**Transforming Online Classrooms**

**Teaser:** Whether we like it or not, online classrooms are here to stay. We teachers can transform online classes into active and lively spaces if we understand the platform well.

Ensuring participation of all learners in a classroom is an accepted challenge in online classrooms. Since learners are in remote locations, the teacher lacks a number of advantages possessed by traditional classrooms. For example, in an online classroom, a teacher cannot physically verify if a learner is actually doing classwork or paying attention. Remote learning has flattened the three dimensional physical space and multidimensional intellectual and affective space into a one dimensional flat screen. However, there are ways in which we can transform this technology-mediated space into a lively classroom and even more. The trick is in adapting teaching materials to the new medium.

We need to accept the fact that most probably, our learners are more tech-savvy and new-media-savvy than us teachers. Most learners are familiar with more multimedia applications than us teachers. Therefore, we should be able to capitalize their expertise. The following questions help us to make our classrooms more remote-learning-friendly.

1. Can we draw parallels between physical classroom activities and online class activities?

For example, if in pre-pandemic classrooms we asked students to stand up and read aloud, in remote classes, we could ask learners to record reading aloud and share in small groups for feedback. The following are some more parallels.

* Written homework can become recorded multimedia presentations
* Attendance ritual can become single-sentence tasks (e.g., I’m Tom and I like ice-creams, I’m Sarah and I love bikes, etc.)
* Require pair and small group speaking tasks to be recorded. Teacher can check random recordings to ensure participation.
* Always require students to report what happened in group activities in written or spoken format.

1. Can we adapt teaching materials to online classes?

Our text books are designed to be used in classrooms. The instructions, material and rubrics show this. When the same material is used in an online classroom, it should be adapted. Adaptation should be guided by questions like the following:

* What material suits online learning? Should I ask learners to look at their books, or should I display the book on their screen? Or can I convert the book into an interactive webpage?
* What about blackboard? Is it ok to write on paper and display in front of your webcam? Or should you type/draw and share a screen with learners?
* Can you use audio-visual content as prompts and models for speaking tasks? For example, in an online class, providing a video to watch or an audio to listen to must be easier than asking students to read from their textbooks.
* Is it ok to submit recorded multimedia responses for evaluation? Or does it overburden the teacher in terms of time?

1. What do students generally speak about? What motivates them to speak?

The most appropriate teaching materials are those that the students take interest in. Students generally do not like to speak of unfamiliar topics. Therefore, we need to find out what they like, and are familiar with. What do they generally speak about? Do they discuss movies, animated films and cartoons? Do they discuss books, family and people? Or do they discuss news and current affairs? We can find this out through a brainstorming activity.

In their informal interactions, students speak of many age-appropriate topics. Young learners for example, may talk about their favourites, role models, movies they watch, sports, etc. If they are motivated to speak about these informally, it would be easier to make them speak about these topics in classrooms, than unfamiliar topics. Therefore, it is important to use familiar, age-appropriate and interesting topics that students are motivated to speak about.

This being said, let us look at a few pair and small group task-types that can be used in speaking classes (See Chapter 3 of *Doing Task-based Teaching* by Willis & Willis for more task-types). Here, note that the language necessary to perform tasks should be given to or activated in students in the pre-task phase. Similarly, in the post-task phase, teacher can spend some time discussing specific language structures used in the task.

* Discussion/debate tasks: Engaging discussions can be generated by topics based on opinion surveys. Present a survey that represents many strong positions. E.g., the school has fund for either a library or a football ground. Based on a school survey regarding this, two groups of students can discuss/debate the need to choose either. Teacher needs to make sure students on both sides of the debate have strong points.
* Information-gap tasks: Here, the information necessary to complete the task is given exclusively to different participants/groups. In order to complete the task, they need to share this information with their partners. E.g., a treasure hunt task where the clues are distributed between participants/groups necessitate sharing of information for task completion. Learners have to be instructed to share information only orally.
* Student teacher: Here, after a lesson, one group of students discusses and prepares and asks comprehension questions while other groups prepare to answer possible questions. In effect, all groups will prepare questions and answers.
* Dialogue writing: Give learners a wordless cartoon, and ask them to give dialogues to characters. For this, they have to discuss in small groups and reach an agreement about each dialogue. In the end, they perform the dialogues in front of other groups.

In an online classroom, these activities can pan out to be different from how it is planned. This is nothing to be worried about. In fact, this slightly unpredictable nature offers both the teacher and the students a chance to be creative and authentic.

Online classrooms are here to stay at least for another year. To make the most of the opportunities they offer, we need to explore and understand the platform and its nature. It has the potential to be equally good or even better than traditional classrooms. It’s up to us to embrace it to the benefit of our students.