

TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND CULTURE DURING/AFTER THE PANDEMIC: CHALLENGES AND FINDING FROM EDUCATORS IN CHINA

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The sanitary crisis of covid-19 has affected economic and social segments in countries all over the whole world. China, the first country faced with this situation, showed that respecting social distancing measures served as an efficient method to decrease the spread of coronavirus, this measure was also recommended by the World Health Organization. In the educational field, Chinese schools and universities were able to urgently face the demand of resuming teaching remotely, preventing the suspension or subsequent delays to the school calendar. In May of 2020, having effectively controlled the health crisis, the return to in person classes resumed normality in several Chinese provinces. In this interview, that took place in August, we invited 6 foreigner teachers of different nationalities, from different continents, all of whom teach in universities in Zhejiang province. We asked them, some that are teaching remotely and some face-to-face, to reflect how they are facing educational tasks in current context and their thoughts about teaching in a post pandemic environment. Similarly, to educational systems of other parts of the world, all of the people that were interviewed faced and are still facing a new reality imposed by the sanitary crisis which demands new teaching and learning strategies, some of which come as much from the greater use of technology as from the need to rethink the role of the educator itself.

The interviews below were conducted by e-mail separately, and the answers were later gathered in order to highlight the polyphonic character that implies the debate about teaching and the pandemic. The foreign teachers answered in their own native languages – Portuguese, English and Chinese; the currently edition, with complete versions in Portuguese and English, the translations were made possible by teacher Jackeline Lee***.

With the desire to contribute to the expansion of educational, international and humanitarian dialogues, we thank our guests for their contribution, the translator, and the editors of this magazine.

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1- As we know, a contamination of the corona virus that started in January this year, with no final period of school holidays. How did you perceive the first signs of a pandemic by working as a teacher?

José Medeiros - I think the fact that we were in the middle of the winter break was a mitigating factor. Since we weren't teaching at the time, we didn't have to hastily interrupt our work, and thus, we gained some valuable time that allowed us to keep up with the developing situation during quarantine. Evidently, during the initial stages of the pandemic, the uncertainties regarding how it would be controlled had a profound impact, since the actual developments were unknown. Fortunately, thanks to efforts by the government and the cooperation of its citizens, the situation was handled properly and the new semester could start, even if only virtually. Of course, as a professor it was a huge effort to adapt to a completely new and challenging work routine.

Song Yuenan - Initially, I was made aware of the pandemic through the news. Since there were no confirmed cases in the area where I reside, most people didn't pay too much attention, but since we were about to start the winter break our colleagues informed us that we shouldn't plan any trips to areas with confirmed cases

Amit Sharma - Initially I did not take covid seriously and dismissed it as a common virus. I presumed it will disappear after a while as the weather changed from cold to warm or hot! And the semester would begin possibly a few weeks later.

JINGXIN XU, (DIEGO) was born in Hangzhou, China. He has a bachelor degree in Chinese-Portuguese Translation from the Polytechnic Institute of Macau, a Masters degree in Translation from the University of Macau, works as coordinator of the Department of Portuguese at the University of Foreign Languages of Zhejiang Yuexiu, is a researcher specialized in Brazilian literature and has translated works by Lima Barreto, Alvarez de Azevedo and Simões Lopes Neto. Author of *the Portuguese Language Regency Dictionary* (2020) specifically targeted for Chinese.



JingxinXu - In January, the most critical moment of the pandemic in China, we were promptly informed that classes would be postponed and that the second semester would take place through online classes. To be honest I was half happy and half annoyed. I was happy because the break was going to be prolonged (at the time I didn't think it would be until may). But I was annoyed because online classes demand more effort than regular ones. At the time I thought that the pandemic would be over in a month, and one month of online classes would be enough. I didn't think I would continue having those classes until the end of the semester.

Lavota Carter - I would probably say the first signs I believed it would evolve into a pandemic is when borders started closing. As a foreign teacher it's essential that you can freely travel to your institution.

André Veloso - The start of the second semester was postponed and classes were resumed remotely. The situation was unaltered for a few months until the school resumed regular classes, that had to abide by social distancing guidelines.

2- Compared to your country's educational system, how do you consider adapting the Chinese university and students to remote classes?

José Medeiros - Since I have been living and working in China for several years, I am not completely aware of how the Brazilian educational system reacted to the pandemic. Through some informal discussions with friends and family, it seems to me that China was able to respond to this new challenge in a more efficient way, especially in regards to the usage of new communication technologies and both mobilizing and syncing efforts to fight it, from institutions to people-administrators, teachers, families, students. In regards to our students, their awareness of the importance of education for their lives was, without a doubt, a decisive factor that allowed them to adapt to these new circumstances in a better way.

Song Yuenan – The peak period of the pandemic coincided with the start of the semester, at that time The Ministry of Education and the leadership of our university were aware that returning to the school would bring enormous risks to both teachers and students, so the departments were informed that they should start preparing online classes, and

training was offered so in case any problem would arise teachers would be able to adapt accordingly. Currently, our countries tele communications systems are very developed, every student is able to take online classes, so the whole process of starting with online classes was promptly resolved



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She has a bachelor's degree in Korean Language and a Master's Degree at Kyung Hee University in South Korea (2016). She has been teaching since graduation and is currently a foreigner teacher in the Korean Department at Zhejiang Yuexiu University of Foreign Languages.

Amit Sharma. - Generally, China, Chinese people, students and our university system (ZYUFL) is far more flexible, innovative and adaptable than India's. College of international business COIB not only adapted to the changed circumstances due to covid (late start, limited class room teaching as many teachers were not allowed to return etc) better but adopted and integrated online learning and teaching softwares like DINGTALK into the pedagogy quickly. The teachers, students, staff and

administrators worked together and seamlessly, most successfully.

JingxinXu - Initially the students didn't think that online classes were lively, because they couldn't see the teacher's reactions, but on the other hand, maybe they enjoyed online classes because they didn't have to wake up as early, they only needed to turn on their computer and that was it. Generally speaking, after the second or third week of classes, most students had already adapted, but after a couple of months, most students were feeling fatigued from the online classes.

Lavota Carter - It was difficult to adapt an interactive language classroom to a remote online course. Delays in the stream, lack of focus, and added amounts of teacher-oriented lectures were not conducive to maintaining the classroom atmosphere pre-pandemic.

André Veloso - Since most students have access to high speed internet and electronic equipment suitable to have online classes there wasn't a big struggle to adapt to online classes on the student's behalf. As for me, the lack of feedback that I received during classes made it a bit hard to adjust during an initial stage, since interaction during classes was reduced to almost 0, and maybe in Portugal this aspect presented a different set of challenges due to the more interactive nature of classes over there.

3- What were the difficulties encountered? What lessons did you consider to be useful for your work after the pandemic? (those who have returned to the classroom or are still working remotely).

José Medeiros - At an earlier stage my biggest challenges were regarding the use of technology and the adoption of a teaching methodology more suited for

remote learning. However, in most part due to the student's commitment, little by little, we were able to overcome many of those initial struggles. For example, we noticed that using audiovisual resources would be more efficient if they were shared beforehand, since even though technology is already very advanced, technical noises are still very common when using broadcasting. Another aspect regards face to face interaction, extremely different from in person classes. Personally, my biggest learning point was realizing that when there are well defined goals, it is possible to achieve great success, regardless of how challenging the situation is. I think this was the case for students and our university. Even faced with a very difficult situation, our institution was able to find a satisfactory way that allowed the teaching-learning processes to remain uninterrupted. Curiously, last semester (from March to July of 2020), two thirds of our classes were remote and a third were in person.

Song Yuenan – I had some technical problems with online classes, but the technicians in charge of online classes were able to quickly help me solve them. Because classes were not face to face, my biggest problem was perhaps the struggle of not being able to completely grasp my student's engagement during classes, so the school encouraged us to enrich the content of our lectures in order to improve the student's level of concentration. After having been through this experience for the first time, I will start using more online resources, and can seamlessly change between online and in person classes.

JingxinXu - The biggest problems regard the subjects we are teaching. If are teaching administration, economy, or even international commerce, the lecturer is able to teach based on a Power Point presentation and the result would probably

not vary too much, although this would be something difficult to prove. But learning a language... You cannot see your foreign teacher. You can compare an online class with buying a prerecorded class online, or watching a video on YouTube. I still have my doubts on how long it is possible to be proactive in your studies.

Amit Sharma - It was difficult to prepare exhaustive teaching resources- PPTs, questions and quizzes to generate discussions in the online classes. Initially it was also difficult to engage the students and assess the quality of class participation of the students. Good Internet connectivity is a must for online teaching. However, I feel covid provided me with the opportunity to develop online Audio video lessons and I can now use this blended learning model in contact class -room teaching also (post covid). I am happy to have learned a new skill..

Lavota Carter - As mentioned before the lack of focus from students that are made to sit and watch because of the restrictions of the platforms used for remote learning. Dealing with internet issues in real-time cut chunks of the standard allotted time in half at times.

André Veloso - Houve There was an initial period when there was a need to learn how to use the software used for classes, and as time went by, there had to be made some adaptations to how I lectured, as well as the exercised and tasks preformed. Learning how to use these new types of software and how to adapt to a new reality will allow me to bring more variety to the way I teach classes.



AMIT SHARMA was born in Buland'hr, India. He has a PhD in Management Sciences from the University of Mysore, India, an Mphil and Masters degree in Economics from North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, India, and a Bachelor's degree in Economics from Delhi University India. He was working as associate professor of economics at Birla Institute of Management Technology, Gr NOIDA, India before he moved to China in 2016 to teach Economics and Management at the College of International Business at ZYUFL, Shaoxing . He is currently working as Vice dean (internationalization) with the College of International Business (ZYUFL). Where his responsibilities include teaching, research and international collaborations.

4. In your opinion, can be a contact teaching fully replaced by online teaching? Do you think that in language teaching is it possible? If so, in which fields?

José Medeiros - I think the most profound aspect of higher education is the environment of human coexistence. All of us, teachers, students and administrative staff are together with one purpose: to teach and learn. In this sense, I think that in person learning is irreplaceable. Evidently, new technologies should be utilized, but only in a way that furthers the dynamic between interaction and learning. Maybe lectures, seminars or even occasionally some specific subjects, like History for example. But the basis should be in person day to day academic interaction.

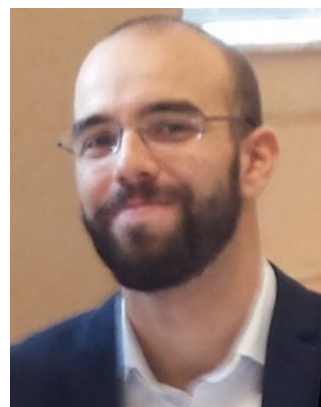
Song Yuenan - Teaching online is very convenient and flexible, not being limited by time or location. It is also possible to utilize some online resources as content for classes, but I do not believe that remote teaching will be able to completely replace in person learning..

JingxinXu - As mentioned in my previous response, it is completely irreplaceable. I believe that the students that had online classes will probably return to school with a Portuguese language level that has regressed to a first-year level. In regards to studying languages, it is possible to study writing and listening on your own, but online learning cannot solve issues that arise when studying oral and listening skills.

Lavota Carter I do not think that contact teaching can be replaced by remote teaching. I do believe it is possible to have online teaching as a successful medium, but only if both sides of the equation have the same material, access, and accountability. However, it can not

replace the all-around experience of contact teaching

André Veloso - In certain cases, I believe that it is possible, but it depends mostly on the student's profile. Some can adapt with ease and have enough self-discipline to be able to study at home. Others, due to their less calm family setting or other factors would still prefer in person learning.



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5. What is the role of a teacher in online teaching? Can you see any differences when compare contact teaching with online teaching? Is this role culturally conditioned? If so, in what sense (given your teaching experience in China or different countries)? Is it somehow reflected in online teaching?

José Medeiros - The role of a teacher, whether it be in an online class or in person setting is practically the same. Besides relaying human values, that can serve as an inspiration to students, the teacher must earn the students trust and motivate them to try hard and to be involved in the learning process. And obviously, the teacher must be able to, remotely or in person, pass on the set of knowledge specifically related to each subject. Regarding both methods of passing on knowledge, remotely and in person, one cannot be viewed as a replacement for the other. They can even complement, but not replace each other. In regards to the technical aspect of learning, you can of course obtain good result with either of those methods. But, as I have previously stated, university is mostly about experiencing. And a living space whose own conception assumes interaction between a diversity of majors, subjects, knowledge... Living in a university is, above all, dedicating some years of your life to an intense immersion in an environment of constant testing and challenges, where different kinds of knowledge and ways of life are acknowledged, arise, engage in dialogues and continue to transform, for eternity, the lives of those who pass through this place. In that sense, this living experience, even if culturally conditioned, is one of a kind.

Song Yuenan - In remote learning the teacher has to take the role of mentor and guide. In person learning in a classroom makes it easier to interact and captivate the student's attention, but in the context

of remote learning it is not possible to control the students learning environment, and it's also difficult to know if something or someone is affecting the student's concentration. In this way, the student's level of engagement is lower in remote learning when compared to in person learning.

Amit Sharma - In my view the role of a teacher at the fundamental level does not change with the mode. Yet online teaching requires greater amount of mentoring, guiding and facilitating. OLT (online teaching) also requires a higher level of technology savviness. Culture is inherent and inextricable part of learning and teaching. Having taught at a variety of institutions and a culturally diverse population of students I find linguistic and cultural plurality in the classroom most satisfying. It enriches both the taught and the teacher - in terms of learning and engagement.

JingxinXu - I believe that the main difference is the lack of effective supervision of the students, since in China, first and second year language students still follow a tradition way of teaching, namely, the students listen and the teacher speaks, while everything that is said must be memorized and written down. With the introduction of remote learning, it is increasingly difficult to supervise student's memorization on a daily basis, making you completely reliant on the student's own awareness, and I am not sure about how many students have enough self-discipline to perform these tasks. From this viewpoint, I believe that even more through remote learning, the teacher's role is to relay knowledge. Before it was possible to be a supervisor within the classroom, but now this role has weakened. Just like a TV channel, now students can watch several channels, while before they could only attend one subject in the classroom

Lavota Carter - The role of the teacher in online teaching is to provide structure to the students, meanwhile taking efforts to be capable of troubleshooting or directs towards that endeavor. Lastly, depending on the platform used; the teacher may need to monitor and address student behavior at a higher rate. When sharing a physical space, it is easier to demand attention and control the environment. Remote learning is reliant on each individual dedicating themselves to the class at hand. Virtual classrooms are more difficult to monitor. I am not sure if this is culturally motivated, but the class style that is best implemented in remote online situations is a lecture. Most foreign teachers I have encountered are encouraged to have more interactive,



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exciting, and culturally informative lessons. Lectures without adequate time to allow student expression are not favored.

6. In your opinion, what will be the effect of the Covid situation on the form of education in general?

José Medeiros - Questions about the impact of new technologies in the future of teaching and in the educational system were already being posed even before the coronavirus pandemic, and, of course, now these discussions must be elevated in terms of intensity and depth. In the specific case of remote teaching during the coronavirus pandemic, I see it as only a one-off response during an extraordinary situation. In this sense all the success must be pondered, and its own limitations and urgencies that were imposed by the aforementioned context must be considered. It is worth pointing out that the current educational system is very complex and any change that is rushed could have an irreversible and not necessarily positive impact. As such, I believe that in the coming decades the current system will continue to perfect itself gradually, but without going through such abrupt changes, as replacing in person classes with remote teaching.

Song Yuenan - Since in universities are a location where the high concentration of people in facilitates contagion, these will certainly be an enormous influence to teaching as a whole. Currently the system that the university has put in place is a controlled division of classes in order to reduce the number of students circulating, as well as isolating the campus and having a strict system in regards to leaving the campus

Amit Sharma - I think universities will have to adopt blended teaching model more aggressively in the future. Purely contact based teaching will have to be blended with some form of online teaching in the future.

André Veloso - In my opinion I think that the fundamental role of teaching was even more emphasized, since even such an extraordinary time as the one we are living through now, education is still something that can very hardly come to a complete stop or be replaced. Although many fields were extremely affected by the pandemic, despite having also suffered negatively, it was comparatively to a much lower degree. Maybe the perception that education brings more stability and its jobs can survive even through unexpected crises may attract more people to the field and increase its quality,

Lavota Carter - I think CoVid-19 will open some opportunity for online learning to be more accepted as a medium. New resources in regards to this will be developed and implemented by a growing amount of institutions. The arts and humanities will need to be reconfigured to fit the model of distancing and isolation for long periods of time.

Jingxin Xu - In regards to how the pandemic will influence education, currently the situation is getting better little by little, but from my point of view I can only speak for the influence on those who are researchers, for them staying at home is not necessarily something bad, but as a language teacher, there is a need to spend more time preparing without any guaranty that there will be good results. From this standpoint, I am a pessimist regarding remote learning due to the difficulties in observing and evaluating the student's performance.

JOSÉ MEDEIROS DA SILVA (施若杰)

Was born in Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil, has a bachelors degree in Letters from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (1992), a master's degree in Communication and Semiotics at Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (1996) and a PhD on political aspects of the peasant issue in China, from the Political Science at University of São Paulo (2008). In 2007, he moved to China to teach Portuguese at the University of International Studies in Xi'an. In 2010, he received the "Sanqin" Friendship Award (三秦友谊) from the government of Shaanxi Province and in August of the same year he started working at the Hebei Communication Institute in Shijiazhuang. In 2012, he started to work in the Portuguese Department of China International Radio in Beijing. Since 2015, he has been working in Hangzhou at Zhejiang University of International Studies (浙江外国语学院). Currently, in addition to teaching activities, he develops research on political and social issues in Brazil and China.
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