

The New Normal: Using Online Teaching Experiences as a Catalyst for Change

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Like many educators out there, I, too, found myself in a raft out to sea with nothing but a spoon for a paddle in April 2020. My duties as an instructor at a university included planning after school English lessons for the adjacent elementary school, Grades 3 to 6. These hour-long, face-to-face lessons were supplementary to the curriculum covered at the school and geared towards giving students more opportunities to speak and interact in English as opposed to the traditional focus on reading and writing. Despite the absence of usual curricular pressure, these face-to-face lessons were no walk in the park. The main challenges across all grade levels included a lack of motivation and difficulty focusing among students, which I quickly learned were brought on by the timing of the lessons. Students were attending these lessons after a full day of classes, and no amount of games and fun activities—in English, at that—were going to distract them from how restless they were feeling.

Fast forward to the unexpected turn 2020 took and suddenly having to move everything online. My colleagues and I found ourselves having to make the switch to online classes in a matter of days with little assistance. However, we had to face some uncomfortable truths before beginning. First, our students, no matter how comfortable they were at home, were not going to be able to sit in front of a screen and participate in a lesson for an hour. Additionally, creating opportunities for a class of 20 students to have a chance to actively participate on Zoom would be challenging. It required us to make some substantial changes to our lesson delivery and teaching practice.

Objectives

- To facilitate the integration of technology and promote sustainability with a conceptual framework.
- To use the online medium to enhance and/or transform processes of teaching and learning.

Practical Implications

Puentedura's (2012) SAMR model is one example of a framework for the sustainable integration of technology in education. The four areas of the model—substitution, augmentation, modification, and redefinition—provide a taxonomy with which to evaluate how technology enhances or transforms tasks. Using a framework such as SAMR to identify how teaching practice can be enhanced or transformed ensures that technology is utilized with a specific purpose in mind rather than for the sake of fulfilling an integration requirement. As a result of referring to the SAMR framework, I was able to focus on how the use of technology could improve both teaching and learning and what that meant for future practice.

The lesson outline below focuses on student output via a guided online lesson. The following plan was created as a 25-minute online lesson, with a maximum of 5 students per session. The applications used were Zoom, PowerPoint, and Flippity.net.

Warm-up

Greet students and ask them each a question. This segment often turns into students doing an informal show-and-tell of an interesting item of theirs, or a pet.

Vocabulary

Run through the vocabulary using PowerPoint, asking students to raise their hand (real or virtual) in order to identify the word before revealing it and practicing pronunciation. Limit this section to about eight to ten words, as students can lose interest if too repetitive. Run through once more at a faster pace, calling on students in a specific order to ensure that everyone has a chance to speak.

Activity

Flippity.net is a great resource for activities. Playing a round of memory, for example, allows students to review vocabulary once more in an interactive manner. Moreover, since the teacher has

control of the cards and students themselves are not able to select them, they must communicate with the teacher to flip the card over. There is an option to display a number on the back of each card, so this becomes a great exercise for reviewing numbers, too. More importantly, it creates an opportunity for the situational use of English with a clear objective in mind (i.e. asking to flip over specific cards), going beyond the set vocabulary and target language.

Target Language

Use the vocabulary from the previous sections to introduce a question or phrase appropriate for students' grade level and/or ability. Be as creative as you like. For example, I sometimes use the reaction buttons on Zoom as designated "yes" and "no" buttons for students to answer a question using the vocabulary.

Roleplay

Create a visual guide/script in PowerPoint for a short fill-in-the-blank role-play using the target language. Assign one student the role of A and another the role of B. For example: if the target language involves the phrase "I want to...", student A would use the phrase in combination with a verb learned during the vocabulary section. Then, student B reacts ("Really?", "Me too!"). Repeat until all students have had a chance to speak.

Reflective Conclusion

Although not all educators can speak positively about their experiences teaching online, there is an increasing amount of literature exploring the effectiveness of the online format compared to face-to-face lessons (Moskowitz, 2016). As educators with differing knowledge and experiences, we might begin by reflecting on what aspects of learning could benefit from an online format. Moreover, how can the practices we form in response to online teaching be incorporated into our teaching repertoire? By starting anew online, my colleagues and I were afforded an unparalleled opportunity to address and improve on the issues we were already facing and establish a new pattern of practice.

Through my experiences, I was able to see that the reconfigured online format is not a band-aid solution to language education during a public health crisis. It took reflecting on my previous knowledge, experiences, and creativity to deliver content that

improves on face-to-face lessons. Although the online format is by no means a one-size-fits-all solution, the feedback from parents has been overwhelmingly positive, with most appreciating the smaller, more tight-knit class sizes that allow their children to focus on output. In fact, the school has decided to keep the lessons online for the foreseeable future, which has, in turn, validated our efforts of rebranding the program. While the shift initially had my colleagues and I lost at sea, the sustainable changes have completely transformed our way of delivering lessons, allowing us to navigate uncharted territory with confidence alongside our students.

References

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- Puentedura, R. R. (2012). SAMR: Thoughts for design. *Ruben R. Puentedura's Weblog*. http://www.hippasus.com/rrpweblog/archives/2012/09/03/SAMR_ThoughtsForDesign.pdf

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Link to presentation on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFj3Rj1w8Ls>

