, as they will elicit little in the way of actual discussion. Instead, well-designed high-level questions that are thought-provoking or evaluative in nature in order to stimulate discussion among students. This could include the use of hypotheticals (e.g., What would you do if...?) or questions that require students to make a choice among given options (e.g., Out of the following three pictures, which best represents our city? Why?)

7. Stay sane.

Bender (2003) points out that one big difference between offline and online classes is that in an offline class, it is clear when the class is occurring, and thus, students and teachers know when they can “turn off” their mental energy - at the end of the class. In contrast, with online classes, the delineation is quite blurred. This can be exhausting not only for students but also for online instructors. Thus, while an online teacher should check in with the class on a regular basis, it is not unreasonable to set specific hours when the teacher will not be available. For example, the teacher could set a policy of being unavailable on Saturdays; or the online instructor could promise to check online discussions each morning at 8 a.m. to ensure questions are answered in a timely manner. That way, if students post a frantic question at 3 p.m., instead of stressing for hours while not getting an immediate reply, they can know in advance when to expect an answer.

Even if an online teacher has clarified specific hours she will or will not be online, students may have ~~an~~ unrealistic expectations of the teacher’s involvement online. However, if a teacher tries to reply to every post each student makes on a discussion board, not only may it discourage students from replying to each other, but it is also quite onerous for the instructor. Instead, Bender suggests online instructors choose “the excellent, original thoughts, and comment on them” (2003, p. 116), thus eliminating the need to respond to every post. Similarly, she suggests asking students to save emailing the teacher for personal matters that cannot be discussed in front of classmates. Even if online instructors set such a policy, students will inevitably still contact the instructor privately, for example by email, to simply ask course-related questions about content or even about assessments that are clearly explicated in the syllabus. In such situations, it is useful to have a policy stating that replies to such queries will be given in a public space, such as in an announcement on the course website or through a class chat room (e.g., using Kakao groups). This is not only more efficient but also helps students get in the habit of using communal spaces for interaction with peers.

III. CONCLUSION

Teaching online can be quite a challenge, but in this day and age it is virtually unavoidable. Furthermore, many online teachers have reported that teaching online has renewed their motivation and produced better outcomes than offline learning, as students can reflect more deeply and share perspectives with peers online to increase their understanding of concepts (Harasim, 2000). In order for instructors and students to experience the many benefits of online education, clear steps have been outlined in this paper to aid online instructors. Although many of the tenets are common sensical and not dissimilar to those of offline teaching, the practical implementation may seem unfamiliar or uncomfortable at first. Despite this, it is worthwhile to adhere to the given advice in order to reap the benefits.

Although teachers generally focus primarily on the core content of a course, if Korean students feel they are not cared for, their focus and commitment will dwindle. Likewise, if an online course does not start strong, the online instructor will have little chance to salvage the course later in the semester. By putting forward a friendly and caring demeanor, devising and managing smaller study groups, crafting video lectures that have a predictable format with chunking, making use of online discussions to complement the lectures and allow for personalization of the course content, and setting forth reasonable expectations for both students and the teacher, even an instructor teaching online university students in Korea for the first time can have a rewarding semester and create fruitful learning experiences for students as well.

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