

OLLReN Paper on:  
**MOTIVATION AND  
LANGUAGE LEARNING**  
IN ONLINE CONTEXTS

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# MOTIVATION & LANGUAGE LEARNING IN ONLINE CONTEXTS

## ABSTRACT

Educational research shows that learner motivation is complex, regardless of the type of learning environment: motivating students to learn in an online environment is not very different from motivating them to learn in any situation. While extrinsic motivators, such as grades based on the quality of online discussions, are part of the online teaching and learning process, effective pedagogical strategies are key to providing intrinsic motivation to learn. There are a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic factors that impact motivation and that may come into play in effective online language learning.

Two significant factors are online learning readiness and promoting interaction. Studies show a correlation between online learning readiness, i.e., a learners' ability to use a learning platform, and their motivation to participate; familiarity increases motivation. The instructor should not assume that the learner has the technological knowledge and skills necessary to be successful in an online course. By directly addressing issues related to online learning readiness, instructors can provide intrinsic motivation by helping learners to develop confidence and a positive attitude toward online learning.

Research also shows that effective online language teaching provides adequate opportunities for collaborative learning, which has been shown to be intrinsically motivating. The instructor can promote group interaction by providing clear expectations and instructions, helping learners build relationships through careful monitoring and by providing value-added feedback that encourages interaction. Research shows that the use of authentic online materials and social media platforms are intrinsically motivating, and that they also promote group interaction and collaborative learning.

**Key words:** online language learning; online learning; motivation

## KEY FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

From the outset of online learning, some educators and learners have assumed that the novelty of the online platform and the convenience of self-paced learning outside the classroom walls would provide ample motivation for learners. However, as educational research has shown in all learning environments, learner motivation is complex and can change. Extrinsic motivators, such as grades based on quality of online discussions, show the same mixed results toward motivating learners as they do in any learning situation. The novelty of technology for learning and earning a grade soon wears off and the learner needs effective pedagogical strategies to provide intrinsic motivation to learn.

Research in motivation and online learning, and motivation and online language learning in particular, shows that there are a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic factors that impact motivation and that may come into play in effective online learning. The research presented here focuses on how online learning readiness and promoting interaction support intrinsic motivation at any level of online language learning.

**Online learning readiness** Studies show that when learners are not very familiar with the learning platform, or have difficulties with it, their motivation to participate and learn drops. Therefore, online learning readiness should not be assumed.

### The instructor needs to:

- be proactive and give learners clear instructions on how to use the platform
- give clear and direct instructions for assignments
- provide clear expectations

In this way, the learner develops confidence and a positive attitude, increasing learner autonomy and self-regulation, which leads to

intrinsic motivation.

Promoting interaction Research also shows that effective online language teaching provides adequate opportunities for collaborative learning, an effective motivator in any learning environment.

**To promote group interaction, there should be:**

- clear student-centered learning outcomes
- clear expectations and instructions
- space for learners to build relationships
- instructor monitoring
- value-added feedback
- use of authentic materials

## DEFINITIONS:

### WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE TERMS IDENTIFIED?

**asynchronous** – when all users are not participating at the same time, such as online discussion boards

**authentic materials** – texts, video and audio materials created and produced for and by native speakers

**extrinsic motivation** – doing something for an external outcome, such as a grade or a reward

**intrinsic motivation** – doing something for an internal outcome “because you like doing it”

**motivation** – the reason for doing something or behaving in a certain way

**online learning readiness** – what a learner needs to know and be able to do to participate effectively as an online learner

**learner autonomy** – learners identifying and using appropriate strategies to promote their own learning

**synchronous** – when all users are participating at the same time, such as a live chat

## KEY ISSUES

Research in both areas is concerned with intrinsic and extrinsic factors that impact motivation and result in effective learning.

Effective learning is defined here as a learner not only meeting learning goals, but also internalizing the content and concepts. This is the opposite of learning just to pass a test. The research presented here focuses on three issues: promoting intrinsic motivation; online learning readiness; and promoting interaction.

**Promoting intrinsic motivation** Research has shown that intrinsic motivation, doing something because you like doing it rather than for some type of “reward”, such as a grade, is key to effective learning. Research on motivation and learning is often based in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) which makes a connection between motivation and individual autonomy, another key factor in effective learning (Deci & Ryan 1985; Ryan & Deci 2000a; 2000b).

Related to autonomy is the notion of “self-regulation”. Learners who are aware of their own learning and how they learn have been shown to be more effective learners. Promoting learning autonomy and self-regulation can increase learner confidence and help them develop a positive attitude. Each of these contributes to promoting intrinsic motivation.

**Online learning readiness** The degree of online learning readiness that an online learner possesses helps promote autonomy in their learning. The more easily a learner can use technology and understand the process of online learning, the more confident he/she feels. This confidence can translate into a positive attitude toward online learning, which in turn promotes intrinsic motivation to be an effective learner.

**Promoting interaction** According to Vygotsky (1978), interaction is key to learning. In any learning context, there are three basic types of interactions:

- content-learner
- instructor-learner
- learner-learner

In the online context, these interactions are played out a little differently than in the face-to-face classroom because most online learning is asynchronous. Even when there are synchronous interactions, such as an audio or video chat, there is still a feeling of distance among the participants. Therefore, care must be taken when developing courses to create interactions that decrease the distance and have a sense of authenticity.

## SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS OR INSIGHTS

Research on motivation and online learning in general, and in the language learning context in particular, focuses on what influences motivation and how to increase it. Factors such as a tendency for self-directed learning, online learning readiness, learner engagement and learner autonomy are often examined to determine the impact of intrinsic and extrinsic factors in online learning.

### ONLINE LEARNING IN GENERAL

Three factors for determining the degree of motivation of online readiness are “self-efficacy, self-directed learning, and motivation factors” (Cigdem & Ozturk 2016, 104). This study shows a positive correlation between achievement and self-efficacy, and between achievement and self-direction.

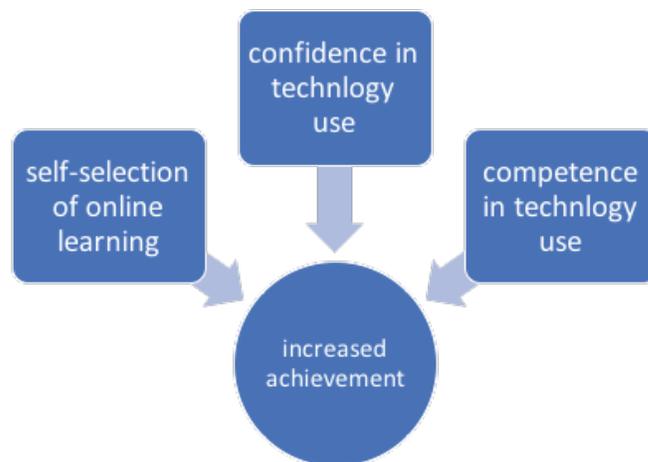
The researchers found that not only are today’s learners more familiar with various types of technology, but they also “try different tools, and choose which ones fit their needs best” (105). The study, which is supported by other research, also shows that competence and confidence in using technology or online learning readiness can help a learner achieve better results than if a learner is not technologically savvy.

It can also motivate a learner to choose online learning over face-to-face learning. The authors suggest that if a learner actually chooses online learning over face-to-face learning, he/she will be more motivated to do well and will achieve better results than a student who has online learning thrust upon him/her.

The researchers also determined that online learning readiness and self-selection of online learning is related to a learner’s ability to learn independently (see Chart 1). A student who is not successful as an independent learner would probably not self-select an online course.

Another aspect of online learning readiness is that motivation increases perceived learning, what the learner thinks they have learned. Horzuma, Kaymak, & Gungorenc (2015) looked at connections with online

Chart 1. Factors for Achievement in Online Courses

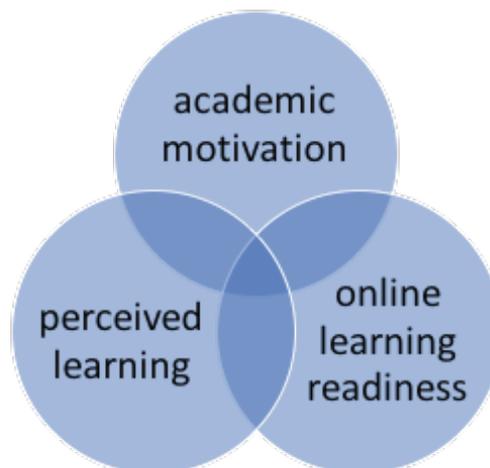


learning readiness, academic motivation and perceived learning. This study describes online learning readiness broadly as the skills and attitudes that a student needs to learn effectively in the online environment. Academic motivation is a learner’s motivation for engaging in academic activities. Perceived learning refers to what the learner thinks they have learned. The research found that:

- **online learning readiness** can predict motivation directly
- **online learning readiness** predicts perceived learning indirectly
- **academic motivation** predicts perceived learning directly

The relationship among the three factors is interrelated since academic motivation can increase perceived learning and online learning readiness can increase academic motivation (see Chart 2).

Chart 2. Motivation and Online Learning Readiness

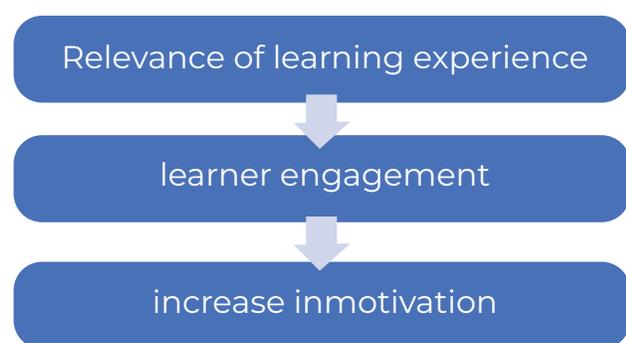


The Self-Regulation of Motivation (SRM) Model is a process for analyzing, controlling, and assessing how and why one learns and behaves as he/she does in a learning environment (Sansone & Thoman 2005). Sansone, Fraughton, Zachary, Butner and Heiner (2011) used this model to examine the relationship between self-regulated online learning and motivation and its impact on learning. Their study identifies two types of motivation:

- **goals-defined motivation** which is related to the perceived value of the learning experience for the learner and the learner's expectations of the learning experience
- **experience-defined motivation** which is how interesting or not the learning experience is for the learner

The more useful, i.e., relevant, a learner finds the learning experience, the more engaged they are; this in turn increases motivation (see Chart 3).

Chart 3. Self-Regulation of Motivation

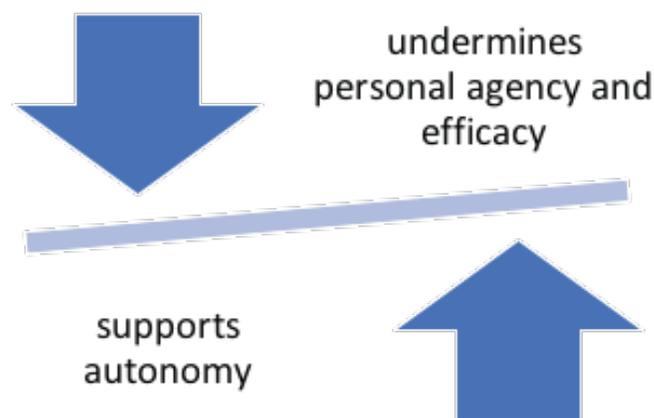


Studies by Hartnett, M., St. George, A, & Dron, J. (2010; 2011) suggest that the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) can provide a useful framework for studying motivation in the online learning setting. SDT makes a connection between intrinsic-extrinsic motivation and learner autonomy. This theory supports the notion that: "... all humans have an intrinsic need to be self-determining or autonomous (i.e., experience a sense of agency and control), as well as to feel competent (i.e., capable) and connected (i.e., included and linked to others) in relation to their environment." (Hartnett et al. 2011, 22).

Self-motivation, or autonomous motivation, increases when the environment supports individual autonomy. However, just as the environment can support individual auto-

my, it can also have a detrimental effect on self-determined, or intrinsic motivation by undermining the individual's perceptions of personal agency and efficacy. Hartnett et al. (2011) also caution that motivation is complex and multifaceted and is sensitive to situational conditions (see Chart 4).

Chart 4. Effect of Learning Environment on Motivation



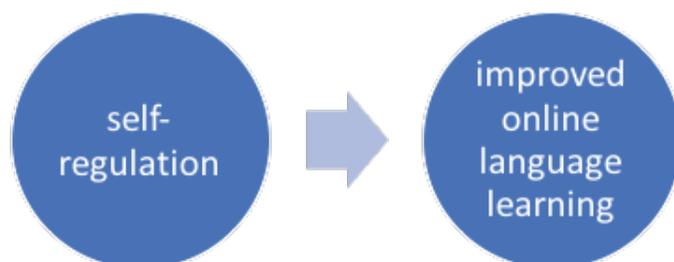
## ONLINE LANGUAGE LEARNING

Online learning can take different forms in the language learning context. One way is by accessing and using online materials as resources. Learning management systems, social media networks, and language learning websites also provide interactive language learning opportunities.

## ROLE OF SELF-REGULATION

Lin, Zhang, & Zheng (2017) found that online-learning strategies and the awareness of them by learners "positively predicted the respondents' satisfaction, perceived progress, and final grades" (81). The authors concluded that helping students learn to be self-regulated, i.e., aware of their own learning and how they learn, will improve their online language learning (see Chart 5).

Chart 5. Relationship between Self-Regulation and Online Language Learning



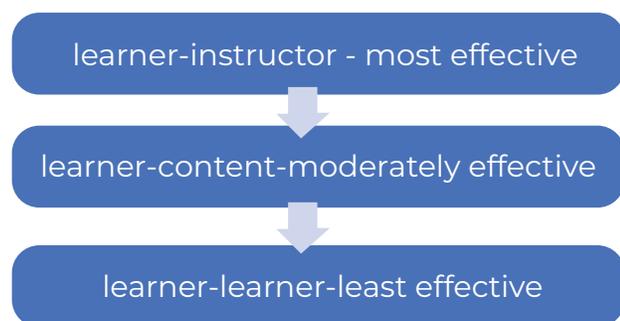
## ROLE OF INTERACTION

In an earlier study, Lin, Zheng, & Zhang (2016) looked at the importance of interaction in online language learning. Their analysis looked at:

- learner-learner interactions
- learner-instructor interactions
- learner-content interactions

They found that learner-instructor interactions were the most motivating. Their study also confirms previous research that shows the positive impact of learner-content interactions. Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of learner-learner interaction. However, this study shows that the online language program in the study has limited opportunity for meaningful learner-learner interactions through synchronous interactions, which is often the case in online language learning programs. (see Chart 6).

Chart 6. Effectiveness of Interactions for Online Language Learning



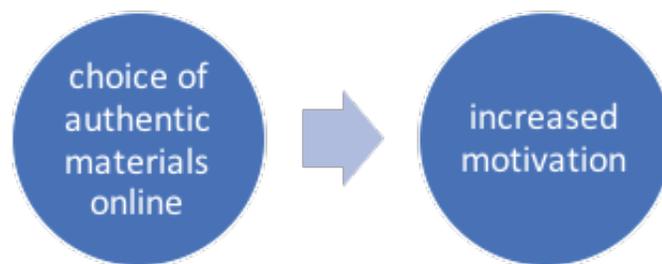
## ROLE OF AUTHENTIC MATERIALS

Having access to a wide variety of online authentic materials can also motivate students' language learning. Abdelhafez & Abdallah (2015) found that when students have a choice in what they study, they are more motivated (see Chart 7). Although some research shows that using authentic materials can be de-motivating because of its difficulty for learners, this project supports other research that shows the importance of using authentic online materials to increase motivation.

## ROLE OF LEARNERS' CHOICE

Chen (2012) also looked at the motivational importance of the ability of students to choose their own online material. Chen found that when learners are able to choose topics more related

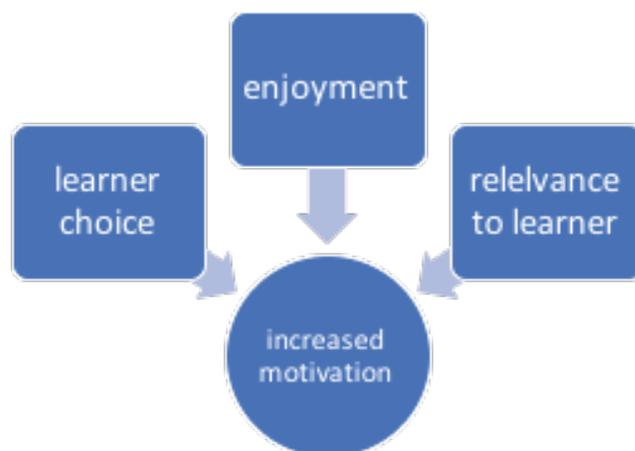
Chart 7. Authentic Materials and Motivation



to their tastes and preferences, they feel more motivated to engage with the material. She also found that most students prefer entertainment-related online materials, which she attributes to two factors:

- learners think they can learn better when they enjoy what they are reading or listening to
- entertainment is often more relevant to learners' life situations (see Chart 8)

Chart 8. Relationship Between Entertainment-Related Online Materials and Motivation



## ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

One authentic source of language learning that is often used in the language classroom is social media, especially Facebook. AbuSa'aleek (2016) looked at learners' perceptions when using Facebook and its impact on "language improvement, confidence, motivation and attitude" (60).

While some research does not support the usefulness of social media, AbuSa'aleek's study supports other research, such as Rosen's (2010) which suggests that "social networks provide opportunities for exchange of synchronous and asynchronous communication, social interaction, and multimedia information" (62). Rosen (2010) also stated that social networks can contribute positively to learners' "language

socialization”, or their natural use of the language in authentic social contexts. Abu-Sa’aleek concluded that using Facebook facilitates English language learning by increasing motivation and confidence, and this in turn promotes a positive attitude toward language learning (see Chart 9).

Chart 9. Relationship Between Social Media and Attitude to Language Learning



## ROLE OF INSTRUCTOR SELF-DISCLOSURE

Aubry’s (2013) study on using Facebook in language learning focused specifically on motivation types and self-disclosure by the instructor. He found that students who have access to the instructor’s Facebook profile experience a shift from being extrinsically motivated to being more intrinsically motivated, a shift which other research has been shown to promote language learning (see Chart 10).

Chart 10. Relationship Between Instructor’s Self-Disclosure, Intrinsic Motivation and Language Learning



## DIRECT IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER TRAINING

As this research shows, there are two factors which can be controlled for in developing online language learning coursework that promotes intrinsic motivation: online learning readiness and promoting interaction. These issues can be addressed by teachers at any level of online language learning.

## ONLINE LEARNING READINESS

While many people are able to text and play computer games, they often do not understand how to use technology as an educational tool and may need to be coached on how to transfer these skills to language learning. The instructor cannot assume learners know how to do online coursework (Cigdem & Ozturk 2016). It is up to the teacher to:

- give clear instructions on how to use the platform
- give learners a chance to practice with an ungraded assignment first
- give clear and direct instructions for assignments
- lay out expectations clearly
- provide a rubric so learners can see clearly what the assignment objectives are and how they will be assessed (see Table 1)

Table 1. Sample Online Discussion Rubric  
(10 possible points)

Criteria	2.5-3	1.5-2	0-1
Content	Is accurate; is relevant to topic; relates to course materials	Has some off-topic posting; has few references to course materials	Is inaccurate; has little or no relevance to topic; does not relate to course materials
Support	Uses course materials, outside materials, and personal experiences to support comments	Has few references to course materials and/or personal experiences	Has no supporting evidence
Clarity	Is accurate; is relevant to topic; relates to course materials	Is accurate; is relevant to topic; relates to course materials	Is accurate; is relevant to topic; relates to course materials
Content		Expresses ideas clearly and concisely; meets length criteria	Lacks clear organization; does not adhere to length criteria
Mechanics		Uses standard grammar and spelling; meets deadline	Has grammatical and spelling errors in several posts; does not meet deadline

On the surface, this type of direct instruction appears to be focusing on extrinsic issues. However, if the teacher thinks about how building learner confidence helps learners develop a positive attitude and how this in turn leads to increased learner autonomy and self-regulation, it is easy to see that this type of direct instruction can lead to intrinsic motivation.

## COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Research has shown that collaborative learning is an effective motivator in any learning environment. Some key points to keep in mind when planning collaborative activities are:

- **a need for clear student-centered** learning outcomes that promote group interaction, collaboration and participation
- **clear expectations and instructions** for what the individuals should do and what the group should accomplish
- **space for learners to build relationships** with one another and the instructor
- **monitoring what the learners are doing** and giving them feedback and encouragement
- **taking advantage of learning styles** to motivate groups to interact and participate more effectively in the online learning environment
  - adding variety to the online questions and projects so that they do not all depend on written answers.
  - learners recording themselves making a short presentation, and giving one another feedback
  - learners linking to a website that has games and/or puzzles to practice and reinforce their new vocabulary or grammar, and then as a group creating their own game or puzzle

Such attention to the process by the instructor increases the effectiveness of online work, which in turn increases learner motivation.

## VALUE-ADDED FEEDBACK

Providing value-added feedback can also promote student engagement and motivation. Although many learners want a relationship with the instructor, in online language learning, it is important that learners also see the value of learner-learner interaction, so the instructor must provide feedback that promotes these interactions. Compare this feedback:

- “John, that’s a good point.”
- “Alice, I like what you’re thinking.”

This type of quick and direct feedback is commonly used. Let’s see how it can be value-added so that it promotes more interaction between the students, rather than just being individual praise.

- “John and Alice looked at two sides of the issue and both made good points. What other perspectives are there? What can you add to what they said?”

In this way, the feedback is generalizable to all participants and it is prompting students to think more broadly about the issue.

## AUTHENTIC MATERIALS

The use of authentic materials can promote content-learner interactions, especially when learners are given a degree of autonomy in choosing their material. Teachers can provide a selection of materials for learners to choose from on the given topic. Not only does this give the individual a sense of agency in their learning, it also provides an effective way for all learners to interact with a wider range of materials.

For example, setting up an online discussion by assigning students to groups in which members have read or seen different material can give learners a broader view of the topic. With this type of jigsaw grouping, they are learning from one another, not just the teacher or the material (see Chart 11). They can help one another understand vocabulary and concepts, even grammar, as they are discussing the content. This deeper engagement with the material and one another develops intrinsic motivation to learn more.

Chart 11. Online Jigsaw



## SOCIAL MEDIA

Using social media networks, another form of authentic material, also promotes intrinsic motivation. A social media group for a course such as a Facebook group can be more or less structured. These groups can be open to anyone or restricted to the people that the administrator invites. Social media can increase learner autonomy by:

- providing space to share links they find interesting
- uploading videos that are related to the course
- making quick or more in-depth comments about other learners' posts

As Aubry (2013) points out, authentic interaction with the instructor is also a key aspect of using social media in the classroom. The instructor seems more “real” and a relationship can develop between instructor and students which has been shown to increase participation and intrinsic motivation. Feedback feels less abstract when given by someone you “know”.

## CONCLUSIONS

The research examined here confirms that while motivation is a complex concept, intrinsic and extrinsic factors that positively impact motivation result in effective learning, regardless of the learning context.

Many studies also support the notion that instructors can take steps to promote intrinsic motivation so that learners can become better online language learners. By developing strategies that address online learning readiness and promote interaction, the instructor can increase intrinsic motivation in the online language learning context.

Using direct strategies, the instructor can help learners effectively use technology as an educational tool. Such online learning readiness promotes intrinsic motivation because the more easily a learner can use technology and understand the process of online learning, the more confident he/she feels, creating a positive attitude toward online learning.

Additionally, intrinsic motivation can be achieved through instructional strategies that promote interaction. Carefully planned collaborative learning activities that use a variety of strategies can be effective motivators. A strategy, like a jigsaw, can promote deeper engagement with the material and with classmates, developing intrinsic motivation to learn more.

Giving learners autonomy in choosing authentic materials can also promote content-learner interactions as they interact with a wider range of materials. Finally, monitoring what the learners are doing and giving them value-added feedback and encouragement is a key role for the instructor once the class is underway. Such attention to the process by the instructor increases the effectiveness of online work, which in turn increases learner motivation.

Whatever strategies are used, it is important that the instructor be aware of how to increase intrinsic motivation in online language learners. The instructor should consider factors such as a tendency for self-directed learning, online learning readiness, learner engagement, learner autonomy, and learner interaction, in order to plan how to capitalize on them in online language courses.

In addition, the instructor needs to become familiar with the potential of learning management systems, social media networks, and language learning websites, which can all provide a range of interactive language learning opportunities to be integrated into the online language classroom. In this way the instructor can be assured that the learners are confidently engaging in effective pedagogical strategies that provide intrinsic motivation to learn.

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[http://www.educationworld.com/a\\_curr/strategy/strategy036.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_curr/strategy/strategy036.shtml)

Gives an overview of what a “jigsaw” is and links to other resources

Forster, S. (2016). How to shake up the discussion board in your online class. *Mediashift*.

<http://mediashift.org/2016/07/how-to-shake-discussion-board-online-class/>

Gives an overview of how to facilitate and manage online discussions

Swartz, R. (2015). Rubrics for assignments in online courses. Touro College.

<http://blogs.onlineeducation.touro.edu/rubrics/>

Gives a concise overview of benefits of using rubrics and links to three useful rubric sites



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