



# Using Self-Directed Learning and E-Learning to Support Students in Reaching their Individual Learning Goals. Language Teaching in Times of Covid-19? Challenge accepted.

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## Abstract

*Heterogeneity in EFL classes and exceptional situations, such as the current Covid-19 pandemic, necessitate extraordinary flexibility in language-course design. Teachers are confronted with challenges they have not been adequately prepared for. To meet the standards of excellent teaching practice, especially in times that make face-to-face classes impossible, teachers are required to employ strategies that guarantee learning success and keep students motivated.*

*Self-Directed-Learning (SDL) in combination with E-Learning offers the students the freedom to choose their individual learning goals and -tools and provide the learners with autonomy in regards to time, place and pace of studying. The self-directed learning approach embraces and reaches the diversity as it provides students with the opportunity to take initiative and responsibility for their learning progress. They can select their own learning goals and activities and pursue them at any time, in any place and using any materials and tools they want, guided and supported by their teacher. The combination of self-responsibility and independence results in higher student motivation even in difficult learning situations.*

**Keywords:** *Self-Directed Learning, COVID-19, learner autonomy, E-learning, student motivation, online teaching*

## 1. Introduction

Language classes in tertiary education have become more and more heterogeneous in the last decades. Courses with learners at different language levels, from diverse cultures and ethnical or professional backgrounds, of different ages and native languages, are the daily routine of language teachers. However, if an obstacle, such as the abrupt transition from face-to-face classes to distance learning, appears, teachers may be easily overwhelmed, for although the teaching conditions change completely, the needs of the students do not, and the outcome according to the curricula should still be guaranteed.

## 2. Implications of COVID 19 for The University of Applied Sciences Burgenland

From Mid- March 2020, universities and other educational institutions in Austria were affected by a decision of the national government that was made due to the worldwide CoViD-19 pandemic. Based on this decision, which stipulated a transition to Distance Learning, the University of Applied Sciences Burgenland (UASB) provided all lectures online only from that day. In the beginning of April, it was decided to continue Distance Learning for the entire summer semester 2020 to avoid the risk of infection during on-site courses.

As considerate the decision by the university's management might have been, as challenging it was for students and teachers equally. At the very beginning of the semester, when all the courses had been planned and prepared and just had started, teachers were informed that no face-to-face lectures would be held and that they needed to give all lectures online with immediate effect.

Changing lesson plans on short notice is a necessity sometimes, and teachers should be flexible enough to adapt to changing situations fast; however, it became obvious very soon that the situation might be difficult to handle. Some teachers/lecturers had never or hardly ever used online tools before and were completely overwhelmed by this situation.

## 3. Major differences between face-to-face and synchronous online language classes

The challenge is that many aspects of face-to-face language classes are lost or become much more difficult in an online setting. The most obvious difference between face-to-face and synchronous online teaching is the physical distance in online sessions and the loss of sensing the mood or the energy in



a classroom that incurs with the absence of this said room. Sometimes, the physical distance is aggravated by a visual absence of some of the participants. This may be due to technical problems or because the environment does not allow the attendees to activate the cameras. It also might happen that students do not turn on the camera simply because they do not want to.

Closely connected to the visual dilemma are the problems that occur with the audio devices. Speakers or microphones might not work, and students are sometimes unable to listen to the lecture or participate appropriately.

Interactive communication is an integral part of any face-to-face language class, and students are encouraged to speak and participate in discussions, negotiations, etc. The technical problems mentioned above can impede any kind of oral participation in online classes though, and lively discussions on Zoom or Teams are practically impossible, as one needs to make a decision between annoying audio feedback and muting most of the microphones.

Other difficulties are the organization of group-work, pronunciation practice, learning games that are played in a physical classroom or giving different instructions to different students.

What is definitely underestimated is that is simply impossible to teach an online lesson following a face-to-face session lesson plan, and the course outline has to be restructured.

However, students who have been introduced to the Self Directed Learning (SDL) approach and have been working with it for some time are used to studying independently, and teachers who have incorporated this methodology in their courses will be versatile users of online tools, sources and technological devices and, thus, flexible in their course design.

#### **4. SDL, E-Learning, and online teaching**

SDL is a hands-on approach to learning and teaching that requires students to diagnose their learning needs, define their learning goals, find appropriate resources, choose learning methods, and document and evaluate their learning outcomes [2]. Thus, learners are empowered to become independent, mature and authentic students. For teachers, SDL is an approach where they need to support learners in developing these dispositions and where they become “facilitators of learning, resource providers, guides, evaluators, critical thinking promoters and supporters, in addition to their role of a language expert” [1].

The fact that students have the freedom to choose what aspect of English they would like to improve each semester, creates a feeling of being taken seriously as a learner. The requirement to provide the teacher with a thorough and clear documentation as well as a self- evaluation and reflection upon their learning process, makes them feel much more responsible for their own learning success. Students become used to making their own decisions regarding content, time, and place of learning, which gives them a huge advantage compared to students who have to reach collective goals determined by the teacher.

E-Learning seems to perfectly complement SDL as it deploys electronic technology to access learning tools, information and different communication channels that are needed to work on individual tasks to reach the learning goals.

Fortunately, the English classes of the International Business Relations (IBR) and International Wine Marketing (IWM) MA programs had implemented Self-Directed-Learning (SDL) and E-learning many years before the lockdown in spring 2020, which mitigated the difficult transition from face-to-face to online learning and teaching. The result was that students extremely enjoyed their English classes despite the exceptionally difficult circumstances, especially in comparison to the other subject courses. Students were already being used to doing approximately 50% of their course work online (synchronous or asynchronous) and, therefore, did not show any reluctance to increase this to 100%. They had been familiar with WebEx, the online platform the UASB provides for online teaching, Moodle, and numerous other online language-learning tools they had used before.

Teachers, similarly, adapted quite fast to the changed circumstances, and the UASB was rated as Austria’s best UAS regarding online-teaching with 87% satisfied students [5]. An internal study also showed that students were satisfied with the transition, however, they felt they had to invest more time and they missed the social interaction of face-to-face sessions [3].

#### **5. Tips for making online sessions fun, motivating, and successful**

To guarantee student satisfaction, some simple pieces of advice might help. First of all, synchronous and asynchronous online sessions need to be planned differently. Asynchronous online sessions might be used for activities such as desktop research, forum discussions, watching videos on the internet, voice recordings for pronunciation practice, vocabulary and grammar training with different



kinds of online resources, speaking sessions with peers on skype or reading online articles, to name just a few. These sessions can be used for any activity that does not necessarily require the presence or intervention of a teacher. Anyway, it is of extreme importance that students know exactly what the teacher expects them to do in these sessions. Instructions for asynchronous online sessions must be very clear and specific, should not be longer than one screen, always come in the same form, and they should include the purpose of the task as well as the goal [4].

In the synchronous online sessions, teachers should strive to create an atmosphere that resembles a face-to-face session as much as possible, and even though it might be tempting, the teacher's speaking time should not be more than in a face-to-face setting.

Unless there are any technical problems, it is recommended to turn on the cameras to evoke the feeling of being in a physical classroom. It is a good idea, however, to mute the students' microphones to avoid annoying and loud background noises, and only students who want to say something unmute their microphone for the time they are speaking.

Group work may be done in breakout sessions, which are a feature in most of the platforms used for online teaching. However, it is also possible to use WhatsApp groups to let students work in small teams. Tools like Quizlet and Kahoot can also be incorporated into online teaching sessions to do quizzes and vocabulary work; however, if a teacher shares their screen, time-delays may occur.

Apart from choosing adequate activities and appropriate contents, one should not forget to plan regular breaks, at least 10 minutes after 45 minutes, to keep students focused and concentrated. Another option is to assign students some work they can do individually, deactivate cameras as well as microphones, and meet after an agreed amount of time to discuss the set task.

Never forget to give feedback to all work that is done in synchronous or asynchronous online classes to avoid that students become demotivated and/or lost in the cloud.

## 6. Conclusion

(Language) teachers might have to get used to teaching online much more than they had to do before the CoViD-19 pandemic. No one can know when we will return to living our lives as they used to be, or if we will return at all. This means that educators will have to be prepared and find ways to teach adequately in online classrooms without any loss of efficiency and quality. After all, students will not change their needs and expectations, and they have to earn their ECTS credits.

It is the teachers' responsibility to change the structures and the time management of their courses, to accordingly adapt tasks and activities, and to ensure that the students will not be deprived of the benefit and progress, regardless whether they are being taught face-to-face or online.

Implementing SDL and E-Learning as much as possible, also in times when students can be on-site, is a very efficient way for students to get used to working independently, without the constant presence of a teacher. Students learn to rely more on themselves, reflect more on what they do, think critically, and it seems that self-directed students are in a continuous learning mode, strive for improvement, can cope with occasional failures better and are constantly improving and growing. These facts also seem to support their positive approach to the transition to online teaching.

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