

Covid-19 and education

Supporting remote English language teaching and learning

16 April 2020

#teachingfromhome

Introduction

International agencies (UNICEF, UNESCO, World Bank) have published guidance and support for governments and ministries of education in response to the education crisis created by the Covid-19 pandemic. The British Council supports the advice from international agencies focused on the whole education system. In the guidance here, we focus on how education systems can support continuing English language curriculum, teaching and learning during the crisis.

Due to the pandemic, over 110 countries have nationwide school closures and a smaller number have partial school closures. This means that over 1.5 billion children are now out of school (of which 258 million were out of school before the crisis). This is a huge challenge for education systems which in general are organised to provide traditional classroom-based teaching and learning. The response has been to look for ways of supporting remote and home-based learning.

International guidance emphasises the need to base decisions about how to increase remote and home-based learning on accurate assessments of needs and risks. These assessments should provide information about issues such as:

- access to hardware and connectivity at home
- the impact of home-based learning on children from different groups in society and
- the preparedness of schools and teachers to support remote and home-based learning.

We encourage ministries of education to also assess how additional language learning can be continued and supported, given that effective language teaching and learning ideally requires motivational communication activities in the target language, as well as less interactive learning materials related to the curriculum.

We also recommend that ministries of education incorporate a broad understanding of all the options that can support remote and home-based learning. The international guidance suggests a number of areas of focus:

- **Teacher engagement and expertise** – supporting their ability to teach in the new environment and sustaining their commitment
- **TV, radio and printed materials** – where internet connectivity is less available
- **Mobile messenger services** – useful for sharing general school information and updates as well as resources and teaching ideas
- **Online teaching and learning** – using online platforms and tools to substitute for classroom teaching and engagement with students, including low bandwidth (and offline / asynchronous) solutions
- **Role of parents** – supporting their children’s learning and safety in the home environment

These are all relevant to supporting English language teaching and learning during the crisis and in section two of this guidance we will present in more detail our advice and the resources we can provide.

The closure of schools raises profound equity concerns for education systems. As the World Bank notes, ‘the move to online learning at scale typically disproportionately benefits students already advantaged in various ways.’ In many contexts online learning at scale is not feasible and other media, such as TV, radio and print materials, need to be packaged to provide learners with a coherent learning programme at home. Teachers also need to be prepared to support that learning at a distance. In all education systems, extra effort needs to be directed at mitigating the effects of inequity on less-advantaged groups by planning specifically to meet their needs and providing access to learning that meets their material circumstances at home.

Supporting teachers

Teachers remain a fundamental asset for the learning process during the covid-19 crisis, even though they may be unable to have regular contact with their learners. They will need support to know how to translate their classroom teaching skills to this new environment.

In the context of English language teaching, teachers will need to learn how to continue to develop the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking as well as provide input so their students can continue to develop their understanding of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. This is likely to involve some departure from the textbook they are used to using in class. They will benefit from training on how to find appropriate resources to help them teach the curriculum in new ways, while still focused on the overall learning outcomes their students are expected to achieve for each grade level.

In higher resource contexts where online interaction or communication is available, teachers will need to quickly develop their digital literacy skills to be able to effectively use the available tools. This might be done by setting up online training or by distributing clear guidance and resources for them to self-access. Again, developing strategies for navigating through the available content online for this purpose will be extremely important.

In lower resource contexts where the infrastructure is not available for online teaching (either for use by teachers or in the homes of the students they teach), supporting teachers to find alternative modes of communication and teaching is critical. It is widely recognised that there will be greater challenges here than where teachers and students can use the Internet. However, many organisations – including the British Council – are working on developing the skills of teachers in these contexts and exploring different ways that they can be supported to continue teaching their classes ideally with some two-way communication so they can review their students' work. This might be via mobile messenger apps (e.g. WhatsApp, Telegram), over the phone or finding ways to distribute print materials.

A final consideration for supporting teachers is exploring options for fostering teacher communities – online or via mobile phones. Teachers will need to support each other and share ideas to be successful with using new approaches.

The British Council is currently surveying English language teacher needs during the Covid-19 crisis in order to help shape our response. The survey is available for your teachers and teacher educators here: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/ZHDFJ2>

Channels for providing language teaching and learning opportunities



Print

If newspapers continue to be widely available, using these as a channel to provide English language learning content is worth exploring. Content can be targeted at primary or secondary level learners and could include comics, puzzles, short reading texts with comprehension questions, ideas for projects which students can do at home (e.g. writing a daily diary in English; interviewing family members). These can be explicitly linked to the curriculum where appropriate and possible. While print

content alone won't be as effective as classroom teaching – listening and speaking practice will be difficult to do – a daily dose of engaging content can help students to maintain some focus on learning English.

Broadcast

In contexts where there is access to TV programmes or films in English (including via the Internet), listening material can be available for students of any age, offering great gains in comprehension and increasing learners' motivation towards learning English. The use of subtitles can also support hearing impaired learners. Teachers of primary learners can encourage their learners to watch story readings, cartoons, children's news and documentary programmes. To focus the offer of broadcasted resources available to secondary learners, teachers can set learner-centred tasks for them to research the most suitable broadcasted materials available to them linked to their curriculum and build a collaborative bank of recommended material. In contexts where foreign language programmes are normally dubbed, scheduling a greater number of programmes with the original audio in English on TV and radio could immediately increase the opportunities for directed and informal learning offered to learners during the crisis.

Where English language content is less regularly available on TV and radio, some ministries are exploring options of creating new content, including drafting in expert teachers to present to students via these media. This could include simple approaches such as reading stories in English – from the textbook or elsewhere – to delivery of full lessons. It is also possible to combine this kind of educational TV or radio with an SMS or phone in service to allow viewers / listeners to share their questions or comments with the teachers. Compressed video and audio files can also be shared on SD cards for use on compatible mobile phones, where distribution is possible.

Mobile phones

For parents and teachers who do not have Smartphones, bulk text messaging and automated messages in languages familiar to parents and teachers could be explored. There are also some tools available which allow two-way communication via SMS (responding to questions). In some countries, groups of teachers have been assigned to answer phone calls or text messages from students, answering questions as they work through their textbooks at home.

UNESCO has released a list of learning management systems (LMS) that are built for use on basic mobile phones, alongside a variety of more sophisticated options. These offer a space to build a class community between teacher and learners for sharing resources and running collaborative and communicative activities in English. As with online services where there is interaction with learners, it will be critical to monitor child protection, accessibility and connectivity issues in each context. Partnerships with mobile phone and network providers can provide basic mobile phones and network hotspots for less advantaged learners. This will enable the use of either a basic LMS or the use of mobile messenger services such as WhatsApp. Content of all types linked to the English curriculum can be delivered to learners' or parents' phones for download and text messages can be used for sharing weekly work plans, reminders, feedback and praise.

Online

Where there is reliable access to ICT infrastructure, offering remote teaching online may be a good solution to keep children learning. However, ministries will need to help parents to manage their children's increased use of the internet to keep them safe online. This can include sharing information about parental controls that allow parents to monitor and limit what children are doing online; setting time limits so that a balance is maintained between online and offline activities, establishing rules to protect children from online predators, checking that recommending apps, games and social media sites are age-appropriate and advising on the use of privacy settings. Encouraging parents to co-view and co-play with their children online is one of the best ways for them to understand what their children are doing online and to discuss online safety.

Creating and maintaining motivation for remote learning

Learners need to share and collaborate in English with their classmates and teacher to maintain motivation in the remote learning setting. This will create a sense of joint purpose and will show them that their teacher is available, approachable and still interested. This is particularly important for language learning, given the emphasis on communication. Learning activities can be designed so that learners can get feedback from teachers easily and give likes and replies to what is produced by other classmates, increasing their motivation to stay on course. This is possible whatever channels and platforms the teachers are using.

Learning management systems make this possible, and WhatsApp or email groups with parents can achieve the same. To manage this, teachers need support and guidance from education ministries to develop new strategies for the things they normally do to keep the students engaged: collaborative setting of expectations of behaviours; giving clear instructions for tasks and deadlines; modelling tasks and behaviours; giving regular reminders and prompts for completion of tasks; communicating assessment criteria clearly; integrating assessment for learning, encouraging peer assessment and sharing recognition and praise in class. Teachers can access free courses for online learning focused on the teaching of English to help them do these things.

Supporting parents and caregivers

Many parents around the world are spending a lot of time at home with their young children. Our website can help parents support children's English learning at home. It has many ideas for short activities that children can do by themselves and/or with limited guidance from parents/caregivers. If English is not spoken by some parents, the child can be given the instructions in the home language. The most important thing is that while they are doing the activity, they are using English. Parents can also support in revising schoolwork by looking at their children's English school books to see what topics they have covered this year, then look for the topics on our [Resources](#) page.

Parents, caregivers and older siblings can play an important role in supporting reading and writing for primary aged learners. For example, parents can support their children to read and write stories in English with resources from the British Council websites and other sources that do not rely on the internet, such as textbooks. Reading in home language too is essential in building foundational literacy – free stories for primary aged children in multiple languages including English are available on several websites. Parents can also tell their children stories (in any language) and follow up with questions.

Our free global support

These are the British Council's online resources for English language teaching and learning. They are freely available to all teachers, learners and teacher educators. Ministries of education and other organisations can integrate the resources into their programmes for learners and programmes for teachers' professional development.



Impact of Covid-19 on English language teaching in education systems

- We have special resources for teachers and teacher educators coping with the impact of Covid-19 on English language teaching in education systems here: <https://tinyurl.com/qnar332>



TeachingEnglish: www.teachingenglish.org.uk

- Access free teaching resources for teachers of English at primary, secondary and adult levels, including lesson plans, activities, stories and poems, songs and teaching tools
- Sign up to our webinar series and other training activities to enable teachers to update their skills with international experts



TeachingEnglish Facebook: www.facebook.com/TeachingEnglish.BritishCouncil

- Join a global community of English language teachers to discuss teaching issues, share knowledge, and keep up-to-date with new activities, training and resources.



Twitter: <https://twitter.com/teachingenglish>

- Keep up-to-date with the latest developments in English language teaching on the TeachingEnglish website



Teacher Educator community: <https://tinyurl.com/tqz6cyc>

- Join teacher educators to share practice, engage with international experts and sign up to professional development and training opportunities



LearnEnglish: <https://tinyurl.com/yxzsraux>

- Access resources for adult learners of English, including language skills, grammar and vocabulary activities, online courses, business English, video and audio



Kids and Parents: <https://learnenglishkids.britishcouncil.org/> <https://tinyurl.com/v7ep737>

- Access songs, stories, video, games, grammar and vocabulary activities for primary
Facebook group for parents supporting their children's learning



Teens: <https://tinyurl.com/ukrndfe>

- Access activities for developing English language skills, grammar, vocabulary and



FutureLearn: www.futurelearn.com/partners/british-council

- Sign up for one of the MOOCs (Massive open online courses) for English language teachers and learners to help improve language and teaching skills



The English Channel: theenglishchannel.britishcouncil.org

- Access interactive videos to help learn English and build career skills

Links to Covid-19 education system guidance from international agencies



- **IFRC, UNICEF and WHO** guidance to protect children and support safe school operations. Guidance includes practical actions and checklists for administrators, teachers, parents and children.
<https://tinyurl.com/t86qlom>



- **UNICEF** Covid-19 education: contingency planning, risk reduction, preparedness and response framework.
<https://tinyurl.com/wok4l2n>



- **World Bank** EdTech & COVID-19 – useful resources and related documents for use by policymakers around the world.
<https://tinyurl.com/uqb4qp4>



- **UNESCO** education response. Information and guidance on UNESCO's support, national platforms being used and distance learning solutions.
<https://tinyurl.com/swvlyqj>