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## teaching & learning

(at a distance)

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# Teaching in times of crisis: personal story

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**O**n March 16 a vast majority of schools were closed due to the COVID-19 ; no-one could really foresee the end of this global nightmare. When were we coming back to school? Would teaching and learning be same again?

At that time I was teaching a German A2 course to emigrants, a four-month-project which was suspended as well. The impact this would have on newly literate learners, could be detrimental to their acquisition of the German language.

In my career as a language teacher I have undergone many ups and downs due to various reasons, but this unprecedented experience has proven to be utmost challenging both professionally as well as personally. In a professional manner, as I had to move out of my comfy zone looking for new schools specializing in remote teaching. My whole working routine changed as I did not have to travel 3 hours a day and could organize my work in my home office much better. Another plus was definitely being able to create a better online presence on Social Media, which also allowed me to connect with lots of awesome new colleagues. I use LI daily and enjoy the exchange with people from all over the globe.

Before the pandemic I had wanted to get back to online teaching for a while, but I couldn't due to the lack of time with day-to-day teaching. The lockdown has allowed me to step back into remote teaching; it was easy for me to jump back onto the bandwagon of distance learning. However, when adapting to a change like this there are challenges. In my case I was luckily to have found an awesome school who already before the crisis had transformed lots of their courses into remote classes and

they offered me my first classes. The next step on my agenda towards this new venture was to find the most reliable video-conferencing tool: I had discarded Zoom due to privacy issues and Webex which (currently in Germany) did not prove to be reliable. I could attend some teacher development webinars the school had organized for their staff and was really glad to learn so much new input. In the end after having the choice between several videoconferencing tools I opted for Skype, as personally it has proven to be the most reliable.

Since teaching remotely I have taken away some key top tips that I would like to share with you! Before you really get into the swing of teaching online you need to demystify some ill-beliefs:

**1** Teaching online is a challenge: It's an incredible effort, a real challenge for teachers and students; for teachers, you need to consider timing, planning and adapting content, and tweaking content to meet the individual needs of the student.

When considering timing, I found a remote lesson should not exceed 60 minutes, due to a reduced window of learning time, i.e. "attention span" of the student. You need to adapt your standard content to more "digestive pills". I have decided to teach Grammar sticking to a very slim approach and not overloading my students. I simply give them grammar exercises and grammar overviews to be done at home, which gives the student the chance to do exercises at their own path or in self-study mode. I use a KISS (Keep It Short and Simple) approach. No-one has to re-invent the wheel again. Once I figure out some activities, like readings work, I stick to them and "recycle" them in other classes.

**2** Technology my bug: Consider that probably you will reside in different countries, please remember that even due to this technology could go down the drain with a poor bandwidth, or especially in times of the day or if you teach on the weekend with lines being down because of overloaded lines. Ergo a reliable internet connection is a must. I recommend your having a plan B and suggest using other tools like Whatsapp chat if the videoconferencing tool keeps bugging. Personally, I also tested Microsoft Teams or Google Meet, but the most intuitive and my first choice remains Skype.

**3** After circa two weeks in lockdown I came across an online course called "How to teach online-provide continuity to students" run by @FutureLearn. One of the key issues I learnt from the course was that our well-being as a teacher is extremely vital (read here a very useful article by Jo Steer, published on Tes.com about how to protect our mental health in difficult times <https://www.tes.com/news/coronavirus-7-way-protect-your-mental-health>). We need to allow feeling upset and more stressed as the current global event. Make sure you treat yourself kind and find techniques not to feel overwhelmed. For me while at the beginning I would check news constantly after two months I only follow once a day the news, and am not synchronized to all news channels. A necessary exercise for me to not to feel overwhelmed. As for my students I always do a "mental check-in" at the beginning of each lesson to see how well they are coping, which goes a bit beyond the traditional "how are you" in a normal F2F classroom setting. Resilience is the key as I see it. When I recognize a student is having a hard time, I try and engage them in a fun activity or intercultural quiz, or come up with funny story to get them distracted at least for the time of the lesson.

Finally, I have read lots of different views and position on online teaching and heard a lot of people who can't wait to get back into their traditional classrooms, I am probably an alien, as I have found this niche made 100% for me. I'm comfortable with organizing my time. It's such a relief not to get stuck in traffic and be able to react much faster to potential requests. The travel factor has always been a big hassle on my working day. Well, I have to admit that the virtual world has their pitfalls as well. Here are my two cents worth to enjoy teaching online:

## Technology

Ensure you have a backup plan if the internet is not connecting. Consider offline options that will support your teaching and the learning of your students.

## Time management

Allow enough time to get ready for each lesson and not have to do many lessons in a row. Have a daily routine just as a lunch break, coffee, walk, workout during the day which gives you again enough energy to get started for your next day.

## KISS

Keep the lesson content short and simple as saying above there's no need to reinvent the wheel. Tailor your lesson to the student's needs, I mainly use the tons of terrific copyright free resources available, but started also creating some activities myself.

## Workload

Do not overwhelm your students, give space to oral communication activities which boost the student's speaking skills and give them asynchronous (offline) exercises to be done at their own pace and corrected again in class. Propose regular "check-up" sessions, i.e. two weeks to study survival expressions in the target language (I use loads of these to motivate my students in honing and increasing their vocab).

## Feedback & review

Give your students feedback on their performance. In traditional classes this may apparently sound easier when you are face to face, but you can always do that. Use smileys in the chat or simply verbalize it. Hearing you say "Good job", "Well done", at the end of each exercise, will help to keep motivation high. I also invented a so-called "self-reflection" sheet I also share with the student at the end of each class, it's editable and they can simply note down the content (vocab etc.) they remember to be done best one day after the last lesson in order to review the content "by heart".

**#StaySafe**

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