

# The Integration of Distance Learning and Classroom Teaching

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The COVID-19 has not only changed people's life-style, but also has changed our teaching concepts and methods. It causes sudden transition from classroom teaching to virtual teaching and then hybrid teaching. This presents a special challenge to language instruction which requires mutual communication between instructor and students as well as communication among students. First, by tracing the history of distance learning, this paper introduces the developmental stages of distance education, and the communication technology conditions behind them. Second, the background and current situation of Chinese language distance education is introduced. Third, after discussing the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning, the complementary relationship between virtual and face-to-face Chinese instruction, the ideal teaching mode and corresponding teaching strategies are discussed.

*Keywords:* distance education, classroom and virtual instruction, communication technology, hybrid mode

## Introduction

Unprecedented challenges brought by COVID-19 have driven instructors to reconsider instructional methods. After being passively switched to virtual teaching, distant education became an unavoidable topic. Either to go online or face-to-face, or hybrid, at one time, was a choice that instructors and students had to make. Even after classroom teaching has been restored, distance learning still is still unavoidable. What is distance education? When did it start? What are the advantages and disadvantages of classroom and virtual learning? What are the strategies that Chinese language instructors have to take under current situation? With these questions in mind, we are going to explore the new era of instruction: the integration of virtual and classroom instruction of Chinese language.

## Distance Education

Distance education, or distance learning, refers to the education provided for students who cannot attend school physically (Honeyman & Miller, 1993; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2016) or where the learner and the teacher are separated in time and distance (Anderson & Rivera, 2020). Due to the different ways and means of information transmission, distance education has experienced three stages in its development. The first is the correspondence education stage which involved correspondence courses wherein the student corresponded with the school via mail; the second is the radio and television teaching stage by means of radio and television, audio and video recording; the third stage is the online distance education through the combination of computer, multimedia and remote communication technology.

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One of the earliest attempts was advertised in 1728. This was in the Boston Gazette for “Caleb Philipps, teacher of the new method of Short Hand”, who sought students who wanted to learn through weekly mailed lessons (Holmberg, 2005).

### **The First Distance Education Course**

According to Wiki, the first distance education course was offered by Sir Isaac Pitman in the 1840s. He taught a system of shorthand by mailing texts transcribed into shorthand on postcards and receiving transcriptions from his students in return for correction. Getting feedback from students was considered as a crucial innovation in Pitman’s system (Alan, 2003). This first distance course was made possible by the uniform postage rates across England in 1840.

### **The First University to Offer Distance Learning Degree**

The University of London was the first university to offer a distance learning degree. In 1828, the school established an external program, which was chartered by Queen Victoria in 1858. This made the University of London the first university to offer distance learning degrees to students.

### **Father of Modern Distance Education**

Charles Wedemeyer, the William H. Lighty professorship in Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is considered the father of modern distance education.

In the early 1930’s Wedemeyer used the University of Wisconsin’s radio station to broadcast English lessons and expand access for those otherwise excluded from the education system. As a World War II naval instructor he created effective teaching methods for thousands of sailors deployed around the world.

As Director of the University of Wisconsin’s Correspondence Study Program (1954-1964) Wedemeyer and his graduate students initiated a number of research projects on learning theory and the sociology of independent learners. The work advanced a new discipline in the field of education by integrating adult, distance, open and independent learning with instructional systems design, and applications of instructional technology, organizational development, and evaluation. (Tony Bates, 2016)

### **Open University**

Tracing the history of distance education, we cannot jump over the Open University in the United Kingdom. The Open University has revolutionized the scope of correspondence courses, introducing a widely recognized alternative to traditional forms of education.

### **COVID-19 Pandemic**

Although distance learning has provided educational opportunities to many, for a long time, it is in no way to compete with the traditional classroom teaching until the coronavirus pandemic. In 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the globe, a majority of countries announced the temporary closure of schools. According to a report by United Nations in August 2020, closures of schools and other learning spaces have impacted nearly 1.6 billion learners, accounting for 94 percent of the world’s student population (United Nations, 2020).

An unrepresented challenge to the education system presented by the COVID-19 pandemic has left educators helpless and at a loss. For a period of time, online distance learning seems to be the only option. The platforms such as Zoom, Cisco Webex, Google Classroom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, D2L, Edgenuity, etc., suddenly dominated the education world. The familiar classroom instruction came to an abrupt stop overnight. The sudden shift has had a negative impact on the unprepared instructors and students. It also raised all kinds of legal issues, especially the question of copyright. For instance, is it okay to upload textbook content online?

## **Technical Support and Types of Distance Education**

### **Technical Support**

Distance education benefits from the development of printing and communication technology. The correspondence distance education was supported by postal communication and printing technology; then the radio and television distance education was supported by radio, television, audio, video; and our familiar online distance education was supported by network (computer, telecommunications, and satellite communications) and multimedia technology.

### **Synchronous Learning and Asynchronous Learning**

Internet distance education technologies have two modes of delivery: synchronous learning and asynchronous learning. Just like a traditional classroom teaching, synchronous learning requires all students are “present” at the same time in a virtual classroom. Zoom is a typical example of this type. It contains additional interaction tools, such as breakout rooms, text chat, polls, hand raising, emoticons etc. Zoom also supports asynchronous participation by students who can watch or listen to recordings of synchronous sessions. Asynchronous learning, on the other hand, allows learners to access course materials flexibly based on their own schedules. Therefore, students do not have to be present at the same time. Mail correspondence belongs to asynchronous delivery. Message board forums, e-mail, video and audio recordings, printing materials, voicemail, and fax are all asynchronous delivery technology.

### **Paced and Self-Paced**

Most distance education uses a paced format similar to traditional campus-based models in which learners commence and complete a course at the same time. Some institutions offer self-paced programmes that allow for continuous enrolment, and the length of time to complete the course is set by the learner’s time, skill, and commitment levels. Self-paced courses are almost always offered asynchronously.

### **Types of Distance Education**

Kaplan and Haenlein (2016) divided distance education into four categories based on “time dependency” and “number of participants”: MOOCs; SPOCs; SMOCs; and SSOCs. MOOCs refers to Massive Open Online Courses. It offers open-access online course (i.e., without specific participation restrictions) that allows for unlimited (massive) participation; SPOCs means Small Private Online Courses. Since it is a type of online course that only offers a limited number of places, it usually requires some form of formal enrolment; SMOCs is the abbreviation for Synchronous Massive Online Courses: an open-access online course that allows for unlimited participation but requires students to be “present” at the same time (synchronously); SSOCs means Synchronous Private Online Courses. It is an online course that only offers a limited number of places and requires students to be “present” at the same time (synchronously).

## **The Background and Current Situation of Distance Chinese Learning**

### **Chinese Learning Websites**

The relatively mature concept of online teaching Chinese as a foreign language originated in the 1990s. Chinese teaching website was the earliest form of distance learning Chinese as a foreign language. For example, in 2001, Beijing Language and Culture University and Huaxia Dadi Distance Education Network Service Co., Ltd. jointly established a Chinese teaching website—Beiyu Online (<https://www.eblcu.com/index?lang=EN>). Authorized by the Ministry of Education, Beiyu Online is the only professional website that can provide online

Chinese distance education and non-academic education worldwide. The website has rich resources and powerful functions. Beiyu Online advocates resource co-construction and sharing as well as open and interactive resource development and cooperation. In addition, comprehensive portal websites run by the government, such as the Online Confucius Institute (<http://www.chinese.cn/page/#/pcpage/mainpage>) run by Hanban, is also quite influential. From the technical point of view, the most popular Chinese teaching website using podcast technology is ChinesePod (<https://www.chinesepod.com>).

### Chinese Learning Platforms

In recent years, distance Chinese language learning platforms have sprung up. Co-founded by investors from the United States and China, Italki is one of the world's largest online language learning community platform. There are more than one million users learning various languages in the world, and more than 1,000 Chinese language teachers. Other platforms like TutorMing, ChineseBon, TutorMandarin, and platforms designed for Children such as Wukong Chinese, Blingo, and Yayaya Learning Chinese Characters, etc., have attracted a large number of online learners.

### Computer Assisted Language Instruction

Computer-assisted language instruction (CALI) began in the 1960s and was later renamed computer-assisted language learning (CALL). It developed with the rapid development of computer technology, the popularity of personal computers, and the update of teaching theory. There are three stages of research as is indicated in Table 1 (as cited in Xie, 2007) below:

Table 1

#### *Different Stages of CALL*

Time	Types of CALL	Teaching theory background	Computer technology background
1960-1970	Behavioristic CALL	Behavioristic approach	Mainframe
1990-1990	Communicative CALL	Communicative approach	Personal computer
2000-	Integrative CALLL	Integrative, holistic approach	Multimedia, Internet

Computer assisted Chinese language teaching began in the 1970s (1970-1985), when Professor Zheng Jinquan at Illinois State University creatively taught Chinese characters through the computer system (PLATO). After that, it went through several stages: initial period (1986-1993), development period (1994-1999), and rapid development period (2000-current).

The application of multimedia technology in teaching Chinese as a foreign language in China started in the 1990s. Due to the fact that computers were not popularized in mainland China at that time, research on the application of multimedia technology in teaching Chinese as a foreign language was limited. Zhang (1991) pointed out that the trend of informatization in Chinese teaching is irresistible, and the combination of Chinese teaching and science and technology is inevitable. Earlier research mainly focused on the possibility of applying computer-assisted teaching from a theoretical perspective. *Multimedia Chinese Character Dictionary* (Zheng, Huang, Zhao, & Cheng, 1999) indicated that multimedia technology entered the classroom of teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

### PowerPoint Courseware

The introduction of PowerPoint courseware into Chinese language teaching class began in the spring of 2001. At that time, Professor Zheng Yanqun posted advertisements on the Beiyu campus to attract students to

sign up for the pilot program of multimedia Chinese course. The PowerPoint courseware entered the Chinese classroom in North America a few years later. In 2006, at The Fourth International Conference & Workshops on Technology and Chinese Language Teaching held in Los Angeles, Professor Zheng and Chinese instructors from our Columbia University (Liu Lening and Yan Ling) presented PowerPoint courseware Chinese teaching demonstrations, which aroused repercussions.

Zheng (2006) proposed that the use of multimedia technology is more conducive to creating a language use environment suitable for students to learn, and to promote students to develop their own learning strategies while developing communicative competence. She suggested that when teachers make multimedia courseware, the content should be appropriate, not too little nor too much.

Zheng (2009) put forward the basic principles of layout design for Chinese teaching courseware, and introduced the techniques and skills commonly used in courseware. Courseware software includes Microsoft PowerPoint, WPS, Prezi, Apple's Keynote, and google slides.

### **Advantages of Multimedia Courseware**

The advantages of multimedia courseware are many: (1) Language situation display is more intuitive and vivid; (2) Teachers can provide students with more realistic communication scenarios through video, audio, and animation; (3) It saves time and has large information capacity; (4) By sharing teaching resources, it can greatly reduce teachers' repetitive work; (5) It can make the class more interesting; and (6) The multi-sensory stimulation can lead to long-term memory. But if the PowerPoint slides has too much information, the interaction with students will be affected. If so, the courseware will become a "blackboard display".

### **Courseware Template**

The following websites are very useful: (1) Daoker (<http://www.docer.com>) provides both free and paid templates. The quantity and quality of paid templates, of course, are superior; (2) Yanjie (<http://www.yanj.cn>) is the largest professional presentation and communication platform in China. The platform has many free PPT works, PPT templates, and PPT charts; (3) The Website of Office Plus (<https://www.officeplus.cn/templates/?cat=PPT>) is the official website of Microsoft Corporation. It has a large number of high quality templates; (4) 51PPT template network (<https://www.51pptmoban.com>) is also a website that offers free templates. It has author collection categories for people to contribute; and (5) Youpin PPT (<https://www.ypppt.com>) is a platform which not only provides free and high quality template downloads, but also font download. Instructors can download special fonts for Chinese characters.

### **Advantages of Distance Education of Chinese Language**

Due to its flexibility of time and space, distance learning provides ordinary people and enterprises with more opportunities for education and training. It relieves the pressure on supply and demand of institutional buildings and infrastructure. In addition, it provides opportunities for students from different geographical, social, cultural, economic, and experiential backgrounds to interact with each other and communicate with native speakers of Chinese. It is believed that distance education will promote institutional change and innovation. For skilled instructors, distance instruction is as effective as classroom teaching.

Compared with traditional teaching methods, it expands the objects of education. Learners are no longer limited by age, occupation, and education background. Distance education is more student-centred. The class pace is more based on student's progress. Furthermore, by using multimedia technologies such as video and audio for teaching, distance education enriched the teaching procedure.

The teaching resources—courseware, pictures and animations, audio and video materials can be reused, which greatly reduces teaching costs and saves teaching resources. This can further save students' tuition and textbook costs. As the number of students increases, it is profitable for educational institutions as well.

### **Disadvantages of Distance Education of Chinese Language**

Zheng Yanqun (2013) put forward the concept of “ecological environment” in second language learning. The “ecological environment” of second language learning refers to all human and human-related factors that affect language learning and language practice of second language learners. She emphasized the importance of constructing an ecological environment for Chinese online learning, including the design of digital environment, the way and role of individual interaction, and the design principles of website navigation. Due to the relationship between time and space, the online instruction of Chinese language urgently needs to be improved in terms of “ecological environment”. Xin Shichang (2016) pointed out that the correlation between digital learning and language ability is not necessarily proportional. Actually, the excessive use of computers will actually reduce learner's language ability. It may have a negative impact on their speaking, reading, and writing. He said that the extensive use of computers will reduce the chances of facing real people, and form a paradox of “cultivating the ability of interpersonal communication by reducing interpersonal relationships”.

The author of this article noticed that distance learning will also make testing more difficult, especially the Chinese character writing part. In addition, although online test questions can be reused, making each online test is time-consuming and has unpredictable problems. Sometimes, audio files for the listening part of test cannot be opened by individual students due to their own Internet speed and the browser they use. When we invigilate the exam online, the teacher has to answer all kinds of unimaginable questions in the chat.

Although there are many platforms that can be utilized, language instructors are not professionals after all. Making specific video clips is both time-consuming and giving us too much pressure. In addition, the copyright of textbooks is also an issue to be considered. Also, the physical isolation of students from teachers and their peers makes interaction difficult. Some students are reluctant to turn on the camera due to various reasons. Even if they are in a group activity in the breakout room of zoom, talking to their avatars or names gives people an unreal feeling. Unlike in the traditional classroom, group reading or drilling cannot be achieved in the current zoom class. Therefore, the pace of the class is relatively slow and lacks change.

Since virtual class usually takes place at home or some public places, family members or cats and dogs or background noise may suddenly appear on the screen, causing distraction. Friends or family members even sit beside the students, making the students very embarrassed.

In addition, synchronous distance education has greatly increased the workload of teachers. The learning cost for some students has also increased relatively. They must be equipped with appropriate electronic equipment to study, which is a large expenditure for students with low family income. In addition, temporary power and network outages will also affect synchronous remote teaching.

Since there are so many deficiencies in distance learning, can we simply put it aside? The answer is no. Then, what is the role of Chinese teachers in the era of distance education and classroom teaching?

### **The Relationship and Prospective of Distance Learning and Classroom Teaching of Chinese**

As early as 2001, Zheng Yanqun pointed out that traditional face-to-face classroom teaching cannot be replaced by distance learning, but it could be strengthened by introducing modern educational technologies such

as network technology and computer-based multimedia technology. She stated that modern educational technology should serve the traditional classroom teaching. Zheng also believes that putting classroom teaching on the Internet, or creating a virtual classroom teaching environment on the Internet, will be the most effective way of distance teaching. Then, what is the ideal teaching mode? In line with Zheng Yanquan (2001), Zhang Ni (2016), and Lǚ Wenjiao (2017), the author believes that a hybrid approach, combining classroom teaching and distance learning, is the most effective way of teaching.

### **Ideal Teaching Mode**

Allen and Seaman (2016) stated that according to the statistical report of the American Online Education Consortium (OLC): Since 2002, among all types of online courses, blended courses have the highest learning effectiveness and student satisfaction. The hybrid course refers to the teaching method in which face-to-face teaching is combined with online teaching, and the online teaching component accounts for 30%-79%. In 2021, Thomas and Stritto concluded that

Instructors need to be knowledgeable not only in their content area, but in pedagogy and in working with online students as well. Trainings for instructors in higher education should include pedagogy that can be applied across modalities, technology skills to enhance the course and help individual students, and information about how to work with diverse student groups around the globe. (2021, <https://ojdla.com/articles/what-is-the-future-of-online-education-the-perceptions-of-instructors-with-over-a-decade-of-online-teaching-experience>)

OLC researchers believe that asynchronous remote classroom and traditional classroom hybrid mode can give full play to the respective advantages of classroom and online teaching, complementing each other. At the same time, by making relatively more use of various teaching resources, blended courses are economical and practical. Under the premise of ensuring the quality of traditional teaching, traditional Chinese classroom can be assisted and strengthened through the Internet, with the help of online platforms (such as zoom, etc.). Hybrid mode also provides students the opportunity to learn at their own pace. At present, the most effective forms of network-assisted teaching are Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), micro-lectures, and flipped classrooms.

### **MOOCs, Micro-courses, and Flipped Classrooms**

MOOCs refer to large-scale open online courses. In 2012, top universities in the United States successively set up online learning platforms to provide free courses online. MOOC integrates a variety of social networking tools and various forms of digital resources. It breaks through the time and space limitations of traditional courses. Through Internet, learners from all over the world can take courses offered by top universities regardless of their location. Like other distance courses, MOOCs have a high degree of participation and autonomy. Although the enrollment rate is high, the dropout rate is not low neither, which requires learners to have strong autonomous learning ability to complete the course content on time. However, due to the requirement of mutual communication of language courses, apart from grammar and listening, the author believes that MOOC courses are not suitable for teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

Micro-lecture refers to the use of video as the main carrier in accordance with the new curriculum standards and teaching practice requirements to record teachers' teaching on certain structures or distinction between a pair of synonyms. The core content of micro-lecture is classroom teaching video, and also includes teaching design, material courseware, teaching reflection, practice test, student feedback, teacher's comments, and other auxiliary materials related to the target words or structure. Teaching resources jointly "create" a semi-structured, thematic resource unit application or mini-environment. In general, micro-lecture has the following features: (1) short

teaching time: Teaching videos are the core content of micro-lectures; the duration of the “micro-class” is generally about 5-8 minutes, no more than 10 minutes. Therefore, “micro-lecture” can be called “class example fragment” or “micro-class example”; (2) Less teaching content: It is mainly to highlight the teaching of a certain subject knowledge point in classroom teaching (such as key points, difficult points, and doubtful content in teaching), or to reflect a certain teaching link and teaching theme in the classroom; and (3) The resource capacity is small. In terms of size, the total capacity of “micro-lecture” videos and supporting resources is generally around tens of megabytes, and the video format must be a streaming media format that supports online playback (such as rm, wmv, flv, etc.). This allows teachers and students to smoothly download and observe course examples online.

How to make a micro-lecture video? In order to save time, the author believes that we should first use the short videos that are available on the Internet; for instance, about Ba-construction, the following video is quite interesting and useful: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LV-3GeZMyVI>. When choosing online, animation form is preferred for they are funny and humorous. Also instructors can make their own short videos at home which will provide a familiar and friendly presence for the students; finally, instructors can assign students homework to make short videos such as cleaning up the house, making a dish, or arranging the setting of their room by using Ba-construction. This will strengthen the impression of students in which scenario the Ba-construction is used. However, since micro-lectures are aimed at specific target groups and deliver limited knowledge, it is considered not systematic and comprehensive but fragmental. On the basis of micro-class, people start to turn to flipped classroom.

Flipped classroom or “Inverted Classroom” refers to the readjustment of time inside and outside the classroom and the decision of learning is transferred from teachers to students. Flipped classroom changes in the roles of teachers and students. In this teaching mode, during the valuable time in the classroom, students can focus more on active project-based learning, mutual communication, class discussion, etc., so as to gain a deeper understanding of the target knowledge.

In the full sense of flipped classroom, teachers no longer occupy classroom time to teach information, which students can learn independently by watching video lectures, listening to podcasts, and reading electronic courseware with enhanced functions before and after class. Of course, they can discuss online with other students. Teachers thus will have more time for personal tutoring. After class, students plan their own learning content, style, and way of presenting knowledge at their own learning pace. Instructors use lecture and collaborative methods to satisfy students’ needs and facilitate their personalized learning. The goal is for students to gain through practice and more authentic learning context. The flipped classroom model is part of a larger education movement that overlaps in meaning with blended learning, inquiry learning, and other teaching methods and tools, all of which are designed to make learning more flexible, active, and student-engaged.

After watching the teaching video, we can design a few questions about the content to see if students have any questions or not about the content. Instructors can respond in a timely manner according to students’ answers to help them understand. Teachers can also use the platform to allow students to upload homework.

### **Questions to Answer**

In the blended teaching mode, or more specifically the individualized teaching mode, instructors face a lot of challenges. In addition to reposition, to learn the technical skills, we also have to consider how to assist students to complete the learning procedure. To what extent will micro-videos help students to learn and teachers to tutor



individually? Another question is: How to design syllabuses? If the new teaching mode emphasizes personalization, should tests be personalized? Will students be allowed to take exams asynchronously? If allowed, how to avoid the test questions leak? Should multiple sets of test papers be prepared?

### Conclusion

Distance education will keep playing a key role in Chinese language teaching. As language instructors, we should adjust to, learn new technological skills and adopt new strategy in language teaching.

The hybrid teaching model will force us to rethink and reposition. Getting out of the comfort zone is not easy. Facing the challenges, cooperation and exchange of teaching resources will undoubtedly release us from pressure. We should be aware that distance learning and face to face teaching are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they will work together to achieve better teaching and learning results. Computer technology assisted learning is the trend and will be an indivisible part of modern language teaching.

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