

SCILT Lessons from Lockdown – A review of online teaching and learning

Introduction and Background

During the first period of lockdown last year, from early May until the end of June, SCILT delivered a series of online live language classes which were open to learners across Scotland. This review will examine and evaluate this online teaching and learning exercise, and share the key lessons learned from it.

These online lessons were designed to support teachers, parents and pupils and to offer a range of high-quality live online language learning experiences during this difficult time. The classes were delivered in collaboration with eSgoil using the relatively new online platform of Vscene. Although lessons were delivered live, they were also recorded and links to the recordings were posted in Microsoft Teams. This allowed pupils who attended to revisit the lesson, or gave an opportunity to view the lesson for any who could not attend or had technical difficulties.

For the teachers involved (a mixture of SCILT staff and associates), this was the first experience of online teaching and was a steep learning curve! Lessons were developed before online teaching began and adapted as SCILT staff's experience of teaching in this way developed.

The following classes were offered:

Primary

Primary 1-4 French Storytelling sessions

Primary 1-4 Beginners' French classes

Primary 5-7 Discovering China course

BGE

Discovering China course

Give it a Go Italian course (also open to Senior Phase beginners)

Senior Phase

National 5 classes in each of the following languages: French, Gaelic, German, Italian, Mandarin, Spanish

Higher classes in each of the above languages

Advanced Higher classes in all of these languages too.

Over 2000 pupils from across Scotland registered for these classes.

Evaluation processes

SCILT undertook a robust self-evaluation process, both during and after this period of online teaching. This covered lessons delivered to the full range of age and stage from P1-S6. It took the form of lesson observations, pupil, parent and teacher evaluation forms, and a focus group of learners.

During the period of teaching

At this point SCILT requested the help of an external observer with extensive experience of school and lesson inspections in Modern Languages. A wide range of different classes was observed during the period of teaching. Although teachers were aware in advance that this process was in place, they did not know when the visits would take place. Some of the key observations of this evaluation were:

- Content was always relevant and challenging. There was a real effort to bring in interesting aspects of the language and culture. It should be recognised that it is very much possible to do this in online teaching, and that this area need not, and should not, be compromised when teaching remotely.
- A very good range of classes/levels/languages was delivered, demonstrating that this is also very much achievable online.
- Very good relationships between learners and teachers/tutors were observed and can clearly still be established in an online setting. The chat box was used extensively and it is evident that a strong class dynamic can be established through effective use of this.
- Live lessons maintained interest in languages and helped learners to maintain confidence.
- Having two teachers in each online class is extremely helpful. This allows one teacher to monitor and respond to the chat box while the other presents. It allows for interaction between teachers, including the opportunity for role play and exemplification of speaking. Where one teacher acted as the learner in a new language, it gave scope for learners to feel more confident and to see that learning means 'having a go'. It would be possible for teachers to 'team teach' virtually in this way.
- Technical issues arose and, although frustrating for both teachers and learners, could be managed effectively. The restrictions caused by technology necessarily have an impact on the way lessons are conducted but should not compromise the quality of learning and teaching; creative pedagogy and opportunities for interaction can and should still be used. The challenge is to find ways of working around these as effectively as possible so that they do not dictate all that teachers do in terms of pedagogy.

Key recommendations which came from this observation process were:

- Consider ways to include more interaction and more direct teaching as appropriate – with contributions from learners, as would happen in class.
- Chunk lessons to allow for more interaction throughout the lessons as well as at the end.
- Use all four skills and practise these. The integration of Talking requires more careful thought than other skills in an online environment.
- Maintain interaction and learner involvement through the chat box and direct communication where possible.
- Maintain key basics of language teaching such as repetition, practice and recycling of vocabulary.
- Use of the target language for communication whenever possible, with support as required. This is a key aspect of pedagogy in Modern Languages.

After the period of teaching

When each set of classes ended, pupils and/or parents were asked to complete evaluation forms. SCILT also conducted a pupil focus group to discuss their views on the online learning experience. Teachers were asked to evaluate their online teaching experience, and some parents also conveyed their views via email.

The results of these evaluations have been analysed by a lecturer in the University of Strathclyde School of Education who specialises in Languages Education and has considerable expertise in data analysis. They found that user opinions closely mirrored the findings from the lesson observations, and their summary of these is as follows:

Overall strengths

- Quality of the experience in respect of:
 - Teachers' interactions
 - Materials
- Use of the chat box for interactions between the teacher and the participants
- Links between language and culture
- Synchronous learning experience and interaction with the teacher(s)
- Creation of a positive attitude towards language learning
- Additional learning materials (including recordings)
- Opportunities for 'meeting' and 'interacting' live with other learners
- Support for continuing the learning experience and returning to school (Exam level classes)
- Teachers found the experience to be a rewarding one, and found that a strong class dynamic was achievable online, even despite teaching pupils that they did not previously know.

Points to consider

- The online platform for accessing the classes and technical issues (related to the platform) was the main concern identified by respondents
 - Access and issues with the online platform were the single issue identified by respondents – this included access to the chat box on certain platforms.
 - The use of the chat box was considered highly positively to encourage interaction – this might need an adult to coordinate and respond to the answers in addition to a teacher delivering the session to be effective.
- Pupils requested a continued balance of language and culture in the sessions. It is vital to integrate language and culture in online lessons in the same way as would be done in face-to-face teaching.
- There was a strongly-expressed desire for live, online classes to continue, and to be expanded.
- Learners also asked for further opportunities for interaction and participation. In exam-level classes, demand was expressed for opportunities to practise speaking online.
- Additional asynchronous materials should be available and easily accessible. It is important to clearly signpost, even to demonstrate during live classes, where and how to access these as this can be an area of perceived difficulty for pupils.
- Teachers found the technology challenging at times. Pupils were, however, generally very patient when issues arose.

The respondents to this survey were highly complementary about the provision in general but especially the enthusiasm of the teachers and the quality of the input. Respondents liked the option to interact via the chat box and the synchronous input that was provided.

Where 'negative' comments or 'suggestions' were made, these were almost exclusively related to the online platform and accessibility issues rather than the course itself.

Summary

Teaching online during the first lockdown was a challenging, but rewarding, experience for those who were involved. SCILT is very grateful to those who observed or participated in these lessons and gave their feedback. We extend our grateful thanks in particular to Fiona A Pate HMI and educational consultant formerly of Education Scotland, and Dr Ingeborg Birnie, Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Strathclyde, for their invaluable work in observing and evaluating lessons, data and feedback.

What has changed in SCILT's practice as a result of this evaluation process?

SCILT has continued to teach online since last May, and has sought to incorporate the feedback and recommendations from the first lockdown experience into our practice in many ways, including the following:

- Use of the chat box throughout lessons, for example :
 - Emojis to check comprehension/ how pupils feel about a task or skill
 - Using multiple choice questions for quick answers – pupils put letter/number in chat box
 - Allowing pupils to indicate that they are ready/willing to speak
 - Encouraging pupil interaction
- Chunking:
 - Using a larger number of smaller activities in order to maintain pace online
 - Covering all four skills: not necessarily in every lesson, but incorporating multiple different skills each time for variety and practice
- Using the target language as often as possible.

One of the main messages, however, which became evident from the evaluation processes, is that learners most value a solid learning and teaching experience, and a positive relationship with their teacher. This is clearly more important to them than technical wizardry, and allows them to easily forgive any technological glitches. This may perhaps reassure teachers who are unsure where to begin with online teaching. A robust pedagogical approach and a positive teacher-pupil relationship is still the key to successful teaching and learning.

What about you? We would love to hear about your experiences of online teaching and any suggestions that you have, either for Professional Learning or support which we could provide, or of advice that you would wish to pass on to fellow practitioners. Get in touch at scilt@strath.ac.uk!