

# TEACHING LANGUAGE SKILLS ONLINE

## DEVELOPING READING, WRITING, LISTENING, SPEAKING SKILLS AND INTERACTION AT A DISTANCE



Below are some strategies to address the needs and particularities of the productive and receptive language skills when teaching online. We look at how to teach reading, writing, listening and speaking both synchronously and asynchronously.

### LISTENING

Listening skills can be practiced in both synchronous and asynchronous teaching.

#### Synchronous teaching

In a meeting room (zoom, adobe connect etc.) and in small groups (breakout rooms). Depending on the platform, you can share videos by screenshare or audios with enabled source sound. You might also ask your students to listen to an online resource before the class and work on the comprehension activity during the lesson.

When teaching synchronously online, it is especially important to keep students engaged and involved. Use the variety of features available (e.g. breakout rooms, shared screens, chats) and give your students the opportunity to get involved with the content and with each other in different roles and at different levels, for example, by varying between small group discussions and plenary discussions, or by holding student-led discussions in chats or breakout rooms.

Most meeting software will allow you to record meetings. If appropriate and if your students agree, recordings of interactive tutorials can be helpful for reinforcing listening skills and good preparation for further spoken interaction.

#### Asynchronous teaching

Outside sources: media, news websites where students can listen to audio files and/or watch videos and work on related activities with the help of exercise sheets or quizzes.

Think about how you can scaffold these resources for your students and how you want them to respond/share the information they got through listening and watching. It is important that teaching online is not just sending students to lots of different material, but to ensure a coherent, level-appropriate learning experience.



Speaking and interaction can also be practiced synchronously and asynchronously.

### Synchronous teaching

Synchronous teaching in a meeting room (zoom, adobe connect etc.) and in small groups (breakout rooms): role-plays, dialogues, information gap, simulations (any form of meaningful communicative interaction). The online context lends itself to shorter, but more frequent sessions, in this way students could get speaking practice more often than in a classroom-based environment.

You can also encourage your students to access communication exchange sites according to level and interests.

### Asynchronous teaching

1. **Voice recorder** activities (if available to you): students listen to an audio and record a response. Then they play their response back and compare it to a pre-recorded model.

2. Recording can be done with a **phone**. For example, you can use your mobile phone (which usually has built-in Voice memo and recording features that can provide good enough sound quality). The important things to remember when recording audio using a phone are:

- keeping the phone close to the person speaking,
- recording in an environment which is not resonant and has a minimum of reflective surfaces. A normal domestic environment, with lots of soft furnishings, should be fine,
- and: keeping an eye on the size of the recording: it can be difficult to upload and handle files with a large size.

3. Recording a **dialogue**. If both speakers are together and recording on a mobile phone, it would be better to record each sound clip twice (once with the phone close to one person and the other being “off-mike”, and then with the positions reversed – but you might want to disinfect the phone in between the recording to minimize the risk of transmitting Covid-19!). The two versions can be combined in editing which is possible on most phones). If the two people are recording separately, we recommend that each person speaks **\*both\*** parts (the “other” part serving to provide a reference and to help with timing), and then editing the two versions together. To check the recording environment, it’s important to listen back to a test recording on headphones (or earpieces) and listen out for echo.

4. Leaving **voice messages** in a chat group, such as WhatsApp or on a voice board like Wimba in moodle. Students can reply to each other’s voice messages. If using this facility, it is important to obtain the **consent** of all the participants that they are being added to the group.

## WRITING AND WRITTEN INTERACTION



Writing is typically taught asynchronously, although synchronous teaching in a classroom is also possible, but with shorter exercises, more frequent feedback, and more detailed instructions. A forum or a wiki is a very good medium to practise writing and interact with other students. It is a good way to build a learning community and enhance peer support. A forum is an ideal medium for meaning-focussed written communication. It gives the students time to reflect on their responses, depending on your objectives, you can encourage them not focus on accuracy, but on communication. You can help through

- providing useful expressions in advance;
- moving the discussion forward (but not necessarily always interfering straight away);
- summarizing good ideas and useful language.

These tasks will allow you to summarise some common errors and tailor teaching to difficulties that have emerged in the discussions.

## READING



As with writing, reading is generally taught asynchronously, although synchronous teaching in the classroom is also possible, but with shorter exercises, more frequent feedback, and more detailed instructions. The advantages of teaching reading online can be

- that students can be given more choice of what to read;
- they can easily switch between reading in their first language and reading in the target language;
- it is easier to find graded texts.

## IDEAS FOR ACTIVITIES FOR LISTENING, WRITING AND READING

Most of the activities below relate to asynchronous teaching. Most of these activities can be provided in a simple word or pdf file or in Google sheets, for instance, which can be posted on your forum or VLE. Depending on the technical support available and your Virtual Learning Environment, a wider variety of interactive activities might be available to you such as gap-filling, pair matching, etc.

## Listening, writing and reading: typical activity types

- Free response questions where students type their responses. Give advice on how to type special characters.
- Single-choice activities, where students choose a single option from a range of options.
- Multiple-choice activities, where students choose multiple options from a range of options.
- True or false activities.
- Drag-and-drop questions where students drag the correct answer to the right place.
- Unjumble activities; write comments in forums or chats.

**Question 9 Tries remaining: 1**  
Marked out of 1.00 | Flag question

Richtig oder falsch?



After 4 p.m. you can have your evening meal here.

Select one:

True

False

Figure 1 - Open University Beginners' German reading activity with single-choice answer

## FIGURE REFERENCE

The Open University (2012). 'Online quiz. L193: Rundblick: beginners' German (restricted online access).

Photo courtesy of Elke St.John