

AIU Language Centre: Online Teaching and Learning Strategies in Response to the Movement Control Order (MCO)

Due to the recent outbreak of COVID-19 and the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) by the Malaysian government, several institutions of higher learning including AIU have had to immediately transition to fully-online teaching and learning. While we consider ourselves new in the field and the region, the AIU Language Centre (AIU LC) is willing to rise to the challenge.

Semester 2 of the IELTS Preparatory Course (IPC 2020) was scheduled to commence on 13 April 2020, but under the circumstances was pushed forward to allow for LC's teaching staff to conduct research, planning and training in efforts to reinvent ourselves into an efficient and capable remote teaching team. The office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) also demonstrated a strong leadership role in providing all academic staff with useful survey data and clear-cut guidelines for this transition, making this a true team effort. God willing, AIU LC, together with the other Schools and Centres are now ready to commence our fully-online semesters.

Strategies for Online Language Teaching and Learning

The second semester of the IELTS Preparatory Course focuses on the language skills assessed in the IELTS test (Speaking, Listening, Reading, Writing Task 1 and 2). The main strategy in transitioning to online learning was that instead of just "converting" existing learning material of each language skill into digital form, which may prove detrimental in the long run, a "backward design process" was implemented. Firstly, the desired results (learning outcomes) were identified; next, ways to assess students' understanding using online tools were explored, and finally suitable learning experiences were arranged that could help the students achieve those outcomes.

In terms of student management, a new strategy of grouping students according to proficiency was adopted, instead of having mixed-ability classes as originally planned. This was due to the necessity of the immediate transition to online learning; grouping according to proficiency level was deemed more suitable for an online learning environment as differentiation by support could be implemented.

It was decided that the technological tools used in class should be standardised, for the convenience of both teachers and students. The teaching and learning was divided into synchronous (S) and asynchronous (A) activities for both practicality and pedagogical purposes.

SYNCHRONOUS T&L ACTIVITIES (SCHEDULED)			
S1.	Live Session (Google Meet)	1.5 hours per week	Teacher-led
S2.	Tutorial Session (other platforms)	1.5 hours per week	Teacher-led
		1.5 hours per week	Teacher-led
S3.	Lab Session using online resources	1.5 hours per week	Student-led
		1.5 hours per week	Student-led

(Total contact hours per week: 22.5 hours)

ASYNCHRONOUS T&L ACTIVITIES (SELF-PACED)			
A1.	Discussion Forum (weekly)	Google Classroom for each skill	Student-led
A2.	Unit Assignment (weekly)	Google Classroom for each skill	Student-led
A3.	Reflective Journal (weekly)	Main IPC 2020 Google Classroom	Student-led

S1. Live Session via Google Meet

Teachers would utilise the video-conferencing application Google Meet to hold one Live Session per week to teach a particular unit to the whole class. Prior to this, students would be directed to engage in some "pre-reading" with materials uploaded on a dedicated Google Classroom, including unit objectives, notes, slides and so on. The teacher may also guide students to specific pages in the coursebook (due to the MCO, digital versions of the coursebooks will complement physical ones).

The main objective of the Live Sessions are mainly to demonstrate skills and/or explain a concept to a large group at once; so to minimise distractions, students will be advised to disable their webcams and/or mute their microphones, at least until they are required to contribute or ask questions.

S2. Tutorial and S3. Lab/Online Practice

After Live Sessions, the class would be divided into two smaller "breakout" groups (Groups A and B). While Group A has a tutorial session with the teacher, Group B will do independent practice with available online resources; afterwards, these two groups will switch.

The tutorials are meant for guided reinforcement and application of the taught skills, through activities matched to a specific learning outcome. The small group interaction here would allow for immediate feedback and a more personal touch that occurs easily and naturally in the physical classroom. As these elements are extremely important for language acquisition, teachers would need to emulate them using

synchronous communication tools that also allow for easy enforcement of student engagement. The tools would need to be those which the students are already familiar with, including not only videoconferencing but video or audio calls and even chat sessions (e.g. via Whatsapp, Telegram etc.)

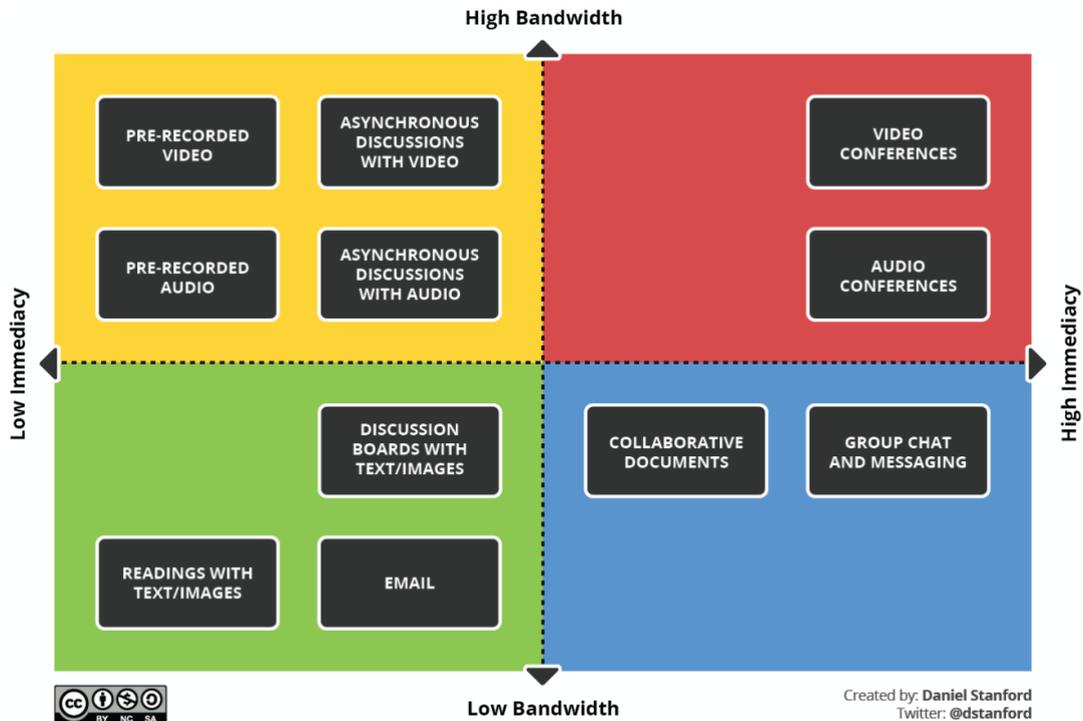
The lab sessions will allow students to practice the taught skills and to immediately self-check / self-evaluate. There are a number of existing online resources that the students can be guided to, which not only reduces the load of the teacher but introduces variety and a wider, more diverse perspective to the students.

A1. Discussion Forum and A2. Unit Assignment

Apart from the scheduled contact hours, the students are also required to complete self-paced tasks to complement their learning. For example, they will demonstrate their understanding of a topic by posting in the class's Discussion Forum (they can also read, evaluate or discuss their peer's posts). They will also be given a weekly Unit Assignment to test their application of the taught concepts, and be encouraged to reflect on their weekly self-study in a journal on Google Classroom.

Self-paced tasks foster student empowerment and independence and promote longer retention of learned concepts. Self-paced learning also allows students to train themselves to be better with time management and problem-solving.

The methods as described above are by no means fixed; teachers are given the flexibility and trust to vary between different tools and adapt to the situation as long as they fulfil the required hours for each component. A possible guideline to refer to is the "Bandwidth Immediacy Matrix" by Daniel Stanford (2020):



Ensuring a Smooth Transition

In situations where in-person learning is transitioned online, many suggest to carry out a technological ability survey or conduct a “pilot” class or short training session. Unfortunately this was not an option so LC took the last two weeks of Semester 1 (which coincided with the MCO) as a “piloting” period where both teachers and students would “learn by doing”.

During these two weeks, final classes were conducted and final assignments and/or quizzes were given. There was a learning curve for both teachers and students in three main areas: (1) discovering the best ways of managing and completing these activities online, (2) identifying devices and hardware available for use and/or trying several out and (3) learning to quickly resolve problems with things like time management or technical issues. Now, as the time to commence the next semester draws near, it is felt that both teachers and students have had time to “feel out” this new method and would now be better equipped for online learning.

One thing that LC has been able to do that may ensure a smooth transition is providing students with a clear brief on the rationale, objectives and structure of the online learning. The brief also includes tips to handle technical issues and motivational guidance. Students are asked to read this brief thoroughly in preparation for a mass live orientation session where they can ask questions or raise concerns. To view or download the PDF file of this brief, click **here** ([see AIULC_IPC 2020_OnlineLearningBriefing.pdf](#)).

The strategies described above are but plans put in place before implementation. It remains to be seen whether things go according to plan; however it is believed that the plan has enough flexibility which would allow

teachers to adapt to the situation without too much disruption. What is important to keep in mind is that the teacher's role and presence is as crucial as it ever was, whether online or offline, scheduled or self-paced. Instead of teaching to technology, we need to teach through technology and make sure that whatever the medium, our students can continue to benefit from our guidance and expertise.

References:

Helen Strong and Anne Fox, "Teaching Online - alternative platforms, lesson structure and task-types" (Webinar)

Robert Martinez and Ceri Jones, "Teaching Online - tech tools and tutor presence" (Webinar)

David Mills and Patrick Alexander, "Small group teaching: a toolkit for learning",
https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/resources/Small_group_teaching_1.pdf