

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

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 learning and teaching exercise, and share the key lessons learned.

These online classes 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 e-Sgoil 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 those who attended to revisit the lesson, and, in addition, gave an opportunity for any who could not attend or had technical difficulties to view the lesson at a later date.

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

The following classes were offered:

BGE Primary

Primary 1-4 French Storytelling sessions

Primary 1-4 Beginners' French classes

Primary 5-7 Discovering China course

BGE Secondary

Discovering China course

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

Discovering the Arabic World

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 each of the above languages

Over 2000 learners from across Scotland registered for these classes. Not all attended; there is no precise data on how many attended nor the reasons for non-attendance.

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 inspections and modern language learning. A wide range of classes of differing age, stage and language was observed. Although teachers were aware in advance that this process was in place, they did not know when the visits would occur. 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, although it is important to note that the latter is introduced most effectively through the language learning experience. It should be recognised that it is very much possible to introduce appropriate content in an online teaching setting, and that this 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.
- Lesson aims and there was good use of recap at the start of lessons. It is also important to review aims at the end of lessons.
- Presentation slides were interesting and stimulating. In preparing presentations, it is important to ensure that slides are designed to maximise clarity and readability.
- Very good relationships between learners and teachers/tutors were observed and can clearly be established in an online setting. The chat box was used extensively and it is evident that effective use of this contributes to a strong class dynamic. However, all learners have to be encouraged to use it, and to do so appropriately.
- Microsoft Teams was also used effectively to support learners, through recordings, resources and the opportunity to ask questions of teachers and fellow learners.
- Live online lessons can help maintain learners' interest and confidence in language learning.
- 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, were managed effectively. The restrictions caused by technology necessarily have an impact on

the way lessons are conducted but should not necessarily 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 restrictions 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. Consider developing use of microphones and cameras where possible.
- Chunk lessons to allow for more interaction throughout the lessons as well as at the end.
- Use all four skills and practise these. In an online environment, the integration of talking skills requires more careful thought than other skills.
- 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 and language.
- Use of the target language for communication whenever possible, with support as required. This is a key aspect of pedagogy in Modern Languages.
- Careful thought is required on how to meet the needs of all learners.

After the period of teaching

When each set of classes ended, learners and/or parents were asked to complete evaluation forms. SCILT also conducted a learner 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. Some teachers sought informal feedback from learners. This was helpful for on-going evaluation and improvement.

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. This analysis found that user opinions closely mirrored the findings from the lesson observations, and the 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 for returning to school (NQ 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 viewed very positively as a means of encouraging 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 learners.
- Teachers found the technology challenging at times. Children and young people 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, formerly of Education Scotland, and Educational Consultant, 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 current 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 forgive any technological glitches easily. This may perhaps reassure teachers who are unsure where to begin with online teaching. A robust pedagogical approach and a positive teacher-pupil relationship are still the keys to successful learning and teaching.

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