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Teaching English Online: Understanding Teenage Language Learners Online

(Book Review)

Osama Koraishi^{1*}

^a Independent Researcher, Turkiye; <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-1670-3436>

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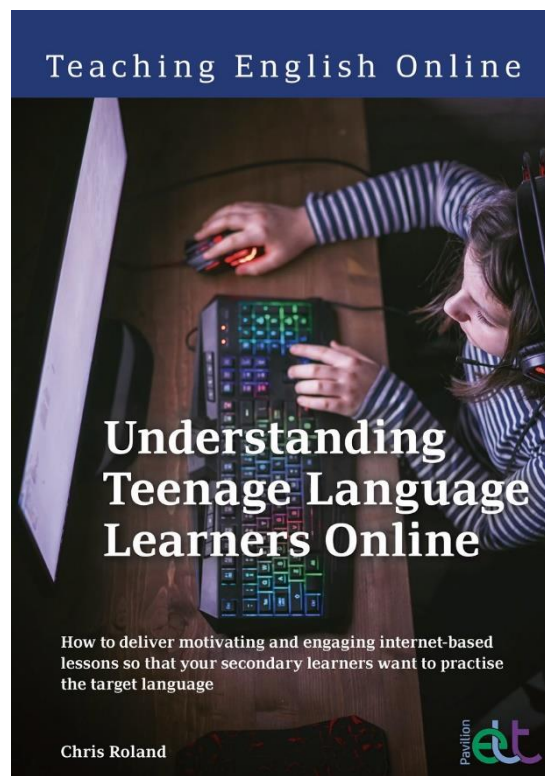
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Book Review

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^{1*} Osama Koraishi. Independent Researcher, Turkiye.
e-mail adress: osama.koraishi@gmail.com

Introduction

In the rapidly evolving landscape of education, the migration of education to online platforms has necessitated a profound shift in pedagogical approaches, particularly for the often-complicated demographic of teenage learners. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the urgency of this shift bringing about unprecedented challenges for the educational sector, compelling a swift and radical shift to online teaching modalities (Iglesias-Pradas et al., 2021; Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). Educational institutions of all kinds around the world contended with the immediate need for this transition, and educators were tasked with reimagining their pedagogical approaches and harnessing the potential of digital technologies to ensure continuity in learning whether they were ready or not. This transformation, in many respects, has been particularly pronounced in the area of language learning and teaching, where face-to-face interaction and nuanced communication are often deemed part and parcel of language education and effective instruction.

“Understanding Teenage Language Learners Online” is Chris Roland’s attempt to address the challenges that come with the virtualization of his, and other teachers’, educational milieu. It serves as a practical accessible guide to empower experienced language teachers who seek to adapt and transfer their existing offline expertise to the online environment and effectively navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by online education, tailoring their methods to the unique needs and preferences of adolescent students. Through a rich tapestry of realistic examples and evidence-based strategies, Roland's book not only demystifies the virtual classroom but also tries to equip educators with the tools and insights required to foster a dynamic and engaging learning environment for the digital-native generation.

Throughout the nine chapters of “Understanding Teenage Language Learners Online”, Roland tackles teenagers’ classrooms in areas such as safety and teachers’ wellbeing and how it connects to the students’ (Roffey, 2012), usage of different software features, eliciting learner response and motivation, and even

evaluation and feedback. It is also worth noting that the book is structured in a somewhat parallel structure to his earlier book *Understanding Teenagers in the ELT Classroom* (Roland, 2018).

Chapters

Chapter 1, "**Key Takeaways for Teaching Teens Online**," provides essential tips for teaching teenagers in an online setting before delving deeper to the rationale behind each tip. These include preserving learners' dignity, maintaining a positive attitude, focusing on language learning, and encouraging self-expression. The chapter also highlights the importance of utilizing multiple communication channels, fostering responsibility, creating consequences for tasks, and managing classroom dynamics. Additionally, the author suggests using ready-made messages, adopting an empathetic perspective, avoiding treating online teaching as a direct replacement for face-to-face teaching i.e., suggesting that hybrid education might be the more sustainable solution, and using audio feedback for correcting learners' writing.

Chapter 2, **Online Safety and wellbeing**, emphasizes the importance of creating a safe and secure online learning environment by focusing on trust, privacy, and respect between learners and their teacher, as well as among the learners themselves. The author suggests several pre-emptive measures to ensure privacy, such as not sharing audio or video materials without permission and avoiding full-screen displays of students' webcam images. Addressing the potential issue of screenshots being taken during class, the author recommends setting guidelines and rules for respecting each other's privacy and explaining the consequences of violating these rules; in fact, he goes further by involving the learners in the creation of said rules and consequences. Moreover, to foster a sense of security among students, the chapter highlights the significance of teacher wellbeing in an online teaching context and ways of mitigating these challenges such as planning moments of downtime. Lastly, the chapter provides a series

of professional development suggestions encouraging educators to practice reflective teaching and self-assessment when it comes to teaching online.

Chapter 3, **Managing your online classroom**, discusses the challenges and opportunities that arise when teaching teenagers online and provides insights from experienced educators and IT professionals. It presents a case study of ELI language academy's transition to online teaching in March 2020, highlighting the decisions, difficulties, and adjustments made by the institution and its staff. The Director of Studies for ELI, Elspeth Pollock, shares her experience in managing the transition for approximately 5,000 students, with 3,000 of them being teenagers. Pollock emphasizes the importance of selecting the right platform, being adaptable, and supporting teachers throughout the process. She also points out the need to manage student and parent expectations while dealing with various technical issues. We see another interview with Miguel Miracaballos, an IT professional who provided tech support for ELI during the online phase, and identifies common technical problems and patterns that emerged during the transition. He notes that teenagers can be easily distracted by their computers during online classes and suggests that teachers find ways to maintain engagement. Furthermore, the chapter provides practical suggestions for educators currently teaching online, such as keeping a record of classroom management and technical issues, identifying the class type, and establishing a clear stance on webcam usage. By learning from the experiences of others, being flexible, and providing clear communication and support, Roland believes that teachers can help ensure a successful online teaching experience for both themselves and their teenage students by following the aforementioned guidelines.

Chapter 4, **Using the Chat Box to Focus on Language**, tackles various strategies and techniques to enhance language learning for teenagers in online lessons. By leveraging the chat box and verbal commentary via the microphone, teachers can provide rich language input and feedback, contributing to an engaging and effective learning environment.

The first part of the chapter discusses the importance of addressing language errors, upgrades, and impressive language usage through the chat box. By focusing on the language learners provide, teachers can correct systematic errors, suggest more advanced or natural alternatives, and reinforce correct usage. In the later part of the chapter, strategies for reinforcing language input are presented. These include providing words in both spoken and written forms, exploring word formation, covering sound and spelling systems, and offering quality examples of language items in context. Additionally, the author suggests making a note of new language items for a recap at the end of the lesson.

Chapter 5, **Explaining Things and Getting a Response**, focuses on task design and small details that can make instructions more effective and activities more productive in an online language classroom with teenage students. The author emphasizes that successful online lessons do not depend on expert knowledge of apps and programs, but rather on understanding the students' experience of the tasks set for them.

Roland explores the critical role of communication and feedback in online language teaching, specifically focusing on techniques to maintain student engagement and motivation. He emphasizes the importance of response, as it serves as the driving force that keeps students actively participating in the virtual class. He further highlights the concept of "rolling consequence," which encourages students to maintain their attention and stay involved in the lesson.

The chapter provides several strategies to address common challenges in online teaching, such as managing breakout rooms, handling non-responsiveness, and providing feedback on students' written work. The author suggests different strategies addressing each common challenge mentioned in the chapter.

When it comes to providing feedback on written work, the author notes that assignments may come in various formats, making it difficult to provide uniform feedback. They propose using audio feedback as an effective solution, allowing students to hear their work read by a proficient English speaker and to process the feedback more effectively. Throughout the chapter-and the book-, the author also includes professional development tips and suggestions for teachers to implement and reflect upon in their practice.

Chapter 6, **Activities and Techniques that Work Well Online**, is dedicated to exploring a range of activities and techniques that work well for online learning. The chapter begins by highlighting the advantages of online learning, such as the fact that learners are able to access net-based apps, sites or other features during the lesson with little difficulty. Additionally, learners are at home most of the time, which provides opportunities for drawing inspiration from their surroundings. The chapter then goes on to provide a detailed overview of various activities and techniques that have been tested, by the author and proved useful in online learning.

This chapter represents the most hands-on section of the book as the listed activities tackle many goals, usages and adaptations. The activities are designed in a way to maximize attention and engagement by involving various senses and relating them to the environment of the learner. In fact, the author claims that even if the activity was related to the teacher him/herself, that would be enough to engage the students i.e., using some realia such as the food he was preparing on that day might prove useful to learners' engagement.

Perhaps the most important part of this chapter is the valuable insights into how educators can make online learning more engaging and effective by taking advantage of the unique opportunities it offers.

Chapter 7, **Using Clips, Video and Other Digital Effects**, is complementary to the previous chapter in the sense that it presents a variety of practical strategies and activities for teaching English online, but particularly by focusing on the use of video and audio clips. These strategies aim to improve students' listening and comprehension skills while engaging them in a meaningful way. The techniques discussed include priming and funneling, rolling comprehension, guided listening, generic questions, and staggered surveys, which vary in style and length to suit different learner needs and preferences.

According to the author, by using authentic materials such as news clips, music videos, TED talks, and podcasts, teachers can create a more engaging and effective learning environment. The author also highlights the importance of using pre-recorded/prepared task instructions and sharing personal projects to involve learners more deeply in the learning process. The rationale behind this lies in the materials being relevant to the real world and the learners.

To enhance the online teaching experience, teachers can employ special effects such as camera filters and voice changers. However, it is crucial to ensure that these effects are appropriate for the class and do not distract from the learning process.

Furthermore, teachers can benefit from recording themselves and critically analyzing their on-screen presence and language clarity. The chapter encourages teachers to experiment with various techniques and adapt them to their teaching context while considering the students' language level and maturity. This enhances the teacher's ability to self-reflect and assess their own practices.

Chapter 8, **Evaluation and Feedback**, explores the challenges and potential solutions for evaluating teenage learners in an online language learning environment. The author argues that traditional assessment methods may not be effective in an online context; believing in the importance of feedback

and evaluation, he suggests four alternative evaluation approaches. These include task-based evaluations, such as vocabulary-specific presentations, where students present on a given topic to demonstrate their understanding of the vocabulary; integrated testing, which involves incorporating assessment tasks into lessons; and real-time testing, where the teacher conducts a personalized one-on-one test with each learner.

The chapter also discusses the importance of adapting feedback and report cards to better suit the online learning environment. The author recommends addressing the specific skills and behaviors required for success in online language learning, such as responsible use of communication channels, responsiveness, and attentiveness. Redesigned report cards should include an overarching statement about the learner's adaptation to the online medium, an evaluation of the learner's performance in various aspects of online learning, and a section for addressing any technological issues encountered by the learner.

In the ninth and last chapter, **Final Thoughts**, the author reflects on the challenges and rewards of teaching online language lessons to groups of teenagers. The chapter highlights that the success of these lessons depends on the teacher's commitment to the profession, empathy and ability to adapt to the unique aspects of online learning. The author acknowledges that the experience can range from engaging and fruitful exchanges to one-sided struggles with unresponsive students and technical issues. The author emphasizes here, and throughout the book, the “*shared strain*”, as he called it, between the students and the teacher and encourages the teachers to face these challenges with their students and cherish the comical and unexpected moments that can sometimes arise from them.

Evaluation

In response to the pressing challenges in digital pedagogy, Chris Roland's book, "Understanding Teenage Language Learners Online," offers a valuable contribution to the growing literature on digital pedagogy.

The book is an accessible yet comprehensive guide that targets seasoned language teachers seeking to transfer their offline expertise to the online environment, with a particular focus on adolescent learners. It provides a thorough examination of the theoretical underpinnings of online language teaching, practical examples, and evidence-based strategies that empower educators to navigate the intricacies of the virtual classroom confidently.

Roland's writing style is engaging, with "things to try" and self-reflective questions at the end of each chapter, providing readers with practical ideas to implement in their teaching and facilitating meaningful self-assessment. The book's unconventional start, presenting the overall gist upfront, sets the tone for the entire reading experience. The author's emphasis on teacher wellbeing, while others ignore it, acknowledges the importance of a balanced and sustainable teaching environment in the online education context (MacIntyre et al., 2020).

Roland's book covers various aspects of online language teaching, including the use of digital tools and resources, fostering a sense of community among learners, and adaptive and inclusive teaching methods. The book not only illustrates the nuances of the digital-native generation but also offers concrete recommendations for implementing engaging and effective learning experiences tailored to their unique preferences and expectations.

However, the book is not without its limitations. It focuses on experienced teachers who are unfamiliar with online teaching but offers little to an overall novice teacher who might not be familiar with traditional methods and techniques. Additionally, the book only explores readily-available and simple digital tools, limiting the reader's ability to fully capitalize on technological advancements in the field; in fact, experts would argue that AI tools might be essential for online education nowadays (Niemi & Liu, 2021). Finally, the exploration of technical challenges such as server overloads may detract from the

overall focus on pedagogy and practical teaching strategies; in other words, this is not typical within the scope of the teachers' duties nor should it be expected to.

Overall, in an era characterized by rapid technological advancements and the increasing ubiquity of online education, "Understanding Teenage Language Learners Online" is a timely and indispensable resource for language educators striving to adapt their pedagogy to the evolving needs of their students. It offers a thoughtful exploration of the challenges, opportunities, and best practices associated with teaching adolescents in a digital context, holding the potential to significantly enhance the quality and impact of online language instruction for this critical demographic in a virtual environment.

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