

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

*Who were the learners?*

Upper secondary school students – 3<sup>rd</sup> year (11<sup>th</sup> grade, Italian school system); school type: Lyceum (Liceo); curriculum: Foreign Languages (English – Chinese – Spanish)

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

- Further develop oral interaction skills (foreign language: Chinese)
- Describe the main features (history, scenic spots, local folklore, etc.) of some minor Italian towns to the Taiwanese audience (students of the same age + teachers)

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

During two conversation classes held at the end of March 2021, Italian and Taiwanese students met each other via Google Meet, after a preparatory stage started two months before. Each of the two classes was divided into small groups (5-6 students each), and each group was asked to choose and describe a small town from different points of view (history, tourist attractions, traditional customs, etc.) to their international classmates, therefore acting as “tourguides”. On the presentation day, Italian students were asked to point out the essential features of the selected locations in Chinese, while directly addressing their Taiwanese classmates through questions aimed at arousing their interest and curiosity. The same task was subsequently carried out, in English, by the Taiwanese students. In short, a 3-month classwork resulted in a precious opportunity not only for students to get to know each other and put into practice (or better, into play) their language skills, but also for them to receive a significant amount of culture-specific information which, under normal circumstances, is not easily available and/or accessible in ordinary textbooks.

It is important to point out that resorting to an online platform to carry out the above-mentioned activity implied its thorough “reshaping”; in other words, all students were required to attach the same amount of importance to both their speech (in terms of accuracy of wording and language fluency) and the digital material created to support it (PPTs specially designed to arouse the curiosity of the audience – both peers and adults – while listening to a student’s presentation of a given topic), in order for their communication to be fully effective. I was sincerely impressed when I noticed that, within all groups, each member focused spontaneously and successfully on the “sub-task” s/he could perform at his/her best (e.g.: drafting a concise text – bullet points – for each slide; looking for information on reliable web sources; selecting relevant pictures or videos to enrich the original texts; choosing a colourful background for each slide, etc.); in so doing, mutual interdependence (which is a key social skill, having to do with the concept of mediation as well) was established and developed while carrying out the whole task, which gradually evolved into something much more complex, stimulating and challenging than a merely “linguistic” or “communicative” task. Under normal circumstances, in my opinion, such a

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highly cooperative approach, together with its remarkable learning outcomes, would be extremely difficult to achieve. That's why I have always been firmly convinced, both before and (even more so) after the pandemic, that ICTs should extensively be used as part of each teacher's daily teaching routine, because they enable students to put into play their "soft skills", which is something that, unfortunately, they do not normally do in classes where teaching is carried out with more traditional approaches.

*What lessons might there be in your experience for language teaching in general beyond the pandemic?*

Experiences implying communication and exchange between peers coming from different cultural contexts should be carried out, whenever possible, on a regular basis, either online or in person, because they turn out to be extremely enriching and stimulating for all parties involved. Moreover, creating digital resources specially designed to support oral interaction (e.g., PPTs whose text is enriched with relevant pictures and/or videos) turns out to be an extremely involving task for students, especially if carried out in small groups.

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

First of all, a satisfactory level of digital literacy has been achieved in the past two years, thanks to training programmes on a regular basis (focus: 1. basic knowledge of ICTs for teaching purposes – hardware, software, apps, online resources, etc. –; 2. how to use correctly PCs and other devices available in each classroom), organised by a group of colleagues whose main task is to provide training and technical support and/or advice to all teachers working at the school (approximately 120 each year). Secondly, in order to avoid information overload, official communications have been made available through two channels only – i.e., the school's website and the electronic attendance register–.

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

The ongoing pandemic emergency has made me reconsider several aspects of my daily teaching practice, in order to cope with an unprecedented situation; firstly, I have made extensive use of online resources (especially videos available online and self-made digital material, such as interactive PPT presentations); secondly, I have split relatively large learning units into shorter and more flexible modules (maximum teaching time: 45 to 50 mins.), which, as far as the assessment is concerned, has resulted in more frequent "micro-tests" (each of them focused on a limited range of specific tasks and related skills). Lastly, much more attention was given to oral interaction skills, which became prominent in the last two years, as it was the only way to make the teaching and learning process effective and, more importantly, involving for all students.