

# 'Free' online courses versus interactive classroom courses

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The internet is currently abuzz with advertisements for "free" online language courses and online education. While developments in technology have undoubtedly created opportunities for more people to access education, the question still remains as to whether it is actually possible to learn a language solely with the use of an online platform. Whilst there are numerous advantages to using online platforms, there are equally as many disadvantages.



Online platforms are limited in their capacity to support group discussions, as well as the engagement with language facilitators and tutors. Many platforms are also unable to cope with the thousands of students that try to join online discussions. Language learners benefit greatly from human interaction within a classroom. Mark Edmundson (2012), an English professor at the University of Virginia, argued that online education creates a “monologue and not a real dialogue” in the learning environment. Classroom environments allow learners to express their opinions, participate in debates, and engage in face-to-face interaction with classmates and their instructor.

Language facilitators are responsible for explaining material, answering questions and guiding learning based on students' needs and language levels in real time. From an online perspective, this resource becomes diluted, as often there exists back and forth communication between the student and the facilitator over an extended period of time. Within a classroom environment, learners are immersed in the language and encouraged to speak. Learning takes place in a pro-active way with a balance of learner-facilitator interaction and group work. Language learners receive undivided attention from the facilitator, and the pace and content of the tuition is thus tailored to the learner accordingly.

Two of the benefits of online courses are that they offer flexibility and convenient accessibility; however, they also require a greater amount of self-discipline, reading and time-management skills. Online courses tend to make it easier to procrastinate and they create a sense of isolation. These elements are not conducive to successful language learning. Motivation levels are likely to decrease when using online platforms, as learners have no real external influences to help keep them motivated and inspired.

The quality and accreditation of online language courses is also a concern to most learners, as many online courses lack

valid accreditation and certification. It is crucial to enrol in a course that provides legitimate information and that is accredited with a relevant board or organisation. A course that does not provide valid accreditation will serve no purpose or advantage to the learner.

[Wits Language School](#) was established in 1997 and forms part of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. Over the last 19 years, the school has built a reputation for providing high-quality language services and short learning programmes in a dynamic and international learning environment. Wits Language School endorses interactive teaching styles, uses up-to-date teaching methods, and employs experienced and highly qualified teachers who are mother-tongue speakers to assist all participants in their quest to learn a second language.

Online learning should be considered a supplement and extension, rather than a replacement, to traditional classroom learning.

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