



# Safety in live online lessons

**Paul Ashe**

looks at safety, in the fourth article in this series.

It is a commonly held belief that children and teens find more benefits from in-person synchronous teaching than live online lessons. I would agree there are many socio-emotional and educational reasons why it is preferable to start learning in person before contemplating the live online option which is why this article will focus on adult learners.

There are many things to think about when dealing with safety in live online lessons and it all starts long before the lessons do! We need to think about different aspects of safety such as physical, emotional, psychological, professional and data security.

Before we start our lessons we need to think carefully about our own set-up and that of our students to ensure we are all in a safe environment. The advice provided in the first article in this series will help with the teacher's set-up to

ensure positive physical wellbeing. Once your working area is created you should look carefully at what students can see through your camera. Ensure there is no personal information that you would not share publicly on social media. Solutions for this include setting up your teaching area in a corner of a room with the camera looking at the corner. This has the added benefit of focusing the attention of the students towards you. You might also prefer to use a virtual background which means you can teach from different locations during a whole course but appear to be in the same place each time. Similar advice should also be provided to students and can be included in your acceptable use policy (AUP) which they should sign before the lessons start. You might also wish to use your initial contact with the student(s) to provide digital literacy tips and show them how to blur or change their backgrounds, for example.

## Acceptable use policy

Prior to starting any live online lesson or course it is necessary to establish the ground rules of behaviour and acceptable use in classroom. This should include a code of conduct and a lesson agreement. Points to include in this policy would be the prohibition of recording or taking screenshots of other participants and sharing any personal information that may have been provided accidentally or purposefully during the lesson; the avoidance of any form of harassment as well as ensuring lessons are free from any form of discrimination. This latter point is particularly significant in live online teaching as your students may be formed of a wide variety of backgrounds and, in a world in which conflict is ever present, the possibility of students from different countries in conflict coinciding in your lessons is a strong one. The positive take on this is that language learning can be a

form of bringing people together to focus on learning. Scan the QR code to see one example of an AUP.



Figure 1: Example of an AUP

## Classroom settings

Check the settings of the online teaching platform you are using for your live lessons and, just as you would in an in-person context, ensure you know your classroom well. There are several things you can do before the lessons start. You might wish to limit the possibility of students privately messaging one another via the chat option on the platform and sharing files. Ensure you know how to change the name of the participants as they enter and you can quickly mute the audio and turn off the camera of students if necessary. You may wish to set up the classroom link to require students to sign in using their email or a password which will reduce the risk of 'Zoombombing', a phenomenon in which a random person enters a Zoom room and disrupts the lesson. Some platforms allow you to enable a waiting room so you can vet those entering. If you do not recognise the name of the student in the waiting room ask your students to turn off their cameras or put them into a separate room (aka breakout room) before allowing the unknown student to enter. Remember also to disable permissions to record the session and screen share. Once all your students are present some platforms give you the option to lock your meeting room which will not allow anyone else to join.

It goes without saying that you should not post the link to your classroom publicly.

## Online classroom management

In a live online lesson our ability to read body language and measure students' wellbeing is more limited than in an in-person classroom. However, the benefits are that if students need a moment to themselves they can easily turn off their cameras and microphones. We should pay special attention to ensure we can see all our students at all times and this may require the teacher having a bigger or second screen. This will help read body language better and ensure we are naming all students to promote equity. The fact that the teacher can message students individually allows you to contact them privately during the lesson to ensure everything is well. If your teaching platform allows you to create smaller groups for students to work together, you need to ensure you can move quickly between each group to monitor them and ensure the AUP is being adhered to. You might also wish to use a different device to be present in the online classroom so you can monitor two or more groups at the same time. Ideally you would be doing this unobtrusively, i.e. with your camera off.

## Data protection

If you are collecting any personal data from students such as names, what time zone they are in or email addresses you will need to ensure you get their consent for this and explain clearly what information will be kept, where it is stored and for what purposes. You should also provide a business email address (avoid using your personal email) to allow students to request the elimination of their data at any time.

This is even more significant if your lessons are recorded, perhaps to help absent students keep up with the course.

## Professional safety

One final thing to be aware of is that you are running a business; your working hours, during which you can be contacted, should be clearly delimited for students. Working online means your student base is potentially the whole world with a variety of time zones. Ensure you set up a business email address. While providing your phone number to use instant messaging apps might be a useful backup line of communication with students, it also means sharing your personal number. Perhaps a business number would be preferable, to allow you to switch off outside office hours.

Teaching adults in live, online lessons is highly effective when you have been trained and are aware of all the many factors to ensure a safe and efficient learning environment; I hope some of the insights from the English live online teaching (ELOT) course included in this article will help you and your students make the most of live online learning.



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ELT management, online teacher training and Materials writing. Since 1997 he has enjoyed being a teacher, academic manager, teacher trainer, business and academic management tutor, and a director of a large physical language school. He has also helped set up online schools.

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