

“SO, I DECIDED TO FOCUS ON ALL THE USEFUL WORDS WITH HER FIRST.”

STUDENT TEACHERS IN ZÜRICH TEACHING ONLINE ENGLISH LESSONS ONE-TO-ONE TO YOUNG LEARNERS IN BISHKEK, KYRGYZSTAN WITH A FOCUS ON LEXIS.

Anstelle eines dreiwöchigen Praktikums in einer Primarschule im englischsprachigen Ausland (Assistant Teachership), haben rund 300 Studierende der Pädagogischen Hochschule Zürich Lernenden in Kirgisistan zehn Online-Einzellektionen in Englisch erteilt. Administriert wurde das Programm von der live Sprachlern-Plattform *loquilove*. Da die Lernenden über geringe Englischkenntnisse verfügten, fokussierten die Studierenden in ihrem Unterricht auf den Erwerb von Lexis. Die Evaluation dieses Alternativprogramms zeigte, dass sowohl die Studierenden als auch die Verantwortlichen der kirgisischen Primarschulen zum Schluss kamen, dass dank dieser Online-Lektionen die Lernenden ihr lexikalisches Wissen ausbauen konnten und dass die Studierenden Fortschritte im Aufbau ihrer Medienkompetenz machten.

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Introduction

Due to the Covid-19 restrictions, the assistant teachership programme at Zurich University of Teacher Education (PHZH) for primary school student teachers training to teach English had to be cancelled. The programme would have included a three-week internship in a primary school in an English-speaking country. The university was able to provide an alternative programme in collaboration with *loquilove*. *Loquilove* (www.loquilove.com¹) is a live tutoring and language learning web-application which allows for the learning and teaching of languages online and which, in addition, supports educational projects. The alternative programme involved having student teachers teach ten one-to-one English lessons to young learners in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan and took place between September and November 2021.

¹ Loquilove will be renamed to «lologu» in the near future.

The aims of the alternative programme were that student teachers:

- apply and further develop their language teaching competence.
- use and expand their digital media competence and acquire new instructional techniques.
- are socially committed and reflect upon their personal and professional values.
- expand their language teaching skills in a way that has sustainable positive social effects.
- develop their intercultural communicative competence.

The second aim not only refers to the competence of planning and implementing online lessons that takes into account the available digital resources provided by the communication platform being

used (e.g. Skype) such as screen sharing or the chat function; it also implies the use of additional interactive online tools or playful learning programmes to make lessons more appealing. Online games or language learning apps increase learners' motivation and attention, facilitate action-oriented and contextualised language practice, provide immediate, often individualised feedback, and bring variety into the classroom (Surkamp & Viebrock 2018: 228; Li 2017: 42). Moreover, working with interactive, playful activities online appeals to different learner types because it promotes emotional, multi-sensory learning and hence enhances retention (Eisenmann 2019: 137; Pratibha 2019: 19). Lastly, young learners in the 21st century have all grown up with digital technology. For these digital natives, technology is essential to their everyday lives – it should therefore also be an integral part of their learning environment (Li 2017: 22).

Description of the context

As mentioned, loquiloive is a live tutoring and language learning web-application that allows for the learning and teaching of languages online while at the same time supporting educational projects. This means that the student teachers were not paid for their teaching and the young learners were not charged for the lessons. Loquiloive contacted five private primary schools in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and the headmasters were able to provide close to 300 young English learners for the project. They also organised rooms, technical equipment, and teachers to oversee the pupils during their online lessons. The class teachers provided information concerning the pre-knowledge of the 9 to 12-year-old learners. Most of the 298 student teachers were full-time students at the beginning of their 5th semester. They had completed one English methodology module and several internships during which they taught English in a class setting.

After the first few online-lessons had taken place, it was observed by many student teachers that the young learners' level of English was much lower than initially communicated and expected. This meant that the student teachers had to abandon some of their previously more communicative-oriented lesson plans and focus mostly on teaching lexis.

Since lexis is the foundation of language production and the key to meaningful communication (Surkamp & Viebrock 2018: 142), placing the teaching of words and phrases at the centre of the lessons makes sense when teaching young learners with limited foreign language skills. In this article, the focus is on the teaching of words or lexical structures in a one-to-one setting with learners who do not share a common language with their student teacher.

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The essentials of learning and teaching lexis

Lexis or lexical items refer to individual words or units of vocabulary with a specific meaning (Spratt et al 2011:16). Knowing a lexical item means understanding its meaning, form and use. Moreover, in order to learn lexis deeply and be able to apply it, learners need to encounter it repeatedly in contextualized, meaningful and memorable ways (Butler 2019: 13; Godwin-Jones 2018: 1–2). Thus, learning and teaching lexis occurs over time in multiple steps. According to Brewster et al. (2002: 86–91), young learners acquire lexis typically in five stages through which they need to be guided by the teacher.

Stage 1 refers to understanding and learning the meaning of the new lexis. The fastest option for conveying the meaning of new lexical items, but also the least effective one because of its low cognitive demands, is to translate them (Surkamp & Viebrock 2018: 145). Fortunately, due to the fact that in the present setting student teachers and learners could not fall back on a common language, new lexis had to be introduced through other presentation techniques. Ideally, lexis is presented in meaningful groups (e.g. in lexical or grammatical sets) with the help of pictures, gestures, or sample sentences.

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Preparing the student teachers for online lessons

Due to the novelty of this programme and student teachers' inexperience in teaching English lessons one-to-one online, the two senior lecturers responsible for this project at the PHZH prepared an online learning tool. It offered a short summary of important methodological concepts for specific one-to-one settings. These were visually assisted by short film clips, accompanied by reflective questions, and underpinned with practical ideas. The tool also included information on lesson planning and evaluating learning, a list of useful learning apps and online tools as well as practical teaching tips for coping with the online one-to-one teaching situation.

The most distinctive feature of the learning tool are the film clips which resulted from the eight online lessons that one of the senior lecturers conducted previously as a pilot. The film clips aimed at providing practical insights into exemplary one-to-one English lessons and at inspiring student teachers with examples of good practice.

The chapter of this learning tool about teaching lexis equipped student teachers with practical ideas of how to implement the five stages of introducing and practising lexis (Brewster, Ellis & Girard 2002: 85–91) in an online one-to-one setting. For example, student teachers got ideas how lexis can be introduced with the help of pictures and gestures, how it can next be personalised with self-made word cards and how it can then be trained in playful hybrid activities (e.g. word card games) or with interactive activities. Figure 1 shows some useful websites.

Stage 2, attending to form, means that the sound, the spelling or, where applicable, further grammatical knowledge is introduced. At this stage learners should be given a chance to listen to and repeat the pronunciation of words (e.g. with drills) and to notice their written forms (e.g. with copying exercises). These first two stages of the lexis acquisition process can effectively be enhanced with the multimodal use of technology, including audio or visuals (Li 2017: 116–17).

At stage 3, learners work actively with the new lexis and train it in varied ways to make strong and sustainable memory connections. At this stage again, using technology like online games or learning apps provide learners with motivating opportunities to train new lexis in an interactive way. This is particularly effective if a teacher is present to facilitate interactions in which the meaning and use of the lexis is additionally scaffolded (Butler 2019, 17). Moreover, since lexis and grammar are often closely related, applying lexis in contextualised ways helps learners to explore the patterns of the foreign language (Surkamp & Viebrock 2018: 134).

Stage 4 refers to the need to organise, to record and to personalise lexis so that it can be consolidated and recycled frequently. For example, learners could write the words or expressions down in a personal booklet or on cards to have the lexis at their disposal for individual training.

The final stage 5 emphasizes the need to develop vocabulary learning strategies so that learners become more efficient language learners and users.

Even though the five stages provide helpful guidance on teaching lexis, stages 3–5 do not need to follow the described chronological procedure strictly but could be incorporated in the process in any suitable order.

Figure 1

List of useful websites published on online learning tool

- **Wordwall:** Collection of interactive templates such as quizzes and wordgames
- **Quizlet:** Vocabulary training
- **ESL Kids Game:** Collection of vocabulary games
- **Games for ELS:** Engaging games for learning English
- **Quizizz:** Tool for creating quizzes, flashcards, and presentations
- **Online Teaching Activities:** A collection of ideas for online-English lessons
- **Padlet:** Online pin board to display information and set up tasks
- **YouTube:** Videos, stories, animated story books, songs, chants
- **Classroomscreen:** For managing lessons online
- **Edupad:** Web-based collaborative text editor
- **Kahoot:** A digital learning platform
- **Book Creator:** Creating digital books that combine text, images, audio

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Study

The qualitative evaluation of the project was subdivided into different parts which allowed us to gather data from various perspectives and from multiple sources.

Participants and data collection

Once the 298 student teachers had carried out ten online English lessons, they evaluated their learner's progress and reflected on their personal learning regarding the aims of the programme in a written assignment of about 500 words in length. Out of these nearly 300 assignments, 30 documents were randomly chosen and read in detail. In addition to writing a reflection, student teachers were asked to share their views on the opportunities and challenges, as well as on the organisation and implementation of the programme in a survey carried out with Microsoft Forms. 117 of the students (39.26%) participated in the survey. Five lessons by different student teachers were observed by one of the senior lecturers and these student teachers were additionally interviewed about various aspects of their experience which included questions about aspects of good practice in an online one-to-one setting as well as reflections on the use of technology. Moreover, a short Microsoft Forms survey about the perceived learnings, the opportunities and the challenges of the programme was sent out to the five headmasters of the schools in Bishkek. The short questionnaire was returned by all five headmasters.

The assignments, the transcribed interviews and surveys were analysed with the help of a keyword-search (like 'vocabulary', 'lexis' or 'words') to find evidence of how student teachers worked with the teaching and learning of lexis.

Findings

As the following quotes summarise, many student teachers felt the immediate need to expand their young learners' lexical knowledge once they got started with teaching online.

- «I was supposed to do a short exercise on grammatical tenses and sentence formation, but I skipped this as the child could hardly say a word by herself. I decided that I would focus more on building her vocabulary when working with her» (student teacher N.D.).
- «I planned on reading a book with her, this was not possible anymore so I decided quite fast that we would try to learn some words with games and pictures» (student teacher N.S.).

The answers to the question "Which tasks, tools or instructional techniques proved especially useful?" in the survey show that over 90 % of the student teachers taught lexis and used online tools for introducing and practising lexis. Four headmasters from Bishkek noticed too that the teaching of lexis was the main focus of the online lessons and that the learners expanded their lexical knowledge remarkably: «The children learnt lots of new vocabulary based on pictures and target words» (headmaster 2).

With regard to how the student teachers implemented the above-mentioned stages of introducing and practising lexis, the data revealed the following findings: At stage 1 of the acquisition process, when introducing the meaning of new lexis, student teachers observed that using multiple means (e.g. pictures, gestures,

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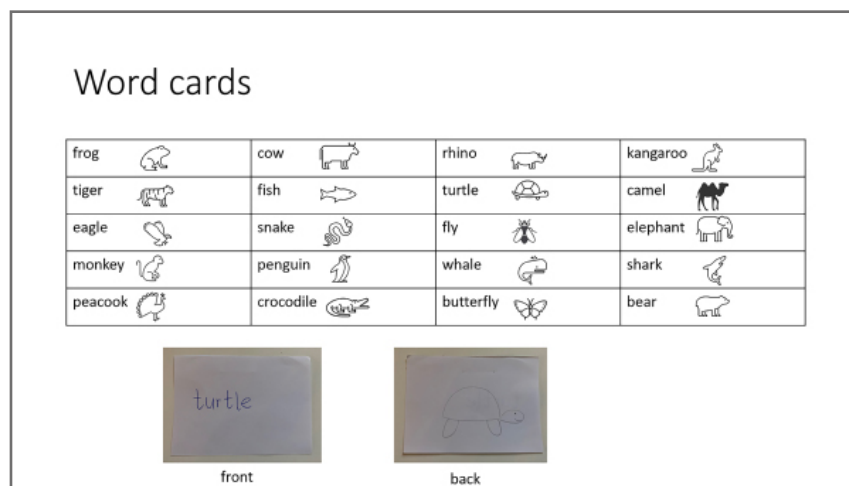
mime) and scaffolds (e.g. word-banks, sentence starters) proved to be helpful: «Also, the way I introduced the vocabulary to him, turned out to be really effective and I've made the conclusion that the best way to learn new words is by hearing them, reading them, and then repeating them. Ideally also writing them, but that didn't quite work out, as I had no possibility to check if he had written them correctly» (student-teacher C. M.).

At stage 2, focussing on formal aspects of new lexis, a large number of student teachers mentioned that having just one learner allowed them to better focus on their pupil's individual needs in terms of improving pronunciation, repeating lexis and using the chat function for writing practice. «Ich habe zum Beispiel gemerkt, dass er 'beer' sagt, statt 'bear', und nun kann ich mit ihm daran arbeiten» (student 3). Or: «Ich habe den Chat gebraucht, um das Schreiben von Wörtern zu üben. Dabei habe ich drauf bestanden, dass er es richtig schreibt» (student teacher 4).

Most of the student teachers worked a lot at stage 3, which means training words actively to make strong memory connections. They tried out online games or learning apps and facilitated the learners' learning process by providing scaffolds: «Ich arbeite extrem viel mit Wordwall (...). Und das ist schon extrem toll, all diese Spiele dort. Da bin auch ich mal kurz entlastet. Es klappt noch nicht, dass sie es selbst macht, meistens machen wir es zusammen, aber dies ist wegen technischer Probleme» (student teacher 2). Or another student teacher mentioned: «Wir haben viel mit Wimmelbildern gearbeitet, *I spy with my little eye*, oder Bildbeschreibungen haben wir auch gemacht. Und dann halt so ein Rätsel draus gemacht, dass er erklärt, wo's ist. Und ich muss es dann finden» (student teacher 4). Another student teacher mentioned: « (...) da habe ich Bilder gezeigt, und dann den Scaffold «I see» und dann «This animal eats», einfach solche Satzanfänge und (...) er hat dann gar nicht mehr auf mich gehört, was ich ihm als Auftrag gegeben habe, er hat einfach die Satzanfänge gesehen und dann bei allen Sätzen gemacht» (student teacher 3). This last example illustrates how lexis and grammar are interdependent. Many student teachers used lexical chunks and whole sentences while teaching and made sure that the lexis was taught in context and not in isolation.

At stage 4, to organise and record lexis, many student teachers worked with word cards or personalised lexis for their learner's individual training. The word cards were used for playing games and various other activities such as matching, categorising or prioritising: «Ich habe nun auch diese Wortkarten gemacht, damit ich damit Spiele machen kann (...). Weil sonst bin immer ich die, die etwas macht. Und so mit den Karten kann er das gut selbst steuern» (student teacher 3, Figure 2). «Er spielt sehr gerne Eishockey und dann haben wir seine Ausrüstung angeschaut und dann hat er ein Bild gezeichnet und das Bild mit den Vocis angeschrieben. Das war der Volltreffer!» (student teacher 4). Using interactive games and playful activities enabled student teachers to create varied, motivating, and engaging lessons. This was also noticed by several headmasters:

Figure 2
Screenshot of hands-on learning of lexis in online lesson



«One more important point in the programme is that fact the student teachers are taught how to make lessons exciting online» (headmaster 1).

Thanks to the meaningful use of technology student teacher not only managed to keep the learners focussed for longer periods of time, but also succeeded in - as recommended at stage 5 of the acquisition process - teaching them some strategies for learning lexis like using word cards for memorising or repeating words regularly with games.

The data did not show evidence of the evaluation of the teaching and learning of lexis within the ten lessons. The reason for this might be that only a few students managed to carry out a proper assessment at the end of the programme. Furthermore, there were no specific questions in the surveys and the interviews regarding the assessment of acquiring lexis.

Conclusion

The evaluation of the alternative programme for the Assistant Teachership at the PHZH has shown that teaching lexis online can be motivating and rewarding when various technology-based games, learning apps and hands-on word cards are used in this one-to-one setting in which the teacher is present to mediate supportively. The focus on lexis facilitated interaction in these online English lessons for the reason that lexical items are the building blocks of communication, and their immediate use can be scaffolded in multimodal ways on a computer screen. Furthermore, the playful learning arrangements helped to make memory connections due to regular repetition of the lexis and learners' interactive engagement. Moreover, learners got to know some vocabulary learning strategies (e.g. using word cards, playing games) which they can apply in their future English learning. As the online lessons were perceived as fun by many learners, the positive emotions involved often resulted in a trusting and appreciative relationship between learners and student teachers. This proved to be especially important with learners who do not share a common language with their teacher.

In addition, the skills learnt by student teachers when using the five stages for teaching lexis to learners who do not share a common language can be transferred to their future classrooms in Switzerland and might help to prevent the use of German in English lessons.

However, there are limitations to this study, as it is not known how useful the assessment of the learning progress is, and whether indeed, in-depth sustainable lexis learning has taken place at all. For a next time, the assessment of the learning process should be planned and evaluated more formally. Moreover, it would be interesting to investigate how much lexis was remembered at a later stage if student teachers and learners were to meet up again a few weeks after the programme ended.

On a more general level, despite some technical challenges such as poor internet connections or malfunctioning computer equipment, and the impression of some student teachers that teaching online cannot replace a three-week Assistant Teachership programme in an English teaching country, most student teachers felt they gained confidence in teaching English online resourcefully. Knowing a repertoire of useful online tools or learning apps as well as being able to implement them in engaging ways in the classroom or in an online-setting seems to be a vital necessity for every teacher in the 21st century: «It was a very interesting experience to teach lessons online and to use these new tools. In my opinion it would be very useful to talk more about these online methods because due to Covid we were shown how quickly online teaching can become necessary». (student teacher A.S.)

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