

HAPPY ONLINE: A BLENDED-LEARNING LESSON PLAN

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Level: Upper-Intermediate and above

Time: at least 3 periods (50 minutes each)

Aims:

1. To enhance development of four language skills.
2. To engage in a chat activity with a native speaker of English.
3. To foster oral communication skills by giving learners opportunities to use the language in an authentic manner or real-life situation.

Technical Requirements:

- 1 At least one computer with the Internet access
- 1 In voice/text chats, you could use any free chat software available online. Commonly used programs are Yahoo Messenger (YM) available at <http://messenger.yahoo.com/> and MSN Messenger. See featured URLs below for links on other Free Online Voice/Text Chat Software. In this lesson, I used iVocalize from Talking Communities which is provided by ALADO (see <http://www.alado.com/webheads>). This chat program has been graciously offered by Mr. Andy Pincon for members of Webheads online community).
- 1 a multimedia projector or any broadcasting system that could project images/sounds.
- 1 an optional webcam

Introduction

The lesson plan is heavily influenced by a musical composition written by a singer/composer, educator and a fellow-webhead, Michael Coghlan (see <http://users.chariot.net.au/~michaelc/songs.htm#hol>). The theme, Happy Online, is highly appropriate for this type of blended learning activity. The lyrics fit well with the students' way of life and they could easily relate to the message. The theme is up-to-date and could be used by other teachers in different contexts. The message of the song is about meeting people online and getting to know more about them. It is also about technology - the fun and fear that is associated with using it, about the simple joys in life that we experience when we go online. On a personal level, it is that golden smile that people have every time they see each other's faces on the web cam.

This activity is divided into three phases, 1) pre-online chat activity, 2) during chat, and 3) post-online chat activity.

Necessary Preparation

Prior to the online event, the teacher should arrange for a guest speaker (a native speaker of English or a non-native but with near-native English proficiency) to meet with the Ss. Since this activity requires collaboration between the teacher, the guest speaker/s and Ss, it is advisable to invite someone you know (a friend, family member/s and/or colleagues). You may also find support from professional organizations such as TESOL or IATEFL and their respective English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Interest Sections (IS) or Special Interest Group (SIG). Teachers can also benefit from joining online collaborative communities such as the Webheads in Action (http://www.geocities.com/vance_stevens/papers/evonline2002/webheads.htm – see the other article in this issue), ePals (www.epals.com), and Intercultural E-mail Classroom Connections (www.iecc.org). Time and availability of the guest speaker should also be taken into consideration.

Note

[You should give clear instructions to students on what to do, provide the necessary URL links (or websites) where they could listen to the song online and the web page of the forum where they will be posting their comments. This activity requires online work, ideal to give as an assignment. This will also give students ample time to prepare their work.]

The students were instructed to post their answers to the questions on the forum <http://dcyeh.com/ipw-web/bulletin/bb/viewtopic.php?t=5>. Their answers were used as a springboard to get our online discussion going. (Another alternative to creating web pages is to post the URLs and assignment questions on a blog, on a forum, via emails and other ways of making these links available for them.)

Procedure

I. Pre-Online Chat Activity (1 week prior to the scheduled blended activity)

1. Before the online meeting, list all the links and forward them to students. Also give some notes on topics/issues that could be further explored.
2. Instruct the students to read and answer the questions posted on the forum. Advise Ss that activity in the forum is being observed by the online guest/s in preparation for the online discussion.

II. Blended learning activity: Online chat

Warm-up and pre-online chat in-class activity

Time: 50 minutes

1. Have a short discussion about the song "Happy Online", which can be initiated by sharing your own experiences with meeting people online
3. Then, gather students' opinions and experiences by asking questions such as, "Have you ever met someone online?", "Has this experience bloomed into friendships?", "Do you have inhibitions on using chat rooms, Yahoo messenger, Skype, etc.?"
4. After soliciting answers to your questions, you can now tell your Ss what the activity is about. For example, "You will be meeting (name of guest speaker) online and he/she will share with you his/her views on meeting people online."
5. Explain in detail the tasks that they will have to accomplish for the day.

Voice Conference with Students

Time: 50-60 minutes

Notes

For the online chat activity, the teacher should make sure that the computer to be used has Internet access and chat software has been successfully installed.

Steps:

1. Log in and start the voice conference.

2. Test sound equipment with your invited guest making sure that the sounds from both sides are working.
3. Start the conference as soon as everybody (students and the guest speaker) has settled down. The LCD projector should be running at this point to broadcast and project images as they appear on the monitor.
4. Give brief information on the following: topic of online discussion, online guests' bio, and the class (course and number of students).
5. Pass the microphone to a student volunteer who will start the discussion. This could be in a form of a question or statement based on the song.
6. Ss take turns in asking/giving questions or comments/opinions.
7. Alado has a built-in recording function that allows you to record the online discussion in .htm file which contains both the audio (saved as .wav file) and the web interface of Alado showing all the webpages or PowerPoint presentations that were used during the online chat. If the chat software you are using does not have a recording function, then you will need to have an external recording program that could capture audio from your computer, i.e. Total Recorder and Real Player 10. Both the text and voice log can be used for assessment purposes and material for peer feedback.

Teaching Tips

The interaction between the Ss and the guest speaker should be as spontaneous and natural as possible. If you lose voice or any of your Ss is unable to hear the sound, it would be wise to settle for a text-based chat.

III. Offline Post-chat Activity

Time: 50 minutes

1. Follow up your guest speaker's comments with some basic comprehension questions to check whether the whole class understands the issues that were discussed during the online chat. You may touch on some lessons that they have learned by invoking such questions as 'What did you learn from the online discussion?'
2. Summarize the topics and events that occurred during this activity by looking back at the aims of this lesson plan.

3. Take this opportunity to remind students to be careful when using online chat program. With the Internet, education and learning will never be the same again but due to its open nature people with bad intentions could use it for their own benefit.

Implications for teaching and learning

Blending online technology with traditional classroom has its own challenges and limitations. Technical difficulties often occur when you least expect them - and they do happen. These glitches can make or break your session. Yet, similar to any presentations, be it F2F or online, preparation is the key. Online discussions would only work if you have invited guests who are willing to spend their time with students. Planning is important, but still, it is not foolproof. Guests may arrive too early or too late, and worst; they could miss the whole event due to time differences and time conversions.

In a nutshell, the tasks in this activity are designed to achieve the aims of the lesson by combining a blended approach to learning English that crosses boundaries and cultural dimensions. This online discussion gives students the opportunity to practice and use in real time the skills that they have been trying to learn and hone for the past year. It was a chance for them to actually speak in an authentic manner. Having said the pedagogical implications of online discussions, we could not, however, refute the possible dangers of visiting public online chat rooms. As teachers, we should take note and cautiously address the safety issues concerning the students' use of online chat tools outside the classroom.