CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF TEACHING ENGLISH WITH REDUCED CONTACT HOURS

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Abstract: The paper looks at some problems and opportunities of teaching English language with reduced contact hours at the university. The classroom and remote learning are compared and contrasted. The author examines the ways how the English syllabus can be streamlined in order to make the course more effective and motivating. Some practical activities, which can help teachers and students to make the most of the classroom time, are presented in the article. Special attention is given to some challenges that language instructors may face when they teach English with reduced contact hours, and solutions to these problems are provided.

Keywords: syllabus, contact hours, distant learning, self-study, online platform, language material, assessment

English language teachers who work in non-linguistic universities often face a situation where contact hours with students are reduced or subject to inconsistency and variation. Therefore, the prospect of trying to fully cover an English course syllabus might be challenging. A reduction of contact time and a compressed timetable can make it difficult for a language instructor to cover a full English course. Nevertheless, there are some steps a teacher can take to ensure successful teaching and positive learning outcomes for students.

The main issue to consider is how make the most out of the time available in class, by assessing its value compared to both online classes, and distant learning platforms where students can work on their own. Practical experience indicates that there are many things that can be efficiently done outside the classroom using instructor-guided autonomous learning, and others which are best suited for conventional classroom context. When a teacher reviews the syllabus for the upcoming semester, it is possible to identify some language material that will work better when delivered face-to-face, and other material that can be covered through online classes or independently by students.

However, with university students, it is necessary for a teacher to keep in mind that they may have limited time available outside the English language classroom due to numerous assignments in different subjects and other commitments. A teacher should also think about which aspects of the English syllabus in the specific course materials are key, and whether any structures, topics or areas can be omitted or postponed to a later date.

Being English language teachers, we can use our expertise in the classroom to present complex ideas in a more simple way, and these are areas that may be best suited for coverage in class. Practical experience shows that a teacher can make the most of the available contact hours to give students clear explanations of difficult language points, with the opportunity to check understanding and to review the topic so that no learners are left behind.

It is important to note that students can benefit from the supportive and collaborative nature of the classroom environment [5]. Due to the lack of time for self-study, the English classroom can be the best place to present language and skills engagingly and dynamically through a variety of communicative

activities. Self-study at home can then be supported through worksheets, workbooks and companion websites. This will give our students the opportunity for more efficient independent language practice that a teacher can guide and assess as necessary.

During English language classes a teacher can model new language, ask questions, encourage students to ask questions, and provide feedback [6]. Undoubtedly, all of these things can be done distantly, if needed, but there is a value of doing it in the supportive and collaborative classroom environment. In this case, there is more scope for on-the-spot questions and answers, and teachers have an perfect opportunity to provide constructive feedback.

Some useful examples of how to make the most of classroom time are presented below.

First, it can be a good idea to introduce a new topic in the classroom, rather than distantly. This will give learners an opportunity to engage with the topic as a group. Any further reflection at the end of the topic can be done at home and then shared and discussed in class.

Second, for developing communicative skills, such as extended conversations or role-plays, learners may be less self-conscious in case they can interact face-to-face rather than online. This also eliminates the possibility of any technical breakdown which are likely to disrupt the flow of the lesson.

By analysing the English course material, the teacher can identify and create a pattern of which sections to cover in the classroom and which ones should be referred to teacher-based self-study. For instance, if the unit in coursebooks starts with a lexical set, a teacher can use it as a part of the classroom lesson to introduce the new vocabulary and discuss the context in group. Further into the unit students will have an opportunity to practise the new language, and this can be done distantly.

In many ways, the switch to distant learning can have a little impact on English language learners. Many students have experience in such online courses, and have the discipline and motivation to make efficient use of online resources and platforms. Nevertheless, it might be useful for a teacher to monitor involvement and encourage feedback to find out how well the learners cope with the change. A teacher should also discuss individual concerns as they appear and adapt learning materials as necessary.

For online classes, a teacher needs to ensure that all students are familiar with the platform used. It is very important for learners to know how to operate the video and audio settings, so that they listen to new language. A teacher can motivate students to watch video and listen to audio material on their own, working at their own pace.

If classroom hours are unavailable or reduced, a teacher can deliver synchronous online classes, using such platforms as Zoom or GoogleMeet. A teacher can share the screen to demonstrate teaching materials, or use special classroom presentation tools to ensure students have access to the same learning materials [1]. This makes it possible to effectively present new topic, vocabulary and grammar, and to check comprehension, by adapting teaching to the new context. When teaching online it is important to keep learning as interactive as possible, making use of voice and gestures to foster teaching [4].

It is important to note that in some learning contexts, a more self-directed or flipped model may be appropriate. Online activities can be used to support language learning undertaken in the classroom, or they can be used as a basic introduction to new topics before they are studied in depth in class. If learning materials in English are covered at home, classroom time can be focus on more meaningful and active tasks. This can also allow teachers to spend more individual time with learners in class, paying special attention to areas of particular difficulty.

When assigning tasks for students to complete autonomously, a teacher can set degrees of flexibility. It might be useful to offer an extension activity where possible for learners with more time, but

define the basics of what has to be studied for students who have more time constraints. For example, it might be useful to cover a listening or reading text in class, to allocate time for questions and discussion of the topic, then assign a variety of follow-up activities to be done independently by students.

It is necessary for the teacher to be aware of various learning styles, which will result into some students showing better results in self-study than others. Learners who rely on the group support need more help during learning English online.

It is also important for the teacher to consider how to support students through distant learning. For instance, a teacher can organise group forums to promote peer support, or provide learners with a way of sharing their difficulties and getting feedback.

Practical experience indicates that both in the foreign language classroom and in a distant learning context, it is essential to check engagement through feedback and questioning. In both cases, a teacher should monitor the success of the method on a regular basis, to ensure it has the positive outcome.

In the situation of teaching with reduced contact hours an English syllabus needs to be streamlined using a simplified approach. At the first stage a teacher has to examine the syllabus in detail and identify which components are key and which can be put off for later coverage or missed out. In most university contexts, the syllabus is followed closely, and there might be an expectation from some students that all language material will be covered.

Nevertheless, an English language teacher can compare the course materials with the curriculum requirements of the educational institution or relate them to the federal curricular needs. This will allow a teacher to decide which elements of the language course are the most important. For instance, a teacher may decide that it is necessary to cover the full grammar syllabus in order to equip learners with the building blocks of English language and prepare them for external exams. If English exams are less of a focus, it is better to use more contact time in class to develop listening and speaking skills collaboratively.

One way of streamlining student learning results is to encourage students to take more responsibility for the studies. It should be mentioned that this might be not appropriate in all situations, but this is one approach a teacher can consider for an individual situation.

In this approach, a teacher can actively involve students in selecting the learning materials they consider are the most useful or relevant for their context, for example through questionnaires, discussion, and surveys. This enables students to feel they have a contribution into what and how they are studying, and therefore can boost engagement and motivation [3].

University students can have a variety of incentives for studying English language, compared to students in secondary education. By giving them an opportunity to identify and focus in what they want to achieve in their studies, a language instructor can reach an agreement on what to prioritise in the English course material. A teacher can even omit some topics that are less relevant or motivating for students, and focus on topics that are interesting and useful. Nevertheless, it is crucial not to leave out any key elements. In some cases, it is necessary to conduct lessons on key language structures in order to bridge the gap before learners move on to the next stage.

It is necessary to note that there is a variety of supplementary materials and resources a teacher can give students to do at home, including video and audio materials, workbooks, and online games. This will allow students to go beyond the core syllabus, to follow personal interests and promote further language practice of key topics.

Assessment plays an important role while teaching English with reduced contact hours [2]. A teacher should keep in mind that beyond unit tests and end of the term tests, it is necessary to use class time to assess learners' progress, confidence, attainment and proficiency. This kind of formative assessment can give a teacher a good idea of how students are progressing and identify any difficulties or language points that need to be revised. It is also a suitable moment to encourage self-reflection as a part of learning process. A teacher can encourage peer- and self-reflection by giving learners reflective tasks to promote autonomy, which enhances motivation.

To summarize, a teacher can find that there is an external expectation to cover all English course material and give complete formal assessment at key points of the academic year. Nevertheless, through applying a selective learning approach and with guided work done at home, there is no need for reduced contact hours to result into reduced learning outcomes for students. With thorough planning, English language teachers can get the most out of new situations which bring opportunities as well as challenges.

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