



Spotlight on Online Classroom Management

by [Robyn Stewart](#)

Over the past few weeks, I have watched my colleagues demonstrate what adaptability and resilience means with regards to online teaching. I'm amazed at how quickly we have all moved our classes online, with great results. Now that we have our content figured out, let's turn our focus to the learner experience. Here are some ideas for embracing the features found in most classroom platforms to enhance your classroom management for language learning online.

1. Create a Routine for Starting the Class

We know that a routine is important for classroom management. My in-person classes always started with a warmer—an easy game to allow students to feel comfortable and relaxed at the start of class. Online, there seems to be a lull as we wait for all the students to appear. We watch names pop up with cameras and microphones turned off. I see it as the digital equivalent of the student who would stand outside the classroom to be able to walk in with their friends. Now they are forced to risk being the first student in class and have to talk to the teacher (gasp!).

To help students feel comfortable entering the “room” alone, I put a small assignment in the chat box or on the “whiteboard” so that students know immediately what they need to look at. Some days, it's a question that we will be talking about, other days it simply says “We'll go over homework first—make sure you have it finished.” I find that students don't log in to class late because they are no longer afraid of being caught alone with me! They also know what to expect at the start of every class. It takes just a minute to create the virtual warmer for the day, and the effects can be felt immediately.

2. Call on Students by Name

In person, many teachers ask a question and look around for a volunteer to provide a response. The live classroom allows teachers to see slight shifts in body language that signal a student is ready to speak. Getting to know our learners and their signals is part of the fun of teaching. Online, however, we do not have access to the same rich context that provides these clues. When a question is posed that is met with silence, the pace of the class drops, and students start looking bored.

I recommend calling out names. Call them often. Call them loudly. At first, it may feel very uncomfortable for students who are not used to this style of class, but I promise, in time, it will help not only diversify the participation in class, but also the pace of the lesson. Don't be afraid to choose a student. They will answer! If this is very different from the style you are comfortable with, agree with your class on a word to use to request a pass. If you call on a student who is unprepared to reply, they can call out "skip," and trust that you will move on. However, this is also a good way to teach that making mistakes is expected and a natural part of language learning.

3. Use the Tools Available and Make Sure Students Know How to Use Them, Too

No matter which learning management system or online platform you are using, now is the time to master it. Learn about all the features that you can exploit for your classroom management. Here are some of my favorite features to use:

Mute

Mute is one of my favorite functions to use in unexpected ways. On most platforms, the moderator or presenter has the ability to mute or unmute participants. This function can be used to play quick-paced games. Picture a typical vocabulary review game where one team gives a clue and another has to guess the answer. Telling a student that they have 5 seconds to answer and then muting them to keep the time is super fun and adds a level of excitement that is hard to create online. Some platforms allow the role of moderator to be transferred to anyone logged in—in that case, a student team captain can call on and mute their classmates to create that competitive vibe that is often missing online.

Raise Hands

This function is available on most platforms in some form. It's really useful to avoid the strange lapses in activity that result in a student trying to ask a question and forgetting they are on mute or having a moment of slow Internet connectivity. Create an online class culture where students use the "hand raised" signal when they have a question, a contribution to the conversation, or an answer to keep the lesson moving.

Feedback Buttons

These buttons take different forms on different platforms. On Zoom, participants have access to buttons like thumbs up, thumbs down, and request to slow down, among others. Blackboard Collaborate has a fun feedback feature where everyone can choose a feeling, such as "surprised" or "confused." In a class I am currently taking on Zoom, we have individual exercises to work on and then we come back together to discuss our questions. Akin to the teacher monitoring in person, we use the feedback button to notify the teacher that we need assistance or that we are finished without interrupting the other students who are working.

Breakout Rooms

Breakout rooms are a wonderful feature for pair or group work and to break up the instructor-led typical online synchronous class. Some platforms require that these be

activated before the session begins; others have the feature activated at all times. The moderator has the ability to move into each of the breakout rooms to monitor (sometimes in stealth mode, so students don't know you are watching them). Most platforms only allow monitoring of one breakout room at a time, which leaves the majority of students unsupervised. In person, when the teacher is helping one group, they still monitor the whole classroom. Online breakout rooms are like putting each group in a different physical classroom, and might therefore feel uncomfortable.

I recommend nominating a student to be in charge of the group or designating roles, such as secretary and time keeper, to keep the groups on task while they are unsupervised. Impose a strict time limit that allows enough time to accomplish the task without extra time to goof around. There's no way to monitor every group in different breakout rooms at all times, but I think the benefits of using breakout rooms for pair and group work outweigh the negatives.

Virtual Backgrounds

These have become very popular on Zoom. Yes, they can be distracting. Yes, you sometimes disappear into the background depending on your operating system and the background you have chosen. But let's harness that fun energy and use it to keep class exciting. Have students choose a background and talk about why they chose it, what it means to them, and how it makes them feel. Use the first few minutes of your class "warmer" to have students join a chat about the different backgrounds they see. Break out into groups to design a background (perhaps from a history or social studies unit you've already covered) and present it to the class or use the background as a warmer once a week. Some wonderful new vocabulary will come up as students practice describing places, real and imaginary.

Keeping students engaged and interested in English class online can be challenging. These tips will contribute to a new class routine, help with pace changes during the lesson, and ensure that all students are given the opportunity to participate. Keep up the good work, teachers!

Robyn Stewart is a teacher, teacher-trainer, and lifelong student of languages based in Washington, DC. She currently works for Shorelight as the associate academic director for the International Accelerator Program at American University. Robyn likes fast-paced games for class and is dedicated to finding that excitement in the online world.