

Using Constructivist Pedagogies to Support Foreign Language Teaching in Remote Spaces

Valerie Harlow Shinas, Lesley University, United States
Huijing Wen, Moravian College, United States
Lijing Luo, Conrad Schools of Science, United States

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Abstract

This paper discusses the experiences of one teacher's experiences as she pivoted to remote teaching in response to the pandemic. In the spring of 2020, schools across the globe were thrust into emergency planning as they pivoted from face-to-face teaching in brick and mortar classrooms to remote instruction in response to pandemic-related school closures. Using a combination of video conferencing, online composition tools, and asynchronous learning tasks, teachers redesigned their instruction to address district mandates and to meet the needs of their students. Ms. Luo, a Chinese language and culture teacher in a public school in the United States, re-envisioned her constructivist teaching practices for fully online instruction. She leveraged evidence-based practices including Project-based Learning (PBL) and jigsaw strategies to engage and motivate the secondary students in her Chinese language and culture classes. Her experiences uncovered recommendations for teachers as they plan remote and hybrid foreign language instruction.

Keywords: Remote Teaching, Foreign Language Teaching, Constructivist Pedagogies, Problem-Based Learning

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Introduction

In the early spring of 2020, schools across the globe were thrust into emergency planning as they pivoted from face-to-face teaching in brick and mortar classrooms to remote instruction. Using a combination of video conferencing, online composition tools, and traditional paper-pencil tasks, teachers cobbled together curricula to address district mandates and meet the needs of their students. The effectiveness of this instruction has not been measured but we speculate that the shift to remote teaching has been difficult for teachers, parents, and students (Heubeck, 2020).

The backdrop for this watershed moment in K-12 education is a decades-long conversation about if and how teachers integrate digital tools within their instruction. Although most teachers in the United States report good access to technology for instructional planning and teaching, before the pandemic mandated that all instruction be delivered in remote spaces teachers tended not to integrate these resources into their instruction (Ertmer et al., 2012; Hutchison & Reinking, 2011). We know that teachers' beliefs about technology have important impacts on their use of digital tools (Ertmer, Ottenbreit-Leftwich, Sadik, Sendurur, & Sendurer, 2012) yet it is not clear why many teachers did not use available digital resources to support teaching and learning (Beschoner & Woodward, 2019; Hutchison & Reinking, 2011). This is striking when we consider that in the winter and spring of 2020, teachers were asked to immediately pivot to online teaching with little time to prepare. Not surprisingly, even the most technologically savvy teachers experienced challenges (Heubeck, 2020).

Teaching Chinese Language and Culture Remotely: Responding to a Pandemic

The purpose of this paper is to describe the experiences of one teacher, the third author of this paper, during pandemic-related school closures in 2020. During the spring of 2020, Ms. Luo was teaching Chinese language and culture classes in a public school in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. In March, she and her colleagues were forced to pivot quickly to 100% online teaching. Shortly after Ms. Luo began teaching remotely, the authors of this paper engaged in informal conversations about her experiences. What began as a collegial conversation became a process of collaborative, reflective inquiry aimed at understanding how Ms. Luo, a digital native who frequently employed digital tools and constructivist pedagogies to support student learning in her brick-and-mortar classroom, responded to the rapid shift to fully online instruction. As we reflected on the effective practices Ms. Luo used to engage and motivate students and the subsequent challenges she encountered, we identified important implications for other foreign language teachers who design and deliver hybrid and remote instruction for K-12 students.

Our collaborative journey was framed by the understanding that effective teaching is intimately bound to the content and the contexts of the curriculum (Hodkinson, 2005). This was further contextualized by evidence that teaching Chinese language and culture as a second language outside of China presents a specific set of challenges, such as the impact of teachers' pedagogical schema and beliefs about education on their practice (Moloney & Xu, 2012). Evidence suggests that Chinese-born educators demonstrate a deep appreciation and respect for education; this view shapes their teaching and their perceptions of students. Although this is a generally favorable stance, it may be problematic during pandemic-related school closings when many adolescents reported

that they had difficulty with remote learning and did not attend virtual sessions regularly (Kamenetz, 2020). Teachers' perceptions about their students' challenges, lack of participation, and low levels of engagement during remote learning complicate an already complex learning environment.

When considering the challenges of remote teaching, it is also important to keep in mind the unique challenges content-specific teachers may face when preparing for online learning. In the language classroom, we know that students benefit from regular and authentic opportunities to use their developing language in meaningful ways. The teacher must create many opportunities for them to read, write, listen, and speak in the new language (Wright, 2019). Designing instruction that includes many opportunities for students to communicate and learn in a new language may be more difficult in the virtual classroom where students must engage in a variety of activities that allow them to use their developing language skills (Zhang, 2009).

Another complexity of pandemic-related teaching was the reality that families were suddenly tasked with supporting their students' learning with little time to prepare. This made planning for remote teaching more complex, especially for foreign language teachers who relied on families to support learning of a language not spoken at home. Teachers and families were ill-prepared for the many challenges of remote learning (Richmond, Bartell, Cho, Gallagher, He, Petchauer, & Curiel, 2020). However, careful review of the literature points to tools and evidence-based practices to help teachers plan for those challenges.

Extant literature provides strong evidence that language instruction is most effective when it is framed by a strong set of standards and activities that leverage students' own interests and prior knowledge (Wright, 2019). The World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages provide a framework for designing language instruction framed by the following: communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 2006). *Communication*, the first and the foremost of the five standards, highlights the development of students' interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational communication skills in the target language. The *culture* standard provides guidance for curriculum that targets culturally-connected language development and the *connections* standard refers to the interdisciplinary nature of effective foreign language instruction. Integrating many opportunities for *comparisons* allows students to engage in the deep thinking about cultural and language differences. Finally, the *communities* standard describes the ways teachers prepare students to become active participants in multilingual communities. These standards may serve as the starting point for pedagogical decision-making and, when paired with pedagogies that support remote learning, provide the foundation for rigorous, engaging instruction.

Pedagogies that Support Remote Teaching and Learning

Effective pedagogical strategies for the remote classroom are, in many ways, the same as those we use to engage and motivate learners in physical spaces. For example, teachers can inspire and support learning using constructivist pedagogical approaches such as accountable talk strategies in face-to-face class discussions or video meetings. Similarly, project-based learning (PBL), a student-driven, teacher-facilitated approach to learning (Bell, 2010), is a pedagogical approach that creates a framework for

effective teaching and is well suited for the remote classroom. Evidence suggests that PBL promotes meaningful learning in language and literacy classes (Stroller, 2002). PBL encourages in-depth investigation of learning objectives through meaningful hands-on projects while it provides autonomy for students. The key elements of PBL include collaboration, curricular content, authentic tasks, multiple expression modes, and innovative assessment. It offers numerous benefits including increased content knowledge acquisition, motivation, knowledge retention, and academic achievement (Hernandez-Ramous and De la Paz, 2009; Karacalli and Korur, 2014).

One promising pedagogical approach aligned with PBL, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT; Yildiz, 2020), is well suited for instruction of language and culture in remote spaces. In TBLT, language teachers design engaging and authentic tasks that allow students to practice their developing language skills. The TBLT approach prioritizes meaning over mechanics, thus motivating students to communicate in the new language. Importantly, language instruction is framed within the history and culture of the language; this allows students to make authentic, real-world connections to their own experiences (Lai & Li, 2011).

Finally, any discussion of remote teaching must include consideration of the role of technology integration. Today's adolescents are technologically savvy and use technology to communicate, play online, and learn about the world (Li, Snow, and White, 2015). Evidence suggests that when technology is used to support language instruction, language production and motivation increase (Lai & Li, 2011). Given the highly motivating nature of technology (Gee, 2010) and the strong relationship between language learning and motivation (Ranjan & Philominraj, 2020), students benefit when their teachers create authentic opportunities for students to use technology for learning (Alvermann, 2002; Beach, 2012). One effective way to integrate technology within instruction is through PBL (Lee & Blanchard, 2019). With the availability of technology in classrooms, technology-integrated PBL has great potential to have positive impacts on student learning.

Teaching about Chinese Language and Culture: Ms. Luo's Virtual Classroom

Ms. Luo has taught Chinese language and culture to secondary students in a science magnet school in an urban area of the mid-Atlantic region of the US for six years. A passionate and dedicated educator, her teaching is framed by theories of motivation and engagement with a particular emphasis on drawing deep connections to students' own experiences. Before COVID-19, this was accomplished through project-based learning and peer-to-peer collaboration in her physical classroom. In the spring of 2020, Ms. Luo recognized the urgent need to reimagine her curriculum. She leveraged the constructivist pedagogies that worked well in her face-to-face teaching as she designed a project-based approach that built on students' interests and made strong connections to Chinese language and culture.

Although Ms. Luo's instructional plans were engaging, Ms. Luo's students demonstrated low levels of participation and engagement. In response, she explored new ways to draw students into the virtual learning space. Ms. Luo explored digital tools and online resources that she hoped would capture students' interest and enhance language learning. Although this was time consuming, Ms. Luo created relevant, authentic language learning experiences for her students, such as jigsaw activities to

strengthen their listening and speaking skills, that invited full participation. In addition, she drew on students' shared experiences with youth culture to build bridges into Chinese language and culture learning activities. Finally, Ms. Luo used a project-based learning approach to incorporate peer-to-peer collaboration and group work, thus creating authentic interaction among students.

The lessons Ms. Luo learned have implications for language teachers as they plan for an uncertain year that will likely include remote and hybrid learning in some capacity. Therefore, we share this list of recommendations, informed by Ms. Luo's experiences and supported by the literature. It is important to note, however, that teachers must build remote instruction based on their own experiences and the needs of their students.

1. *Use project-based learning to engage and motivate students.* Ms. Luo reimagined her project-based approach to instruction and redesigned her curriculum for the virtual classroom. For example, the online, group project, "My Trip," was easily re-designed for virtual learning for her intermediate level students. Over the course of several weeks, students worked together to conduct research and to plan a virtual seven-day trip to China. A truly interdisciplinary project, students created a budget, researched and booked hotels and flights, and planned sightseeing activities. Small groups worked together outside of the remote class time to complete the project in Google classrooms; the final projects became the performance-based instrument Ms. Luo used to assess students' learning. At the conclusion of the project, Ms. Luo invited students to reflect on their own learning and their experiences. Students were motivated by their interest in planning a trip, particularly at a time when many of them were not free to leave their homes regularly, and the opportunity to work with classmates online.

2. *Select technological tools that students know and enjoy using.* Ms. Luo is a tech-savvy teacher who regularly used available digital tools in her brick-and-mortar classroom to engage students and support her instructional goals. When teaching remotely, Ms. Luo selected tools she had used before the COVID-19 school closure such as Edpuzzle, Kahoot, Quizlet, Flipgrid, and Duolingo. By integrating these tools, Ms. Luo created content-specific activities and assessed students' language development from a distance. For example, when teaching a Chinese song "Listen to Mom", Ms. Luo used Edpuzzle and a teacher-edited YouTube video with embedded questions about the song to activate and build students' background knowledge. Digital tools that allowed for authentic collaboration, Kahoot and Quizlet, were used for vocabulary instruction and review.

3. *Embed instruction within interactive, dynamic activities.* When learning a language, students benefit from collaborative and interactive experiences (Wright, 2019) with their peers. These authentic opportunities for rehearsal build oral language skills and strengthen vocabulary knowledge. To create interactive experiences to support students' learning of longer songs and texts, Ms. Luo often implemented the jigsaw strategy using the breakout room feature of Zoom. The jigsaw approach invited students to flexibly collaborate and support one another as Ms. Luo grouped and regrouped them throughout the learning activity (Aronson, 2002).

4. *Build bridges for students between American and Asian culture (music, pop culture, etc.).* Many young adolescents are familiar with aspects of modern Asian culture and may be eager to learn more if they can draw connections to their own lives.

One way Ms. Luo did this in her remote classroom was through the Chinese zodiac. Specifically, Ms. Luo taught students the Chinese words for their zodiac signs and those of their family members in Chinese and introduced the history and culture behind the animals and icons of the zodiac. To build personal connections, she invited students to explore personality traits based on the Chinese zodiac and compared them to the constellations they are named for. These lessons allowed students to make personal and cultural connections as they learned Chinese vocabulary.

5. *The teacher must take on the role of cultural ambassador in the Chinese language and culture classroom.* When language teaching is embedded in cultural immersion, students are more engaged and learn more (Celik, & Yıldız, 2019). To do this, Ms. Luo served as a cultural ambassador for Chinese language and culture in many ways. For example, she created a Chinese club to introduce students to Chinese history and culture. Before the pandemic, Ms. Luo shared Chinese foods and delicacies such as moon cakes and Chinese dumplings with her Chinese Club. She continued this practice during COVID-19. Although students could not taste the food, they learned many Chinese foods, the ingredients of each delicacy, and the Chinese words for each one, thus expanding students' knowledge of Chinese culture and supporting language development.

Although these recommendations were shaped by constructivist pedagogies that Ms. Luo found to be effective, these approaches will not ensure that remote teaching will be trouble-free. Students will struggle and many will become disengaged as learning becomes more challenging. However, these principles may provide guidance to teachers who must design and teach engaging language and culture curriculum in virtual classrooms.

Conclusion

Ms. Luo's reflective, inquiring stance allowed her to learn from the challenges she experienced and adjust her teaching to better meet the needs of her students. An uncertain and rapidly shifting public health landscape has taught all of us to be flexible and pivot quickly. Teachers are now prepared to do whatever they must to support student learning across all modes of delivery. Moreover, remote teaching during the pandemic has forced many of us to re-evaluate our perspectives on teaching and learning. During the shift to remote teaching, Ms. Luo's perspective shifted from an "all children can learn" stance to a more nuanced perspective that recognizes all students can learn *if* they are fully engaged. As we learn to accept that the future of education has been forever changed by the pandemic, teachers must grapple with how they can engage students and support learning for all students in the remote classroom.

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Contact email: vshinas@lesley.edu