

# Introduction to The world universities' response to COVID-19: remote online language teaching

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## 1. Project rationale

March 2020 saw the advent of a pandemic that is having a profound impact on all facets of our lives with special reference, in our case, to language education. Universities worldwide found themselves in an emergency predicament and we had to suddenly abandon traditional forms of classroom and/or blended learning and move to a completely remote online delivery of courses. The imperative to continue teaching in these new circumstances did not come, as very often is the case, from the relevant institutional administrations in a top-down manner, but from our own, inner pedagogical and human instincts. The usual lines of communication with our students and colleagues were cut off and we had to find and resort to new ways of communicating and teaching. We had no precedents to refer to and found ourselves in the situation to search for innovative solutions using the already existing technology, skills, resources, and methodological approaches. This situation was challenging in the extreme.

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Searching for solutions and support, our language learning community developed, in many ways, new lines of communication. It was then, in June 2020 that we had the idea of writing a case study each to be published together in one volume, to make some of the informal conversations that had happened during the lockdown formally available to the whole community. We come from different countries, different institutions with distinct academic, linguistic, cultural, and professional backgrounds and yet we all found ourselves in the position to have to solve a major puzzle – a pandemic-caused lockdown that fragmented our established practices.

We realised very quickly, however, that the potential pool of candidates interested in joining our effort was much larger. As the number of contributors increased we decided to cover a large proportion of the world. After reaching out to fellow language practitioners from around the world, we are proud to be able to announce that this collection of case studies brings together colleagues from 18 countries, five continents, and a very diverse range of higher education institutions. This project brings together colleagues from Argentina, Brazil, Cameroon, China, Egypt, France, Germany, Iran, Italy, Lithuania, New Zealand, Nigeria, Qatar, Russia, Rwanda, Spain, UK, and USA.

Thus, an essential feature of this survey is its global perspective. Although we accept that globalisation may challenge some local traditions, we are convinced that global networking can support language practitioners and critical discussion as well as provide reference to good practices. While it is true that we reacted in a hurry, our reaction was predictable from the point of view of:

- the framework of our core beliefs – pedagogical approach and philosophy; and
- the institutionally available technological expertise.

As is visible from the chapters' opening sections that describe the wider institutional, cultural, and academic context of the university where the authors work, the common objective was to carry on teaching languages in a way that

could guarantee the same quality as before the pandemic crisis. At the same time, however, technology posed issues of accessibility, so that a trade-off between quality and accessibility had to be found. What we, as editors, thought would bring interest to the project was to draw common analytical lines along which to compare case studies that could be representative of individual contexts. The qualitative case study seemed the most appropriate research perspective to help understand as complex a phenomenon as education in times of crisis in that a case study “ensures that the issue is not explored through one lens, but rather a variety of lenses which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 544).

By bringing together these studies, this book documents the higher education pedagogical responses to the COVID-19 emergency in 2020, focusing on language instruction worldwide. Furthermore, this project unites international language professionals around a common pedagogical platform as well as encourages active and impactful networking. Eventually, the project signposts the path to a flexible and diverse approach to language teaching and learning.

## **2. Scope of the project**

Since our call for papers left the responses open to individual authors, we received very diverse contributions in terms of genre conventions and approaches. These range from narratives of how an entire language unit was reorganised because of the pandemic to reflective pieces of single teachers taking stock of their teaching and assessment practices to data-oriented, empirical analyses of students’ responses to surveys. Some writers were happy with the more centralised approaches, others with individual creativities. Some were more concerned with technical details, others with suitable responses to student problems. Some of the authors are early career teachers and others are more experienced colleagues in managerial roles. We did not want to prioritise any of these perspectives, as we consider them all as worthy contributions to this global survey and the understanding of our practice. We believe that the forced migration to remote teaching offered an opportunity for everyone to expand

their teaching and learning experience. We thus document the challenges in the national and institutional contexts, while at the same time we present these as opportunities that can serve as a new basis for international exchange and progress in digital language teaching and learning.

Each chapter should be read independently. Therefore, of the keywords in each chapter three to four are specific to the context and contents described, and the remaining ones are common to the whole book project, namely *COVID-19, online language teaching*. The table in the supplementary material link synoptically presents the scope of the project with details about the technology used, types of classes, proficiency level, and issues that we think stand out as special to each contribution.

Dissemination and networking are no less important than the process of documentation. This volume is published under the Creative Commons licence and made readily available online. The project also features a website with a link to a downloadable copy of the publication and some basic information such as the outline, the full list of participating institutions, and biographical details about the contributors. Furthermore, we planned an official launch under the auspices of CercleS (*Confédération Européenne des Centres de Langues de l'Enseignement Supérieur / European Confederation of Language Centres in Higher Education*) followed by other presentations and events. We also plan a follow-up project that will seek to continue to document ongoing changes in our practices and expect most of the current participants as well as some new ones to contribute.

### **3. Research Questions (RQs)**

In putting this collection together, our research interest was to record how language practitioners, both teaching and managerial staff, engaged in the deployment of their best skills and knowledge to meet the needs of their academic communities, and thus gain insights into the ideas and processes involved. Given the very wide scope of the collection and the different contributor backgrounds,

the RQs below underlie each of the case studies and indeed guide our editorial contribution. However, they are not intended as prescriptive guidelines, rather leaving everyone the freedom to express their culturally, linguistically, institutionally, and personally diverse experiences and views.

- RQ1. What was the decision-making process like in shifting to remote online teaching? Were the changes implemented in top-down or bottom-up fashion?
- RQ2. Technology, administration, or pedagogy, which was the driving force for change?
- RQ3. Predictably, responses to the emergency varied depending on the specific contexts. However, is it possible to discern some patterns emerging?
- RQ4. How have teachers managed to maintain or include interactive elements in their teaching?
- RQ5. How learner-centred was the switch to remote online teaching?
- RQ6. How were task-based approaches included in remote online teaching?
- RQ7. To what extent was the process of moving to remote online teaching able to cater for the diversity of the student body?
- RQ8. What methodological developments did we record?

## **4. Methodology**

Guided by case study methodology, we collected 23 chapters written by colleagues from 18 different institutions around the world on the assumption

that the nature and scope of the measures taken in response to a globally critical emergency situation was contingent on the cultural background of the country, single institution, teaching staff, students body, access to technology, experience in deploying technology, funding, as well as a range of other variables.

The first draft of the articles was collected by early November 2020. Each article was refereed by two colleagues internal to the project as well as one external reviewer. The required changes were documented and the articles sent back to the authors for revision. The revised versions together with the authors' responses were collected again in early January 2021 and sent to the editorial team for further review and standardisation. The editors made further suggestions for improvement and these were completed by late February when the articles went to the publisher for similarity check (to avoid plagiarism), formatting, and proofreading. The whole process was completed by the end of April 2021.

We tried to make the articles as comparable in format as possible. To do so, we required, and mostly adhered to, a fairly standard outline and posed the overarching question to all contributors: *how did you go about moving to teach remotely during the emergency?*, in other words, *what has it been like?*, a question which we did not have time to pose back in the spring of 2020 because we were too busy doing the work. In terms of content, we asked contributors to address these points and structure:

- institutional, cultural, and academic backgrounds;
- type of course;
- usual and emergency delivery patterns;
- technology deployed;
- teacher training and support;
- student and teaching staff feedback;
- teaching/learning outcomes;
- discussion/lessons learnt;
- limitations; and
- conclusion and way forward.

In editing the final versions of the articles we tried to standardise not only the format but also the concept and style as much as possible to make the case studies comparable and meaningful as a whole. At the same time, however, since only few contributors have English as their first language, we strived to preserve the original ‘accent’ of the author by letting the diverse cultural traits shine through the chapters. We will read, therefore, how the University of Isfahan made telephone calls to all 15 thousand of their students to comfort them about the emergency situation, how the University of Auckland insisted on kindness, how the University of Cairo consulted their overseas students about the format of the teaching, how Italy was the first to decide to shift online, how in Chinese classes the pandemic helped to initiate new forms of native/non-native interaction, or how a Chinese model blended different platforms of pre-, in- and after-class activities, and how in Africa some universities were privileged to provide an institutional frame whereas others looked at their students’ smartphone practices and adapted their teaching to students.

We thought that such valuable cultural insights were inspiring and well worth reporting and highlighting. In all, the chapters offer a positive outlook in challenging times through reflective reports, case studies, and best practices.

## 5. Key concepts

The very title of this volume introduces three key concepts in need of clarification: *remote*, *online*, and *language teaching*. We start by contextualising the notion of *remote* in relation to learning as, first of all, a continuation of the more traditional concept of *distance* learning; we use *online* to denote activities and/or learning/teaching resources that are accessible in digital format via the internet. An online activity is normally integrated into a blended learning mode of delivery, classroom *and* online teaching/learning. The term *remote*, however, denotes a situation where students do not attend the institution *in situ* at all and have no access to face-to-face, classroom-based teaching. They engage with their studies fully and completely at a distance, remotely. In terms of *language teaching* we discuss a number of relevant aspects in the following subsections.

## 5.1. Distance learning becomes remote learning

Distance learning started in Europe with correspondence courses over 100 years ago and the term was used to describe a range of institutional and educational situations (Valentine, 2002). Correspondence stayed the main vehicle of distance learning until the middle of the 20th century and the advent of new technologies such as radio and television (Imel, 1998). This ushered an era where learning materials were delivered at a distance by postal service on audio and video tapes. Since the mid 90's the internet allowed real-time, live, video and audio enhanced communication and teaching to take place at a distance (Ostendorf, 1997).

Since the practice has been around for so long and in so many diverse settings, making use of several generations of technologies, it is not easy to give a clear, unambiguous, and all-encompassing definition of distance learning. Greenberg (1998) suggests that it is “a planned teaching/learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach learners at a distance and is designed to encourage learner interaction and certification” (p. 36). This definition has historical merits but also as it lays the foundation for further developments in this field and in that respect can be operationalised for the purposes of our study. Greenberg's (1998) assertion allows very wisely, we note, for further technological advancements to be instrumentalised and more importantly, for the focus of this activity to firmly rest on the educational role of technology, namely ‘to reach learners’ in pedagogically meaningful ways (e.g. through interaction and certification).

An offshoot of the more recent technology-enhanced forms of distance learning is *distributed learning*, a pedagogy empowered by the new media and experiences that enabled the evolution of synchronous, group, presentation-centred forms of distance education. Such new forms were able to replicate traditional teaching-by-telling across barriers of distance and time (Dede, 1996, p. 4).

These concepts were made possible thanks to technological advancements. Approaches to the design and production of teaching materials evolved accordingly as did methodological developments in classroom-based teaching



and the integration of online learning activities into an effective curriculum. Teachers became increasingly aware of the role and most importantly, we would argue, of the possibilities of technology. Since the early 90's of the 20th century, Information Technology (IT) has become an increasingly important part of the practice of language teaching and started being referred to as Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). Originally perceived as an approach to language learning that makes use of IT in the preparation and/or delivery of the teaching, CALL evolved into an exciting scholarly field of studies described as “the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning” (Levy, 1997, p. 1). While the role of CALL will be discussed further in the next sub-section dedicated to blended learning, let us just assert here that the CALL theoretical framework and practice opened the door to the kind of IT-enhanced remote online learning that we are witnessing today. With the advent of social networking and multimedia tools at the turn of the new millennium, IT is now an essential part of our communication patterns and the teaching of languages. Computers have become increasingly networked and the internet fully multimedia capable. Facebook, YouTube, and the full range of messaging, communication, and authoring tools have blurred the distinction between face-to-face, classroom teaching and Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and given birth to concepts such as blended or *inverted* learning (Baker, 2000; Lage, Platt, & Treglia, 2000; Whittaker, 2013) and the *flipped classroom* (Andujar, Salaberri-Ramiro, & Cruz Martínez, 2020; Bliuc, Goodyear, & Ellis, 2007; Chandra & Fisher, 2009; Donnelly, 2010; Strayer, 2012).

As we see from this brief overview of distance and remote learning, technology, in different aspects and guises, has been part and parcel of teaching and learning much before the advent of online IT. The efforts we describe in this collection therefore, while indeed, of an urgent nature, do have a precedent in our practice.

## **5.2. Blended learning is no longer the same as hybrid learning**

A useful operational definition of blended learning with special reference to language teaching is certainly the following: “‘blended learning’ is the term most commonly used to refer to any combination of face-to-face teaching with

computer technology (online and offline activities/materials)” (Whittaker, 2013, p. 12, and see also Graham, 2013). We must note, however, that this definition is very broad and encompasses classroom or laboratory-based activities as long as IT is involved in their delivery. It is also true that in the US blended learning was adopted widely and quickly and researchers began referring to it as the “new traditional” (Ross & Gage, 2006, p. 167) or the “new normal” model of course delivery (Norberg, Dziuban, & Moskal, 2011, p. 207). Dziuban et al. (2018) note that another definition put forward at the time described blended learning as “a combination of online and in-class instruction with reduced in-class seat time for students” (Parsad, Lewis, & Tice, 2008, p. 1). This second definition introduces the notion of the reduction of in-class time without loss of educational impact. The theoretical possibility of reducing class time without producing a negative educational impact, or even with an enhancement of learning opportunities, has been instrumental in the implementation of the emergency moves to remote online teaching described by the case studies in this book.

In the early days of blended learning there was another term that was used as a synonym – *hybrid learning* (see for instance Allen & Seaman, 2003; Klimova & Kacetl, 2015). It is important to clarify that today, with special reference to this study, we use the term ‘hybrid’ in the sense given to the term by more recent researchers in the field such as Beatty (2019) and Lederman (2020), who use the term ‘hybrid-flexible’ or ‘HyFlex’ to describe a pedagogical situation where some students are attending the class and are in a face-to-face teaching situation whereas others choose, or are compelled by, e.g. health considerations, to follow the lesson remotely, online. This brings about a further useful terminological distinction between *asynchronous* and *synchronous* communication and teaching. Asynchronous communication takes place by sending someone emails (historically, paper-based letters) and/or messages via a messaging service or an online forum. Such a teaching style requires students to attend to communications and tasks sent and set for them by the teacher. Synchronous communication, by contrast, is real-time and requires two people to engage in a communicative or teaching/learning activity at the same time. It is important to note that none of the two modes require participants that share the same physical place. Both synchronous and asynchronous teaching styles, the flipped classroom strategy,

and the blended learning modes of delivery at large, enable the extension and enrichment of the classroom social environment that is beneficial for language acquisition (Loewen, 2020; Ortega, 2014; VanPatten & Benati, 2015). This is specifically true when we take into consideration other key concepts that need to be addressed in this overview – that of *participatory communication* and *collaborative learning* (Dooly, 2018; Macaro, 1997; Richards, 2006).

### 5.3. From CALL to ‘pre-tasks’ and resources

CALL was framed and characterised by the tools at our disposal in the 90’s: floppy disks, CD/Roms and DVDs, limited bandwidth (not multimedia capable) and web pages with asynchronous discussion forums. We should emphasise that CALL theory and practice laid a solid foundation for the blended-teaching endeavours of the past 20 years as well as for solving our more recent COVID-19 emergency teaching puzzle. Such an IT-enhanced environment made possible the re-evaluation of teaching approaches and practices that lead to the formulation of the concept of the flipped classroom introduced in 5.1. When it comes to second language acquisition, however, a number of researchers assert that the concept of communicative ‘pre-tasks’ (Ellis, Li, & Zhu, 2019) antedates that of the flipped classroom (for a discussion see Cunningham, 2017). If so, we can argue that language teaching is at the forefront of the application of novel pedagogical approaches. Since the beginning of this millennium language teaching has made increasing use of technology to access, evaluate, design, produce, and deliver digital teaching resources online, at a distance, or to the classroom smartboards. Such materials are typically stored in an online depository and students are asked to attend to them outside of their class time. We slowly witnessed the demise of the old fashioned, pen-and-paper-based homework and the rise of self-study. As already discussed, blended learning came to language teaching as a natural extension of the changes witnessed in communication and presentation patterns in society as a whole. It can be said that CALL described and informed our practice in the last decade of the 20th century while 21st century online technical affordances made it possible for language acquisition to take place beyond classrooms, linguistic laboratories, and study centres. Learners’ networked homes and student dormitories became a

multimedia capable, resource-rich hub of communication and interaction that is linguistically meaningful and fully integrated with the classroom.

#### **5.4. Collaborative learning at the heart of online language teaching**

[Kessler \(2013, p. 307\)](#) suggests that by participating and communicating via social media platforms we develop a sense of ownership as well as belonging to a community and that of obligation. Indeed, CALL practice fostered a significant interactive element and enabled collaborative learning to take place ([Davies, 2016](#)). Such co-constructed participatory environments rely upon communities of users who find such a participation meaningful and rewarding. Not only do we develop a sense of community and belonging with peers in the classroom setting, we do so in a virtual, online setting too. Given that such a social environment is beneficial to our language learning aspirations, participation and communication should be encouraged by remote online teaching settings.

There are a number of tools that enable such an extension and diversification of the classroom social environment. The flipped classroom is one of them, but given its all-encompassing nature and role, the VLE is certainly the most prominent one and the one that needs to be discussed first. There are a number of commercially and open source available VLEs (e.g. Moodle, Black Board, Canvas) and their main function is to create environments akin to the classroom but technologically enhanced as to offer to the learner the opportunity to engage with the resources and in communicative tasks in a flexible and low-anxiety<sup>5</sup> manner (see RQ2 and RQ4).

#### **5.5. Pedagogical issues in remote language teaching**

Apart from challenges in terms of the mode of delivery, technology, and overall approach to remote online teaching, some key aspects relate to the field of our immediate pedagogical interest – the teaching of foreign or world languages.

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5. For a discussion on the role of anxiety in second language acquisition see [Horwitz \(2010\)](#).

We mention both these terms as their usage is heavily conditioned by the geographical and cultural context of the relevant contributors and you will see them used in different chapters by different authors. Most of the contributors teach the English language for a range of purposes, but others teach Arabic, Chinese, German, and Persian. A number of contributors are managers of language programmes offering a variety of languages. These could be and are described in different settings as foreign, second, as well as world languages. This project brings together teachers and experts in the field whose standard, pre-COVID practice varies and makes any generalisation about the relevant approaches and methodologies unwise. We try, however, to offer a theoretical framework that might be able to, if not accommodate, then at least position the described teaching situations in relation to some of the main recent language teaching trends (see also RQ1).

The cornerstone pedagogical points of reference that we identified relate to *communicative* and *learner-centred* approaches where interactivity is of paramount importance (see RQ4 and RQ8). Communicative language teaching was introduced in the 70's and over time there were many different definitions and interpretations of this approach. Spada (2007) argues that these interpretations range from the emphasis on the communication of messages and meaning to a focus on the analysis and practice of language forms. The range could be so wide that a number of second language acquisition researchers argue that the term has become empty and impractical while Spada asserts that this is a matter of balance, integration, and equilibrium. Many of our world languages' syllabi are informed by a 'focus on form' task-based approach where learners' attention is attracted to linguistic functions as they engage in the performance of tasks (Long, 1985; see RQ6). This approach sits in contrast with a structure-based approach known as 'focus on forms', where linguistic features are taught directly and explicitly (Ellis, 2015, 2016; Long, 1991).

The other notion central to contemporary language pedagogy is that of learner-centred teaching (see RQ5 and RQ7). Nunan (1988) put forward the concept of a curriculum mediated and articulated through a collaboration between the teacher and the students. Indeed, the notion that a teacher should understand

the academic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, learning styles, needs, and preferences has become, in most institutions, part and parcel of our standard teaching practice (see [Benson, 2012](#), p. 30; [Nunan, 2012](#)). Furthermore, such a learner-centred approach leads to the notion of a learner autonomy that implies the understanding of the purpose of one's learning, the acceptance of responsibility for it, the participation in the setting of goals, the taking of initiatives in planning and executing the relevant activities, and regularly reviewing and evaluating the effectiveness of the learning process ([Holec, 1981](#); [Little, 1991](#)).

## 6. Discussion of the RQs

### 6.1. Decision-making trends, driving forces, and patterns for change

Contemporary higher education pays consistent attention to the university governance issues, given an increasing focus on the contemporary transformations of higher education in line with societal needs. COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of the comprehensive institutional response to the advent of the pandemic. The forced migration to a completely remote online teaching/learning required that the university leadership and academic staff provide timely solutions to those challenges which emerged with regard to the educational process management. Therefore, it is logical that all the chapters consider the respective issues.

- RQ1. What was the decision-making process like in shifting to remote online teaching? Were the changes implemented in a top-down or bottom-up fashion?

Every chapter provides a particular background regarding the institutional administration actions in the face of the COVID-19. Some authors mention national ([Mentchen](#); [Salem](#); [Uwizeyimana](#)) or regional (e.g. [Oliver del Olmo](#)) decrees and further move to particular internal regulations. In contrast, others focus on university-wide institutional governance (e.g. [Bordet](#); [Radić](#); [Ross &](#)

**Axelrod**). Furthermore, there is also mention of interuniversity experience in tailoring internal institutional regulations to the tasks of ‘conventional’ study-abroad programmes of international students from different countries (**Kashef**), as well as interuniversity cooperation within the country national framework (**Salem**). One chapter reports on a thorough institutional survey to profile pre- and post-COVID-19 university policies in Rwanda (**Uwizeyimana**).

Most chapters reveal the dominance of the top-down trend in the university pathway to introduce changes in the organisation of the educational process (**Heider; Martelli; Mayrink et al.; Oliver del Olmo; Zheng & Zhang**). However, such an approach does not seem to affect the spirit of institutional academic freedom, as the emergency requires a coordinated response from the departments and/or language centres, namely managerial staff, teaching staff, specialists from the technical support division, and students.

- RQ2. Technology, administration or pedagogy, which was the driving force for change?

Each chapter explores the use of technology. This angle stands in line with the project rationale that focuses on remote online language teaching. What seems genuinely relevant for the contemporary landscape is that every author examines concrete tools for content delivery, students’ self-study, and assessment issues, etc. Scholars also mention hardware and software issues (**Radić**), and consider the integration and specific choice of platforms and services (**Chodzkiené et al.; Ghaffari**) for asynchronous and online learning (**Mentchen; Ope-Davies; Zheng & Zhang**). Further, researchers specify possible options of digital tools choice for various learning formats, e.g. lectures, workshops, self-study, exams (**Critchley; Schmied**), and underline the importance of software compatibility across partner universities (**Kashef**).

However, the authors seem to be unanimous in prioritising the human factor and pedagogy that are considered the driving force to tailor the learning process to the remote context, to customise the technology to a diverse student body in terms of social, cultural, and academic background. As far as

administration is concerned, the chapters reveal either explicitly or implicitly that administrative initiatives and actions coordinate the pathway to change, provide the learning/teaching process' continuity, and consistency of teachers' and students' activities.

- RQ3. Predictably, responses to the emergency varied depending on the specific contexts. However, is it possible to discern some patterns emerging?

A brief tour across chapters raises awareness to some common patterns across countries and continents. Online remote language teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic has enforced the overall university community focus on “language as a social practice” (e.g. **Mayrink et al.**). The project data confirms that institutional stakeholders' capacity and readiness to collaborate are crucial for the emergency disruptions to be tackled (e.g. **Atabekova et al.**). The chapters highlight the critical importance of the teachers' and students' human side; their interaction (e.g. **Freddi; Nkemele**). Furthermore, the authors coincide in underlining the importance of content adaptation, specifics of course delivery, and implementation due to various learning activities (e.g. **Atabekova et al.; Bordet; Schmied**). The data also reveals the ongoing adaptation of formative assessment to new contexts (e.g. **Rafiei & Amirian; Martelli**), the increasing role of teachers and students' feedback (e.g. **Chodzkienė et al.; Freddi; Kashaf; Radić**), and the need for academic community training and support (e.g. **Uwizeyimana**) to help both students and teachers overcome fatigue and stress (e.g. **Mentchen**). Finally, those scholars seem prophetic who argue that, following the pandemic, the digital and face-to-face modalities will co-exist (e.g. **Gastaldi & Grimaldi**), and move beyond traditional institutional curriculum boundaries (e.g. **Critchley**).

## **6.2. Communicative, interactive, and learner-centred approaches**

Since many teaching approaches over the last few years have been developed under the general label of *communicative*, it is interesting to analyse to what



extent such approaches have been lost or, to take a more positive and creative stance, how such approaches have been integrated into remote online teaching practices. Of course, many communicative elements seemed to be difficult or even lost during the forced migration to remote online practices, but if we look at some details in the reports we can be much more optimistic, since problems have made us aware of many things that we had taken for granted, in many cases more explicit interaction cues may be necessary, but in some cases the digital mode has even opened up new opportunities.

- RQ4. How have teachers managed to maintain or include interactive elements in their teaching?

The loss of face-to-face interaction in remote online teaching and the problem of multimodal interaction is mentioned in almost all chapters. Some contributions mention it more than ten times (e.g. **Mayrink et al.**; **Ope-Davis**; **Salem**; **Schmied**; **Zheng & Zhang**). The initial problem was usually the camera, i.e. many young, especially female, learners did not want to switch on the camera. Such users may see it as an advantage when they can choose a background in their platform (like in Zoom). No camera may be seen as acceptable as a privacy right, but it does not help teachers when they would like to rely on multimodal cues to see how their learners react to their teaching, which parts of their teaching seem to be understood easily, which students they can ask, etc. It is difficult to pick up such interactive cues when the camera is not on, especially when microphones also have to be muted in larger groups or disturbing internet technicalities.

But the interactive elements were not restricted to the normal teacher-student interaction or the even more challenging student-teacher interaction (e.g. **Zhang & Chen**). Teacher-teacher interaction is usually not mentioned explicitly, but it is clear that the exchange of experience and advice is always useful in the peer group and student-student interaction is discussed in many contributions, especially in task-based learning or activities in breakout rooms, for instance.

- RQ5. How learner-centred was the switch to remote online teaching?

Although learner-centred approaches are extremely important in modern foreign-language teaching, they were mentioned explicitly only rarely (e.g. in **Freddi** or **Ross & Axelrod**) and more often implicitly. Thus, a lot of the group work and breakout room discussions can be included in this perspective. The problems mentioned with reference to breakout rooms, however, are not more dramatic than in similar face-to-face activities and moving from a digital breakout room to another may even be easier and more effective. The possibility to record group discussions more easily may even give teachers a chance to analyse activities afterwards and to adapt their teaching (as done in e.g. **Freddi's** video). Of course, the recording must not be on if students need the privacy to discuss their own progress or their teachers' instructions or help openly and critically.

Another positive result of the pandemic was that it brought the learner back to the centre of the educational process through various forms of content negotiation: **Mayrink et al.** focus on forms of assessment; **Heider** and **Gastaldi and Grimaldi** are concerned about students' satisfaction; **Freddi** presents various forms of enhanced feedback and project-based learning; **Salem** and **Oliver del Olmo** both emphasise the centrality of feedback; **Atabekova et al.** argue in favour of the flipped classroom methodology and demonstrate various degrees of learner engagement depending on year and level of study.

As this can only partly compensate for the lack of informal common room or cafeteria meetings, which are not to be underestimated as learning opportunities, digital meeting places have been proposed as digital solutions (e.g. Kumospace). This may bring learning closer to language acquisition in less institutional settings – whether this is appreciated by language learners still needs to be analysed.

- RQ6. How were task-based approaches included in remote online teaching?

Task-based learning is mentioned in many contributions, as it is part of a modern curriculum (e.g. **Nkemleke; Ross & Axelrod**). Tasks are discussed as a central element of learning in several contributions (e.g. **Zheng & Zhang**). Of course,

which tasks are possible in online teaching depends on the platform or tool used. The well-known open source platform Moodle offers a wide choice. Etherpad provides a good opportunity for brainstorming where each contribution can be allocated through different colours to individual learners. In BigBlueButton, the shared notes feature offers an opportunity for anonymous contributions of the entire class, which may be seen as a disadvantage by teachers, but as an advantage by more introverted learners. For smaller groups, breakout rooms are available on many platforms and are frequently used in teaching.

Breakout rooms are good if students are good at organising their own and their group's work, as in in-class cultures where leadership is built into the education system, e.g. course speakers like in China (**Zheng & Zhang**). It is always crucial that instructions come across clearly to the learners, since it is impossible for teachers to monitor all groups at the same time. This is why the random allocation of breakout rooms may not be chosen by teachers for pedagogical reasons: they may intend to group students according to levels and tasks or reckon that they need one better student in certain groups who can lead on the others.

### **6.3. Students diversity and other emergent methodological lessons**

- RQ7. To what extent was the process of moving to remote online teaching able to cater for the diversity of the student body?

That diversity of the student body is emphasised by the online shift is apparent in all the chapters. Diverse teaching approaches were used depending on, primarily, level of study (undergraduate, graduate and post-graduate), class size (ranging from small seminar to large lecture), and course objectives, i.e. general language or language for specific purposes (e.g. translation training in **Atabekova et al.; Bordet**). Combined with the online mode, these traditional pedagogical distinctions brought about improved patterns of interaction, as different ways of managing interaction were experimented with, depending on level of study, class size, and course objective. In some instances the chat function of the video conferencing tool is used to facilitate question-and-answer and prompt active

student engagement, when the shutoff of the video or the number of students connected do not allow for more direct spoken conversation to take place. Some chapters stress interactivity and the interpersonal dimension as a crucial feature of these new teaching/learning processes catering for student diversity. Particularly, **Oliver del Olmo**, calls language pedagogy at UAB during the pandemic “a new interactive scenario”. **Ross and Axelrod** talk about the need to “foreground the use of student-centered, interactive, and task-based activities, and to help teachers find ways to minimize one-way transferral of information for students to absorb”. **Atabekova et al.** compare BAs, MAs, and PhDs and observe how different years and levels of study correspond to different degrees of teacher-student and peer-to-peer interaction.

Diversity may be both an advantage and a disadvantage in online classes, intercultural aspects may be more difficult to overcome, but they may also be a realistic challenge closer to the real-life workplaces of the future that students have to be trained for (e.g. **Freddi; Schmied**).

- RQ8. What methodological developments did we record?

Some of the issues discussed in relation to the previous RQs already point to the methodological changes that we record through this collection of case studies. One of the major developments emerging from the chapters concerns the communicative approach: some (e.g. **Gastaldi & Grimaldi; Heider; Ross & Axelrod**) make explicit that the specific pedagogical paradigm in which they operate is still very much influenced by the communicative approach and many of the digital developments discussed reinforce that paradigm. Notably, the notion of ‘scaffolding’ in **Ross and Axelrod** is used as a metaphor for the kind of extra support teachers should be offering students when working remotely. Even the chapters that do not explicitly mention it refer to notions that are linked to the communicative approach. **Atabekova et al.**, for example, have the flipped classroom methodology as one crucial way of structuring remote learning.

Another evident development is what we could call the shift from *unintentionally blended* language teaching/learning to *blended by design*: all of the chapters

show that the higher education system had already undergone an extensive digitalisation process long before the pandemic and that language education had already been using tools specific to teaching and learning such as Moodle to support face-to-face teaching. This existing digital base is what allowed universities to continue their first mission, i.e. teaching, during the first lockdown. However, as already stated with reference to RQ3, a more intentional blended language learning represents the way forward for many contributors (e.g. **Critchley**; **Freddi**; **Gastaldi & Grimaldi**; **Mayrink et al.**; **Oliver del Olmo**; **Radić**).

This is linked to the other major development emerging from the collection, namely that of innovation in language teaching and learning. Many chapters recognise that, if the initial response was dictated by an emergency, a sudden crisis nobody could have forecast, there is an immense potential for adapting and innovating processes and practices during times of crisis (e.g. **Freddi**; **Heider**; **Radić**). In order to implement innovation, many chapters call for centralised support that should be offered to teaching staff at a time of profound changes. This would contribute to overcoming the clash between technological and educational values and to better understanding between those in charge of the changes at the system level and the teaching staff as frontline implementers. Some others, written by those in charge of language provision within language centres (e.g. **Critchley**; **Gastaldi & Grimaldi**; **Radić**; **Ross & Axelrod**), have set up study groups to advance knowledge of technology-based language learning or provided faculty-wide support (e.g. **Ross & Axelrod**). A very detailed recount of the kind of centralised support offered by the institution is given in **Oliver del Olmo**'s chapter, where, on one hand, the university has provided its members with consistent and timely information and advanced technical support; on the other, education experts set up a series of training sessions very much focused on the pedagogical implications of the technical affordances of the various tools more than the technicalities of each tool.

The challenge for the higher education system, therefore, is whether they/we are capable of sustainable innovation, of efficient and positive changes that

will benefit a wider students' population, in the specific case analysed here, as regards language teaching and learning.

## **7. Limitations to this study**

The main limitation to our work was time pressure as we felt it was important for this collection to be published and the experiences shared as widely as possible within the briefest period of time. We therefore limited the scope of this volume to the collection of case studies and stopped short from engaging in a thorough analysis that could offer a more general overview of the state of world language teaching during the 2020 emergency period.

The special feature mentioned at the beginning, namely 'global', necessarily leads to limitations. Although we attempted to include current experiences from as many different countries as possible, our networks were limited and it is understandable that colleagues had to make a special effort to share their personal responses to a global crisis which demanded their full attention and energy. We are extremely grateful to those who managed our deadlines and accepted our continuous efforts at harmonising contributions.

However, we did neither attempt nor want to harmonise too much, because we believe that every language teacher deserves an opportunity to develop his or her own teaching identity, depending on learners and contexts. The individual contributions in this volume showcase a wide range of educational traditions from different parts of the world. This also applies to the academic writing conventions and preferences. We observed that some writers tend towards more descriptive styles, whereas others added generalisations or even theoretical perspectives; some prefer more tentative statements, others rely on quantitative statistical data. The emphasis on practical approaches to teaching in different contexts and by both native and non-native teachers and writers allows us to include local styles that may not be supported by prescriptive usage books, but show the authors' personality and identity. Although we tried to clarify technical terms, we noticed different lexical conventions that we found interesting and useful

for a global state-of-the art survey. We also left author-specific idiomaticity and some grammatical special features untouched, when the general understanding was not affected.

## 8. Conclusions and way forward

The pandemic has boosted the digital technological component even in contexts that were not inclined to remote education by tradition or vocation. VLEs like Moodle or Canvas are no longer extraneous to the course setup and will gradually be perceived as such by all teaching staff across the board. Technology can now be more fully integrated into the face-to-face classroom in a more balanced way. What is yet unknown is to what extent institutions are ready to dive into the flexibility of models and curricula that characterise blended learning and this includes the deployment of and access to authentic resources. An additional dimension of this flexible model is of course the de-territorialisation of languages, students, and teachers: languages are not necessarily spoken within the boundaries of countries and/or territories while students and teachers can be located anywhere in the world.

The way forward stresses the fundamental role of the *blended learning* modes of delivery which do not exclude face-to-face, classroom teaching or, conversely, fully remote designs. Such future modes are likely to include *hybrid* deliveries to students *in situ* and in remote locations, simultaneously and in real-time. In terms of teacher training, teaching methodology, and materials design, such a hybrid mode is demanding and will require strong and multi-faceted institutional support. It might require additional teaching tools too such as the Owl (Owls Labs) that integrates a 360-degree camera, microphone, and speaker combined into one easy-to-use device<sup>6</sup>. The tool allows students attending the lesson remotely to view all in-class participants on the screen and to participate interactively.

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6. <https://uk-shop.owlabs.com/products/meeting-owl-pro>

If we may be allowed to make a general statement about the contributions in this volume, we can say that all colleagues showed and documented their passion, willingness, and ability to innovate and the imagination to create, as well as their belief in the key role of education. We can assert furthermore that what clearly transpires from all the studies is a foremost focus on the student and their academic and personal characteristics and needs.

We would like to conclude by offering an observation and posing a question. In this volume we discuss the emergency period from the point of view of language teaching. However, the impact of this situation on most world societies is far greater and far-reaching. For one, our communication patterns have changed. Our social and professional interaction with family, friends, and colleagues has moved online and we have adopted different tools and developed new strategies to cope with this situation. Will we ever go back to the old normal patterns of face-to-face meetings, conferences, and lessons? That is hard to imagine.

We are very likely to take with us into the future all the new skills we learnt and approaches we developed. If the patterns of communication have changed and we are no longer confined to talking to people face-to-face, do we need to study, acquire, and learn a language in a face-to-face setting? Do we need a classroom to learn how to communicate online in a foreign tongue? If the answer is no, this represents a palpable and meaningful paradigm shift. Either way, the future of the teaching and study of world languages looks exciting and judging by our contributors and their contributions, we are in good, safe hands.

These observations assert the critical importance of training and supporting teaching staff. The COVID-19 pandemic caused in language teaching, as in other ways of life, an acceleration of developments and a confluence of modern trends such as the use of authentic resources and establishing students as autonomous learners, the de-territorialisation of language and language teaching, and learner-centred approaches and teacher empowerment – the pandemic has instigated an unprecedented range of responses that demonstrate the innovative spirit of teachers and the advantages of global networking. This survey aims at making



a modest contribution in documenting that language teachers have used the opportunities to develop their profession further for the benefit of international communication in our modern digital societies.

Of course, this compilation of ‘COVID-19 responses’ is not the only ongoing academic discourse on language teaching during the pandemic. Many related publications are country-based because the national context usually sets the legal and conventional frame for teaching and learning. The technological basis also depends on national grids, funds, and training traditions. We have tried to include this in the framing at the beginning of our contributions. In this setting, many comparative projects chose a national background, e.g.

- [Plutino and Polisca \(2021\)](#) on the UK; and
- [Henaku, Agbozo Edzordzi, and Nartey \(forthcoming\)](#) on Ghana.

Some chose a smaller teaching perspective, focusing on English only ([Wong, 2020](#)), others took a much wider perspective, observing the entire education system, national (e.g. [Traxler, Smith, Scott, & Hayes, 2020](#)) or global ([UNESCO, 2020](#)). Many concentrated on sharing their personal experience with colleagues, some also included the student experience explicitly ([Amrane-Cooper et al., 2020](#)).

What most of these publications have in common is that they show that instead of lamenting about the forced migration, teachers demonstrated their positive outlook: they were open to adopting technology if and when they saw its pedagogical values and if they were able to adapt them to their immediate needs in the virtual classroom. They combined face-to-face conversational conventions with new technical affordances. They readjusted teaching methodologies and examination practices. And they took the opportunity to leap forward into the digital age of language teaching and learning that will equip teachers and students for their digital future.

Our collection documents the individual global perspective in language teaching and learning. We tried to include the national and institutional context as a

baseline and the diversity of creative responses as individual choices that may be inspiring to others. It is clear that the technology choice is easy, it is the standard international tool of the international teaching community. What is not so easy is the critical digital literacy for teachers and learners: the supportive, resourceful teacher and the independent, confident learner – and this pandemic provided the necessary opportunities of practice to develop resilience and collaborative efforts for all stakeholders<sup>7</sup>.

To conclude, this collection testifies to global language teaching efforts in higher education during the 2020 COVID-19 emergency period and will serve, we trust, as a useful point of reference. Based on the collated evidence, we are proud to conclude that our profession rose magnificently to this specific challenge and that we are confident that it will continue to thrive in many diverse educational and learning contexts. And finally, we hope to have been moderately, at least, successful in offering inspiration and encouragement to colleagues around the world.

## 9. Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/ubu13w6qsp7j1c4sgjj5j6rlo1k051c>

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7. An international comparison not directly related to teaching, but to projects can be found in a [DAAD \(2021\)](#) working paper. It is not representative but rather a survey of innovative international project partners (n=398 all, 238 not German) that shows results that are similar to ours: The online tools (p. 10) used have a similar variation as ours and the future expectations are also that “we continue with methodologies developed” (p. 6) in blended formats. The issues of integrating social media and inverted classroom methodologies are comparable (p. 4). The problems noticed include lack of interaction and the social divide (p.13), as illustrated in many contributions in our volume. The ‘lessons learnt’ partly coincide with our experience (excerpts from p. 12; translated by Josef Schmied):

- Face-to-face teaching can be reduced but not replaced by online teaching!
- In synchronous formats, interaction and exchange should always be in the foreground.
- Practice-oriented content is very difficult to convey in digital form.
- E-lectures should not be too long as it is very difficult to concentrate on longer e-lectures.
- The supervision effort is immense and places more of a burden on teachers than the occasional appointments in traditional lectures.
- Access to some tools (e.g. Zoom) is blocked in some countries. The amount of data for downloads is also capped or... there may be political obstacles to digitalisation.
- Non-verbal interaction and group dynamics are not very noticeable in online teaching and are difficult to interpret.
- [Teachers] had to fundamentally rethink and question their teaching, which was very good for the quality of the teaching.

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**Edited by Nebojša Radić, Anastasia Atabekova, Maria Freddi, and Josef Schmied**

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