Cambridge Assessment English

Teaching online vs teaching face-to-face

By Cecilia Nobre

Teaching online and teaching face-to-face require different skills, but there is some overlap. The stereotype that online teaching is less rigorous, or that students cannot be engaged in it with appropriate rigour is not true from my experience. In both teaching contexts, it is vital to cater to students' individual skills and needs continuously. Let's look at six teaching skills and how they differ in online and face-to-face contexts.

Communication skills

Online teaching: In the online environment, teachers need to develop a wide range of communication skills to make up for the lack of natural face-to-face interaction. First, it is crucial to build an extra sense of patience and empathy. Teachers need to actively listen to students and understand hidden messages due to the difficulty in showing body language and facial expressions (though, it is possible). Being able to grow empathy and patience will also help teachers to build rapport with students. As well as that, ensure you use a good-quality microphone and webcam so that students can see you and hear you well.

Face-to-face teaching: The same skills can be transferred to face-to-face instruction, being potentially more accessible to implement. Imposing your voice and body language in a confident yet caring manner can be easier to demonstrate.

Time management skills

Online teaching: Personally speaking, online lessons feel more intense and fast-paced, therefore it can be easy to lose track of one's time. Planning your lessons should not take long either. Make sure you teach different skills in the same lesson to add dynamism. If you, like me, used to commute to your students' homes, you used to spend hours commuting and now these hours will be freed from your timetable. You can work more flexible hours if you want, and this mode of teaching is suitable for students who live in a different time zone. If, for example, you usually go to bed late, you can teach a lesson late at night. You can either teach more hours or use this extra time differently, perhaps taking up a sport or hobby.

Face-to-face teaching: Face-to-face lessons can take place in different contexts: your student's home, the teacher's home or in a school. If you travel to your student's home or a school, you have to manage the commuting time and planning time, leaving some spare time to relax or recharge. If your students go to your house, the logistics are similar to teaching online – you end up having more time to yourself. Generally speaking, face-to-face lessons limit the teacher's working hours due to the travelling time most teachers need to add to their routine.
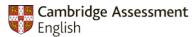
Organisational skills

Online teaching: Teachers might end up going paperless over time, so it's essential to organise your teaching files (flashcards, lesson plans, handouts, videos, exercises, etc.) in a digital folder – this will be your digital library. I recommend using Google Drive to save your files, which you can also share with your student. With regard to gathering materials, it's useful to gather your favourite links online, and I recommend bookmarking your favourite sites under tags on Diigo (www.diigo.com). It will make your life easier. Some coursebooks have digital versions, for example *English File* by Oxford University Press has digital tools. Taking photos of your materials and saving them in a folder on your phone can also be helpful. Alternatively, you can use an app to scan your materials. You can add tasks to your Google Calendar to help you manage your schedule.

Face-to-face teaching: Teachers usually carry paper books, flashcards, lesson plans, etc. – there's a lot of paper involved. Again, it's important to organise your materials properly; you can use binders or folders sorted by names of students or levels.

Computer skills

Online teaching: There are a few essential skills that teachers need to master to be able to teach online effectively: sharing materials online such as audios, videos and pdf files; teachers need to know how to use the webcam and its features; and once the virtual learning platform is chosen, teachers need to master it thoroughly to be able to help students in case they get stuck. Additionally, teachers need to know how to record videos, mainly their own lessons online. Also, it's important to know how to convert different file types and store them. Teachers may want to set up an online classroom system where learners can access assignments, materials, quizzes, etc., outside their normal class time. Edmodo or Google Classroom can do a great job in that. Finally, an online teacher cannot live without Google Drive.

Face-to-face teaching: Overall, teachers who work in a face-to-face environment adopt a coursebook to be used with their students. They also use presentations made in PowerPoint and some may use an interactive whiteboard.

Assessing students

Online teaching: Before choosing which platform to use, teachers need to evaluate a student's proficiency level, needs and learning preferences through a needs analysis. This can be done as a Google Form and an online interview, while others may choose to carry out an interview analysis only. It is important not to overlook the needs analysis because that will shape the type of lessons your student needs. When it comes to giving feedback, it can be very beneficial to use screencast videos to provide accurate and productive feedback.

Tools: Google Forms, https://screencast-o-matic.com and https://zoom.us

Face-to-face teaching: The needs analysis is usually shaped as a face-to-face interview and a questionnaire to be filled in. Alternatively, students are also expected to sit a placement test.

Social media

Online teaching: It is imperative to join groups of teachers online and to network because teachers tend to feel lonely when they start teaching online. Online communities of practice, such as Twitter and Facebook, can become a huge global staffroom where teachers can connect and interact with other like-minded teachers from their home country or worldwide.

Face-to-face teaching: Teachers who teach face-to-face also benefit from joining Facebook groups or Twitter to interact with other teachers.