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Teaching Languages Online: Innovations and Challenges

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Teaching Languages Online: Innovations and Challenges

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Abstract
Language professionals long resisted teaching online mainly because it was unthinkable to teach speaking in the online environment. Recent advances in technology, however, have made it conceivable. This chapter presents the design and implementation of online courses in Japanese and Chinese recently developed and being offered at Purdue University. We will highlight not only technologies involved, but also pedagogical innovations that helped resolve difficult issues. The efficacy of online teaching will also be touched upon. Reactions from enrolled students and the instructors that have taught the courses will also be shared.

Introduction
One major motivation for developing online foreign language courses was that some students are interested in taking a foreign language, but can’t fit one in their schedule. 1st and 2nd year Japanese and Chinese courses meet five times a week. There are quite a few students who cannot fit that into their schedule. Also, some students prefer to learn on their own at their own pace. Online courses can accommodate such students. So far, we have only had Purdue students taking online Japanese courses, but the courses can potentially accommodate all college students, high school students, business people, and so on, from anywhere in the world.

What is an online course? What do learners expect an online course to be like today? They expect online courses to be mostly asynchronous, and they expect to be able to learn at their own pace to a much greater extent than in the regular classroom course. How can we teach speaking in this kind of environment? This is our first challenge.

Another challenge concerns testing. Considering that the students may be on the other side of the earth, as in the summer session, it's not practical to give a test at the same time. Even if everybody is in the same time zone, proctoring online is very problematic. There's a technology called Lockdown Browser. It's a browser that allows students to take an online test but doesn’t allow them to do anything else on the computer. It also video-records the test taker in an effort to prevent cheating. But the test taker may have cheat sheets in places that the webcam can’t see. They may also have another computer or device on which to look up things. Another approach to secure testing is to have students go to test centers to take a test proctored by a human proctor. This solution requires a fee, a reservation in advance, and is not ubiquitously available worldwide. A major weakness of this solution is that a student that takes the test first can tell his classmates what the test questions were.

The following two sections will describe the design and implementation of Japanese online course and those of Chinese online courses, addressing the two challenges along the way. The
Japanese Online Courses

Course Design and Development

Overview. The objective of our Japanese online courses is identical to that of the traditional classroom courses: i.e. to prepare students to be able to perform what they learned in class in real life. In order to achieve this goal, our online courses were developed following the backward design method (Wiggins & McTighe 1998).

Our online courses are built with three building blocks: self-learning modules, real-time sessions, and performance-based tests. Self-learning modules are a series of asynchronous activities that students complete on their own. Students are given a schedule to follow, but within it, they can set their own pace and practice as many times as they want. Ninety-percent of the activities are focused on oral practice which promotes active learning in speaking. A real-time session is a venue for synchronous activities, where students virtually meet with their instructor and one classmate online. These sessions provide a venue in which students can engage in real-time interaction with other speakers, putting to actual use the language elements they learned in self-learning modules. The course assessments are called Performance-based Test (PBT). Unlike traditional paper-and-pencil tests, PBTs focus on what a learner can do with a language rather than what they know.

Here is how one chapter of instruction proceeds. Our 1st-year Japanese courses use the textbook Nakama 1 (Hatasa, Hatasa & Makino 2014). In a regular academic semester, six chapters are covered. Typically, each chapter is covered within two weeks. At the beginning of each chapter, students are introduced to the objectives of the chapter and to the contents of the chapter test. There are two self-learning modules and two real-time sessions before the chapter test. First, students complete the first self-learning module in Week 1 that includes a large number of oral activities that require students to submit audio recordings. Instructors monitor students’ progress and provide feedback before a real-time session. Towards the end of Week 1, students meet with their instructor and one classmate in a real-time session. There, the focus is to practice using those newly learned materials in live conversations. Then, they go through another self-learning module and a real-time session in Week 2, covering the latter half of the chapter. At the end of the chapter, PBT is administered to test how well they can perform what they learned from self-learning modules and real-time sessions.

Learning Tools. Our online courses utilize four tools: Blackboard Learn, a textbook, Cisco WebEx, and Speak Everywhere (SE). Blackboard is used as a place where students can access their learning objectives, schedules, and grades. SE is an online platform where students can access their self-learning oral activities, and Cisco WebEx is a web-based video-conferencing tool used for real-time sessions.
Self-learning Modules. Figure 1 shows a sample list of self-learning activities. As shown on the list, most of the activities focus on oral practice, which gives students ample opportunities to practice speaking.

As seen in Figure 1, these exercises are designed to help students develop their language competence step-by-step from lexical-level, to sentence-level, and eventually to discourse-level. Activities are prepared in such a way that students first familiarize themselves with new vocabulary words or grammar points, move on to using them in a short Q&A, and then try applying them to open-ended Q&A tasks. By the end of each learning module, students are expected to be able to use newly learned materials to talk about their own personal experience/information. Since these activities are available online, students can practice wherever they want, and as many times as they wish before submitting their recordings for grading.

Real-time Sessions. Real-time sessions are designed for students to practice what they learned during self-learning in a live conversation with an instructor and a classmate. This small group arrangement is intended to maximize opportunities for language output. Since students have already completed basic oral practice asynchronously, real-time sessions focus on
engaging students in a longer, interactive, more authentic practice such as information gap activities or role plays. Crucially, oral drills are not to be conducted in real-time sessions; they are part of self-learning modules. WebEx, an online video-conferencing application, allows sharing of such media files as audio and pictures, and an interactive white board to facilitate real-time session activities (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. A Sample WebEx screen

**Performance-based Test (PBT).** As a solution to the test security issue discussed above, all chapter tests in our online courses assess students’ language performance rather than their knowledge. The test contents align with the chapter objectives, and are available for students to review from the beginning of every chapter. By making the test contents open from the beginning, students can clearly see what they are expected to be able to do by the end of the chapter. PBT tasks are created on the Speak Everywhere platform, and as such, students can access, practice, and review them throughout the chapter. PBT focuses on students’ performance, and not on their memorization skills. All test contents were developed to measure students’ ability to use the language. At the end of each chapter, students are given 24 hours to complete the test and submit their best recordings. The grading criteria examine how accurately, appropriately, and fluently they can perform the tasks, and not simply whether or not they can perform the tasks.

PBT represents a radical departure from the traditional written test, and it is a curricular innovation supported by the SE technology. It is designed to bring us three benefits. First, it provides a solution to the test security issue. Since the test contents are open to students from the start, they don’t have to be secured as in traditional tests. Second, because the test tasks are known to the students, we can expect PBT to have a positive washback effect on student learning by promoting oral practice. Finally and perhaps most importantly, PBT is almost entirely oral, reflecting the oral emphasis of the course objectives. For these reasons, PBT is now used in our classroom courses as well.

90% of PBT consists of oral tasks, and the other 10% is timed dictation. Timed dictation is used to assess students’ character writing fluency and accuracy that cannot be assessed through oral tests. Audio-recordings of a set of ten key sentences are played, and students are asked to
write down what they heard within allotted time. The oral portion of PBT usually consists of five tasks: monologue, reading aloud, read and answer, Q&A and a role-play or a guided conversation. The oral tests are administered on SE. Figure 3 shows a sample of a guided conversation task.

In guided conversations, students are to carry on a conversation with the person in the video using cues on the screen. When creating this type of task, the cues were carefully designed so that there would be ample room for creativity. Monologue is a task where students give a short monologue production: e.g. a short speech or a voice mail. Reading aloud is to assess students’ reading fluency, accuracy, and pronunciation. In a read and answer task, students first read a short paragraph on the screen, then respond to questions posed by the person in a video. This is a multi-skill task that combines listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and oral production. In Q&A, various cues are prepared (text, chart, picture, photo, video, and audio) to which students are expected to respond appropriately. All questions on the test are based on self-learning modules and real-time session activities.

**Implementation and Outcomes**

**Online course offerings.** As of Fall 2017, Purdue University offers four Japanese online courses (Japanese 101, 102, 201, and 202) covering the first two years of Japanese. In a regular semester (16 weeks), we strive to offer all four courses. They are offered during the summer semester as well. The summer course is an intensive course, since the same amount of materials that are covered during the regular semester is covered in half the time (8 weeks). Therefore, the pace of instruction is doubled; the students have two real-time sessions a week,
compared to one a week in the regular semester. Other than that, the basic flow of the course is the same, where students complete a self-learning module before moving on to a real-time session.

**Overview: students’ and teachers’ tasks.** Many students have the misconception that an online course is easier and less work than the traditional classroom course, because they do not have to go to class every day. However, this is far from the truth. Students must complete all speaking, listening, reading and writing tasks during their self-learning time, so that they will be ready for the real time session. What they learned is also assessed in various ways, including their participation in and their readiness for the real time session, as well as their assignments, quizzes, and tests.

Instructors who do not know how the online courses function may also think that it will be less work for them, since they do not have to make lesson plans for their daily classes and do not have to physically go to the classroom to teach. However, this is also not the case. In response to students’ self-learning work, instructors must grade all the assignments that are submitted. All speaking assignments are submitted through SE, and instructors must listen, grade, and give feedback, as necessary, to them. Feedback can be given to the students directly using SE. Instructors can both record and type their feedback to inform students what they can improve on. In addition to the speaking assignments, students also practice reading and writing in Japanese, and their assignments must also be graded. There is a convenient feature on Blackboard, which allows instructors to write/type comments directly on the students’ assignments once they are uploaded as PDF files. Although the online course is set up as primarily a self-learning course, using features in SE and Blackboard it is possible to create a course where students can receive feedback and have interaction with the instructor, so that they do not feel completely isolated.

**Advantages and challenges.** Our online course have a number of advantages to offer. The most significant is, of course, flexibility. There are a number of students who want to take Japanese courses at our institution, but cannot because they cannot fit a Japanese course that meets five times a week in their schedule. The online course helps to solve this issue, as the student only needs half an hour to dedicate each week to attend the real time session, as far as scheduled sessions are concerned.

It is also flexible for the instructors since they can teach from anywhere, even if they cannot be on campus due to research, attending conferences, or other obligations. The same applies to the students; they do not have to be on campus to take the course, and that is why the summer online courses have especially been popular among students since they can go back home for the summer and still take a course.

Another advantage is that online courses can increase the interaction between the instructor and each student. This may sound contradictory since the instructor sees the students only once a week for half an hour compared to the traditional classroom course where they see them five times a week for fifty minutes. However, how often is there a chance in the
classroom for instructors to talk with particular students for thirty minutes? Since the instructor only talks to two students at a time during the real time session in the online course, it gives the instructor a chance to interact more closely with the students, compared to the classroom where there are typically around 20 students.

There are also far more speaking assignments than in the traditional classroom courses, which is beneficial for students who want to improve their speaking skills. Another advantage for the instructors is that it definitely takes less time to make lesson plans, since only one lesson plan is needed every week for one real-time session.

Along with the advantages, there are also challenges. One significant challenge is that our online courses (and in fact, online courses in general) require students to have self-discipline, good time management skills, and self-study habits, among other things. Not all students have these qualities, and the trouble is that they may or may not know whether they have these qualities until they start. As detailed above, the whole course is set up in such a way that they self-learn the materials before they participate in the real-time session. If they are not prepared, real-time session activities will not go smoothly and that will hurt the unprepared student as well as the other student who may have come perfectly prepared. It is hoped that academic counseling and the online registration system will give students some guidance as they consider signing up for online courses.

Another challenge is that many students tend to do all their self-study assignments at the last minute, right before their real time session, and this cramming method is not beneficial to them if they want to learn Japanese well. One way to prevent this might be to divide the self-learning tasks into a few sets and set up a deadline for each.

Lastly, it is sometimes difficult to find a perfect pair for the real time session where both students’ levels are about the same. It is difficult to conduct a lesson together with one advanced learner and one struggling learner. Given this difficulty, it is tempting for instructors to pair up the students and decide on a time when they should have their real time session, but this is not recommended. Students should be able to choose a time slot that best fits their schedules, and if instructors decide this for the students, it diminishes the advantage of flexibility.

**Survey study.** To assess the online courses, a survey study was conducted with students taking Japanese 101 Online in the 2014 academic year, soliciting their opinions about the online course. The survey consisted mostly of five-point Likert scale items (1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree), some of which will be discussed below. To the statement “The amount of communication and interaction between students and an instructor in the online course was sufficient for effective learning,” their mean response was 4.6. One of the goals of the online course development project was to maximize student-instructor and student-student interactions, so we believe this has been successful based on the students’ responses. The fact that the statement “The online format allowed me to control the overall pace of my learning” also received a mean of 4.6 indicates that the course was flexible enough to allow a
certain amount of student control. Most students answered that they prefer online courses to traditional face-to-face courses (mean=4.2), and that they feel they can learn the same amount in an online course as in a traditional course (mean=4.2). From the survey, we were able to see that students have a positive reaction overall, and that the learning goals of the students have been met from taking this course (mean=4.5).

**Preliminary efficacy study.** We conducted a preliminary study comparing a traditional classroom course and an online course at the 101 level. The research question was whether or not the online students became as orally proficient as the classroom course counterparts. We had both groups perform three speaking tasks: Questions & answers, Elicited Imitation Task (EIT), and a picture description narrative task. As seen in Table 1, the online students performed comparably with the classroom students on Q&A and narrative. On EIT, they actually outperformed the classroom students. These results demonstrate the efficacy of the online course and validate its curriculum design.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Q&amp;A</th>
<th>EIT</th>
<th>Narrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom</td>
<td>114.71 (5.65)</td>
<td>87.86 (16.54)</td>
<td>34.19 (2.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online</td>
<td>118.33 (2.29)</td>
<td>118.50 (22.48)</td>
<td>34.92 (3.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>30.64**</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**p < 0.01

Table 1. Oral proficiency comparison between classroom and online courses.

**Chinese Online Courses**

**Introduction**

Online education has entered an era of “full bloom” (Qayyum, 2016) with rapid development and implementation of technology. This trend also brings revolution to the field of language teaching and learning, presenting new opportunities and challenges. While the past decade witnessed an increasing number of publications on online language learning in general (White, 2006), attention to Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) in online education is still scarce (Li, Yao & Hong 2016). The first few studies on CFL online courses observed benefits and disadvantages of teaching Chinese online. The main attraction of online language courses is their flexibility to accommodate different schedules and learning styles (Cheng, 2011; Sun, Chen & Olson, 2013; Jiang, 2014; Li et al., 2016). By utilizing online platforms, it also allows instructors to develop and deliver course content in diverse formats (Sun et al., 2013; Jiang, 2014), providing students with unlimited access to course materials (Cheng, 2011; Jiang, 2014).

Despite these apparent advantages, online learning poses challenges to language teachers as well as students. In an online learning mode, most communication is asynchronous, leading to an isolated learning context. Some researchers thus questioned the limited amount of listening and speaking opportunities in language courses and how this may affect students’ oral
proficiency development (Felix, 2001; Hurd, 2005, 2007; Jaggars, 2014). Sun et al. (2013) argued that this isolation can make language learning “extremely difficult, especially when learning a category IV language such as Mandarin Chinese” (p. 162). This isolated learning context also provides less opportunity for face-to-face meeting, which may directly impact students’ perceptions about online language courses. In his investigation of three web tools in CFL teaching and learning, Jin (2009) found that face-to-face communication remained learners’ most favorite learning style. This finding was echoed by Cheng’s (2011) study that 78% of his participants indicated their preference to a regular course over an online one.

In addition, large amounts of self-learning, self-regulated oral practice, delayed feedback, a lack of instructor-student and peer-peer interactions, and isolation from a language learning group in the learning process are criticized for increasing students’ affective factors such as learning anxiety (Hurd, 2007) and decreasing students’ initial motivation to continue the course (White, 2003; Lancashire, 2009; Jiang, 2014). Furthermore, while online learning provides instructors with great flexibility, it may create an excessive workload for them, especially for those who are developing the course in its initial stages (Sun et al., 2013). Lastly, how to provide feedback as instantly as possible and how to better monitor and assist students’ learning process in addition to the heavy workload remain to be ongoing challenges to instructors as well (White, 2003; Cheng, 2011; Jiang, 2014). Xie (2003) summarizes the challenges in developing CFL online courses in the U.S. as follows: overload in designing and maintaining online course materials, instructors’ unfamiliarity with the use of technology, insufficient practice opportunities in speaking and reading, mismatched course expectations between instructor and students, and a lack of self-management skills on the part of the students. These challenges have also been reported in several other recent studies as well (Cheng, 2011; Sun et al., 2013; Jiang, 2014; Li et al., 2016).

Considering these challenges, Sun et al. (2013) proposed a prototype of the entry-level course design model, featuring “asynchronous instruction, synchronous interaction, and asynchronous assessment” (p. 182). According to the authors, the key components of a successful online Chinese language course should include a hybrid of video-based daily instruction (15-30 minutes), optional on-campus office visit or Skype video chat, and a private discussion page on Facebook with CFL learners at all levels. These features can help create a target language learning environment and better facilitate interactions between instructor and students and among peers.

Following this course design model, Li et al. (2016) demonstrated a more comprehensive model of entry-level Chinese online courses. In our course design, we not only included the featured components proposed by Sun et al. (2013) with video-based instruction on grammar, but also utilized a web-based program Speak Everywhere (SE) as the main tool for oral practice and assessment. In addition, we will make some recommendations with regard to new strategies to develop students’ Hanzi (character) handwriting, speaking, and listening skills to be used in future course design.
Course Description and Development

Purdue’s Chinese Program launched its first online course in Fall 2013, and seven students enrolled in it. Once set in motion, online courses have been on steady growth. From Fall 2013 to Spring 2018, a total of 251 students have benefited from taking either semester or summer online Chinese classes at Purdue.

The online courses for first-year Chinese language learners illustrate a typical case of paced online learning in an institutional setting. In this highly-structured coursework progression either in a 16-week regular semester or an 8-week summer schedule, course objectives and expected learning outcomes are kept equal to those of the regular face-to-face course curriculum. To achieve our goal to provide a rigorous as well as flexible curriculum, three interactive learning modes have been developed: student-content, student-instructor, and student-student (Li et al., 2016). In the following sections, each mode will be discussed in detail.

Student-content mode. Based on the textbook used in the course, a variety of multimedia learning materials including annotated PowerPoint Presentations (PPT) (Figure 1), video-recorded grammar lectures (Figure 2), and other supplementary resources have been designed and made available on Blackboard Learn (BL), a web-based learning content management system. These materials are exclusively developed for students to learn new vocabulary words, grammar, sentence patterns, and their pragmatic and cultural associations. During the four years of implementation, all instructional materials have been constantly uploaded, updated, and expanded on BL (Figure 3). Students can learn from these digital materials with audio and video capabilities, and progress at their own pace with possibilities of numerous repeats. We consider this student-content interaction as a preparatory phase in the learning process.

Figure 1. Annotated PPTs on pinyin tones and new vocabulary words
Student-instructor mode. Weekly or bi-weekly videoconferencing via WebEx (Figure 4) offers the opportunity for synchronous student-instructor interaction. With an easy scheduling system, WebEx allows file sharing, screen sharing, whiteboards, video and audio recording, all of which provide convenient means for instant feedback and practice. Online office hours have also been made possible via WebEx where students seek additional help for practice and consultation.
In addition to synchronous interaction with the instructors, student-instructor interaction may also take asynchronous form. Instructors provide both written and oral feedback on students’ assignments through BL and SE, the latter being an in-house developed system for oral practice. To maintain Hanzi handwriting skills in online courses, handwriting homework such as copying Hanzi (Figure 5) and workbook assignments are scanned and uploaded to BL for online grading. Similarly, speaking and listening exercises (Figure 6) are assigned through SE where students practice reading vocabulary words, texts, and guided dialogues.

Figure 5. A sample of student’s Hanzi handwriting homework

Figure 6. Sample SE exercise of reading new vocabulary words

Additionally, an online discussion forum, announcement boards, and a private Facebook group enhance the student-instructor interaction throughout the overall learning progress. While the
virtual meetings and instructor’s feedback are considered as a direct assessment on students’ progress, discussion forums and social media groups are more concerned with encouraging exchanges between students and instructors, as well as among the peers, where reflections, ideas, and views on Chinese language and culture can be shared.

**Student-student Mode.** Teamwork such as peer interviews, group work, and audio/video skits have been designed to facilitate small-group student-student interactions. Students may choose to meet up face-to-face if physically possible, or virtually to work on their team projects. To facilitate sufficient peer interactions and at the same time avoid scheduling conflicts, student groups are kept to one to three members per group and are rotated during the semester for more team member participation. As previously mentioned, a course discussion forum and a private Facebook group add more value to peer interaction and establish a sense of learning community among the students.

**Challenges and Solutions**

While online learning has expanded the reach of traditional language education and allowed for greater flexibility, online courses also pose challenges to both educators and learners. In Chinese online courses, in particular, three aspects are worth consideration and discussion: cultivating speaking skills, assessing learning outcomes, and learning Hanzi handwriting. The temporal and spatial separation between instructor and students in the online learning environment greatly affects the ways in which training in oral, listening, and handwriting skills are carried out. How do students practice speaking without regular face-to-face interactions? How do we assess students’ learning outcomes without traditional paper-based exams? How do we foster Hanzi handwriting skills in students in a computer-based setting? These challenges mandate major adjustments and innovations in Chinese language online course design to adapt to a new teaching and learning environment. The following sections will further address each challenge by proposing possible solutions.

**Cultivating speaking skills.** Fostering oral proficiency can be challenging when learning takes place at a distance. In contrast to the traditional classroom setting, online learning has significantly reduced face-to-face time for maximizing flexibility, and in-class synchronous oral drills are replaced by asynchronous computer-assisted activities. Researchers have questioned the limited interpersonal interactions in an online mode and how it may affect students’ development of oral skills. Thus, how to design activities to create opportunities for practicing oral skills and how to help the learners develop their oral competency become an important issue to address.

As a solution, we devised a hybrid of synchronous and asynchronous modes to maximize students’ speaking opportunities. Asynchronous and self-paced speaking exercises constitute a major part of oral training in a form of daily and repeated practice; synchronous interactions with the instructors and peers complement the asynchronous learning mode by providing additional opportunities for reinforcement and review. Within this hybrid model, the oral practice has been implemented in the following forms:
Asynchronous:

- Self-paced oral assignments & quizzes: oral drills and quizzes such as repeating new vocabulary words and key sentences, text-reading, question and answer, read and answer, monologues, and guided conversations.
- Oral exams: Performance-based midterm and final exams focused on communicative skills.

Synchronous:

- Video conferencing: weekly or bi-weekly student-instructor meetings for conversation practice, progress check, and Q&A.
- Language partner & Teamwork: bi-weekly or tri-weekly student group meetings to complete worksheets for oral exercises and interviews (Figure 7)

Figure 7. Example of teamwork and language partner interview worksheets

Two online platforms facilitate the oral assignments and activities; WebEx provides an online platform for synchronous video conferencing and group meetings, while SE provides a venue for all asynchronous oral exercises, quizzes, exams, and feedback. Comparing to traditional classroom instruction, online language courses diminish the students’ opportunities to listen and speak instantly with the instructor, but our hybrid model includes an increased percentage of graded oral exercises, accounting for 60% of overall course grade. To assess the effectiveness of this model, an experimental study will be conducted to compare students’ oral proficiency of regular and online courses with the hope to provide evidence for a successful (or not) online curriculum in oral skills training.

Testing. Another challenge involving online language learning is testing. Apparently, the physical separation of students and teachers makes it unfeasible to administer paper-based examinations. While it is possible to develop computer-based exams, administering and
proctoring exams online can be difficult as well. Scheduling-wise, students may not be able to take the exam at the same time, and it will be systemically unfair to those who take the exam at earlier time slots. Furthermore, cheating becomes uncontrollable in an online setting if the exam is a closed-book one.

As a possible solution, we first experimented with Respondus. Respondus provides several tools to proctor online exams. It features the LockDown browser technology that prevents students from browsing other sources of information on the computer while taking the exam. It also video-records test-takers during the time of exam. Additionally, teachers can establish an examination question pool with Respondus and these questions can be randomized for each test taker, making it more difficult for cheating and collaboration on a test. While Respondus is widely considered to be an effective tool to mitigate cheating in an online setting, it also has some serious limitations. This platform requires high-spec computer hardware and internet connections. Technological failures often occur if these requirements are not met. Furthermore, the testing system in Respondus models after traditional paper-based testing, with question types such as multiple-choice, true or false, essay, fill in the blank, multiple-choice, jumbled sentence, matching, and ordering. These types of items are often insufficient for assessing students’ communicative competence and oral skills that are of vital importance in language learning.

Thus, SE has been adopted replacing Respondus to implement a performance-based testing (PBT) system as a more comprehensive system of language assessment and evaluation. PBT is widely defined as an assessment tool which contains real-world tasks that are direct and authentic (Wiggins, 1989; McNamara, 1996). In other words, PBT tasks assess students’ ability to utilize their acquired language skills in oral performances rather than testing their underlying linguistic knowledge. In our courses, SE is used to administer oral quizzes, midterm, and final exams. The idea is to shift from a structure-based assessment of students’ linguistic knowledge to a performance-based assessment of students’ language use. Integrated linguistic skills in grammar, vocabulary, fluency, pragmatic and cultural sensitivity become the emphasis of this evaluation. SE makes it possible to design a variety of tasks (Figures 8 and Figure 9) to assess students’ integrated linguistic skills as below:

1) “Read aloud pinyin/text” (testing pronunciation and Hanzi recognition)
2) “Say new words according to picture” (testing vocabulary and pronunciation)
3) “Question and answer” (testing listening, speaking, communicative skills)
4) “Read and answer” (testing reading, speaking, communicative skills)
5) “Guided conversations” (testing listening, speaking, communicative skills)

The overall assessment progresses from simple tasks involving only one or two basic language skills to more complicated ones that require integration of linguistic, communicative, and pragmatic competence. The use of SE for a comprehensive assessment brings significant advantages. SE is a versatile platform that is easy to access, minimizing potential technical difficulties. It also provides an exam mode, in which students must complete the assigned tasks within limited time and respond to each question without delaying recording. In addition,
teachers can redesign exam tasks in exercise mode and make them available for students’ practice and review. In exercise mode, students have sufficient time to decide before recording and compare their responses to sample answers. In this way, students are encouraged to make full use of SE resources, thus improving their linguistic precision.

Figure 8. Midterm exam for 2016 Summer CHNS101 course on SE
Hanzi Handwriting Acquisition. With the shift to online performance-based assessment, the issue of Hanzi handwriting magnified. While some researchers question the usefulness of Hanzi handwriting in an age of digital communication (Allen, 2008), many strongly believe in the long-term benefits of teaching and learning Hanzi through handwriting (Tan et al., 2005, Longcamp et al., 2008, Morgan, 2012). Thus, a compromise has been made to balance Hanzi recognition and handwriting. Specifically, students are required to copy vocabulary words in the textbook by hand stroke by stroke and upload it for grading. However, PBT on SE is only equipped to provide practice in Hanzi recognition. Clearly, other means are needed.

In this context, we adopted Timed Diction (TD) and text-reading for Hanzi training. In a TD process, students are initially provided with stroke order sheets containing all new Hanzi, annotated PPTs with audio, sample usage and etymology, and a set of key sentences (Figure 10) in each lesson with a link to a practice page and corresponding audio files (Figure 11). Students are required to study stroke order and vocabulary PPTs first, and then practice handwriting individual characters and key sentences utilizing the practice page at their own pace. The goal is for the students to be able to write down the key sentences in the designated time frame after they had a chance to listen to the audio. To monitor the learning progress, TD practice test is assigned as homework in each lesson and students need to submit their handwriting to the instructor. During the WebEx meeting session, the instructor will play an audio file including selected key sentences of the lesson, and students need to write down the sentences on-site. They submit their writing immediately after the dictation and get graded on Hanzi accuracy and fluency (i.e. speed). TD offers two benefits to Hanzi learning. It accommodates students with varying abilities and allows them to learn Hanzi at their own pace. It also helps them establish a mental connection between the sound and the shape of a character. In a yet unpublished study on the effects of TD conducted by our research team, we found that TD helped online students achieve better accuracy and fluency in Hanzi writing. Students participated in the study.
reported very positive attitudes towards TD, making statements like “TD helped improve both listening and writing skills,” “It allowed more autonomy in Hanzi practice,” and “TD was beneficial in memorizing sentence structures.”

Lesson 1-2 第一课和第二课
Timed Dictation 限时听写

1. 你好吗？(25s)*
2. 我很好。你呢？(40s)
3. 我也很好。(30s)
4. 你爸爸妈妈好吗？(45s)
5. 他们都很好。 (40s)
6. 你忙吗？(25s)
7. 你男朋友忙吗？或你女朋友忙吗？(45s)
8. 你要咖啡吗？(40s)
9. 我也要咖啡。(40s)
10. 哥哥、弟弟都喝咖啡。（50s）

**25s stands for 25 seconds. It means you are expected to write down sentence 1 in the correct form and characters no more than 25 seconds.

Link:

Figure 10. A sample list of timed dictation key sentences with a link to the practice website

Timed Dictation Practice

Practice your dictation as many times as you want here. You can control the duration of pauses. You can initially make it longer and gradually work up to the speed expected in the actual test. You can make it shorter than the test, too. You can choose whether or not to randomize the items.

Pause control: Same as test [ ] randomize items

Start the audio

Status: ____________

Question No: ____________

Figure 11. Sample page of the TD practice website

Text-reading exercises, on the other hand, shift the emphasis on Hanzi rote memorization to recognition. During text-reading practice, students are given a selection of Hanzi-only paragraphs to read aloud that requires a strong Hanzi recognition skill. This exercise not only motivates the students to learn and memorize Hanzi, but also provides additional opportunity
to refine pronunciation and vocabulary use. Text-reading is often included as a task in SE tests and assignments.

**Future Development**

Developing online CFL courses is an ongoing process with constant challenges in pedagogy and research. As mentioned earlier, online language courses have been questioned for not being able to provide sufficient opportunities for fostering oral skills (Felix, 2001; Sun et al., 2013) despite a few promising results in online learning (Blake, Wilson, Cetto & Pardo-Ballester, 2008; Cheng, 2011). To address this concern, an empirical study will be conducted to compare the oral proficiency levels of online students and regular-class students in the 2017-2018 academic year. Through this study, we hope to assess the effectiveness of our oral skills training in the online courses and to provide evidence-based insights for future course design.

In addition, holistic grading rubrics and a more systematic rating system for oral exams on SE are needed. Currently, instructors reached some level of consensus on grading students’ performance-based tests. However, individual instructors still have sample latitude in grading, which may result in inconsistency and unfairness. A holistic grading scheme thus provides instructors, particularly novice instructors, with guidance and consistency in grading.

We also expect to upgrade to a newly developed rating system on SE soon. Currently, instructors need to type or audio-record feedback and input a score for each item, which is very time consuming and inefficient. Students can see scores, but don’t always understand how they were graded. With the new rating system, each student will receive a link to the grading page when their grade is ready. Through this page, they will be able to see what score they received for each item, which item they got wrong, and why points were deducted. Students can also listen to their sentence productions and compare them with the instructor’s suggestions. For instructors, grading can be conveniently accomplished through the new rating system by listening to students’ productions, choosing a score based on the grading rubric, and providing narrative feedback as necessary. This upgraded system would reduce the instructors’ workload while improving the quality of feedback.

Last but not least, the issue of developing students’ intercultural competence (IC) in the online mode deserves consideration (White, 2006). In the field of foreign language education, it is widely acknowledged that foreign language learners need to be prepared with the ability to successfully conduct intercultural communication (McConachy & Liddicoat, 2016). Among the components of IC, pragmatic competence, which enables learners to produce appropriate utterances in different cultural and situational settings, is an essential skill. However, due to the isolated nature of online language learning, students may experience much less exposure to the target pragmatic input in comparison to their regular-class peers, and thus extra pragmatic interventions become necessary. Therefore, explicit pragmatic instruction needs to be developed and implemented in the current online curriculum. Possible addition of video-recorded speech events by native speakers, video collections of authentic art, culinary, films,
sports, tourism, etc., with supplementary instructional guidance, would contribute to the teaching of IC.

**Concluding Remarks**

A few summative comments are in order. First, it is obvious that technology plays a vital role in online curriculum design, but it would be a serious mistake to think that technology provides solutions to all issues. As seen above, pedagogical innovations like performance-based assessment, asynchronous oral practice, and use of timed dictation for character writing had to be made first, each of which then required technological support to implement. This is a good example of how technology should be introduced into a curriculum. Curricular needs and pedagogy come first, and then comes technology.

Second, sound pedagogical practices transcend instructional modes. Performance-based assessment is a good example. Although it was born out of necessity, in part, to overcome the limitations imposed by the online mode of teaching, it had so many benefits over the traditional written test that we adopted it for our classroom courses as well. Another thing also used in the classroom courses is asynchronous oral practice implemented on Speak Everywhere. As Fukada (2013) argues, basic oral practice like word/sentence repetition should be done individually and asynchronously, whether in a classroom course or an online course.

Third, although the Chinese development and Japanese development happened more or less independently, the two curricular models have a number of commonalities. Although the Chinese design does not make it explicit, it is also built on the three building blocks of self-learning, synchronous sessions, and performance-based assessment. We consider this to be the basic design for an online language course curriculum that can be applied to any language. By offering this basic framework for online courses, we hope to see online language teaching flourish, providing language learning opportunities to all interested people in the society.

Finally, an implication for research should be pointed out. Because digital IT technologies can capture and store data, with careful planning, it is possible to amass large amounts of language production data for research. The data may be oral productions submitted to Speak Everywhere or student interactions in a Facebook group, for example. The efficacy study discussed above is a good sample research study. It may even be possible to build a learner corpus. Research possibilities are endless.

**References**


