COVID-19 emergency teaching: from CULP to remote CULP

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Abstract

In this chapter I describe the emergency delivery of the Cambridge University institution-wide Language Programme (CULP) during the COVID-19 lockdown in March-July 2020. I am the Director of the Programme and report from a managerial point of view. I begin by outlining the institutional context and the student and teaching staff backgrounds. I proceed by describing the decision-making process, the rationale behind the decisions, the steps taken in preparation for the online, remote delivery of the teaching, and the delivery itself. The chapter reports on measurable student performance as well as formal and informal student and teacher feedback. The chapter concludes by drawing the relevant conclusions about this unique professional experience, the changes we witness in communication, teaching, and learning patterns, and outlining a possible way forward.

Keywords: COVID-19, online language teaching, training and support, course-design, university-wide programme, UK.

1. The institutional context

The University of Cambridge is defined by a long-standing tradition, its collegial structure, and the international profile of its students and staff. The academic year is divided in three eight-week terms: Michaelmas, Lent, and Easter. The
Language Centre supports the teaching and learning of languages throughout the university. It does so by offering support in Academic Development and Training to International Students (ADTIS), a self-access learning centre that hosts resources in 180+ languages, a dedicated technical section for the design and production of multimedia resources for online delivery, and a taught programme of world languages (CULP). CULP offers general language courses as well as courses for specific purposes such as academic reading for postgraduates in the Schools of Arts and Humanities and Humanities and Social Sciences, or for students of Clinical Medicine as well as historians and musicians to some 2,000 students per year. CULP offers tuition in 16 languages and up to six levels. All courses are aligned with the relevant international frameworks of reference for languages such as the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), HSK and JLPT, and are formatted to offer 30 hours of face-to-face classroom teaching and require around 45 hours of self-study. General language courses are offered at three points during the year and in three different formats. In Michaelmas and Lent (first and second term), over a 15-week period, students attend two hours of classroom teaching and self-study for around three hours. In the Easter term, the same number of contact hours and self-study is distributed over a period of eight weeks and in Long Vacation (summer period) over four weeks. The vast majority of CULP courses do not use textbooks but digital, multimedia learning resources that are available online via a dedicated virtual learning environment (Moodle). It is also important to mention that Cambridge does not feature a credit system. Most language centre students, therefore, take language classes on top of their regular studies. Languages are studied for a degree in the faculties of the School of Arts and Humanities.

2. Former English for Academic Purposes (EAP).
3. Arabic, British Sign Language, Chinese, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Persian, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Swahili, and Turkish.
4. Basic 1, Basic 2, Intermediate 1, Intermediate 2, Advanced and Advanced+ in European languages and Basic 1, Basic 2, Elementary 1, Elementary 2, Intermediate 1 in Arabic, Mandarin Chinese, Japanese and Korean. Not all levels are available in all languages, though. This is subject to demand.
5. HSK: Chinese Proficiency Test; JLPT: Japanese Language Proficiency Test.
6. Please see in this collection the contributions from Silke Mentschen who teaches German in the Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages and Linguistics (MMLL) and Mahbod Ghaffari who teaches Persian in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies (AMES).
1.1. The students

CULP is an institution-wide language programme that enrolls graduate and postgraduate students as well as university staff and a small number of members of the general public. The programme offers a range of specialist and general language courses to some 2,000 students per academic year. In 2019, Easter courses attracted 242 students. This year however, we announced very early towards the end of March that we would deliver teaching online. We also lowered the fee considerably and the interest was unprecedented. In the 2020 Easter term we nearly doubled enrolments to 460 students. On popular demand we reinstated the Long Vacation courses and enrolled another 120 students. The overall number of students during the April to July period was increased therefore by 130%. This was achieved without any systematic advertising of the courses. The split between undergraduate and postgraduate students remained the same, 50/50.

1.2. The staff

In CULP we teach 16 languages and some 70 different courses. In Easter however, enrolment numbers are smaller so in 2020 we offered a dozen languages and 25 courses. While we have 35 teaching staff, in Easter only 17 were scheduled to teach. CULP is normally delivered in blended-learning mode, so all staff are well trained and experienced in designing and producing digital learning materials as well as teaching using a flipped classroom approach. The challenge we suddenly faced, however, was of a completely different order. Based on my interaction with staff in workshops, meetings, and further correspondence with individuals, I can state that all staff accepted with perhaps muted but nonetheless enthusiasm the decision to teach remotely. With some trepidation too, but they did not feel intimidated or inhibited. We quickly came up with an informed and efficient delivery design that relied heavily on the resources and expertise that we already had.

7. From £285 to £200 (for students). The main reason for lowering the fees was to attract more students. At the same time, due to the need for additional hardware, software, and training, the cost of delivering the courses was higher.

8. 140 under-graduate and 143 graduate students, 76 staff, and 65 members of the general public.
1.3. **Technical support**

The Language Centre has a dedicated five staff strong technical section. The technical section was able to advise in a timely fashion and offer support for hardware and software issues, procurement as well as necessary training. Such training was delivered initially via real-time Zoom-based workshops and subsequently via asynchronous chat forums and a dedicated Moodle web page containing all relevant information. At the beginning of this crisis, the University Information Service and Teaching and Learning Centre were still finding their way and were not in a position to offer us significant support. The University of Cambridge is collegiate and devolved which makes it harder for any centralised decision or action to be implemented.

2. **Teaching remotely, online**

2.1. **The decision to teach remotely**

On 20 March 2020 the whole of the UK found itself in lockdown. University staff was advised to work from home and since it was mid-term many students decided to leave town and/or not to return to Cambridge. The CULP management agreed that going fully online was the only sensible way forward as the only other alternative seemed to be not teaching at all. The feeling was, however, that the lockdown presented also an opportunity to explore new modes of language teaching delivery. In pedagogical terms, we accepted the situation as a challenge rather than a hindrance. Initially, we were only hoping to attract enough students to be able to run at least some of the courses and gain some valuable experience.

2.2. **Assumptions underpinning the design of the remote programme**

We based the design of the fully remote, online mode of delivery on our previous, very extensive experience of offering blended-learning courses. From its inception in the year 2000, CULP delivered courses that bring together face-
to-face teaching and multimedia, and interactive online resources accessible via the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)\(^9\). We felt that this long-standing experience of teaching in what is now called a flipped classroom (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Dunn, 2014) would give our teaching team two clear advantages, as below:

- the availability of digital resources – our VLE already held all or most of the teaching materials in a digital format. This is true for both self-study (homework) as well as classroom teaching resources that are typically accessed via a Smart Board; and

- a sound pedagogical course design approach – our teaching staff were used to designing and delivering courses within a flipped classroom framework.

Our core assumption was that online communication via Zoom would replace face-to-face classroom teaching and be integrated with the VLE (Moodle) into a coherent and pedagogically meaningful teaching and learning platform.

2.3. **Pedagogical and logistical considerations**

In terms of logistics, we were worried that we would not have enough students to be able to run *any* courses. We therefore heavily discounted our fees and hoped to have enough students to run at least some of the courses. The timeframe for preparation was extremely tight and we knew that we might have to compromise and keep things simple, with special reference to teacher training and ongoing technical, logistical, and pedagogical support.

Based on my previous extensive professional experience of teaching remotely, online\(^10\), and in a blended-learning environment at Cambridge, it was clear that we were facing a significant shift and that rather than shovelling teaching

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9. The VLE was initially CamTools, a local product, and since 2013, Moodle.

materials and rebranding activities, we needed to rethink and reinvent our approach to teaching. From the outset, however, I was aware of the magnitude of this task and that the transition had to be approached gradually and managed carefully.

2.4. **Hardware and software**

Teaching staff were now asked to prepare and deliver online teaching from their homes. Not all had dedicated offices or adequate spaces. Schools were closed, so those with small children had the additional problem of childcare that exacerbated the space issue. All staff had networked computers but many, at home, worked on laptops that were not adequate because of the size of the screen\(^{11}\).Cameras, microphones, lighting, and seating arrangements represented an issue too. To meet these requirements, The Language Centre’s technical section sourced the necessary hardware from our own reserves. We were already in late March or early April when the waiting times for online deliveries was getting longer. Most of this equipment was coming from China, the country that was first hit by the Coronavirus. Since The Language Centre’s self-access centre was closed, we borrowed their desktop computers and transported them (using our own, private vehicles) to teachers’ homes. We stripped all computers of microphones and cameras, and borrowed more comfortable office chairs and desk lamps. Eventually, we did manage to raise the quality level of the equipment used in the delivery of the courses. Where necessary, and that was in only a couple of cases, we purchased new computers.

By design, all CULP courses make use of the Moodle VLE. This proved to be a significant advantage and the single most important step towards full remote delivery. The next step was to identify the right tool for real-time, audio- and video-communication and the remote delivery of the teaching. Our director of e-learning recommended Zoom. In 2019, the university had already signed a contract with Microsoft and rolled out Teams (MT), a communication and

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11. A university-wide survey was administered in July and showed that 80% of the university staff worked at home on laptop computers. Laptops feature considerably smaller screens that struggle to accommodate more than 15 little faces in Zoom. They also represent a health risk due to the curved seating posture.
management tool that featured desktop sharing and breakout room facilities but could not display more than six participants on its interface\textsuperscript{12}. This posed serious limitations on teaching. Zoom, on the other hand, featured all of these functions and on top of that appeared to be more user friendly and stable. At the time, however, there were security concerns about Zoom. Our technical section was of the view that the Zoom corporation was in the process of addressing these concerns and solving the security issue\textsuperscript{13}. Since the university had signed a contract with MT, it was free for us to use, but Zoom required us to purchase the professional licence to have the benefit of using all of its functions. Each teaching staff purchased a monthly subscription and subsequently sent the invoice to the administration for reimbursement.

2.5. Initial training and ongoing support

The University Centre for Teaching and Learning\textsuperscript{14} provided remote, online teaching training in the form of a series of workshops. These were mostly delivered online, recorded, and subsequently made available from their web pages. They also developed purposeful manuals on teaching and assessment with technology. Support was also sought from training providers external to the university. Apart from these resources being made available later into the crisis (from June typically), their very general approach to teaching left many aspects of our own operation unsupported. Therefore, we decided very early to run language teaching specific workshops and create support groups. The workshops focused on the integration of Zoom and Moodle while the support groups were language, team-based, and looked at specific courses, resources, and teaching styles.

CULP teaching staff are experienced and comfortable in teaching in a blended-learning, flipped classroom mode. Only a very small number of our courses

\textsuperscript{12} https://myteamsday.com/2020/10/02/teams-roadmap-updates/. It has to be said though, by the end of 2020 MS Teams did acquire most of these functionalities.

\textsuperscript{13} https://www.tomsguide.com/uk/news/zoom-security-privacy-woes

\textsuperscript{14} https://www.cctl.cam.ac.uk/teaching-2020-21
makes use of a textbook\textsuperscript{15} while most of the others rely on bespoke resources designed, produced, and delivered online by our dedicated language centre technical section. Apart from these ‘backbone’ resources, teachers develop their own teaching materials using a variety of software packages (e.g. PowerPoint, Google Docs, Panopto, audio recorders) and tools (e.g. tablets), to meet the requirements of their individual teaching style and specific groups of learners. The CULP blended-learning environment is defined by the use of the Moodle VLE and, in the classroom, by computer-connected, networked Smart Boards. It must be emphasised at this point that prior to the lockdown, as we just described, most of our teaching resources had already been in digital format. This meant that they were all readily deliverable at a distance, remotely.

Training for the remote, online delivery of the courses started with workshops that looked at the technical properties of Moodle, Zoom, MT, Google Drive, etc. In its regular delivery, CULP already used a range of online services and tools. Students would find course-related information on our CULP webpage, then proceed to enrol via the University Training Booking System – UTBS. They would then receive a link (email) to the university payments system and would attend the course-related resources in Moodle. Just getting to the learning activities implied using four different platforms already! Regular communication would take place via emails that could be generated via UTBS, Moodle, or a personal account. We knew this multitude presented a serious problem and needed solving by unifying the process in one single platform, but March/April 2020 just did not seem quite the right time to tackle this issue. Going completely remote by using a wide range of additional tools would have presented us with additional significant design and training challenges. After the initial technology-driven workshops, we set up an asynchronous technical support forum (Moodle chat room) while we refocused hands-on training on strictly pedagogy-driven issues.

It was of critical importance to conceptually match our previous rich experience and use it to create a new, remote, online teaching platform. Zoom offered

\textsuperscript{15} e.g. Intermediate French and German for Medics.
the possibility to do so as it could be integrated with Moodle to take over the pedagogical functions of the classroom Smart Board (share desktop function).

CULP was one of the rare university units that offered a financial incentive to its teaching staff to undertake the necessary training and to work on the modification of lesson plans and teaching materials. While this financial incentive is certainly not adequate in terms of the many hours this urgent and diverse work entailed, it was certainly understood as an acknowledgement of such work. This sent a strong message to all teaching staff who felt supported by their institution and empowered to face this challenge.

2.6. Resources

As we already mentioned, we use just a few paper-based resources (textbooks) in our teaching. The vast majority of the resources were readily available in a digital format. This of course made them readily accessible to our remote students. Some of the teachers did still have pockets of paper-based materials such as photocopies. These were scanned and uploaded into Moodle. The Language Centre holds a vast collection of films and documentaries in DVD format. During the lockdown these were made available to individuals for research purposes only. However, we also have a significant collection of films and documentaries that are readily available online and students were encouraged to make use of those.

2.7. The delivery

In the Easter term, we ran 25 courses and delivered remotely/online 1,500 hours of teaching. Our Swahili teacher was left stranded in Zanzibar due to the British Airways cancelling their flights to London. He delivered his lessons from the local primary school that he attended many years prior. The quality of his connection was excellent, and he never had any connectivity or other technical issues.

During this period, we only had to postpone two sessions (same day) due to connectivity problems at the outskirts of Cambridge.

16. He did complain, though, about the air conditioning being on the weak side!
3. Evaluation

3.1. Student feedback

CULP features a quality assurance framework that relies, among other tools, on student feedback. Student questionnaires are normally administered online mid-course and at the end of the course. The role of mid-course feedback is to inform in a formative manner teaching staff so they can fine-tune their lesson plans, teaching materials and, if need be, class management patterns. This delivery of CULP had no precedents. To gauge some fairly meaningful data we decided to administer a very slightly modified standard questionnaire that we used (a variation of) over many years. This meant that we had some robust and meaningful historical data for comparison.

Here are some of the most relevant answers compared to the regular 2019-2020 classroom delivery of the course. M/L stands for the first two terms, Michaelmas and Lent. Easter is the third term when teaching was delivered remotely. It must be said that the range of M/L answers we used falls within the range of the historical data. They are not, therefore, extreme in any sense. The number of respondents in the two cohorts was comparable (188/160). Respondents had to circle one answer on the Likert scale where one was strongly disagree, and five strongly agree.

- “The teacher stimulated my interest in the subject”: 86% of the M/L and 97% agreed (or strongly agreed) with the statement.

- “The teacher was organised and prepared”: Given the very short period of time teachers had to be trained to use the remote teaching tools and modify their teaching materials, it came as a surprise that 96% of the respondents thought so (M/L 93%).

17. For a full table with all questions and responses see supplementary materials.
• “The course was supported by adequate online resources”: 81% thought so in M/L. The remote course saw that percentage skyrocketing to 96%.

• “Exams related to the course learning outcomes”: 91% of the remote course students were of that view, up from the M/L’s 88%.

• “The teacher used a variety of instructional methods to reach the course objectives”: 26% of the remote students agreed and a further 72% strongly agreed (98% in total). In M/L these figures were 34% and 57% (91% in total) respectively.

• One of the most important questions in this survey relates to the students’ own perceptions of their attainment (or otherwise). The programme aims at establishing students as independent learners for life and to do so, it is of utmost importance that they feel confident and positive about their own learning. So, in M/L 94% of the students felt they made progress in the course while in the remote course that was the view of 98% of the respondents.

• And finally, 93% of the M/L students thought this was a worthwhile class (4% disagreed) while among the remote students 97% thought so and none disagreed.

The student feedback was extremely positive. However, we need to view it with a pinch of salt. The novelty of the mode of delivery and the severe lockdown influenced significantly and positively student feelings and beliefs. For instance, more Easter students agreed that The Language Centre’s website and online information about the courses was adequate. We however, did not alter the web pages in any meaningful way except for adding the new and only most necessary information in relation to the remote/online courses.

This survey, among other information gathered, shows clearly that students are quite open to the idea of remote/online language teaching and learning. More open perhaps, than the teaching staff themselves.
3.2. **Teacher feedback**

The Language Centre features two ‘teachers’ rooms’ in two different buildings. Each of these rooms hold half a dozen workstations connected to printers, scanners, audio-visual tools, and other necessary equipment. The teaching staff, however, always preferred to do most of their lesson preparation work from home. In that sense, the announcement of a lockdown and of the necessity to work and teach from home did not find teachers completely unprepared. Having said that, preparing lessons at home is very different from delivering them from home.

Hardware and software issues were reported and dealt with as per our previous discussion. Some staff reported intermittent but not terminal internet connection issues and were worried about the relevant student connections. It was very quickly made clear to all that any technical problem at the students’ end would be theirs to solve. In cases of severe disruption that would impede following the course, such students would be fully reimbursed the fee\(^{18}\). This put teachers’ minds at ease. Since schools were closed, some teachers had small children running around the house and other family-related distractions. To their great credit, they managed to resolve all of these problems in a friendly, sensible, and positive manner.

In relation to the teaching, teachers highlighted the fatigue element. Suddenly, we all found ourselves with our lesson preparation as well as teaching being performed in front of a computer, as well as all our other professional and social interaction. This was tiring and we addressed the issue by strongly suggesting that all take a ten minute break in between two lessons. Historically, we never used this ten minute break as we all felt it was disruptive and ultimately, time wasted. They also reported a slower pace of lessons. Communication with students with special reference to groups was different. Placing students in breakout rooms is more time consuming when compared to classroom teaching due to the in-built delay. Observing and listening to student performance was

\(^{18}\) Although our students were based worldwide, on all five continents, we had none such cases.
also at a somewhat slower pace as a teacher needs to enter a breakout room and interrupt the ongoing dialogue. There were also (mostly) small technical issues to be dealt with such as sharing the desktop, enabling sound, making sure all participants have decent quality of audio and video, etc. This called for a change in lesson plans and a shift of some materials and activities from classroom presentation to self-study and homework. The flipped classroom thus became even more ‘flipped’. This was necessary because all our courses are benchmarked against (for instance) the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020) as is the assessment framework. The ultimate attainment target at the end of the course had, therefore, to stay the same.

Overall, teacher feedback was very positive. This was an edifying and gratifying professional experience. Some teachers, though, voiced preference for teaching face-to-face. Well, the overall consensus was, we can only hope that a day will come when we will be able to, actually, choose the mode of delivery we feel most comfortable with. Until then we will be in full remote, online mode.

3.3. Learning outcomes

The courses’ assessment frameworks were modified, and the oral component gained in prominence as it was given 50% of the overall mark. Other assessment tools in the courses are online by design: Moodle-based tests, homework, in-class short tests, and a final exam (listening/reading comprehension and writing). The reason for shifting the weight towards the oral component was that this was the only element where we could unequivocally check the identity of the student. Hence the increase in weighing from the standard 30% to 50%.

The retention rate in the 2019/2020 M/L courses was a very healthy 85% while the remote course went up 98%. Only two students dropped out and they both had compelling reasons that they communicated to their teachers and the administration.

The marking schemes and criteria deployed were the same as per the regular courses. All teachers reported that their students achieved very satisfactory
levels of language attainment and this is documented by the work they produced as well as Zoom recordings of their oral presentations. There was a consensus among teaching staff across all languages and levels that the learning outcomes were comparable to those at the end of the M/L cycle.

4. Conclusion

In the academic year 2020/2021, CULP delivers all of its courses remotely/online. Beyond this crisis, I do not see CULP returning to the previous ‘normal’ but rather diversifying its mode of delivery that will be informed by our experience during the current crisis. I expect that in the future we will be offering blended-learning classroom-based teaching, and remote/online language teaching as well as combinations of the two.

We learnt many lessons in this very short period of time. These relate to hardware and software issues, resources preparation, teacher training, class management, and communication with administration and students. Due to all of these factors, this swift move to remote/online teaching represents an important shift in the ways we communicate and teach. Since we are interested in world/foreign language teaching, this confluence of shifts in communication and teaching patterns is significant. Mobile telephony and networked computers have been with us for over two decades and so have Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL)\(^{19}\), blended-learning and, on the margins of mainstream academia, remote/online language learning. However, teaching students skills and knowledge to communicate effectively face-to-face in a foreign country is very different from teaching the same students to communicate effectively and competently remotely and online. During this crisis, we have grown accustomed to communicate with friends, family, and colleagues online. It is hard to see that we are ever going back to the ‘old’ communication patterns that require face-to-face interaction. This change in communication patterns leads to a change in the

\(^{19}\) Also, Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL), Computer-Aided Instruction (CAI), Computer-Aided Language Instruction (CALI), and Computer-Mediated Language Instruction (CMLI).
use and therefore, learning and teaching of foreign languages. This can be said to be a paradigm shift in both the way we live, communicate, and teach.

We, language teaching practitioners and researchers alike, have the opportunity to be active participants and contributors to the development and study of this new language teaching paradigm.

5. **Supplementary materials**

https://research-publishing.box.com/s/ui6gkuhccgw5t3zdp4yt779o15s8btob

**References**

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