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 Tomasso Rossi, Italy

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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?

High school students (4th grade class, aged 17-18), Mandarin Chinese lesson

What were the aims of the session/lesson?

To develop students' critical thinking and personal opinions about a specific issue and be able to write it down in the form of a short text message, instantaneously readable by the other classmates and teacher. This technique would lead to several teaching aims:

- (for students) develop a coherent piece of writing to support ideas in small time units;
- (for students) share opinions with peers and accept/refute classmates' reactions;
- (for the teacher) use students' opinions to trigger debate and to correct common mistakes;
- (for classroom dynamics) promote interaction between peers, in spite of being in distance learning mode.

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

The activity I am going to describe has been entirely conceived to be done in distance learning mode, in particular via an online platform which enables participants to work on the same issue/topic and share opinions in written form in real time. I believe that conventional teaching wouldn't have led to the same result, especially because students in classrooms would be more likely to share their opinions orally in a more chaotic situation, often switching to their native language, without paying much attention to the written form in L2. In addition to this, the process explained below allows students to see everybody's texts/opinions simultaneously and gain at once an overall idea of everybody's views on the matter. The process is as follows:

- The teacher logs in the learning platform Spiral.ac (https://spiral.ac/) and provides students with the code to log in and write their name.
- The teacher enters the teacher's interface and, according to a topic previously introduced in class, writes down an open (controversial) question which is immediately visible on everybody's screen and asks students to type a personal and coherent answer to the question in Chinese in a fixed time unit (5 minutes for instance), then click on "send".
- Once the instruction is given, the countdown starts. As soon as students send their text messages, they appear on the screen, and everybody can see other classmates' messages.
- After the time is over, the teacher asks further questions about students' personal opinions and stimulates debate asking for agreement/disagreement and reasons for choices. This operation can take several minutes and should be done in L2, and the teacher can use the last few minutes to consider the common mistakes arising in the messages or during the debate and correct them publicly.

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As easily grasped so far, Spiral.ac helps the teacher to attain a very specific and advanced educational goal, which is having students produce a coherent written response to a stimulus within a time limit, as well as evaluating classmates' opinions (and language use too). This tool also promotes a certain level of dynamism throughout the teaching time, and helps the teacher run the lesson at a good pace, preventing the whole atmosphere from getting boring or too predictable. This latter outcome turns out to be particularly appreciated in the Covid era, a time in which peer-to-peer interactions have been significantly reduced and in which distance learning sessions (sometimes) have contributed to make learners less and less interactive.

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

The lessons drawn is that conventional language teaching cannot be separated from technology. Applying digital means in language teaching not only increases the number of possible tools for teaching, but can also increase motivation and stimulate the interactive dynamic.

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

Probably the most supportive actions carried out by my colleagues (and my school in general) can be summarised as follows:
1) numerous training sessions have been run to support digital literacy and the proficient use of software and hardware during the pandemic
2) the school has designated some individuals to be contacted in case of didactic/ or IT-related need;
3) the school has remodelled the way to communicate with students, teachers and families, has implemented a more transparent website and rationalised the amount and the clarity of communications.

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

Since the pandemic began, I have realised my teaching attitude has significantly changed. I notice that now:

1) my teaching approach is way more flexible and integrated: it now includes a huge variety of tools I had ever experienced before, like digital advice, learning platforms, apps and so on

2) the teaching time has changed too: every single module lasts 30-40 minutes compared to the 50-60 minutes of the pre-pandemic era

3) the range of testing methods is now wider than before and includes audio tracks, online gap filling exercises and others, so as to make students feel comfortable with distance assessment

 4) assessment criteria have consequently changed and include more flexible ranges

5) more emphasis is now laid on oral interaction.