Teaching Chinese During Covid-19 in the United States – Challenges and Attempts

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Abstract

The emergence of COVID-19 has changed the pace of work, school and daily living habits for Americans all over the US. Under these circumstances, people have been forced to distance learning. Various technological products have appeared one after another, which has greatly helped Chinese teaching in colleges across the US. This article gives an overview of the challenges in Chinese teaching in American universities during the pandemic, and then describes the changes of teaching modes, useful supplementary teaching tools and teaching contents, which have been implemented in Chinese teaching in the US universities to tackle the challenges. The article also shares some attempts that we had when teaching Chinese during the pandemic and point out some future direction of Chinese teaching in the post-pandemic era.

Introduction

During the pandemic, learning Chinese in American universities has faced huge challenges. According to the statistical data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, undergraduate college enrollment fell again this spring (2021), which resulted in 727,000 fewer students throughout the US.[1] In addition to the decline in enrollment, Chinese learning also faced many other challenges.

First off, a lot of instructors are having a hard time changing to newer teaching methods. The acceptance of new technologies by some instructors is staggeringly low. Especially for some old language instructors, the teaching method still stays in the era of blackboards and paper handouts. Although schools often have provided a large number of training courses and the instructors also work hard to learn, but the effects are just still not good enough.

Secondly, many students feel very uncomfortable facing the change in learning methods, especially for Chinese, which is a very difficult course to learn and heavily relies on interaction between instructors and students. Figure 1 shows a survey conducted in Chinese I classes at the end of the first semester of distance learning (Fall 2020). Nearly 80% of students felt the difference between the two teaching methods.
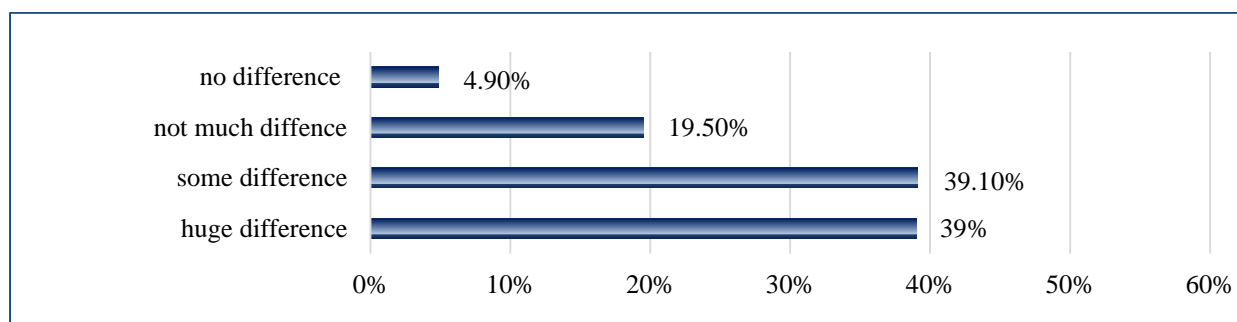
Figure 1: Comparison of students' recognition of distance teaching with traditional teaching.
Source: Anonymous questionnaire survey of the Chinese first-level class of the City University of New York (42 students participated in the survey from December 7 to 8, 2020)

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[1] Elissa Nadworny, "*Spring Numbers Show 'Dramatic' Drop In College Enrollment*", June 10, 2021 *https://www.npr.org/2021/06/10/1005177324/spring-numbers-show-dramatic-drop-in-college-enrollment*

The third is the evaluation of language courses. Since all the courses are all online, students are free to use any technological devices, hence it makes course assessment extremely hard. According to an article, "Cheating at School is easier than ever – and it is rampant" published in The Wall Street Journal, a year of remote learning has spurred an eruption of cheating among students, from elementary school to college.[2] The article cites the situation of two well-known universities: Texas A&M University and University of Pennsylvania. Texas A&M University had a 50% increase in cheating allegations last fall, with one incident involving 193 students self-reporting academic misconduct to receive a lighter punishment than after faculty members found out. The University of Pennsylvania saw cheating case investigations grow 71% in the 2019-20 academic year, school data shows.[3] Many languages online resources, such as Google translate or online dictionaries are available, hence students can easily obtain answers of exam questions.

To tackle the above challenges of Chinese teaching during the pandemic, various teaching modes have been offered, and new technologies have been introduced into classrooms. We will compare different teaching modes and technologies used for Chinese teaching in the next two sections, and then we suggest to revise contents of Chinese teaching to adapt to distance learning. Finally, we provide the prospects and future directions of Chinese teaching in US colleges in the post-pandemic era.

Teaching Modes during the Pandemic

The pandemic has forced huge changes in teaching methods in US colleges and the rapid development of technology has made such change possible. Remote teaching has become the only option during the pandemic so people are choosing software with video telephony and online chat functions that meets the needs of distance education. It's very challenging to Chinese teaching, because Chinese is hardly taught online before pandemic due to lacking online teaching resources, such as web- or mobile- based digital materials and exercises. (Xie,2007) Below we overview various teaching modes used to teach Chinese during the pandemic:

- Remote learning: Online synchronous
- Online learning: Online asynchronous
- Hybrid learning: Asynchronous + synchronous online teaching
- Face-to-face learning: Traditional face-to-face teaching

According to statistics from nearly 3,000 universities in the United States, by the fall of 2020, there has been drastic changes in teaching methods (Figure 2).

Each teaching mode has its pros and cons. Synchronous online teaching refers to real-time online teaching, usually with a fixed course schedule and a required login time; instructors and students can communicate in real time through teleconferencing software. Asynchronous online teaching means that students can access the instructor's pre-recorded lecture content whenever they can and then complete the weekly language homework before the deadline, without any real-time interaction with the instructors. The hybrid teaching mode refers to the combination of synchronous and asynchronous online teaching.

These three teaching modes have their own advantages and disadvantages, and students also have their own preferences. For example, asynchronous classes are good for students that have a busy schedule. As virtual classrooms and virtual campus technology continue to mature, these three models may become the prototype of future education. The pros and cons of these three modes are shown in Table 1.
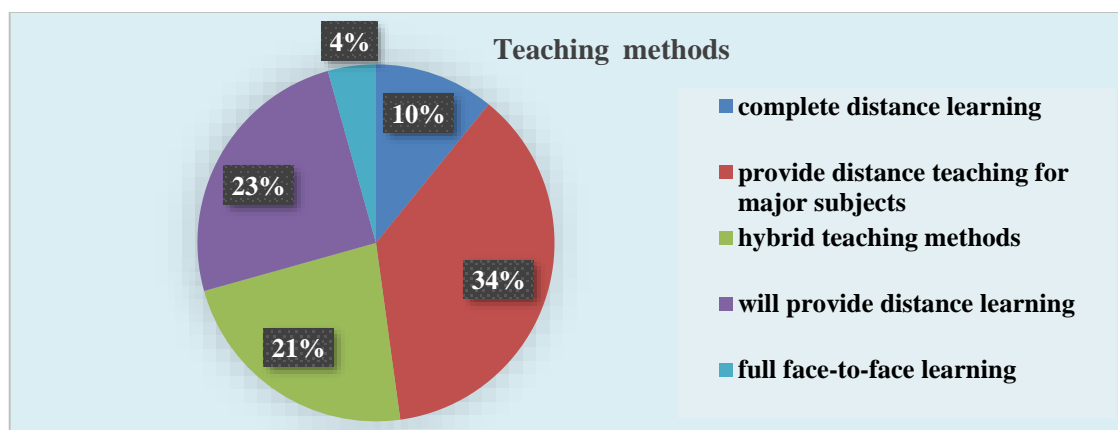

Figure 2: Changes of the Learning Modes, the data shows majority universities offer various distance learning.

[2] Tawnell D. Hobbs: "*Cheating at School is easier than ever – and it is rampant*", World Street Journal May 27, 2021 P. 1
[3] Tawnell D. Hobbs: "*Cheating at School is easier than ever – and it is rampant*", World Street Journal May 27, 2021 P. 1

	Synchronous online teaching	**Asynchronous online teaching**	**Hybrid teaching mode**
Teaching form	Real-time classes through software	Pre-recorded video/audio for students to watch	Part of real-time classes + part of video teaching
Teaching content	Instructors teach all content	Student self-teach all content	The instructor teaches part of the content + student self-teach rest of the content
Classroom interaction	Interaction	Email	Interaction + Email
Teaching feedback	Instant feedback	Email feedback	Instant feedback + Email
Ways of learning	Collective learning	Individual learning	Group learning + Individual learning
Classroom activities	Real-time activities of various sizes	No group	Real-time activities of various sizes
Teaching time	Fixed	Flexible	Flexible and fixed
Assessment	Instant feedback/ class exam/Peer review	Open book exam	Instant feedback/class exam/Peer review

Table 1: Comparison of distance teaching modes

From Table 1, we can find:

a)   The advantages of synchronous online teaching and hybrid teaching mode are:
   • The interaction in the class
   • Peers helping each other
   • Instant feedback can correct errors on the spot
   • Facilitate students to form good learning habits

However, it also has some disadvantages. Some students are unwilling to turn on the camera causing the instructor to face the blank screen with each student's avatar or name for the entire class. It also has a great impact on a instructors' mood in class, which also causes a headache for many instructors. Since some students are unwilling to turn on their cameras, the instructor is unable to see the student's mouth, so therefore unable to correct the students' pronunciation at all. When learning pinyin (Chinese pronunciation system), correcting the mouth shape is the only way to correct the pronunciation, and it's challenging to teach Chinese via synchronous online teaching without using camera.

b)   Asynchronous online teaching has its own unique benefits. It allows for a more flexible schedule for students who have a full-time or part-time job. Moreover, asynchronous online teaching has been developed for a long time, so both content and forms are relatively mature for many subjects and some benefits are:
   • Students can freely arrange time to study
   • Students can freely grasp the learning progress according to their own understanding
   • Reduce competition among classmates
   • Reduce commuting time; saving energy and time

However, asynchronous online teaching has its obvious shortcomings, especially in Chinese classes. It does not allow students to receive immediate help from instructors so they may easily get discouraged or even give up. For the students who take asynchronous online teaching courses, they have to work harder than those in synchronous online teaching courses. Chinese teaching is rarely conducted asynchronous due to lacking digital Chinese course recourses and exercise. Ideally, students can learn the same content with a virtual instructor and complete the digital exercises in a simulated classroom environment. (Aldrich, 2011). Hence, a Virtual Reality asynchronous classroom could be a future direction for Chinese teaching.(Bonne, Reinders, 2018)

c)   The hybrid teaching mode has the same benefits as synchronous online teaching in many aspects. The only difference is in teaching content which makes the students have to spend more time reviewing after class. According to teaching experiences that we have in Chinese I class in a US college, although students have the same expectations for the learning effects of synchronized online teaching and hybrid teaching mode, most of them are completely pinning their hopes on the instructor, and aren't willing to spend more time on self-learning. Their class time is reduced by half, but they can still meet with the instructors with questions next time they meet. Although instructors have provided enough after-class learning materials, the proportion of students who actually look through it after class is very low. A future research direction is how to improve the student engagement in Chinese learning.

Software of Distance Chinese Teaching

When the pandemic began in the spring of 2020, most colleges and universities in the United States moved all of their courses online and closed their campuses. A survey of college students after the end of the 2020 spring semester showed that 43% of all students have not taken any form of online courses before, 21% have only taken one online course before the pandemic and 35% of the students said they have taken two or more online courses before, so students' satisfaction with the courses has also changed qualitatively. (Falk, 2021)

The main teaching software currently in use are Zoom, GoogleMeet, Cisco Webex, Blackboard, Skype, etc. Usually, instructors use the teaching tools provided by the schools. The safety, stability and operability of this kind of teaching software installed uniformly by the school can be assured. Regardless of the school's choice, they will generally provide adequate training and technical support for instructors. After a period of practical use, ordinary instructors can handle online teaching. In short, no matter what kind of teaching software is used, it must meet the three requirements of distance teaching, homework assignment and real-time communication.

1.   *Various distance teaching software*

We found that Zoom and Google Meet are easier to use. They all have the basic functions of classroom teaching such as high-definition video, high-definition voice, screen sharing and whiteboards. Zoom also has the function of private chat and group chat, which is very suitable for group activities in a classroom environment. At the same time, instructors have complete authority, such as grouping, delegated screen sharing authority and so on. Google Meet does not have the function of private chat, but it provides smooth connection to other Google products, such as Google classroom and Google Docs, which hold course materials, homework and exams. Webex is also another popular choice. The above software provides all the basic needs of online classroom teaching. For instructors who are not keen on teaching with new technologies, these functions are sufficient.

Many US universities use Blackboard[4] as a tool for online teaching or homework before the pandemic. After the pandemic began, in order to save expenses and training costs, some schools chose to use Blackboard as the main tool for distance learning. The Collaboration function in Blackboard is also a real-time high-definition video conferencing tool, with the functions of adding files, sharing applications and using virtual whiteboards for interaction. It is the instructor's freedom to choose which teaching tool to use. This is also determined by the instructor's teaching style. If only looking at the teaching content and not the classroom atmosphere, then there would be no difference between these types of teaching tools, (Byrne, 1986) but if you want to activate the teaching atmosphere and strengthen real-time interaction, that's where the functions of Zoom and Google Meet come in. For example, in Zoom, instructors can restrict classroom chats so that students cannot chat privately, control the use of shared screens to prevent students from sharing content that is irrelevant to the course and have real-time polling Although Zoom provides a tool for instructors to collect opinion polls, but instructors can use it to carry out classroom quizzes, classroom quizzes and other games to invigorate the atmosphere.

2.   *Supplementary tools for Chinese teaching*

Under the pandemic situation, the biggest shortcoming of distance teaching is the serious lack of interaction between the instructor and students. In fact, after choosing a main teaching software, instructors can choose one or more free teaching apps and gamification apps for distance teaching. The following are some supplementary teaching software that we have used during pandemic. (Table 2)

Name	Main functions
Jamboard	1. It can be used in any subject that requires students to participate at the same time. 2. Students share their own opinions for their peers and instructors to consider. 3. Enhance students' collaboration ability and participation
Google Docs	1. Can be used as a writing practice for sentence patterns or short essays. 2. Instructors can make corrections immediately. 3. Students can also correct each other
Whiteboard.fi	1. Each student will have a separate whiteboard on which they can complete the homework assigned by the instructor. 2. Instructors can view the whiteboards of all students in real time and track their progress. 3. It can be used as an instant evaluation tool and can provide real-time feedback. 4. All classmates can participate, including shy students or students who are usually unwilling to answer.
Peardeck	1. Students can answer questions on slides provided by the instructor on their own computers. Can be used for group activities. 2. It can be in 2 modes: instructor and student. The instructor controls the speed of the slides in instructor mode and students can control their pace in student mode. 3. Peardeck can be integrated in google slides, so it is easier for some instructors to use.

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[4] https://www.blackboard.com/

Edpuzzle	1. When playing a video, you can stop at any time and insert questions for students to answer.
	2. If the student cannot answer, you can also replay the video.
	3. It is a good app for assessing students' listening ability.

Table 2: Features and courseware of supplementary tools for Chinese teaching

Though above software and distance learning platform allow students to participate various language activities in classroom or out of classroom, there are also difficulties in performance evaluation. (Taguchi, 2017) Leaving aside the authenticity of the assessment results, the traditional written test method used in language teaching in a real environment cannot be carried out. Students do not need to write Chinese characters by hand, as long as they type using the keyboard, so students can use online tools (Google translator, pinyin convertor, etc.) to complete exams. In addition, the above software does not offer smooth communication among students out of classroom.

Changes of Teaching Contents

The current syllabus of Chinese courses has been developed based on traditional language teaching theory. The four aspects of Chinese learning, including listening, speaking, reading and writing in Chinese teaching have unique methods. Tone and writing are the most difficult in the Chinese teaching. David Moser (Moser 1991) lists 9 difficult aspects to learn Chinese, all of which are caused by problems in pronunciation and writing. We conducted a survey in Chinese I classes and survey result supported the above arguments. The 3 biggest challenges are pronunciation, grammar and culture.

The difficulty in teaching Chinese characters is self-evident. In a face-to-face classroom environment, instructors can strengthen students' memory by writing of Chinese characters on the blackboard and assigning handwriting homework. However, when teaching online, instructors are more helpless with students' writing problems. Students' homework is basically completed and submitted online, and students have to type Chinese characters using keyboard. The problem is that writing Chinese and typing Chinese are very different so achieve different effects. In the last decade, Chinese people often communicate via social media, emails and messages, and handwriting is rarely used. Hence, some instructors suggested that future Chinese learning to take up typing Chinese but no one has really tried to implement it in the syllabus yet. However, distance learning may propel this conversion, which replace writing Chinese character with typing Chinese character.

Prospects and Future Direction of Distance Learning in the Post-Pandemic Era

With the advent of vaccines, it is only a matter of time before the pandemic ends. Many schools have gradually increased the proportion of face-to-face instruction. However, after nearly a year of comprehensive distance education, more people have found the benefits of distance education, and it has also prompted technology companies to increase the research and development of distance education technology and they have made progress. It is believed that the increase in the proportion of distance teaching will be a trend, especially with the emergence of virtual classrooms and the application of virtual teaching scenes, students can get basically the same teaching experience as face-to-face teaching, so why not do it? (Thomas, 2018) For young college students, they are willing to enjoy the use of high technology.

In order to achieve the same teaching effect as the face-to-face course, here are some standards need to be met:

- Develop a new syllabus for Chinese distance learning, including teaching methods, tutorial design, teaching assessment, etc.
- Instructors must undergo comprehensive and rigorous training. Whether it is adapting to new technologies or mastering new teaching methods, there should be a quantitative assessment standard.
- Using the technology of Virtual Reality to create a virtual classroom (Figure 3), let students have an immersive feeling and get the same experience as traditional teaching. (Yang, Liu, Song, 2017)
- Design a realistic virtual culture experience using a panoramic camera and it allows students to experience various real cultural situations, promote the combination of language and culture, and jointly promote students' mastery of Chinese.
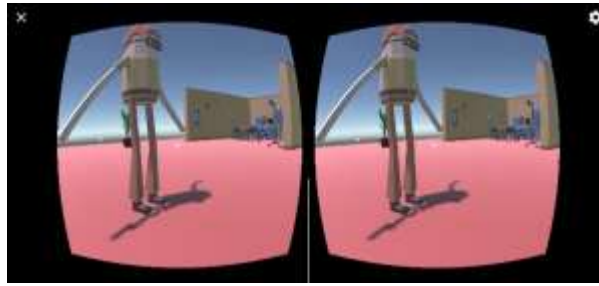
Figure 3. A screenshot of a virtual reality (VR) mobile App designed by CUNY for teaching Chinese. Students are allowed to practice dialogs with virtual characters in VR app.

There is still a long way to go for Chinese distance teaching, but it's irreplaceable adaptability should be a question that every Chinese instructor should seriously consider. No matter how the educational form changes, the rapid development of science and technology will definitely affect the future development of Chinese teaching. Take precautions, adapt to the impact of the digital trend on all aspects of society, and as soon as possible adjust the Chinese teaching mode that is suitable for scientific and technological progress and social development.

Biographical Sketch:

Dr. Ling Luo is an Associate Professor in Modern Languages Department of the City University of New York (BMCC). After received Ph.D. degree from Nanjing University, China, she came to USA as a research follow in Columbia University. Her research interests include comparative cultures, Chinese cultural history and language acquisition using technologies. She has published over 40 research papers, books and book chapters. Her book "Modernization of Nanjing City" was considered one of the most important books on Chinese urban history and has been widely cited. The book was collected by many libraries, including Harvard University library, Columbia University Library, Stanford University Library, and Congress Library.

Dr. Ling Luo is the leading professor of Chinese group in Modern Language Department. She is the recipient of various grants and awards, including Innovations in Language Education Grant, PSC-CUNY Research Grant, Faculty Development Grant and Inter-Disciplinary Project Award and CUNY Collaborative Pedagogical Research Grant.

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