Covid-19 and education

Supporting remote English language teaching and learning

1 July 2020
#TeachingFromHome
Introduction

International agencies (UNICEF, UNESCO, World Bank) have all 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 for education systems. In the guidance here, we focus on how education systems can also support the English language curriculum, teaching and learning in situations where a return to school is still not possible and remote learning continues.

According to UNESCO, at the end of June 2020 123 countries still have nationwide school closures due to the pandemic. This means that over 1 billion children (62.3 per cent of total enrolled learners) are now out of school, of which 258 million were out of school before the crisis. Girls’ education is particularly vulnerable, with nearly 750 million girls affected during the crisis. This is a huge challenge for education systems which in general are organised to provide traditional classroom-based teaching and learning. Across the world, educators have had to look for ways of supporting remote and home-based learning and quickly develop the necessary skills.

International guidance emphasises that decisions about how to increase remote and home-based learning should be based on accurate assessments of needs and risks. These assessments should build on their understanding and experience of:

- access to hardware and connectivity at home and how inclusive this is (e.g. different access according to gender, disability, socioeconomic status etc.)
- 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 and the impact additional caring responsibilities might have on teachers’ ability to work (particularly for women).

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

- **Teacher engagement, expertise and well-being** – supporting their ability to teach remotely, to maintain their learners’ motivation and to monitor the learning taking place, and to look after their learners’ and their own well-being
- **TV, radio and printed materials** – providing access to learning resources where internet connectivity is less available
- **Mobile messenger services** – 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 learners, including low bandwidth (and offline / asynchronous) solutions
- **Role of parents and caregivers** – supporting children’s learning, well-being and safety in the home environment
Evidence from the British Council and other organisations that has been gathered during the crisis also highlights other areas where action is essential:

- **Educational plans** – while providing resources is part of the support needed for remote teaching and learning, ministries of education should publish and update realistic plans defining the aims and action for how the school system as a whole should respond to the crisis, including a road map for how the transition back to school will be managed\(^1\)

- **Monitoring and evaluation** – the experience of continuing education during the Covid-19 crisis provides valuable evidence of effective remote learning, challenges and lessons learned. Ministries of education need working systems to record and understand this evidence, with a view to improving performance in the education system as the crisis continues, the response to future crises, and the transition back to school

- **Well-being** – the crisis impacts on every part of people’s lives. Extensive action is needed to look after the well-being of teachers, learners and caregivers during and while recovering from such stressful circumstances

- **Inclusion** – the crisis exacerbates equity concerns in education systems. It is certain that the most disadvantaged will suffer most. Action needs to be prioritised to deal with issues of inclusion, in particular continuing the education of girls, children with disabilities and other already marginalised groups.

These are all relevant issues when 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 for a continued focus on this aspect of the curriculum.

The challenge of school closures to equity in education systems cannot be over-emphasised. Evidence shows that despite efforts to continue education, in England, for example, a third of pupils have not engaged with their lessons. As school closures continue, the loss of learning increases the challenges for schools when they re-open. Until that time, efforts to provide effective remote learning and teaching need to be sustained, and the well-being of all those affected by school closures needs to be supported.

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\(^1\) The British Council has published a summary of guidelines relating to the return to school available here: [https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/Supporting_transition_back_to_school_guidelines.pdf](https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/Supporting_transition_back_to_school_guidelines.pdf)
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. The findings of our survey of ministries of education show that 70% of the 52 countries reviewed are providing support to teachers. We have also seen many examples of teachers innovating and collaborating to find solutions to the challenges they and their learners have faced. For systems that continue to offer remote teaching, a key focus must be on finding ways for teachers to communicate and share their learning with one another. What seems to be working well, and what doesn’t? They need continued support from school administrators, the government and their learners’ caregivers to know how best to translate their classroom teaching skills to this changing context.

In terms of English language teaching, teachers need to support learners to continue to develop the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Finding ways to engage learners to do this at a distance is critical, while being mindful of the additional priorities of maintaining the development of home or other school languages and other subjects across the curriculum.

Teachers also need to provide input so their learners 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, although this may still be an important resource for many and one that large numbers of learners will continue to be able to access. Many countries have developed online platforms to house resources for teachers and learners to use during the crisis, in addition to the wide range of content that already existed on the wider internet. Teachers will benefit from training and guidance on how to find the most appropriate resources to help them teach the curriculum in new ways, while still focused on the overall learning outcomes their learners are expected to achieve for each grade level. Again, ensuring the availability of channels of communication between teachers is important so that they can share their skills and experiences about the resources they have used and learners’ responses to these.

In higher resource contexts where online interaction or communication is available and expected, teachers are experiencing steep learning curves to learn how to both use the technology and adapt their pedagogical approaches. Digital literacy skill development is a priority and is likely to continue to be in the medium and long term. This skills development might be done by setting up online training or by distributing clear guidance and resources for teachers to self-access, and enabling teachers share their professional learning through communities of practice. Developing strategies for navigating through the available training 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 learners 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 learners can use the internet. However, many organisations – including the British Council – are exploring different ways that they can be supported to continue teaching their classes ideally with some two-way communication so they can review their learners’ work. This might be via mobile messenger apps (e.g. WhatsApp, Telegram), over the phone or finding ways to distribute print materials.
Recognising the new skills that teachers have developed during this period will be important for maintaining motivation and morale. In addition, there will be many aspects of what they have learned which could continue to be useful as they return to face-to-face teaching in schools. Teachers will need to be encouraged to document, share and adapt what they have learned and achieved.

Take a look at our recently published reports which share:

- findings of a survey we conducted of teacher and teacher educator needs at the start of the global Covid-19 crisis
- a global snapshot of ministries of education responses in the state primary and secondary sectors

https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/covid-19-insight-reports

Channels for providing language teaching and learning opportunities

Several modes are available for remote teaching and learning and around the world ministries of education, schools and teachers have been experimenting to find out how they can best reach their learners with diverse needs. It is becoming clearer that a multimedia approach may be the most appropriate, with the same or similar content shared via several different channels in order to have the greatest coverage of the learner population – regardless of the context in which they live.

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 learners 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 learners to maintain some focus on learning English.

In Senegal the ministry of education makes printed copies of online resources available at regional bureaus of the Ministry of Education around the country so that learners with challenges accessing the Ministry’s website can take copies home to study from. In France, the national postal service supports up to 200,000 learners with no internet access by delivering course materials provided by teachers and schools who upload it to a central platform. Homework is printed and collected by
families locally and on completion, is sent back to teachers for correction using the same digitisation process in reverse. The service is free of charge.

Broadcast

In contexts where there is access to TV programmes or films in English (including via the internet), listening material can be available for learners 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 which have 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 – for example in Pakistan – are creating new content, including drafting in expert teachers to present to learners via these media. This could include simple approaches such as reading stories in English – from the textbook or elsewhere – to delivery of full lessons or use of existing animations. 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. This can also enable viewers and listeners to provide feedback on the lessons and content being broadcast.

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, including Ethiopia and Rwanda, groups of teachers have been assigned to answer phone calls or text messages from learners, answering questions as they work through their textbooks at home.

In India, state governments in Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh have had considerable success with using WhatsApp to communicate with parents and learners about expected learning activities during lockdown. More than 20,000 WhatsApp groups have been set up on Rajasthan alone, covering more than 95 per cent of the school-going population and their families. User surveys have shown high levels of engagement with the content being shared. In Malaysia, the government has partnered with mobile service providers to provide free data to school children so they can access online resources.

https://tinyurl.com/y8msevpw
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. Compressed video and audio files can be shared on SD cards for use on compatible mobile phones, where distribution is possible.

🌐 Online

Where there is reliable access to ICT infrastructure, offering remote teaching online may be a good solution to keep children learning. It can also be useful for ministries to set up websites offering resources to teachers and parents. This approach has been taken in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, where the Ministry of Education set up and launched a central website including links to the Ministry’s YouTube channels offering video lessons delivered by MoE teachers, pdf copies of all course books and the related audio files, and online games organised by subject and grade.

In all cases, ministries need an ongoing commitment to helping parents to manage their children’s increased use of the internet to keep them safe online – only a third of the 52 countries we surveyed in April reported that they were providing online safety guidance. This guidance 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 recommended 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. As the crisis continues, this will become even more important to help learners manage fatigue and frustration with the situation.

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3 https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/solutions
4 https://www.it-mohe.com/
Collaboration 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. In Uzbekistan, school children are encouraged to participate in TV lessons through the inclusion of associated online competitions. These types of motivational activities are 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 learners 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 will also need to be flexible and be aware that expectations of what learners can achieve remotely might need to be different to the norm. Teachers can access free courses for online learning focused on the teaching of English to help them do these things.

**Equity and access**

According to the findings of our review, 59% of MoE’s have been taking steps to address exclusion, yet half of the education systems reviewed reported challenges around access to and equity of education provision during the crisis. This was the most frequently reported challenge, with connectivity, cost of data and availability of device representing the factors impeding access. Support therefore needs to be directed towards a better understanding of these barriers and to solutions designed to overcome them, to include effective remedial teaching and accelerated learning once schools reopen (as 37% of MoEs were planning to do at the time of the submission of the responses). MoEs in both high and low resource contexts should recognise that many children and families will be affected by these issues of access to the internet, to devices and to the provision of remote learning and specific action is needed to assist those who are disadvantaged in this way.

Digital access and equity have a particular relevance to English language learning in the twenty-first century because more and more of the opportunities for study, work and engagement with others in English are through the medium of technology. Learners who do not have access to this technology will be unable to take advantage of these opportunities to develop and use the English language and may be unfairly disadvantaged in their educational opportunities and future lives and careers.
Supporting parents and caregivers

Many parents around the world are spending a lot of time at home with their young children. Our websites can help parents support children’s English learning at home. They have 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. 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. Teachers will ideally give more input to parents about what their child is learning and expectations around progress or support that they might require to complete activities.

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 the home language 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.

5 [https://learnenglishkids.britishcouncil.org/resources](https://learnenglishkids.britishcouncil.org/resources)
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 for teachers’ professional development. A link to the wide range of free resources provided by other UK organisations can be found here.

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

- We have special resources for teachers and teacher educators coping with the impact of Covid-19 on English language teaching in educations systems here: https://tinyurl.com/qnar332
  This includes support for parents, tips for all different types of remote teaching, information about safeguarding, lesson plans for returning to school and more.

TeachingEnglish: www.teachingenglish.org.uk

- Teaching resources for teachers of English at primary, secondary and adult levels, including lesson plans, activities, stories and poems, songs and more.
- Information about our webinar series and other training activities to enable teachers to update their skills with international experts.


- English language teachers can join our global community to discuss teaching issues, share knowledge and keep up to date with new activities and resources.

Twitter: https://twitter.com/teachingenglish

- Our social media accounts keep you up to date with the latest developments in English language teaching.

Teacher Educator community: https://tinyurl.com/tgz6cyc

- Teacher educators can join this community to share practice, engage with international experts and sign up to professional development opportunities.

LearnEnglish: https://tinyurl.com/yxzsrux

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

Kids and parents/caregivers: https://learnenglishkids.britishcouncil.org / https://tinyurl.com/v7ep737

- Songs, stories, video, games, grammar and vocabulary activities for primary, Facebook group for parents supporting their children’s learning.

Teens: https://tinyurl.com/ukrndfe

- Activities for developing English language skills, grammar and vocabulary.

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

- MOOCs (massive open online courses) for English language teachers and learners to help improve language and teaching skills.

The English Channel: theenglishchannel.britishcouncil.org

- Interactive videos to help learn English and build career skills.

www.britishcouncil.org
Links to Covid-19 education system guidance

• 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/t86glom](https://tinyurl.com/t86glom)

  [https://tinyurl.com/wok4l2n](https://tinyurl.com/wok4l2n)

• World Bank EdTech and COVID-19 – useful resources and related documents for use by policymakers around the world.  
  [https://tinyurl.com/uqb4qp4](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](https://tinyurl.com/swvlyqj)

• UNESCO education response Addressing the gender dimensions of school closures  
  [https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373379](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373379)

• OECD Tackling Coronavirus impacts and consequences of Covid-19 on OECD countries  

• Save the Children guidance on supporting children during Covid-19 pandemic  
  [https://tinyurl.com/yavpdslw](https://tinyurl.com/yavpdslw)

• Plan International Covid-19 guidance with a focus on supporting girls, young women, children and vulnerable groups  
  [https://tinyurl.com/yboh4323](https://tinyurl.com/yboh4323)

• UK Forum for International Education and Training articles about Covid-19 education responses in countries round the world  
  [https://tinyurl.com/y7udnxnw](https://tinyurl.com/y7udnxnw)

• EdTech Hub Covid-19 guidance focused on the use of technology in education  
  [https://tinyurl.com/ycpymjxh](https://tinyurl.com/ycpymjxh)
- A global snapshot of Ministries of Education responses in the state primary and secondary sector (late April – early May 2020) – British Council

- A report detailing results from our survey of teacher and teacher educators needs during the Covid-19 pandemic (April-May 2020) – British Council