The future of language education in the light of Covid - lessons learned and ways forward

Case study on experiences of foreign language teaching during the Covid pandemic by Heather Kretschmer, Germany

A. *Please write briefly about <u>a memorable language teaching experience, either particularly challenging or especially successful,</u> as an example of your practice during the pandemic:*

What is the national context? What kind of institution? Who were the language learners?

> I work in a center for foreign languages and key competencies at a university in Germany. I teach Business English at the C1 level, and my students study business administration and economics.

What were the aims of the session/lesson/project?

> **Background:** At the beginning of Winter Semester 20/21 students were placed in groups, and each group formed their own fictitious company. Students developed their companies as the semester progressed.
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> **Aims of the virtual trade fair lesson** (90-minute synchronous session on Zoom, midsemester)**:**
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> 1. To compare classic trade fairs (where people physically meet) with virtual trade fairs
> 2. To do a jigsaw reading on virtual trade fair tips and share the tips with group members
> 3. To decide together which tips they would use if they were to exhibit their company virtually
> 4. To plan a virtual trade fair booth for their company
> 5. To report back to the full class.

Please write a brief description – the 'story' - of what you did/what happened that made this an especially memorable experience:

> At the beginning of the lesson, students watched a brief video depicting a virtual trade fair booth. The tips in the reading gave students further food for thought. As I visited groups in their breakout rooms, I noticed students not only used the video and text for inspiration but also drew on their background knowledge and ideas as they planned their virtual trade fair booths.
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> This was the first time I tried out Zoom's virtual whiteboard feature with my students, and the students had fun experimenting with this technology as they were designing their trade fair booths. After finishing their booths, groups took screenshots of their virtual whiteboards. In the last part of the lesson, each group shared their screenshot and briefly presented their booth to the full class.
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> The experience was especially memorable for me because my students learned about a business trend during the pandemic – virtual trade fairs – and built upon what they learned in a fun and creative way in the target language.

What lessons might there be in your experience for language teaching in general <u>beyond the pandemic</u>?

> In an ever-changing educational landscape, building on and adapting what we've learned is a vital skill for language teachers. During the pandemic, I've adapted pre-pandemic teaching techniques, such as jigsaw reading tasks, to teaching online. Post-pandemic I will continue to use techniques and ideas I've discovered and developed during the pandemic. I will explore and take advantage of the affordances of technology for language teaching purposes (e.g., having students use collaborative virtual whiteboards to brainstorm, organize ideas, or design something). That said, I will always have a backup plan in case the technology doesn't work as expected. For example, in a face-to-face lesson, paper and pen will do if the collaborative virtual whiteboard falls through. Being flexible is key for language teachers and learners.

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B. *In your context, how have teachers and other colleagues <u>supported each other's professional practice</u> during the pandemic?*

- My center has two technicians who helped us set up our home offices and always support us whenever we run into technical issues, whether those be malfunctioning video conferencing tools, viruses on our computers, or defective sound systems during listening exams in large lecture halls.
- We also have a colleague responsible for "media didactics" who regularly gives workshops on the intricacies of using our VLE (Moodle) and other useful technology and online resources for language teaching and learning. At the beginning of the pandemic, she helped us transform our face-to-face Moodle courses to online courses. Anytime we have questions or problems with Moodle, she's our go-to person.
- At my center, teachers have generally supported each other informally during the pandemic. If we experience problems teaching online, we ask each other for help and talk through the issues (or email/message each other). Likewise, if we discover or develop something useful for our teaching, we share it with each other.
- From time to time, the director of my center organizes a professional development week. We had one recently and used it to 1) develop plurilingual project ideas which will likely involve multiple classes, each learning a different language and 2) consider new task-based assessment ideas.

C. *The pandemic has now lasted almost two years and is not over yet. How is it affecting your professional practice at present?*

Due to the university's physical distancing measures, my center is continuing to offer only online courses (weekly synchronous lessons alternating with asynchronous phases). Students have gotten used to studying online and welcome the opportunity to interact with one another in a foreign language in synchronous class sessions.

I feel the biggest impact of the continuing pandemic is on assessment. While some exam components (e.g., listening comprehension) are on campus, other exam components are online. My university forbids the use of exam proctoring software (and I wouldn't feel comfortable using it anyway), and we're still grappling with how much help students could potentially receive while working on their online writing and speaking exam tasks. We are continuing to reflect on what are appropriate ways of carrying out task-based foreign language assessment in an online format for university students. We do this informally with each other, in our center's meetings and professional development sessions, and at European-wide workshops and conferences with participants from other universities.