

# Transformation of Esl Activities In Online Studying

Yana A. Alpatova\*, Tatyana Yu. Shershneva, Saule U. Temirkhanova

Kazakh-British technical university (Kazakhstan)

## Abstract.

The shift of education to the emergency remote format of teaching and learning due to the pandemic, now contrasted with what was previously understood by online learning, has been followed by transformations in the ELT methodology. These transformations are characterized by the adjustment of teaching staff to the "The New Normal" in search of relevant instruction materials and tools to design a wide range of classroom activities, starting from regular lesson planning and ending with overall syllabi modifications. This article looks at key transformations in teaching four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking to be implemented into the multilevel academic English programme in remote teaching conditions. The transformations under discussion include adapting lesson plans to online reality with a greater reliance on students' self-study, using an assortment of online tools available on the MS Teams platform, adapting traditional offline speaking games to the online classroom environment, maximizing students' involvement at online lessons, modifying the method of monitoring the target language use and mistakes correction, and using online instruments for assessment and feedback. These transformations are illustrated with descriptions of lesson activities and procedures.

**Keywords:** ELT, methodology, online, modifications, lesson design

## 1. Introduction

The transition of education from offline to online format has been inevitably followed by modifications in the approaches to lesson design, namely a transformation in the ways of virtual classes delivery. Moving to the online format of studies makes English language teachers face the challenge of using appropriate online methods and techniques to adapt a traditional offline lesson to the online environment.

Comparing both study formats it is possible to notice certain similarities/similar components, such as the aim and objectives, the procedure, appropriate teaching methods to maximize student involvement in the class activities, and relevant feedback integrated into a

lesson plan. However, it is important to keep in mind some differences between the two modes, including the features of virtual classroom facilities, the extra time required for preclass, in-class, and post-class routine, and the increased role of independent study. All these lead to transformations in crafting an online lesson, tailoring methods and tools for language acquisition through effective, meaningful, and interactive ESL activities.

The present article shares the authors' insights on the adjustment of lesson designs to synchronous online teaching and learning via the MS Teams platform. These adaptations are mainly based on thoughtful consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of technologyfacilitated language learning. The paper also shares the experience in planning

classroom activities for individual, pair, and group work; maintaining student engagement, and providing feedback aimed at developing listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.

## **2. Overview of transformations of ESL activities in online learning**

### **2.1 Advantages and disadvantages of online studies**

To modify the ESL activities for an online format, it is necessary to analyze what advantages of virtual learning exist, and what disadvantages are necessary to consider.

One of the most important advantages of an online classroom is the redistribution of the teacher-student responsibilities leading to students' independent learning, i.e. selfmanagement and autonomy. As a virtual class is vulnerable due to some technical issues, such as different quality of internet connection, it is not always possible to rely on a teacher's explanation. Therefore, the teacher's task is to prepare and add to the file's repository class handouts, study material, video lectures, or a list of literature with useful Internet links and clear-cut instructions so that students can easily navigate through them.

Another benefit is that visual aids are within the students' immediate reach, that is they can see PowerPoint presentations, illustrations, graphs, and pictures on their screen, in contrast to the same demonstration in the offline classroom where some students might sit far from the board and hardly see what is shown on the screen. Likewise, visual images and videos can be integrated directly into handouts, transforming them into multimedia resources.

Digital learning platforms allow tracing students' activity for objective evaluation of inclass participation. For example, MS Teams' "Insights" application stores some objective data about student digital activity including engagement in-class conversations, submitted assignments, reactions to other students' messages, and so on. In a traditional classroom, the in-class assessment may be less objective, as the teacher follows the intense lesson plan, monitors the activities, and scrupulously traces participation all at once.

Variability of virtual class layouts can facilitate students' engagement in different ESL activities. For instance, it is easier to use the MS Teams breakout rooms, specially created sub-channels, or the "class notebook" application, rather than rearranging the furniture in an offline classroom, applying some physical effort for this.

Besides, a variety of online learning tools, games, and quizzes can support remote studies and contribute a lot to the learning process and relevant feedback.

However, teachers might come across the following disadvantages of online learning. The most frequent one is technical issues, such as poor internet connection, disconnection, or electricity cut. These might lead to slowing down or delays in planned activities and the need to prepare a multiple scenario lesson plan, which inevitably increases the teacher's workload.

The delayed feedback is also a serious shortcoming, especially for activities conducted in breakout rooms or subchannels as a teacher is left in the dark, not being able to monitor these activities on the spot. Only later can the teacher go over the received data and provide feedback.

Also, students can be easily distracted from the lesson in an unsuitable learning environment, for example, when joining the virtual session in a cafe, or a car. So, the teacher struggles for gaining most students' attention and chooses engaging communication activities.

Considering both advantages and disadvantages of online studying, we could point out the aspects of designing class activities liable to transformations for the online learning environment. Among those are facilitating individual, pair, and group work, maintaining student engagement without a sense of "real presence" and providing timely feedback. The following part of the article will elaborate on how each of these targets can be achieved.

## 2.2 Implementing various classroom arrangements

Arranging the classroom layout suitable for the planned language activities, for example by repositioning desks and chairs for different communication scenarios or setting up the necessary equipment, is traditionally the starting point of the lesson design. In the same way, a teacher should prepare the space for the virtual learning environment. Depending on the types of classroom interactions, this might require creating breakout rooms and subchannels for group or pair work, using MS Teams chat feeds and the whiteboard to foster and visualize whole-class discussions, setting up a Class Notebook for independent learning, and administering Assignments for individual assessment.

Individuality and personalization of learning come to the front when shifting to online education and they apply to practice all language skills.

The logistics of setting up and monitoring students' writing practice is becoming way more convenient thanks to the instruments that digital platforms like Microsoft Teams can offer. A case in point is the Class Notebook, which expands the use of long-established students' copybooks to a private learning zone. The OneNote Class Notebook is an application incorporated into the Class Team which allows students to keep their notes in an organized and meaningful way. Students can manage their notes by adding sections for different topics and corresponding pages inside them. The user-friendly interface helps students to learn how to organize their notes effectively and use them later for revision purposes. What is important, all notes are visible to the teacher at any time, not only after the completion but even while in progress. Just like in the regular notebook, students can do writing drills like unscrambling words and sentences, gap-filling, sentence completion, etc. Everything is saved automatically, and the teacher will have constant access to this work to monitor the activity and provide feedback. What makes this virtual notebook outclass its prototype is a range of additional features transforming it into a multi-media resource. Students can insert web links, audio comments, images, videos, symbols and signs, stickers, etc. into their notes to make them powerful, not saying that this brings some fun and gives a fresh look at an accepted practice of not-taking. As an alternative, the teacher can add handouts for individual work to the Class Notebook and customize them using the same features. From this we conclude that ways of organizing activities for developing writing skills tend to be much more sophisticated in the online format, creating favorable conditions for peer-editing and self-correction.

The trend for individual work also accompanies reading activities. Reading out loud for practicing reading fluency is a great example of an exercise that can barely be conducted in the traditional classroom but can be easily implemented in the online setting. In an offline class, students can read the text aloud only one at a time, but not simultaneously. So, in a large class, only a few students will get a chance to be 'active readers' and most of the participants will remain 'silent readers'. Using instruments of online learning, though, each student can record an audio/video of him or her reading the text and send it for the teacher's review. The advantage of this method is that each student can practice articulating sounds, adopting the right speed and intonation as they read.

Self-recording comes in handy for some speaking practices, too. In terms of planning the time and space for oral examinations, for example, it appears relatively easy to assign a speaking task for students for a specified time, in a separate “room” with an option of selfrecording. This way, all students perform their speaking tasks simultaneously, not interfering with each other, and the rest of the examination time can be used by the teacher for

testing other skills through a written component (Thornbury, 2005). As for the listening, activity outcomes largely depend on the technical properties of the equipment students use for online studying. In response to this problem, flipped classroom strategy can be incorporated to enhance students' listening comprehension. The listening stage is fulfilled by the students as a part of their self-study assignment before the class, while pre- and post-listening stages can be conducted in an online classroom. Pre-listening exercises that are done in the online lesson may include a brainstorming session for introducing a broader topic and eliciting the students' associations, explanations, or examples related to it; getting familiarized with the title of an audio or a video recording, and predicting the content; previewing vocabulary through activities such as matching the words with their definitions, finding the words with similar and/or opposite meaning, close exercises, etc. All these will prepare the students for individual listening work. By removing the while-listening stage from the online lesson we can allow more space for post-listening activities requiring a more creative approach from the students, such as roleplays, round-tables discussions, debates, expert interviews, etc.

In the live-streamed lesson, the whole-class instruction is transformed as well. Working with the whole class in the conventional settings the teacher elicits verbal responses from the students, some of whom might be unwilling to talk in front of the whole class or feel shy to express themselves. In an online class, the shy students can be invited to share their comments in the Team Chat. This way students' personal preferences are considered, and the teacher can make sure that everybody has a chance to participate. This serves right especially for lowerlevel students, as they take time to think about their idea composing their message.

It has also become more convenient to work together as a whole class on the written text by using Collaboration Space in the OneNote Class Notebook, where all students can edit the same page, collaborating on different mini-projects – completing tables, mind-mapping, categorizing ideas, etc. If the teachers are not familiar with the MS Teams platform, the same effect can be reached by using shared files through Google Drive, or MS One Drive.

In the same way, students can collaborate on the reading piece of a descriptive or instructional character, trying to visualize the structure of the text in a concept map, a flowchart, etc. According to Svinicki and Mckeachie (2014), “the visualization “becomes the scaffold on which reader builds an interpretation of the text by adding details, concepts, and insights” (p.32). The activity for such a task online can be arranged with the help of a Whiteboard. Additionally, students may be placed in breakout rooms or sub-channels to work in small groups. At the end of this assignment, students can take screenshots of their diagrams and then demonstrate them to the whole class to compare and check. In case students had different texts for visualizing, they can be asked to challenge their peers to reproduce the content of the text based on the visuals.

While accepting the increased role of individual written work in the online classroom, it is crucial not to overlook the importance of student talking time in class, which is usually supported by communication activities in pairs or small groups. Transferring to the online mode many ESL teachers had to face the challenges of adapting classic communication activities to the new format. We would like to demonstrate how we have coped with that.

First, to arrange the space for pair or group activities subchannels can be created in the general channel of the Team. These allow for organizing meetings, exchanging messages in the chat feeds, sharing files, or keeping notes in the virtual Notebook. The alternative is opening breakout rooms by enabling the corresponding option in the meeting toolbar. This can be done automatically or manually. The advantage of using breakout rooms over the subchannels is that the teacher can close the rooms at any time and the students will be returned to the general

channel meeting automatically, but when students work in sub-channels, they are responsible for the time management themselves.

Although some games, especially those involving manipulating objects, cannot be adapted to the online classroom, board games, dominoes, playing cards, tic-tac-toe, etc. can be introduced to the online class with some adaptations. For example, for a Tic-Tac-Toe the teacher prepares a 3x3 or a larger grid in which each square has a specific content (a target word, a question, a task, etc.). Typically, this game is played with two teams. They start by choosing a symbol that they will use in the game X or O and then take turns picking a specific space on the grid and marking it with their symbol after completing the required task (e.g., forming a sentence with a specific word or answering a question). The goal of the game is to mark a complete horizontal or vertical row on a grid faster than the other team. This activity can be set up in the virtual environment using the Virtual Whiteboard (Nunes, 2021), shared files from Google Drive or OneDrive, or Collaboration Space in the One Note Class Notebook. To do this, the teacher makes the grid ready and uploads it to one of the above platforms. The idea is that all students in the class will be able to edit the original file and leave their marks.

The same tools can be used to set up a board game. The teacher needs to prepare the board as a shareable resource. Also, the teacher should give students a link to the virtual dice. It would be more efficient if one student in a group is assigned to roll the dice. This student can be asked to demonstrate his or her screen during the activity so that each player can be sure that no cheating is taking place. There are several ways students can make virtual moves. One idea is to use drawing tools so that each student chooses a different color to mark their moves. Each time they need to move, they mark their new square on the board and erase the previous mark. With the Collaboration Space in the One Note App, teachers can create as many pages as the number of teams they need. When planning this activity, the teacher should allow additional time for instruction on the game and a brief demonstration.

Information gap communication activities, jig-saw reading, or listening activities can also be arranged in the breakout rooms or sub-channels. Usually, each student in the class receives a Student A or a Student B card, then two students with different cards make a pair to fulfill the task: restore the events in the story, complete the picture, ask and answer the questions, etc. The key principle of these activities is that students can have a real communication experience only if they do not see the information on the other students' cards. For this reason, the teacher should make sure to distribute the role cards to the students individually before the main activity. This can be done by several means: providing access to OneDrive or Google Drive files only to certain students; distributing role cards to specific students through MS Teams Assignments or adding individual handouts to the students' MS Teams Class Notebook. The practice shows that it is very convenient to use MS Teams Assignments for this purpose, as the teacher can assign specific cards to different students in advance and set the time when the cards are delivered to the students so they do not see their cards earlier than they should.

### **2.3 Maintaining student engagement**

Engaging activities can maximize the effectiveness of the language learning process. Creative and interesting ESL assignments and activities are always considered to be one of the most powerful ways to make students collaborate productively and be fully involved in the ESL activity. When offline, the teacher can easily identify the signs of students' noninvolvement or nonparticipation and respond to them timely. Usually, it is reached by the so-called effect of "a teacher always there", when the teacher moves around the classroom monitoring the

activities and prevents or stops students' from speaking their native language or chatting about irrelevant topics. Meanwhile, the teacher notices the areas where students are having difficulties, for example, producing the target language incorrectly, or having problems in agreeing, and helps to resolve them. In all these cases, the communication activity is saved only by the teacher's presence, which is hard to feel when students are doing an activity online in breakout rooms. To make students feel that they are not left alone in their studies and that the teacher is constantly monitoring the activity and paying attention to their needs the teacher can accommodate certain classroom routines.

First, to facilitate greater student engagement, the teacher should design communication activities that lead to a viable outcome, such as making a list of pros and cons of something, designing a mind map of a concept, proposing solutions to a problem, etc. Secondly, the teacher should always ask students to report the results of their discussion to the whole class after they have completed their group work, having informed them in advance that the reporter from each group will be randomly selected by the teacher. While students are collaborating in the breakout rooms, the teacher can send announcements to remind students that he/she expects certain outcomes from the group activity. These can be reminders of the remaining time or aspects of the task that are in danger of being overlooked.

Also, to check students' answers to some exercises as a whole class, or share the group projects they can be invited to send messages in the Teams chat all simultaneously. In the same lesson, students can be asked to read through all the chat posts and leave their comments or reactions.

If students are familiar with the established routine and are aware that their input and participation are important, they are more likely to focus and engage in the activity.

## **2.4 Rendering feedback in the online environment**

Timely feedback is an important aspect of both online and offline lessons. In a traditional classroom, the main source of feedback is the teacher who carefully observes students' interactions and immediately identifies areas for correction. Immediate feedback, as most educators agree, is directly related to positive learning outcomes. As Allman (2019) emphasizes, "effective feedback must be given while the learning is still happening so that the students do not develop misconceptions and will remain invested in the subject matter" (para. 4).

However, in synchronous online instruction, the teacher cannot monitor students' activities to a full extent when they are working on their own, in pairs, or in groups in the breakout rooms.

The teacher's often feedback comes out after students submit the recordings of their classroom interactions in the breakout rooms, or written assignments, like a reflection, a summary, etc. Notably, this type of feedback requires extra time and effort for the teacher to view and analyze the recordings but in this way the teacher provides a more detailed analysis and response, though it is delayed. On the other hand, there is a way for the students to get immediate feedback in the form of an online quiz via Teams forms with teacher's comments integrated into the test template in advance. These comments can range from an overall "Well done!", "Need more effort" to more specified explanations of the language used at the teacher's discretion.

Remarkably, teacher feedback can be complemented or even replaced by students' peer feedback. This can contribute to better learning outcomes provided that the teacher instructs the students on the procedure and develops checklists with the assessment criteria before the

peer-assessment task. When compiling a checklist, it is recommended to focus on one or only a few aspects in a peer feedback session, e.g., only task completion, grammar use, or vocabulary choice at a time. The teacher makes sure everyone understands the questions and knows what is required in the peer feedback activity that follows. Peer feedback sessions may directly come after pair communication activities as a follow-up stage, or be scheduled for another class, and even completed as part of students' homework. In the latter case, students are encouraged to view the recording of their peer's performance as many times as necessary until they are clear with all the aspects in the evaluation form. In an online mode, the MS Teams' private chats or the general channel chat can be used to encourage giving and receiving relevant timely peer feedback. Moreover, the research shows that peer feedback helps students reflect on their performance (Saito, 2013). Thus, not only peer feedback provides timely corrections and support for students, but it also teaches them to listen more effectively and pay attention to the target language use.

The unquestionable advantage of online feedback is that it is fixed in the video recordings, written responses, and feedback forms and can be revisited and revised by all the participants of the assessment process as often as needed for the sake of further improvement of their skills that can guarantee an effective course implementation.

### 3. Conclusion

Switching to synchronous online language learning revealed the necessity to make certain transformations in standard classroom procedures to adapt conventional methods and techniques of English language teaching to the new environment.

The search for new techniques and methods, and the adaptation of traditional activities to the online format brought about amazing discoveries of the best international practices of remote teaching and learning. This enriched our experience with multimedia tools to diversify teaching approaches. Several online instruments proved to be highly efficient in language skills development. They include the chat functionality of Teams for discussion boards, multimedia handouts, online assignments and quizzes, a self-recording option, and digital platforms for storing and sharing resources. In our view, online best practices can be also applicable to the offline classroom mixed with traditional methods, when gadgets (smartphones, tablets, and laptops) are used for educational purposes.

### References

- Allman, B. (2019). Effective and appropriate feedback for English learners. Principles of Language Acquisition. EdTech Books. Available: [https://edtechbooks.org/language\\_acquisition/effective\\_ell\\_appropriate\\_feedback](https://edtechbooks.org/language_acquisition/effective_ell_appropriate_feedback)
- Nunes, K.L. (August 6, 2021). 12 Low-prep ESL games for teaching online. Bridge Universe. Available: <https://bridge.edu/tefl/blog/esl-games-teaching-online/>
- Saito, Y. (2013). The value of peer feedback in English discussion classes. In N. Sonda & A. Krause (Eds.), *JALT2012 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT
- Svinicki, M.D. and Mckeachie, W.J. (2014). *McKeachie's Teaching Tips. Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*. 14th ed. USA: Wadsworth.
- Thornbury, S. (2005). *How to Teach Speaking*. Harlow, U.K.: Pearson Education Limited.

---

# 3rd World Conference on Education and Teaching

06 – 08 May 2022

Budapest, Hungary

