

A Collection of Teaching Tips: Teaching through the Pandemic

Transitioning a flipped language course from blended to online delivery

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Teaching and learning context

Research demonstrates many benefits of flipped delivery for student learning (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Flipped Learning Network, 2014; Keengwe, Onchawri, & Oigara, 2014; Talbert, 2017; Zhang & Jaramillo, 2020).

Some beginning and intermediate level Chinese language courses at Iowa State University (ISU) have used flipped delivery by supplementing student independent exposure to new content online with intensive language practice in the face-to-face (F2F) settings. I refer to this arrangement as flipped-blended delivery which follows a weekly 3+1 model: every three 50-minute long F2F language practice sessions require student engagement with one online module.

In the 3+1 flipped-blended model, simpler thinking processes are accommodated by online modules, while learning requiring more complex cognitive processes and applications is addressed in the F2F sessions. In other words, online components focus on improving the learners' receptive skills, such as listening, reading, learning grammar, vocabulary and cultural facts, while F2F instruction focuses on more complex skills, such as speaking and writing.

Connection to course learning objectives

The learning objectives for my CHINESE 202 and 375 courses are to expand on the four language skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing – and build student knowledge of Chinese vocabulary, grammar, and culture. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted and made the F2F sessions impossible to conduct – and therefore came the challenge: How do I improve speaking and writing while keeping my students engaged when our only option to meet synchronously is through web conferencing?

Applied teaching strategy: 4+1 flipped-online model

The solution was to transform the flipped-blended 3+1 model into the flipped-online 4+1 model: virtual, synchronous meetings four times a week for 40 minutes supplemented with student independent exposure to one asynchronous online module.

Every week students were required to watch instructor-prepared videos (on vocabulary, grammar, and culture) (Figure 1), complete a short quiz on new content (Figure 2), and submit detailed notes they took while watching the videos before participating in the four synchronous sessions. Additionally, students watched short movies in which native and advanced-level Chinese learners demonstrated how to use vocabulary and form grammatical constructions in context (Figure 3).

The four synchronous sessions revolved around practicing the basic and comprehensive applications of speaking and listening skills in authentic contexts.

Each synchronous session started by talking about students' daily life in the target language or in English. These quick check-ins gave students a chance to communicate with peers about their lives, feelings and daily activities during the difficult pandemic time. I also encouraged students to discuss the challenges they had with their learning and how they overcame or plan to address them.

After the informal check-in, I used only the target language during the intermediate-level class meetings and 80% of the time during the beginning-level class meetings. I would share a Word document in Zoom and use the annotation tool to write down what was said in the target language (with translation for beginners). I would proceed with the instructions for activities and direct students to the resources in the Canvas course as needed.

The Zoom breakout rooms for pair and group work were key for successful language practice. Sometimes students were randomly assigned to a group, while other times, the breakout rooms included students of similar language ability. I would join the rooms to see if the students were on task or had questions. After each session, if the students had questions or if I suspected that some students might have had difficulties, I would send the entire class an email clarifying and recapping the synchronous session.

Why this strategy worked

The 4 +1 model worked well for my instructional purposes. Meeting more frequently for a shorter period made learning and practice of Chinese more effective. Four weekly sessions provided time for almost daily interaction with my students, increased exposure of these learners to the language and kept them on task.

Key takeaways

Grammar, vocabulary, and culture explanations could be presented in short videos, which students are mandated to watch before a synchronous session. Creating these videos is a time-consuming process that requires careful design, and understandings of the complexity of language learning with technology (Mayer, 2009; 2016). The videos need to be short, concise, accurate, and engaging. Since having a good understanding of the video content is critical to practice, it is important that students watch the videos before their first weekly sessions.

To hold the learners accountable for watching those videos, I implemented the following strategies:

1. Inserted questions in the videos and required students to answer them.
2. Required students to keep an electronic journal of their language learning.
3. Held my students accountable by administering a quick quiz on the video content at the beginning of the first synchronous session.

To maximize the value of synchronous sessions I used the following strategies:

1. Shared a word document with the instructions for activities.
2. Modelled Chinese pronunciation and usage of correct phrases and sentences, asked students to repeat and made sure to provide translations if sentences were not understood by all the students.
3. Used various opportunities to encourage student responses, from asking volunteers to initiate the conversation to calling upon specific students. It is important to combine both approaches to the smooth management of the session's flow.
4. Used Zoom breakout rooms regularly so that students were able to practice in small groups or in pairs. For the most benefit, assigning learners of similar language levels to work together works best.
5. Used as much of the target language as possible to maximize student exposure.

In F2F meetings, body language plays an important role in helping students to understand even if they do not yet have a full grasp of the target language. Online meetings make it more challenging for students to understand the instructor who uses advanced vocabulary and grammar, yet an array of methods described above can ensure that students easily follow.

出生: chūshēng, to be born

1. 我是在美国**出生**, 在美国**长大**的。
2. 书上没说他是**在哪儿出生**的。
3. 她**出生**在一个富裕(fùyú, affluent)的家庭。
4. 他**出生**的时候没有**出生证** (chūshēngzhèng, birth certificate)。

复习一下语法: “(是) ... Verb 的” is used when some event has happened and detailed info such as when, where, how, with whom is provided.
E.g.: 你的鞋真好看! [You have bought it because you are wearing it. I want to know where you bought it and will ask: 你是在哪儿买的?]

问题四: 你是什么时候**出生**的, 在**哪儿**出生? 你的**出生证**在哪儿?

怎么

1. How to do something:
怎么 + Verb + Object?
2. How come?!!
Subject + 怎么...?!!
怎么 + subject ...?!!

- 怎么 + verb
- 怎么吃
- 怎么做
- 怎么写
- 怎么说
- 怎么去

e.g.

1. 我教你**怎么**写你的中文名字吧。
2. 妈妈, 您教我**怎么**做饭, 好吗?
3. 我不知道**怎么**复习中文... ..
小张, 你**怎么**复习?

Activity #3: 你知道**怎么**吃小笼包吗? (xiǎolóngbāo: steamed dumplings)

Figure 1: Sample screenshots of the instructor-made videos

GRAMMAR #2: 是...的

“是...的” is used to describe or inquire about the time, the place, the manner, or the initiator of an action that we already know happened. 是 is optional.

A) 你去过北京吗?
B) 我去过北京。

A) 你是跟谁去的?
B) 我是跟非表姐一起去的。

A) 你们是什么时候去的?
B) 我们是去年暑假去的。

• Your friend just had lunch, you want to know where.
→ 你是在哪儿吃的?

1) Where did you learn Chinese?
→ 你是在哪儿学中文的?
→ 我在高中学中文的。

2) When did you learn Chinese?

Figure 2: Sample screenshot of part of a student's notes



Figure 3: Sample collage of students' short movies

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- . *Shared with the permission from the student.*