

# Opportunities in online teaching with young learners

**Ross Thorburn shows the advantages of teaching online**

As teachers around the world get used to teaching online, it's easy to focus on the drawbacks: the things that we used to be able to do offline but can no longer do online. Far less attention is paid to what we can do online that was never previously possible offline. In my experience as a teacher trainer in an online language school, this context holds just as many opportunities as it does limitations. In this short article I will discuss six opportunities unique to online young learner language classes and how to take advantage of these.

## Genuine communication

Many of the questions that teachers ask in face-to-face classes are questions to which teachers already know the answers. Because teachers and learners in offline classrooms inhabit the same physical space, questions about that space often tend to be 'display' questions. Questions like 'What's the weather like today?', 'What colour can you see?' and 'What fruit is that?' are unlikely to provoke any genuine communication because everyone in the classroom knows it is raining outside, the room is painted orange and the teacher is holding a flashcard of a banana. David Nunan pithily sums this up, writing that 'in



Ross Thorburn started teaching English in 2006. He recently worked as Director of Teaching at an online English school in China, overseeing teaching quality and materials design for 10,000 teachers and teachers at [www.tefltraininginstitute.com](http://www.tefltraininginstitute.com).

communicative classes, interactions may, in fact, not be very communicative after all' (1987, p. 144).

Online teaching has the potential to change this. Because teachers and learners in online classes do not share the same physical space, questions about what learners can see, hear and feel are more likely to be genuine. The teacher does not know what the weather is like outside the learner's house, what the learner can see in their bedroom, or what fruit might be lying on the table in front of them. In an online class, the information shared by teachers and students is limited to what both can see on their computer screen. If teachers can ask questions about the learner's world beyond their computer screen, meaningful communication is bound to follow.

## Personalisation

Learners need to be involved as individuals, if they are to stay sufficiently

**In online classes, the learner's entire house is a giant repository for personalised realia.**

motivated to successfully learn a language (Griffiths & Keohane, 2009). However, it can be challenging to get to know learners as individuals in offline classes. They sit in the same room in the same chairs, use the same coursebook, and in schools with uniforms, wear the same clothes. Personalisation can also be especially difficult at beginner level, where learners often lack the linguistic resources to discuss their feelings, ideas and experiences in detail. One way to personalise at this level is by using objects and items familiar to learners. In offline classes, the use of realia is often limited to items inside learners' pencil cases or the contents of the school's lost and found box.

In online classes, the learner's entire house is a giant repository for personalised realia. Instead of using pictures in the coursebook to learn clothes, online students can open their wardrobes and talk about their favourite outfits. Instead of relying on food flashcards, learners can fetch their favourite snacks from the fridge. Instead of retelling a story from a graded reader, learners can choose one of their own books and try to retell the story in English. Doing this in an offline class would require learners to travel to school in a removal van! Online lessons give us the opportunity to personalise topics using our learners' surroundings.

## Parental involvement

Much of what teachers do in face-to-face classrooms is invisible to our peers and managers (Bailey et al., 2001) and also to parents. Parental involvement in offline education is often limited to pushing kids into the classroom at the beginning of lessons or waiting by the door during the final five minutes of class time. Online teaching tips the scales in the other direction: many parents sit next to their children during class. This can be potentially catastrophic, as some parents translate instructions (often wrongly!) into their child's L1 or even answer on their

son's or daughter's behalf. This interference deprives some young learners of the confidence to speak in English without checking what they want to say with a parent.

But parental involvement can also be a blessing: students can bring their own teaching assistants to class who can help them focus, give assistance when required and manage behaviour. In group classes, parents can also act as language partners for young learners to practise language with. However, parents need to be carefully and respectfully managed if they are to work with lessons rather than against them. Setting clear roles and expectations for parents in online classes can help young learners receive the support they need, without supporting too much.

## Screen sharing

Why do offline classes centre typically around a whiteboard? Perhaps because the text on a whiteboard is virtually the only writing large enough for everyone in the class to see at the same time. This is unfortunate, because there is an abundance of learner-produced language in coursebooks and notebooks just waiting to be tapped into. Moving classes online means students can screen share their stories, drawings, photos and answers with the rest of the class. This opens up possibilities for personalisation, where learner-produced materials can take centre stage in class in place of generic coursebook content.

## Learning 'online' language

When I taught very young learners face-to-face, my first lessons with new groups of students always involved teaching phrases like 'stand up', 'sit down', 'put up your hand' and 'open your books'. These classroom commands are essential to offline classroom management. Online classroom management is just as important, but the language of classroom management is different. Learners need to know 'click', 'circle', 'find', 'move your webcam', 'ask your Mum', 'show me a ...' etc. from the

**As teachers around the world get used to teaching online, it's easy to focus on the drawbacks: the things that we used to be able to do offline but can no longer do online. Far less attention is paid to what we can do online that was never previously possible offline.**



beginning of an online English course if they are to fully participate in English. Anyone reading who has participated in a Zoom meeting recently will also have noticed how 'Can you hear me?' has become a greeting in the same way that 'Hello' is used to answer the phone.

Learners need to learn this language of online communication, and there is no better context in which to learn it than in online language classes. As Richards and Lockhart say, 'The kinds of functions for which learners use language within a class will vary according to the age of the learners, the content of the class and the kinds of activities and learning arrangements that are used' (2000, p. 195), and we must vary the language we teach accordingly.

## Teacher supervision and evaluation

Most online lessons are recorded, making them available for viewing at a later date. This has enormous potential advantages for teacher supervision. Observations in offline contexts are often hampered by the observer's paradox, where the presence of an observer changes what happens in class. This can result in supervisors observing lessons which bear 'little or no resemblance to what happens between teacher and class on a day-to-day basis' (Bolitho, 2013, p. 10) and teachers being evaluated on these outlier classes. Needless to say, evaluating a teacher on such a class is about as meaningful as writing a music review based on an album cover.

Online, supervisors often have the ability to search through a database of recordings of classes. This can allow managers to evaluate teachers using a wide range of data rather than on one single, high-stakes lesson, making evaluation more representative of 'real' teaching and learning and also taking the pressure off teachers from 'performing' a flawless lesson for an observer. Teachers could also be granted more autonomy in the supervision process, choosing some of the

**Moving classes online means students can screen share their stories, drawings, photos and answers with the rest of the class. This opens up possibilities for personalisation...**

lesson recordings they wish to be evaluated on, making a sometimes stressful and unfair process less traumatic and fairer.

## Conclusions

The recent exodus from face-to-face classrooms may have been one of the largest changes in education in the past century. As with any change of tectonic magnitude, those caught up in it will need time to adjust. And adjusting to online teaching will mean identifying the unique opportunities afforded to us by the online classroom and taking advantage of these.

## References

- Bailey, K., Curtis, A., & Nunan, D. (2001). *Pursuing professional development: The self as source*. Cengage Learning.
- Bolitho, R. (2013). Dilemmas in observing, supervising and assessing teachers. In M. Kabir (Ed.), *Assessing and evaluating English language teacher education* (pp. 7–12). British Council.
- Griffiths, G., & Keohane, K. (2009). *Personalizing language learning*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Nunan, D. (1987). Communicative language teaching: Making it work. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 41, 136–45.
- Richards, J. C., & Lockhart, C. (2000). *Reflective teaching in second language classrooms*. Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, K. (2003). *Qualitative inquiry in TESOL*. Palgrave Macmillan.