**What Can ESL/EFL Teachers Do With COVID-19?**

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**Introduction**

Feeling bored at home because of the quarantine or total lockdown of your city? Or being forced to work from home due to the temporary closure of your workplace? No matter where you are now, we all may be currently experiencing the same situation – staying at home and practicing social distancing – probably with the same reason: COVID-19.

While the whole world is worrying about the novel coronavirus and seeing this a global disaster for everyone, some people are trying to find ways to live their lives differently (and positively perhaps) regardless of the risk they have been facing. Medical professionals and researchers are of course looking for cure for this highly infectious disease. Government officials may be trying hard to figure out what to do with the financial crisis and economic recovery. Ordinary people are, mostly, thinking about what to eat and what to do every day when they have nowhere to dine out or shop. What about us ESL/EFL teachers? Is there anything we can do with COVID-19?

Where there is risk, there is opportunity. There are definitely some things we can do during this crisis. Since teachers teach, ESL teachers may dig out new materials from the current hot topic and incorporate them into their lessons.

**Vocabulary**

Among the many English language aspects, vocabulary is seldom the first one ESL/EFL teachers would think of to teach. As well, teachers never spend the whole lesson solely teaching vocabulary. Nevertheless, it plays a vital role in helping English learners develop the four basic skills, i.e. listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Teachers would, more often than not, associate teaching vocabulary with any one of those skills in their lesson plans (Lee & Muncie 2006, Heilman et al. 2008, Lee 2009, Nam 2010). While we appreciate that learning technical vocabulary effectively may facilitate students in expressing their relevant content knowledge (Lee 2009), a science-related subject, like viruses or diseases, may possibly cause anxiety to learners, especially those who are less proficient in English (Ardasheva et al. 2018). As such, we may not want to touch on difficult technical terminology when using COVID-19 as our lesson topic. Neither do we need to explain to our students what a coronavirus is or its structure and features (let the science teachers do it). However, given that news feeds keep flowing in every day, many of us have already inadvertently learned words or phrases, which used to be unfamiliar to us or infrequently used but have gradually become rather common (Category 1). Therefore, those ‘new’ words may be of interest for teachers of upper intermediate or even advanced level students. As for intermediate or lower intermediate level, topics related to sicknesses or symptoms may be more worth teaching (Category 2). For those who are teaching the little ones or elementary level, body parts might work better (Category 3), considering that over the past few months, people have been emphasizing washing hands and covering our nose and mouth when sneezing. With these target vocabulary, English teachers could look for web texts related to COVID-19, which is not only authentic but also easily accessible at the moment, and design various vocabulary exercises to facilitate their receptive or productive skill lesson (Lee 2009, Nam 2010).

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| **Category** | **Focus** | **Target vocabulary** |
| 1 | COVID-19 | Coronavirus, pandemic, epidemic, infectious, communicable, contagious, incubation, pneumonia, quarantine, lockdown, curfew |
| 2 | Symptoms | Runny nose, nasal congestion, sneeze, (dry) cough, sore throat, diarrhea, fever, fibrosis |
| 3 | Body parts | Nose, mouth, elbow, hand, head, lung |

**Imperatives**

During this coronavirus outbreak, people have been asked to follow a number of rules and instructions in order to show our social responsibility and help contain the infectious disease. More often than not, imperative sentences are used in a plethora of materials educating people what to do, such as leaflets/pamphlets, brochures, health organization websites, news articles, notices and announcements. To name a few, there are ten common things people can practice to fight against COVID-19.

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| **Things you can do to help contain COVID-19** |
| 1. **Wash** your hands thoroughly and regularly. 2. **Wear** facemasks properly. 3. **Practice** social distancing. 4. **Avoid** touching eyes, nose and mouth with unclean hands. 5. **Keep** away from crowds. 6. **Stay** home/inside. 7. **Check** your body temperature. 8. **Sneeze** into your elbow (if you don’t have a facemask or tissue). 9. **Sanitize** your hands and/or latex gloves. 10. **Talk** less when you eat. |

When teaching imperatives, setting up a context and using aids that reflect the real-life are helpful and effective (McEldowney 1975). There are a myriad of teaching aids teachers can consider, from maps and diagrams (McEldowney 1975) to traffic sign pictures (Ismail Latif 2019) and computer game (Aster & Narius 2013). To add more fun to the lesson, act-out activities such as a guessing/mining game may be included in addition to all those teaching materials (Hertia & Tiarina 2014). In the topic of COVID-19, teachers can on one hand emphasize those important protection measures and teach students to practice them thoroughly. On the other hand, the structure as well as the practical use of imperative sentences can be made the main focus of the lesson. Once a context is set up, with the assistance of appropriate teaching aids and skills, teachers can design their framework of development for their lesson in teaching imperatives (McEldowney 1975).

In order to make the classroom more interactive for a serious topic like COVID-19, the following activities may be helpful.

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| **Suggested activities for teaching imperatives with the topic of COVID-19** |
| 1. *(without the need of teaching materials)* Divide students into two teams or small groups, each to brainstorm and create two lists of imperatives, i.e. Do’s and Don’ts. This could be done in the form of a competition and used as a warmer at the beginning of the lesson. 2. Prepare a set of pictures (e.g. a facemask, a pair of latex gloves, a bottle of sanitizer) and tell students to think about what they would do with those items. Ask them to create their imperative sentences using those pictures. This could be in small groups (if more than one set of pictures is available) and used as a warmer or production activity. (Alternatively, a collection of action verbs, e.g. keep, wash and stay, could be used instead of pictures.). 3. Design a matching game using both pictures and action verbs. Prepare one set of cards with pictures and one set with action verbs. With all cards facing down, students can take turn to choose one from each set and make an imperative sentence that makes sense. For example, if a student gets a picture of ‘eyes’ and the action verb ‘avoid’, he/she may say ‘avoid touching your eyes with unclean hands’. If one gets a picture of ‘elbow’ plus the verb ‘talk’, he/she can’t say ‘talk to your elbow’ because it does not make any sense. Then he/she has to pass and let the next student do it. This could be used as a production activity. |

**Songs as a teaching material**

Songs have always been a very useful pedagogical tool for ESL/EFL teachers because they have been proved to bring a plenty of benefits to English learners. Due to this reason, the advantages and effectiveness of using songs in teaching both receptive and productive skills of English has been widely studied. Schoepp (2016) summarized that songs could help achieve three theoretical reasons, i.e. affective, cognitive and linguistic. They can also expand the vocabulary knowledge in pre-school children (Coyle & Gómez Gracia 2014) and improve vocabulary competence in upper high school students (Abidin et al. 2011). Using songs can also enhance vocabulary acquisition, literacy development, and other skills like listening and pronunciation in young learners (Paquette & Rieg 2008, Millington 2011, Abdul Razak & Md Yunus 2016). With the help of various types of activities, songs can also work well in adult ESL classroom (Lems 2001). Despite all these benefits, teachers sometimes may find it difficult to select appropriate songs for their lessons and hence, in-service training is suggested (Şevik 2011). In the current digital world, however, teachers can easily search for information or strategies online to help their lesson design if they want to use songs and music as their teaching material. Otherwise, there are quite a number of new ideas suggested in Lems (2018) for English teachers, which are definitely worth a try.

Looking at the present situation, many people are actually given an opportunity to show their talents during this difficult time, especially as songwriters and musicians. From two young children in Hong Kong to a musical band in Mexico and even health authorities in Vietnam, quite a number of COVID-19-inspired songs have been produced in order to help educate people in different places (<https://theculturetrip.com/asia/vietnam/articles/covid-19-songs-go-viral-to-educate-people-to-fight-the-outbreak/>). Not only are new songs being written, many well-known songs have also been adapted and re-written with new lyrics teaching people how to help contain the coronavirus (<https://scroll.in/video/957411/stayin-inside-i-gotta-wash-my-hands-the-bee-gees-and-the-beatles-chartbusters-remade>). ESL/EFL teachers can definitely make good use of these new or adapted songs to teach our students. Out of the many masterpieces online, the following is chosen as an example:

Song: Do Re Mi – Covid 19 version (<https://youtu.be/MMBh-eo3tvE>)

| **Lyrics** | **What can be taught is…** |
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| Let's start at the very beginning  A sore throat, a cough in Wuhan  And in no time at all, there were 1, 2, 3  And one went on a plane - took it overseas  Overseas  And that’s how pandemics get started, you see  Woe is me  Now we’ve got Covid-19  Do not fear - but please stay here  Stay at home now, everyone  We must wash and clean things well  Cars? No long trips just for fun!  Don’t let Covid virus spread  Isolate yourself at home  See your friends online instead  That’s the healthy way to go oh oh oh  X2  Do not fear - but just stay here  Time to all self-isolate  Wash your hands, use lots of soap  Don’t go further than your gate!  Social life must stay online  Keep 2 metres clear of me,  Watch TV, drink lots of wine  That will kill Covid-19!  Cough in your elbow, wash your hands with soap!  Now children, staying at home -and-so on are things we do to stop the spread of Covid-19  Once you have this in your head  You can do a million different things at home to stay sane,  Like this:  Sleep, eat, whinge, tweet, snooze, blob, think  Loaf, mooch, doze, smooch, binge watch, drink  But staying inside is so boring!  So we think about why – remember why we’re doing it – like this:  When you know the reason why,  Kill off Covid – stay inside!  Exercise close to your home  Only shop for what you need  Keep your bubble tightly closed  And we’ll beat this bug with speed!  Social life has been postponed  And you’re bored out of your mind  Suck it up and stay at home  And we’ll leave this bug behind!  Cough in your elbow, wash your hands,  Keep two metres away from me  Yes please, I’m germ free  And that’s how I’d like to be!  Keep away, please from me  I will stay Covid free!  When you know the things to do, germs will stay away from you!  Stay inside your bubble now  Do not spread those germs around  Yes, you might be going mad  And be desperate to get out!  It’s a nasty world out there  Keep the social distance rules  Everything you touch – beware  You could spread – more – germs, you (fools)  Flatten the curve – Covid 19!  You have got the power to flatten the curve through  The things you choose to do – it’s true! | 1. Vocabulary  – sore throat, cough (symptoms of a sickness)  – pandemics, coronavirus  – elbow, hands (body parts)  – spread, loaf (words that can serve as both a noun and a verb)  – sleep, eat, whinge, tweet, …etc. (things that you may do in your daily life/informal words/ emergence of new words, e.g. to tweet (social media), to binge watch)  2. Idiom  – in no time (at all)  – Woe is me  – keep clear of/keep away from  – out of your mind  3. Grammar/Usage  – to let (sth/sb) + bare infinitive  – to go (when not referring to ‘moving from one place to another)  – lots of  – further (compare with farther as a comparative of ‘far’)  – to stay (when not referring to ‘not leaving’)  – why, what, when and how (when not used as a question word)  – kill off (phrasal verb)  4. Prefix and suffix  – ‘self-‘  – ‘-free’  – ‘-en’ to form verbs  5. Slang – suck it up  6. Modal verb – might |

The original song “Do-Re-Mi” in *The Sound of Music* itself is already very good for teaching English. This COVID-19 version as well is worth using if teachers really want to talk about this virus topic plus English. The lyrics here contain a lot of useful resources (e.g. idioms, grammar), from which teachers can choose one or two to focus on. However, some may be rather advanced (e.g. prefix and suffix) for beginners or lower intermediate English learners. Therefore, ESL/EFL teachers need to consider the level of their learners and the lesson focus before they choose their song and language topic. For pre-school children or young learners, teachers may wish to go for a children’s song like “London Bridge is falling down”, which has also been adapted for COVID-19.

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| **COVID-19 version for “London Bridge is falling down”** |
| 1. Wear a mask to fight virus, fight virus, fight virus. Wear a mask to fight virus, my dear students. 2. Wash your hands (yes!) very clean, very clean, very clean. Wash your hands (yes!) very clean, my dear students. 3. Stay away from busy crowds, busy crowds, busy crowds. Stay away from busy crowds, my dear students. 4. Practice your English every day, every day, every day. Practice your English every day, my dear students. |

**Other ideas**

Many ESL/EFL teachers would like to use a warmer or a lead-in session to start their lesson. The following activities or discussion topics may provide some insights for them when teaching this coronavirus topic.

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|  | **Activity/Discussion** | **Content** |
| 1. | Discussion | Ask students to do small group discussion with questions like *‘What would you do if you were put in a 14-day quarantine?’* or *‘What would you prepare if you were put in a 14-day quarantine?’*. |
| 2. | Activity | Prepare a set of pictures showing different items and tell each student that they are only allowed to choose three things (depending on the number of cards and the class size) for quarantine. Ask students to share why those items are selected. Where necessary, prepare several sets of pictures with different categories (e.g. essentials like towel, shower gel, and toilet paper, or food like cup noodles, chocolate bars, and chips) for use. |
| 3. | Activity | Prepare a set of pictures of different items that students may need for quarantine and give each student three (depending on the number of cards and the class size). Ask them to mingle and trade their ‘unwanted’ items with the others and see if they could get something they ‘want’ for quarantine. |

Currently teachers can easily obtain a myriad of resources like articles, podcasts or videos talking about COVID-19. All those could be used as teaching materials to teach students the receptive skills, i.e. reading and listening. As for the productive parts, speaking activities with relevant discussion topics can be conducted, allowing students to express their views and opinions. For example, a debate like ‘*Should the city be totally locked down/a 24-hour curfew be imposed in order to contain COVID-19?*’ or *‘Should the government ban all traveling activities during the outbreak of COVID-19?’* may be appropriate for advanced level of English learners. If writing is planned as the production activity instead, an exercise of re-writing the lyrics using simple songs (e.g. birthday song) may work. Surely it is understandable that not many people are talented in music and rhyming and thus writing song lyrics could be rather difficult and challenging. Here the following writing activity may be considered.

There are a lot of medical experts and health workers, like doctors, nurses and many other frontliners, who have been making countless sacrifice to help us get through this crisis. To show our support to these great people, we certainly should respond to their request *“We stay at work for you. You stay at home for us.”*, but what’s more, we could also show our gratitude to all of them and wholeheartedly thank them for what they have been doing for us. So, it may be valuable to turn this into a production activity, in which teachers can ask their students to write something to thank those medical staff. It could be a letter, an email, or even just a note, depending on what structure or format to focus on. After the activity, teachers may also collect all the students’ works and send them to the health workers as a gift. That would definitely mean a lot to them.

The future, which may be a very devastating one, is unknown but the present is still here for us. We may not be able to take control of many things during this COVID-19 outbreak but it doesn’t mean that there is totally nothing we can do. As long as we understand our role in the society, we can still seize this very moment to teach, to learn, to develop yourself, and to help the others, so as to make our world a better place.

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