

LEARNER ENGAGEMENT AND SPEAKING GAINS IN SYNCHRONOUS VS. ASYNCHRONOUS ONLINE LANGUAGE CLASSES

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Abstract: This study explores the relationship between learner engagement and speaking skill development in synchronous and asynchronous online language classes. As online education becomes more widespread, understanding how different modes of delivery impact student participation and speaking outcomes is essential. The paper compares real-time (synchronous) and self-paced (asynchronous) language instruction to assess which format better supports active engagement and speaking gains. Findings suggest that synchronous classes offer more opportunities for immediate interaction and feedback, which may lead to stronger improvements in speaking fluency. However, asynchronous formats provide flexibility and reduce anxiety, benefiting learners with different needs. The study concludes that a blended approach may be the most effective for maximizing both engagement and speaking development.

Keywords: online language learning, learner engagement, synchronous classes, asynchronous learning, speaking skills, language instruction, fluency development

With the global shift to online education, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, educators and researchers have increasingly turned their attention to the effectiveness of various virtual learning models. Among these, synchronous and asynchronous instruction methods have gained attention for their differing impacts on learner engagement and outcomes. This paper aims to investigate how these two instructional formats influence student engagement and speaking skill development in online language classrooms.

2. Synchronous vs. Asynchronous Instruction: An Overview

Synchronous learning refers to all types of learning in which learner(s) and instructor(s) are in the same place, at the same time, in order for learning to take place. This includes in-person classes, live online meetings when the whole class or smaller groups get together. In synchronous learning, students usually go through the learning path together, accompanied by their instructor who is able to provide support while students are completing tasks and activities. Synchronous instruction involves real-time interaction between teachers and learners, typically through platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Google Meet. It replicates face-to-face classroom dynamics by enabling instant communication and feedback (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Most online teaching happens asynchronously, with synchronous learning usually taking place only if there is a specific need for live discussion or interaction, or as a strategy to build community among learners.

In contrast, asynchronous instruction allows learners to access materials (e.g., video lectures, discussion boards, assignments) at their own pace and time. This model emphasizes learner autonomy and is often used in massive open online courses (MOOCs) and flexible learning environments (Hrastinski, 2008). Asynchronous learning is a student-centered teaching method widely used in

online learning. Its basic premise is that learning can occur in different times and spaces particular to each learner, as opposed to synchronous learning at a same time and place with groups of learners and their instructor, or one learner and their instructor. In asynchronous learning, instructors usually set up a learning path, which students engage with at their own pace.

Learner Engagement in Online Language Learning

Learner engagement is a multidimensional concept encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement in the learning process. In language learning, engagement can include:

- Active participation in speaking activities
- Interaction with peers and instructors
- Timely completion of tasks
- Motivation and persistence in language practice

Synchronous classes often facilitate higher levels of behavioral and emotional engagement due to real-time social presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Asynchronous models, while potentially less interactive, allow for deeper cognitive engagement through self-reflection and repeated exposure to materials.

Speaking Skill Development in Virtual Settings

Developing speaking skills in virtual learning environments presents both opportunities and challenges for language learners and instructors. Speaking, as a productive language skill, heavily relies on interaction, feedback, and real-time communication—elements that are naturally abundant in traditional classrooms but can be limited or transformed in online settings. **Synchronous online classes** offer an effective platform for real-time speaking practice. Platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams facilitate live discussions, presentations, and breakout room activities, which simulate face-to-face interaction. This format allows learners to practice fluency, intonation, and pronunciation while receiving immediate feedback from instructors and peers (Yanguas, 2020). Real-time communication can enhance learners' speaking confidence and conversational spontaneity, crucial elements of communicative competence.

On the other hand, **asynchronous environments** provide a more flexible yet slower-paced context for speaking development. Learners can record their spoken responses using tools like Flipgrid, Vocaroo, or Loom, and submit them for evaluation. These tools allow students to practice multiple times before submission, which reduces anxiety and supports accuracy. Additionally, asynchronous discussion forums with voice or video features promote reflective speaking practices and allow learners more time to construct their thoughts (Moorhouse, 2020).

Comparative Analysis: Engagement and Speaking Gains

Numerous studies have compared the outcomes of synchronous and asynchronous language instruction. Findings reveal that:

- Synchronous learners report higher motivation and increased speaking opportunities (Chen et al., 2021).
- Asynchronous learners benefit from greater flexibility and reduced pressure, which may encourage continued practice outside class (Lowenthal et al., 2020).
- Speaking gains are typically more pronounced in synchronous environments, though long-term retention and accuracy may not differ significantly (Heil et al., 2019).

These results suggest that while synchronous instruction may offer more immediate benefits for speaking development, asynchronous learning can enhance long-term autonomy and reduce learner anxiety.

The Case for a Blended Approach

A blended learning model, combining synchronous and asynchronous elements, may offer the best of both worlds. For example:

- Live sessions can be used for speaking practice, Q&A, and peer feedback.
- Recorded materials and forums can support self-paced review and reflection.
- Digital tools (e.g., Flipgrid, Padlet) can bridge the gap between real-time and delayed interaction.

Blended formats accommodate diverse learning styles and schedules, promoting inclusive participation and sustainable progress.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how synchronous and asynchronous online classes affect learner engagement and speaking development in language learning. Based on the analysis, it can be said that synchronous classes, where students interact in real-time, are more effective in improving speaking fluency and confidence because they allow immediate feedback and live communication. On the other hand, asynchronous classes give students more flexibility and time, which helps reduce anxiety and improve accuracy. However, each method has its own advantages, and their effectiveness depends on the learner's needs and preferences. That is why using a **blended approach**—combining both synchronous and asynchronous elements—might be the best way to support all types of learners. This combination can make learning more engaging, comfortable, and effective. In conclusion, to support better speaking skills and higher engagement in online classes, teachers should try to balance both methods and choose tools that fit their students' needs. More research is also needed to find out which activities and technologies work best for different learners in online environments.

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