4 tips to setting up an online classroom

With physical classes at schools and universities suspended until further notice, teaching online has become the new normal. The teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) industry, which has leveraged online learning as a primary tool for many years, could provide useful insights for teachers looking to set up or improve their online classrooms.

Image: Teacher Gabriella Tavani, @travel_withgabriella

"When you're setting up your online learning environment, its important to remember that you're not replicating a physical classroom. With a virtual classroom, you have many more added benefits, including being able to seamlessly integrate digital media and interactive lesson components," says Tom Gibbons, director at The TEFL Academy, a South African provider of teaching English as a foreign language course.

Existing school and university teachers are in a good position to become online TEFL teachers, says Gibbons; "For those who have taken a pay cut or who are working reduced hours due to lockdown, teaching English as a foreign language online is a viable way to supplement their income. They have the necessary teaching experience and, because they are working from home, their online classrooms are already set up – all they need is a TEFL qualification."

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6 May 2020

The TEFL Academy has put together their top tips on how to set up an online teaching classroom that is conducive to student success. "Teaching online requires an even keener focus on student engagement than the face-to-face model does," says Gibbons. "Ensuring your classroom is fully equipped with props, materials and interesting visuals is as important as the lessons themselves."

1. **The basics:** Good equipment is vital to your success as an online teacher. You will need a laptop or PC with a webcam, headset with microphone, and a stable internet connection. Your computer should be raised to your eye

level to account for the webcam. If you have power issues, invest in a back-up battery pack and UPS so as not to interrupt your lessons if the power goes out.

2. **A backdrop:** The setting for your online lesson – including the noise level, available light and what your students see behind you – is very important. Teaching in front of a window is not recommended because of the light and distractions it can present. We recommend having a wall behind you that you can decorate appropriately. For example, if you are teaching young learners, add some colourful bunting, a world map or interesting pictures related to the subject students will be learning about. These can also be useful conversation starters.

3. **Virtual learning material:** If you can, introduce images, video clips and memes into your lessons to make them more visually appealing and memorable. One of the main benefits of a digital classroom is the ease with which these learning materials can be integrated.

4. **Realia:** Realia are words and expressions for culture-specific material elements. This includes everyday objects that are referred to in the lesson and can be anything from food to stationery to clothing. Learning is all about connecting concepts with real world objects, places and people and realia help students make these connections more concrete.

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