Teaching skills online

By Cecilia Nobre

Teaching reading, speaking, listening and writing online is different from the face-to-face environment, but that doesn't mean it's less effective. While teaching the four skills can feel easier face-to-face in a number of ways because the teacher and learners are in the same classroom, it is possible to adapt and teach reading, listening, writing and speaking successfully online. In this article, I will discuss how this can be done.

What's the difference between a Skype chat with a friend who's abroad and **teaching speaking** online? Many students and teachers might see both experiences as similar, but they shouldn't. Teaching speaking online is not like talking to a friend, even though this idea may help students to feel more comfortable and confident when joining a speaking lesson online. Teaching speaking online requires the teacher to listen and watch the students all the time, monitor their language, give feedback, encourage participation and engagement just as teachers do in the face-to-face classroom. Feedback can be delayed or on the spot and teachers can write on the chat box as students speak or wrap up at the end of a task. Also, the teacher can use the chat box or the screen (if they're sharing it) to clarify questions. The advantage of teaching speaking online is the recording, which doesn't happen face-to-face - teachers and students can watch the lesson again and improve their language.

Teaching reading online can be as effective as teaching it face-to-face and it can be integrated with other skills. The hardcover books and paper handouts are replaced by their digital versions. There are many digital books and websites that teachers can extract text or a story from and share with their online students. Many videoconference platforms such as Zoom, appear.in and Skype have the screen-sharing feature which is quite useful for reading lessons. Additionally, students can use the drawing tools on Zoom for annotation on the screen, which is great when they are scanning or skimming a text. Alternatively, the teacher or student can take a screenshot of their reading materials, save it as a picture or pdf and add it to the cloud or a Google Drive folder, thus going paperless, protecting the environment and staying focused and organised.

Teaching listening, though a more receptive skill, can be integrated with the productive speaking skill. It's possible and crucial to use the right

equipment. Teachers need to ensure the students can listen to the videos and audio files, as well as listen to the teacher themselves. On Zoom, the teacher can share the computer audio, which will enable the student to listen to the sound as clear as it can be, but they need to use earplugs or a headset to muffle the outside noise (if the student does the class in a café, office or noisy place). All listening tasks can be perfectly conducted online, such as pre-listening tasks, watching a video or listening to an audio file, post-listening tasks, decoding techniques (with the help of the whiteboard, chat box or by sharing resources on the screen). The audio can be rewound as many times as needed.

Teaching writing in a face-to-face classroom is usually overlooked because it may be perceived as time-consuming and it's generally seen as a homework task without much thought - but it shouldn't be! Teaching writing online can be a fun and enjoyable experience as long as teachers are aware of the tools available and let their creativity spark. Writing is a process that involves thinking, brainstorming ideas, polishing them, thinking about the structure, connecting ideas, proofreading and so on. At lower levels, writing out a jumbled-word sentence from a text shared on the screen is a writing task. Similarly, at higher levels, it is crucial that teachers set the context of any writing activities and design an integrated skills lesson. For instance, priming the students with a discussion (speaking) about the text in pairs helps students come up with creative ideas and motivates them to write. Also, another great way to get students to write online is through a collaborative writing activity. This can be done by sharing a Google Docs file where each student is able to write at the same time on the same file.