Online Teaching of Chinese as a Second Language in an Emergency Situation: Methods and Findings

by Valentina Ornaghi and Ching-Yi Amy Juan

ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study was to identify problems teaching Chinese as a second language during the unexpected sudden lockdown in 2020 and then to propose strategies for similar future situations and better ways of planning remote teaching programs. The Covid-19 lockdown caused courses at Italian universities that are normally carried out face-to-face to be moved online. This affected language courses particularly severely. This article is focused on the experiences of staff and students involved in three Chinese language courses at two state universities in northern Italy. Background literature about online teaching is analyzed first, then the online teaching methods and tools that were used in the emergency are described and student survey results are assessed. The results are used to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the emergency online teaching provision. The possibility of using self-learning material and watching video-lessons was appreciated, but one of the main drawbacks was the lack of oral and written interaction. Actions for future development are proposed here. These include using asynchronous and synchronous tools to promote active language learning and interaction. An innovative proposal for a long-term teaching program is the flipped classroom, which would allow students to undertake self-learning at home but with a focus on interactions and practical activities during face-to-face classes.

KEY WORDS: emergency remote teaching; Covid-19; Chinese language teaching; active language learning; blended learning; flipped classroom

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

The Covid-19 lockdown caused Italian universities to move to remote teaching to ensure continuity of education. Courses that had previously been face-to-face were moved online within two weeks. Moreover, very little training or help with preparation could be given to staff because the change was sudden and unexpected. Until the lockdown, most teachers had, for their entire careers, only taught in classrooms and directly interacted with students. The situation was similar for the students. Most young people use the Internet intensively for communicating and obtaining information. However, before the lockdown, educational institutions primarily used classroom-based teaching. Teachers and students lacked experience of distance teaching and learning and needed to update their IT skills and capabilities rapidly.

The emergency measures particularly severely affected language courses because interactions in the classroom are essential to language acquisition (Lin and Zhang 52, Panagiotidis 286). The study presented here is based on questionnaires completed by students learning Chinese as a second language on three different courses at two universities. The questionnaires were completed at the end of the first wave of emergency online teaching. The aim of the study is to improve our understanding of how the unprecedented situation was handled by analyzing the student feedback and considering the reflections of teachers. More importantly, an effort is made to propose a more robust method for teaching Chinese as a second language during any future emergencies.

Before the lockdown, teaching on the language courses assessed here took place in classrooms each containing two basic types of technological hardware used for teaching, a computer connected to the Internet and a video projector. During a lesson, a teacher would normally use one main textbook and additional notes. PowerPoint (PPT) presentations would be projected onto a screen to help students take in the key content and maintain a smoothly flowing lecture. The teacher and students would have the textbook at hand for reference when further details or exercises were required. Related material available through the Internet, e.g., YouTube videos, could be accessed through the computer in the classroom and shown to students to make the lesson varied and interesting. Materials (textbook, lecture notes, PPT, and Internet links) that complemented each other would be used during a lesson. Classroom teaching involved three-way interactions between teachers and students. These interactions were key to the teacher reacting to the students' needs and deciding how a lesson should progress. It should be remembered that interactions in the classroom are not only related to learning but are also part of the social lives of students and can be seen as preparation for the adult working lives of the students.

Before the lockdown, each university used a learning management system as an asynchronous teaching platform to support classroom teaching. The platform provided teachers with a space to make supplementary material, such as further reading, available to students and to upload classroom notices. The platform also provided a forum for students to ask and reply to questions.

The lockdown coincided with the break between the first and second semesters, and the teachers decided to continue with the textbooks that had already been selected, adapting the material to online teaching. Initially, some material was used in video lessons made using PPT and voice recordings uploaded to the learning management systems to allow self-study by the students. The platform did not have a function to support synchronous online teaching.

Microsoft Teams was later provided to all teachers to allow synchronous online classes to be delivered in as similar a way as possible to classroom lessons. However, intermittent Internet connectivity made it impossible for the same amount of oral and visual interactivity as in the classroom to occur. Lessons for the three courses assessed here would frequently have 20, 30, or 50 participants. This meant that the teachers relied on screen sharing and PPT to offer students visual help. Using online tools with a poor Internet connection made it difficult for the teachers to explain concepts and receive immediate visual feedback from the students. Chinese is a logographic language, and visual aids such as PPT are helpful for providing explanations.

Synchronous chat was used for some interactions that could not occur orally. Microsoft Teams allows participants to interact both orally and through a chatroom. Many students used synchronous chat to propose solutions. Some synchronous online lessons were also recorded and made available with teaching material on Teams to allow the students to watch the lessons again in their own time and to keep pace with the course. The recorded synchronous lessons also helped students who had experienced technical problems to follow the lessons.

The aims of the teachers were, to the best of their abilities, to lead their students through this period and fulfil the syllabus requirements. However, this type of solution was very different from published recommendations for purposely designed online courses. Some teaching approaches may benefit from well-established online education systems. The activities during the lockdown should be considered a temporary solution to an immediate problem. Here is described how teaching was moved from the classroom to online, the solutions that were found, and the student responses. Suggestions for developing future online courses are proposed based on the experiences during the lockdown.

Literature Review

Developing an online course requires the teacher to draw on theories of behaviorism, cognitivism, constructivism, and connectivism. Theories of behaviorism explain how behavior is linked to experience and reward (Skinner 1968, Thorndike *et al.* 1928). In the

online teaching environment, a teacher should "reward" the students for positive responses not only through assessment but also by giving positive feedback for reaching certain landmarks or actively engaging in discussions. The most widely used theory of cognitivism in education is based on Bloom's taxonomy (1956) and contains six main categories, remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. Theories of constructivism define knowledge as being individually or socially constructed (Vygotsky 66). With respect to online teaching, theories of constructivism treat learning as a process in which the learner actively engages in new ideas through collaborative group activities, as in the online collaborative learning theory proposed by Harasim (81). Connectivism is a recent theory in which the learning content available on Internet platforms are considered to frequently change. The importance of networking and self-organization to navigate the complex digital environment is highlighted in the theory of connectivism (Siemens 5).

In practice, creating an online course requires many resources and involves not only teachers but also other professionals to design and plan content (Cui 18, Laici 20, Muñoz Gonzàlez and Quiroz Vieyra 65, Weerasinghe *et al.* 21). An online course should therefore be carefully planned in advance.

Weerasinghe *et al.* (21) suggested the following approach: display the learning outcomes of the course and the learning objectives of each section; put the learning content in an order to suit the syllabus; set activities for each unit of the learning content; include at least one quiz at the end of each section of the course to allow students to evaluate their learning achievements; provide discussion fora and chatrooms. The content should be established using different types of media (text, graphics, audio, videos, and animations). For an asynchronous online course, various authors have suggested that teachers should provide mini-lectures for self-study as a series of videos followed by specific and targeted exercises to ensure the students understand the material (Chen 123, Hua 164).

The lack of the presence of a teacher and other students and a lack of interaction are the main concerns about online courses, and addressing these is key to avoiding high drop-out rates (Hua 160, Kaplan and Haenlein 444, Panagiotidis 287). This is particularly true for language learning, which is not comparable to learning other subjects and requires reading, listening, and writing activities for both learning and practicing the language (Panagiotidis 286).

Vygotsky (66) stated that humans learn through interaction. In an asynchronous course, such interaction can be achieved through discussion threads and wikis. These require cooperation and mutual work using a shared space in which participants can simultaneously write and edit. It is also possible to use tools for synchronous online chat and discussion or online conversation (e.g., synchronous role-playing), virtual office hours, and online guest lectures. It has been suggested that a blended approach, i.e., a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous styles (e.g., uploading text to present theoretical material, animated presentations, wikis, and threads for asynchronous discussion and chats for synchronous communication) should be used (Burgerova and Cimermanova 277, Capponi 99, Falcinelli 115).

Lin and Zhang (51) analyzed the use of massive open online courses (MOOCs) and found that the large numbers of students enrolled and the lack of interaction was a crucial problem because teachers cannot have individual conversations with all of the students. Most interactions and discussions occur in fora. Some teachers can increase teacher–student interactions by providing dedicated time online for meeting students or by using synchronous tools such as Google Hangouts to hold online conversations and answer questions. Chatrooms are appreciated for written synchronous interactions through which students can receive immediate feedback. They also facilitate students who are shy and do not actively participate in face-to-face classes (Balboni 115, Payne and Whitney 14, Wang and Bellassen 40).

It has recently been suggested that using a flipped classroom can improve interactions and ensure that active learning takes place (Hua 164, Maglioni and Biscaro 16, Trentin 55). In a flipped classroom teaching pattern, mini-lectures (videos or other material) are provided for the students to use before a class. The flipped pattern avoids traditional at-length teaching in the class. Instead, students and teachers analyze key points, perform exercises, participate in group work (e.g., problem solving activities and case studies), and other in-depth activities in class (Maglioni and Biscaro 37).

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The participants of the survey were students in three Chinese language degree classes at two state universities in the Lombardy region of Italy. All of the students had enrolled for campus-based courses. The students all had face-to-face classroom lessons in the first semester of the academic year and were then taught online in the second semester because of the emergency lockdown that started on 22 February 2020.

Two of the classes were master's degree courses and one class was a first-year bachelor's degree course. In total, 33 students from the first-year master's degree course (M1), 26 students from the second-year master's degree course (M2), and 20 students from the first-year bachelor's degree course (B1) participated in the study.

DATA COLLECTION

The data were taken from an anonymous questionnaire. The questions were focused on various aspects of how emergency remote teaching had been handled. Each student was asked to complete a qualitative questionnaire through the Internet in the last lesson of the course.

The aim of the first part of the questionnaire was to gain an overview by asking the seven questions below.

1) Was the platform practical and simple to use?
2) Could you easily follow the teacher's explanations?
3) Could you interact with the teacher?
4) Could you practice speaking?
5) Could you practice writing?
6) Were the materials shared by the teacher clearly displayed?
7) Would you take another online course? (Yes/No)

One of the five answers shown below could be given to each of the first six questions.

a) Strongly agree
b) Agree
c) Neither agree nor disagree
d) Disagree
e) Strongly disagree

The second part of the questionnaire had three main themes: difficulties presented by online learning; advantages of online learning; and suggestions for improvements. The aim was to gain insights into and improve our understanding of the main strong and weak points of the way in which the online course had been handled. Students could select more than one item from a list of answers in each of the three themes. The questions are shown in the data analysis section.

The questionnaire was completed by each participating student in the last lesson of the course before sitting the exams at the end of the academic year.

RESULTS

DATA ANALYSIS

Platform and course delivery

Platform and course delivery (teacher and materials) received positive feedback. The dominant answers for questions on the ease of use of the platform (1), access to materials (6), teachers' explanations (2), and the possibility of interacting with the teachers (3) were: "a) Strongly agree" and "b) Agree" as shown in Chart 1. Combining replies "a" and "b" (see Chart 2), at least 85% of participants gave positive feedback for the four questions mentioned above.

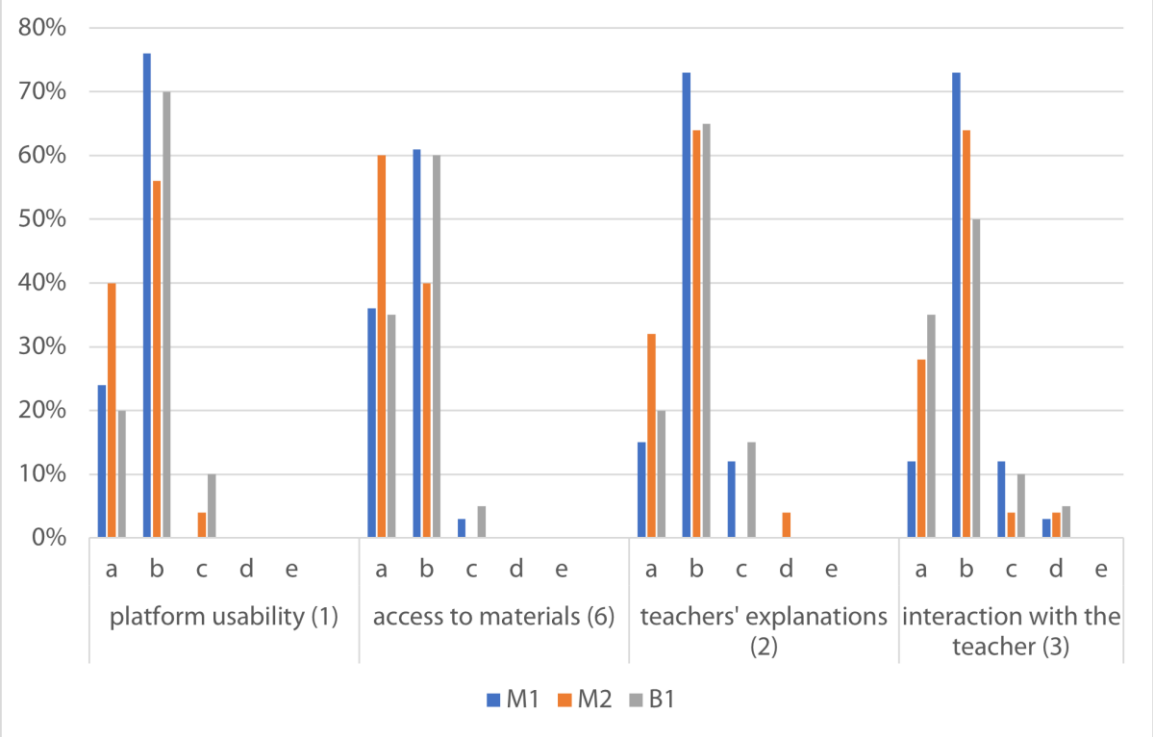

Chart 1. Platform and course delivery.

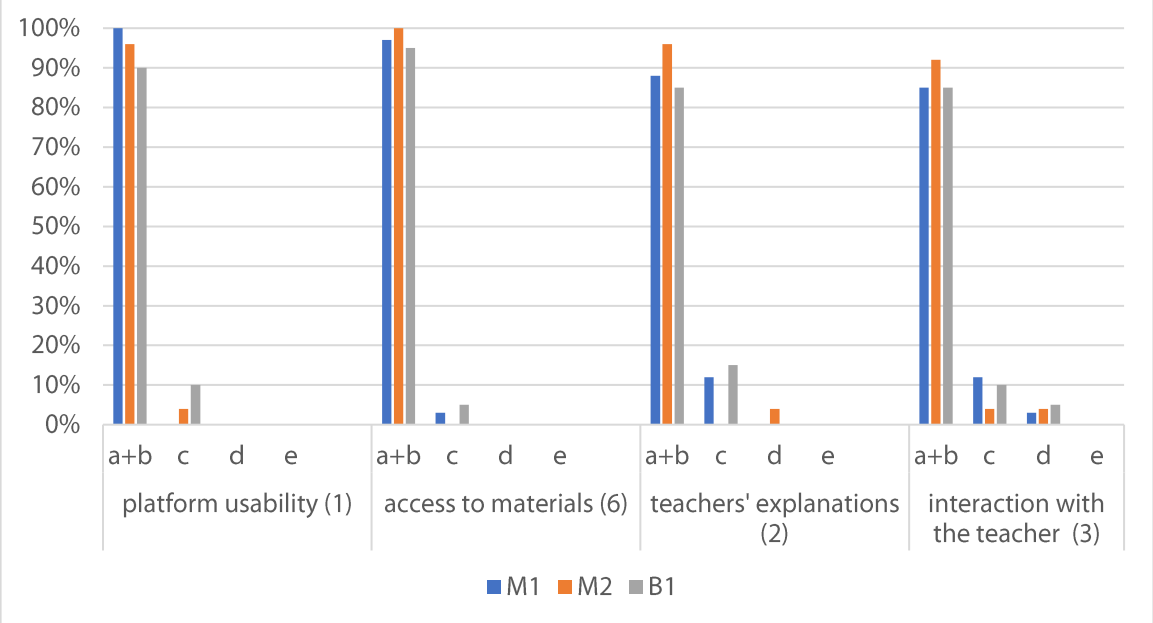

Chart 2. Platform and course delivery a+b.

When students were asked whether they would take another online course, more than 75% of the answers from the students in all three classes were positive, confirming that there was a substantially positive opinion of the platform and course delivery. This is shown in Chart 3.

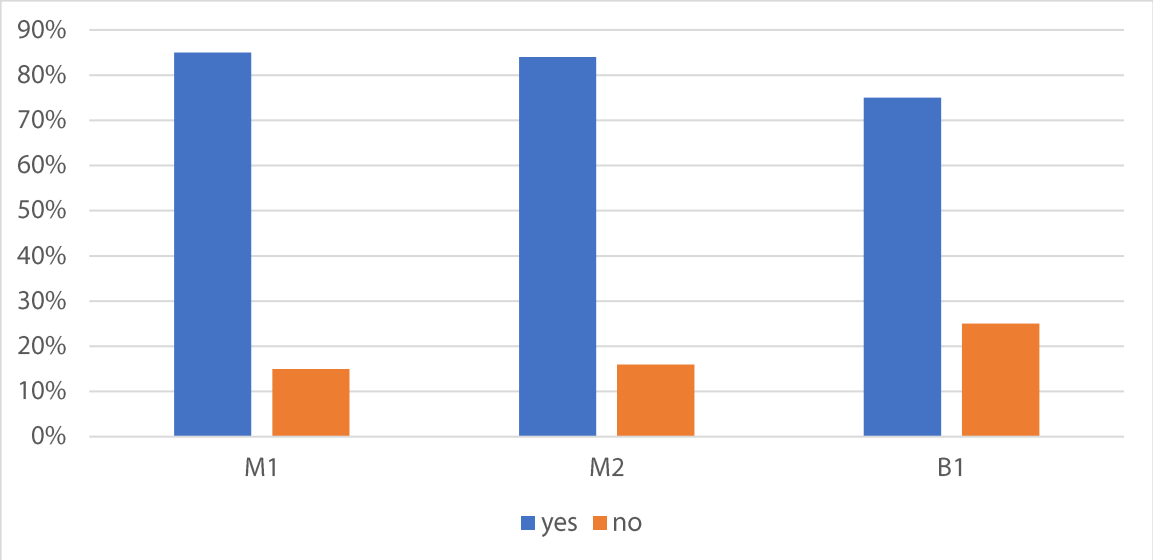

Chart 3. Would you follow another online course?

Speaking and writing exercises

Feedback about the possibility of interacting during speaking and writing exercises was not as positive as the answers to the questions described above, as can be seen in Tables 1 and 2 and Charts 4 and 5.

For speaking exercises, most answers were "b) Agree" or "c) Neither agree nor disagree" (see Chart 4). Feedback was generally neutral to positive. There were slightly more answers "c) Neither agree nor disagree" than answers "b) Agree." The answers from 46%, 36%, and 60% of the M1, M2, and B1 students, respectively, were "Strongly agree" or "Agree," meaning the students felt they were given enough opportunity to practice speaking. This is shown in Chart 5.

For writing exercises, more answers were "c" than the other possibilities. However, the percentage answers "d) Disagree" (36.5%, 32%, and 20% for the M1, M2, and B1 students, respectively) were almost double the percentages for the speaking exercises, as shown in Table 2. This is made very clear in Chart 4. The students in classes M1 and M2 gave more negative answers "d" and "e" than positive answers. In contrast, the students on course B1 gave more positive than negative answers for the writing exercises.

	M1 n=33	*M2 n=26*	*B1 n=20*
a) Strongly agree	6%	8%	20%
b) Agree	39.5%	28%	40%
c) Neither agree nor disagree	36.5%	48%	35%
d) Disagree	15%	12%	5%
e) Strongly disagree	3%	4%	0

Table 1. Answers to the question "could you practice speaking?" Each value is the percentage of the total number of replies.

	M1 n=33	*M2 n=26*	*B1 n=20*
a) Strongly agree	9%	0%	10%
b) Agree	12%	24%	35%
c) Neither agree nor disagree	33.5%	44%	35%
d) Disagree	36.5%	32%	20%
e) Strongly disagree	9%	0	0

Table 2: Answers to the question "could you practice writing?" Each value is the percentage of the total number of replies.

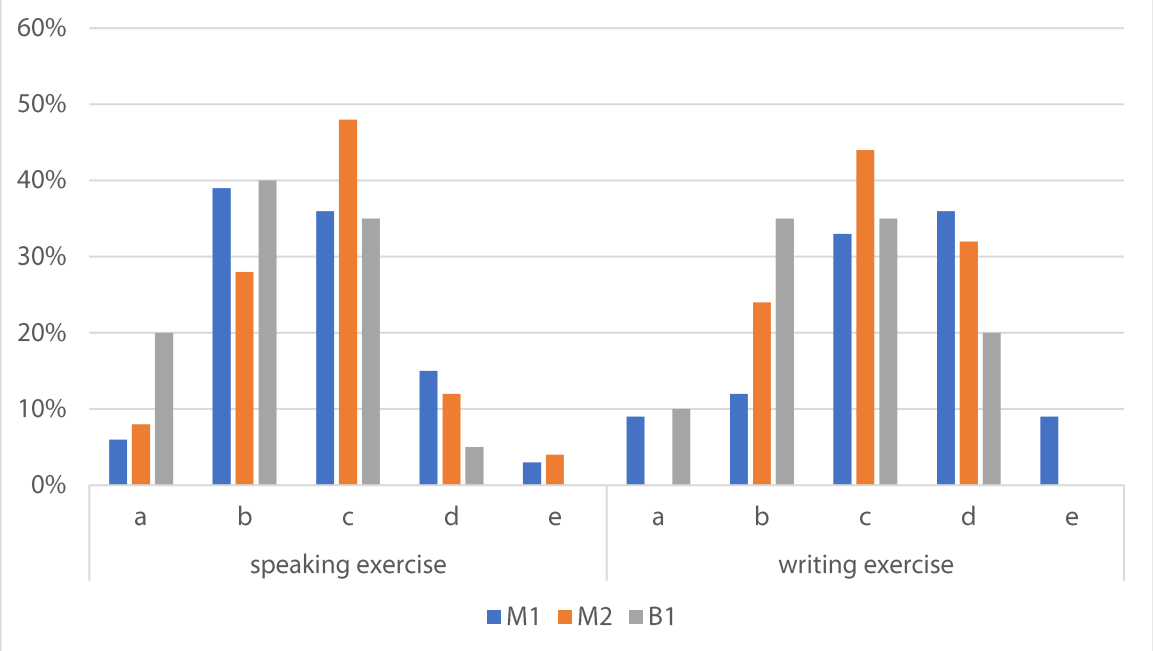

Chart 4. Speaking and writing.

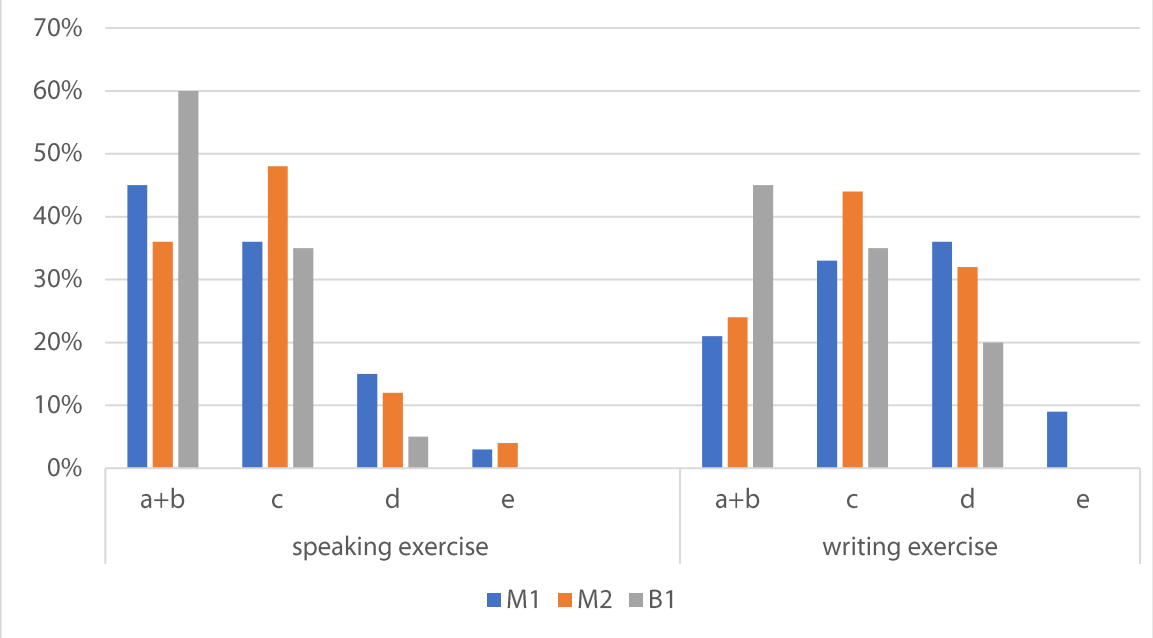

Chart 5. Speaking and writing a+b.

Major difficulties, advantages, and suggestions

The second part of the questionnaire included questions about difficulties (d1–d8), advantages (a1–a8), and suggested improvements (s1–s6). The students could choose more than one option in each section. The combined choices of the students in all three classes and the top three choices are shown in Tables 3a, 3b and 3c.

WHAT WERE THE MAJOR DIFFICULTIES EXPERIENCED?	*NO. OF VOTES*	*RANKING*
d1) Internet connection problems	59	1
d2) Little chance to interact with the teacher and other students	27	3
d3) Unclear materials for self-study	2	
d4) Little opportunity to practice writing	40	2
d5) Difficult to follow the teacher's explanation	6	
d6) Little chance to interact orally	20	
d7) Materials not suitable for an online course	6	
d8) Too few exercises in the online classroom	12	

Table 3a: Answers to the question about the difficulties that were encountered.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES WITH RESPECT TO FACE-TO-FACE TEACHING?	*NO. OF VOTES*	*RANKING*
a1) Lessons from home are more comfortable	48	2
a2) I am less embarrassed and participate more freely in the lesson	20	
a3) Writing exercises are easier with the computer	16	
a4) It is possible to answer the exercises via chat	38	3
a5) Additional self-study materials are helpful to individual study	9	
a6) I can concentrate more and follow the teacher's explanations better	14	
a7) Screen sharing of materials and PPT makes it easier to follow the lesson	25	
a8) It is possible to record and watch the lesson again	62	1

Table 3b: Answers to the question about the advantages of online teaching.

WHAT ARE YOUR SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING ONLINE TEACHING?	*NO. OF VOTES*	*RANKING*
s1) Provide more self-learning materials, such as text, videos, and listening exercises	34	1
s2) Produce multiple PPTs with recorded voice lessons or video-lessons to support synchronous lessons	22	3
s3) During the lesson, the teacher should devote more time to explaining the information shown using PPT	0	
s4) During the lesson, the teacher should devote more time to oral interactions with the students	23	2
s5) During the lesson, the teacher should dedicate more time to writing exercises and using chat	19	
s6) Assign more multiple tasks or intermediate tests to monitor the level of learning	21	

Table 3c: Answers to the question about suggested improvements.

The most commonly noted difficulty encountered was d1 (Internet connection problems), which was selected 59 times and by 80% of students in classes M1 and M2 and 50% of students on course B1. The second most common difficulty was d4 (little opportunity to practice writing), which was selected 40 times by students in all three courses. The third most common difficulty was d2 (little opportunity to interact with teachers and students) and the fourth most common difficulty was d6 (little chance to interact orally).

As for the advantages, a8 (can record and watch the lesson again) was the most welcome aspect of the online course, being chosen 62 times. The second most popular advantage was a1 (lessons from home are more comfortable), which was chosen 48 times. The third most popular advantage was a4 (it is possible to answer the exercises via chat), which was chosen 38 times.

The only suggested improvement that was chosen markedly more often than the others was s1 (provide more self-learning materials), which was chosen 34 times. Suggestions s2 (produce multiple PPTs with recorded voice lessons), s4 (during the lesson, the teacher should devote more time to oral interaction with the students), and s5 (during the lesson, the teacher should devote more time to writing exercises and using chat) were chosen 23, 22, and 19 times, respectively. None of the students chose s3 (during the lessons, the teacher should devote more time to explaining the information shown using PPT). This should not be overlooked.

A comparison of how the answers were distributed between the three classes is shown in Chart 6. The percentage of students in each class who selected each answer are shown. For example, d1 (Internet connection problems) was chosen by 82% of students on course M1, 84% of students on course M2, and 50% of students on course B1.

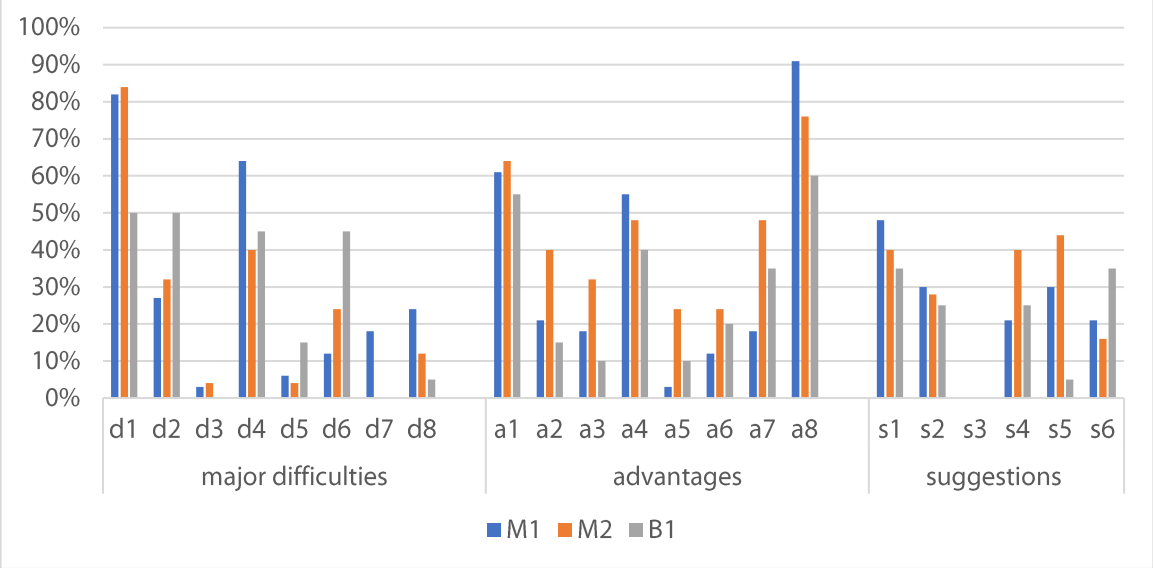

Chart 6. Difficulties – advantages – suggestions.

Results

The main results are summarized below.

1. The general opinion of how the online teaching lessons were managed was positive. The overall positive feedback was supported by the satisfaction indicated by students in all three classes with the platform and course delivery. This was clearly demonstrated by strongly positive answers about the four most important aspects of online teaching, usability of the platform, access to material, the teacher's explanations, and interaction with the teacher (see Charts 1 and 2). This was supported by the high percentage of students willing to take another online course, as shown in Chart 3.

2. The degree of satisfaction was slightly lower for implementation of the speaking exercises. However, overall, the students felt positively about implementation of the speaking exercises (see Table 1 and Chart 5).

3. Feedback about application of the writing exercises was not so positive. The most common answers were "Neither agree nor disagree" or "Disagree." This should therefore be prioritized for development.

4. "Internet connection problems" was the most common difficulty, and the next two most common difficulties were a lack of opportunity to practice writing and a lack of opportunity to interact with the teacher and other students.

5. The online teaching characteristics that were strongly appreciated by the students were the possibility of recording and watching the lesson again, lessons from home being more comfortable, and the possibility of answering the exercises via chat.

6. The most common suggested improvements were "provide more self-learning materials," "during the lesson, the teacher should devote more time to oral interactions with the students," and "produce multiple PPTs with recorded voice lessons or video-lessons to support synchronous lessons."

7. Interestingly and importantly, none of the students chose "teachers should devote more time to explaining the information shown using PPT."

These results indicate the teaching areas that were managed well and areas that need improving. In particular, points 2, 3, and 4 indicate important areas of the course (speaking, writing, and interaction) that need to be organized differently to make online teaching more effective. Improvements in online teaching could be useful even under normal conditions for particular categories of students.

DISCUSSION

OBSERVATIONS REGARDING COURSE DELIVERY

The results indicated that the goal of maintaining education was met when Chinese language lessons were transferred online during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown as an emergency measure and that discontinuity in teaching was minimized.

The sudden change, however, inevitably meant that there were some shortcomings and occasional mistakes during the transition. Now the "overnight-classroom-turned-online" stage is over and the situation is less urgent, a better remote teaching strategy must be established for potential future interruptions to education. Feedback from the students and the teachers' reflections give an opportunity for improving the approach to providing online teaching.

The most noted difficulty was the Internet connection. Poor connections were caused by the sudden increase in demand caused by large numbers of people switching to distance learning and remote working. The high number of requests for "more self-learning materials" (s1) and "multiple PPTs with recorded voice lessons or video-lessons" (s2) and zero selections of "the teacher should devote more time to explaining

the information shown using PPT" (s3) were related to the Internet infrastructure limitations because some students had difficulties following synchronous lessons because of an intermittent Internet connection. The large number of selections of s1 and s2 could also be linked to the answers about the advantages of online teaching. Students appreciated the comfort of being at home (v1), which saved the time required to commute to the university every day. They also welcomed the possibility of watching the recorded lessons again (v8), which allowed them to study at their own pace. These results agreed with the results of previous studies in which it was found that decreasing location and time restrictions allowed students to learn independently at their own pace without having to follow a fixed schedule (Kaplan and Haenlein 441, Liang 1099, Maglioni and Biscaro 16, Piras *et al.* 18, Sun 440).

Similar results were found for the use of chatrooms. Suggestion s5 (during the lesson, devote more time to the writing exercises and using chat) could be linked to v4 (it is possible to answer the exercises via chat) being the second most popular advantage of online lessons. This agreed with the results of previous studies. It has been found in several studies (Balboni 115, Payne and Whitney 14, Wang and Bellassen 40) that chatrooms facilitate learning by students who are more reserved and do not actively participate in face-to-face classes. The teachers of all three courses noticed an increase in student participation when asking the students to type their answers in the synchronous chatroom rather than answering orally as they normally would during classroom teaching.

The important activities of speaking and writing need to be enhanced during online education because the degree of satisfaction was lower for speaking and writing activities than for the other aspects of the course. Students also requested more oral and written exercises (s4 and s5). Teacher–student interaction is key to speaking and writing activities. Face-to-face lessons provide direct teacher–student interactions, but online teaching offers limited opportunities for direct contact.

Interestingly, students on course B1 gave relatively positive feedback for speaking exercises during the online course (see Chart 2). The teacher's reflections suggested this was caused by there being fewer students on course B1 than the other courses and the course B1 content being for beginners and therefore involving practicing everyday conversations. This suggested that smaller classes are better for practicing oral interactions and that authentic activities based on real-life tasks are preferred to other activities. That said, an enhanced teaching strategy needs to be adopted to address the speaking exercise problems often found for online teaching courses despite the reasonably positive reports from the students on course B1.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING COURSE DELIVERY

"Active learning" in small groups (two to four people) may allow effective online speaking and writing exercises because it would allow students to learn with other course members. Positive outcomes have been found using small active learning

groups on other Chinese language courses (Sun 440). The active learning approach is in line with a suggestion made by Burgerova and Cimermanova (277) to have small groups of students collaborate and engage to make activities more authentic. Social constructivist theories such as online collaborative learning encourage students to solve problems through discourse and the teacher to act as facilitator as well as learning community member (Harasim 81).

As a brief reminder, the participants of the study met and socialized face-to-face in the first semester. It is possible that new students will not have the opportunity to meet when they enroll on a remote course. The above approach with group activities not only promotes student-centered active learning but also facilitates the formation of an online learning community as a substitute for the campus. Group activities would hopefully increase the sense of community because a third difficulty, there being "little chance to interact with the teacher and other students," was also selected by many students.

Active speaking exercises

Speaking exercises should be redesigned to be more task-based and interactive and to involve real-life problem-solving (based on everyday situations). To ensure truly functional active learning, the "who-what-when-how and assessment" elements shown below should be used.

1. Groups of two–four students (who)
2. Clearly defined and achievable oral presentation assignments (what)
3. Regular and frequent submissions with set deadlines (when)
4. Using software or available platforms to record a podcast presentation (how)
5. The exercise is part of the course assessment leading to the final marks (assessment)

Recording audio and/or videos will give each student an opportunity to exercise their oral language skills. Recordings have been found to be effective even when synchronous interactions are limited because of a large number of participants (Sun 437). The absence of campus learning and interactions between students can be partly replaced by these group activities. That is, preparing for a group assignment requires students to get to know each other and actively collaborate through constant communication either by physically meeting or through social media.

Active writing exercises

The active learning method with the "who-what-when-how and assessment" elements mentioned above for speaking exercises can also be applied to improving and consolidating writing skills. This can be achieved by integrating speaking with writing. That is, students prepare written PPT presentations to accompany their recorded oral

presentations. Individual writing assignments are considered to be effective in addition to group activities. Again, regular and frequent submissions are key to successful outcomes. However, it is not always possible for each member of a large class to be given individual feedback for each assignment. Correcting written assignments is a tremendous amount of work for a teacher.

A possible solution is the flipped classroom, meaning instructional content such as mini-lectures is delivered as videos or other material before a lesson. The students are asked to process and gain an understanding of the material in their own time and at their own pace. The classroom sessions (virtual or physical) are then used for interactive discussions and to explore the topic with the teacher.

Teachers can incorporate the students' suggestions from the questionnaire in a flipped classroom. Students suggested that "chat" could be used to practice writing and receive more self-study material. Using the flipped classroom approach, when students prepare for written exercises using self-learning material, more time during synchronous online lessons can be dedicated to constructive "chat-based" written exercises. Students in large classes can therefore also effectively improve their writing skills. It should be remembered that none of the students selected the suggestion "the teacher should devote more time to explaining the information shown using PPT." Before the lockdown, the teachers had only performed onsite lessons. After transferring online, the teachers continued to explain the content in a similar way to the standard 1.5 h lecture delivered face-to-face. However, the attention span of a student will be much shorter in a virtual classroom than a real classroom (Szpunar *et al*. 2). A good length for an online lecture to introduce active learning with intermittent quizzing and group activities is 15–20 min, as stated by Prunuske *et al.* (71) and Cecchinato and Papa (70). Plans for short online "instructional" lectures and to actively engage students with activities should be able to maintain interest and create a lively classroom atmosphere.

Transition period

Emergency remote teaching will not and cannot carry on forever. It is logical to expect a transition period in which universities will reopen slowly and hold onsite lessons paying close attention to measures to protect health and safety. The process of returning to the campus will involve class-size limits and probably "blended" lessons, i.e., both online (synchronous and asynchronous) and onsite lessons will take place during the transition. Previously large classes would therefore be subdivided into smaller groups that could facilitate the use of flipped classrooms. More time could therefore be dedicated to interactions and practical activities using previously learnt content. Learning should be active and student-centered, and the teacher can work as a facilitator checking on each small group in turn (Maglioni and Biscaro 36). This is theoretically sound because the transition period would be a good opportunity to implement flipped classrooms. To take the opportunity and reach a good outcome it

will be important to remember that both students and teachers need to make the preparations described below.

First, studying instructional material before a class is key to determining whether a flipped classroom will be successful. Second, material provided before a class will not be prepared easily and will need to be carefully designed and prepared, which can be very time consuming. At the beginning of a course the students should therefore be informed clearly about the structure of the course. Instead of preparing all of the material, a teacher could explore digital networks and tools to shorten the preparation process. Reusable learning objects and open educational resources shared by educators can be good sources of ready-made material to support self-learning and other teaching activities (Tosato and Raffaghelli 88). A flipped classroom can only be truly effective if proper groundwork has been done.

Last but not least, most teachers who dedicated themselves to remote teaching during the Covid-19 emergency probably did not already have enough technological competence to manage a "virtual classroom." Teachers felt very frustrated suddenly moving to online classes. IT departments in both universities tried to provide training despite limited time and resources for the required platforms, which were also being updated frequently. The global pandemic has, without doubt, accelerated a transformation in education. Teacher-centered practices and traditional one-length teaching patterns in the classroom will probably not be the main teaching methods in future. Teachers will need to maintain up-to-date technical and software-specific skills and learn new pedagogical theories to keep pace with the fast-changing digital era. Self-training is important and can be achieved by participating in MOOCs. Teachers with limited institutional resources and technical support should take advantage of the Internet to update their skills not only in times of crisis but also in quieter periods. There is an old Chinese saying, "It takes 10 years to grow trees but a hundred to educate people" ("十年树木，百年树人"). That is, it takes a long time to see the results of a good education. Teachers should always remind themselves of the importance of their input to students and therefore continually update their knowledge to improve their teaching.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the survey and reflections of the teachers after the first period of emergency online teaching clearly indicated that more robust language teaching practices will be required in the future. In summary, flipped classrooms and "active learning" are proposed to be the main ways of improving the quality of remote teaching.

In a flipped classroom, students are required to gain an understanding of material supplied and/or indicated by a teacher before the class to optimize the use of time in the subsequent synchronous online lesson for in-depth interactive discussion. Active learning means students are engaged in activities during lessons and task-based group

assignments after class. The former can help retain a student's attention and improve the student's understanding of the content. The latter can lead a student to apply the new knowledge and partly make up for the absence of campus life.

These solutions cover the first four elements in the well-known Bloom's taxonomy (remembering, understanding, applying, and analyzing). The solutions also take account of behaviorism, constructivism, and connectivism. Given the content of online learning, constructivism and connectivism are the theories that acknowledge the impacts of technology on learning. The proposed temporary solutions to the immediate problem can meet the initial goal of continuing education and even achieve more than the emergency plan initially required.

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Valentina Ornaghi is currently a PhD student at the Italian Institute of Oriental Studies (ISO), University "La Sapienza" (Rome), Curriculum "East Asia". She graduated in 2009 with a Master's degree in Chinese language at the University of Milan and has since been teaching Chinese language in high schools, university and Confucius Institute. Her research fields are Chinese language teaching, Chinese as a second language (CSL) acquisition and the use of technology in teaching.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7894-279X

valentina.ornaghi@uniroma1.it

Ching-yi Amy JUAN, from Taiwan, is a native speaker of Mandarin. She obtained her PhD degree in Environmental Sciences from Lancaster University UK. Living and working in different countries stimulated an interest in languages which inspired her to study "Teaching Chinese as a second language" at Beijing Language and Culture University. She has been teaching Chinese as a foreign language at various universities in Lombardy, Italy since 2006.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3437-9245

ching-yi.juan@unimi.it

AUTHORSHIP

This paper is the result of close collaboration between the two authors. Valentina Ornaghi took responsibility for the sections "Literature Review," "Method," "Data Analysis," and "Observations regarding course delivery". Ching-Yi Amy Juan took responsibility for the sections "Background," "Results," "Suggestions for improving course delivery," and "Conclusions."

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