



## Post Covid-19 Teaching Strategies for Second Language Acquisition

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### Abstract

*the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated unprecedented and immediate changes in teaching strategies when the traditional face-to-face teaching format was suddenly replaced with remote teaching. This paper presents the common strategies employed to transition to remote learning in March 2020 and reflects upon the lessons learned as a result of new teaching modalities, both synchronous and asynchronous, implemented during the fall of 2020 and spring 2021; the impact they had on second language acquisition; and the organization of the foreign language classroom. Our goal is to describe the learning-centered approach of our Foreign Language Program at Penn State Berks, which includes Arabic, German, French, and Spanish. Based on the experience of our Spanish Program in particular, this paper discusses not only the strategies used to engage students remotely, but how they can be applied to in-person classes in the future, how our innovative approach resulted in higher enrollments, and how these changes can enhance teaching and learning. Thus, our discussion will specifically describe some components of the foreign language classroom such as one-on-one weekly conversations in the target language, writing and composition requirements, and dialogue on demand. In addition, we will describe the creation of asynchronous materials and tutorials to support the learning process, the integration of these materials during the semester, and the feedback received from students and peers.*

**Keywords** *Language Teaching Strategies, Engagement, Blended Learning.*

### 1. Introduction

Language changes as society changes. To communicate effectively, one must learn to employ new language signifiers appropriately. By extension, to teach language effectively, one must adopt a new mindset and engage in new approaches to teaching that are in tune with the new way students learn. Therefore, the key to successful language teaching lies not only in the thoughtful preparation of the material, but also in the delivery and in the preparation of the physical (or virtual) teaching site. In the following paragraphs, we offer some examples.

### 2. New approaches in the classroom


Taking attendance, for instance, can be converted from a rote obligation to a meaningful exchange with students. We used to have rosters on a single sheet of paper that could be organized in different ways but with little room to write notes. Now, we suggest utilizing index cards. Prior to the first class of the semester, write student names on individual index cards. Place the cards, in alphabetical order, on the teacher desk or podium. As students walk into the room, ask them their name in the target language. Pull out the student card and record the ease (or difficulty) with which the student responded. Note the student's preferred nickname and any preferences that they may demonstrate such as a favorite sports team, or an interesting book bag, cellphone, etc. Noting this information affords the instructor a connection with the student that can be used to elicit future conversations. By the time the entire class arrives the instructor will have had the opportunity to briefly speak with each student and get an accurate attendance count for the day without using any class time to accomplish the task.

Index cards also offer the instructor plenty of room on which to make notes about each student's preferences, performance, and learning style. The cards allow the instructor to quickly, and effectively, separate the class into working groups (or keep track of breakout rooms on Zoom), and they are an excellent management tool to keep track of who volunteers to ask and answer questions or fails to respond when called upon. Shuffle cards to call on people randomly. Keep a separate pile for those who have answered to know which pile to select from to call on people who have not volunteered answers. Utilizing the cards in this way ensures that everyone in the class participates on any given day. The



incorporation of index cards can be translated into the virtual classroom by using your preferred digital documents or platform. Thus, transitioning from an old-fashioned paper roster to index cards (physical or virtual) engages more communication in the target language.

So that no instruction time is wasted, another proven strategy is to have the classroom (or Zoom site) ready before the first student enters the class. Any important announcements and/or concepts that you want the students to readily digest should be projected on the screen as they walk into the classroom. Also project any image that might entice students to want to read the projected information. For example, a cartoon of the school mascot wearing a mask reminds students that they must also wear their masks in the classroom. Other images could be snapshots of the city or country you will study in that lesson, traditional food, artwork, artifacts, etc., as exemplified in the following image, Fig.1:



**Bienvenidos a la clase de español 2**  
Dr. Chambers

¡Bienvenidos a la clase de español 2!  
¡Las mascarillas son obligatorias!

Hoy es el 23 de agosto de 2021

In your notebook, date your notes in Spanish like you see above.

PLEASE PICK UP A PACKET IN THE BACK OF THE ROOM AND COMPLETE THE FIRST PAGE. ¡GRACIAS!

Please answer the following questions in your notebook:

¿Cómo estás?

¿Prefieres las clases en persona o en Zoom?

Fig. 1 Important Concepts placed on screen

In preparing the physical or virtual teaching classroom for a lesson, it is helpful to put all information on one continuous, projectable document. That requires advanced preparation on the professor's part, but it saves important classroom minutes. Students react positively to instructors who demonstrate a well-designed class plan. When students realize that the instructor cares enough to value their time, they feel they are being taught not just by an instructor, but by a leader [1. Whitehead and Greenier, 2019]. Thus, rather than opening individual websites, signing in, and surfing from one website to another, download all images and activities ahead of time onto one document; imbed music and video links on that same document as illustrated in Fig. 2:

Chart from the textbook website:

Indirect object pronouns	
Singular forms	Plural forms
me (to, for) me	me (to, for) us
te (to, for) you (fam.)	os (to, for) you (fam.)
le (to, for) you (form.)	les (to, for) you (form.)
le (to, for) him; her	les (to, for) them

Activity from the online workbook website:

**Modelo**  
Juan \_\_\_ quiere dar un regalo. (to Elena)  
Juan \_\_\_ le \_\_\_ quiere dar un regalo. (to Elena)

1. Maria \_\_\_ prepara un café. (for us)
2. Beatriz y Felipe \_\_\_ escriben desde (from) Cuba. (to me)
3. Los vendedores \_\_\_ venden ropa. (to you, fam. sing.)
4. Marta y yo \_\_\_ compramos unos guantes. (for them)

Culture Lesson for the day website:  
Son cubano  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GqCXG9a2qi8>

Fig. 2 Example of one projectable document

During class, students will stay on task because there is no interruption in the lesson as they move from one activity to the next. A seamless transition helps the professor present a well-prepared lesson,



implicitly teaching students the importance of being organized. Eliminating downtime in the class increases time spent in the target language; students will have little time to check their cell phones or engage in other non-classroom related activities.

Whereas you may not be accessing certain technology during class time, it is essential that you make use of it for homework. Blended learning has been employed in language teaching for several years. However, the pandemic forced students (and instructors) to become even more proficient in the use of technology. Thus, it is important to build on that knowledge by thoroughly teaching students the various components of the institution's course management system, accessing online books and tutorials, submitting assignments online, and communicating virtually with their professors and peers [2. Dziuban, Graham, Moskal, et al. 2018] You can also ask students to bring their laptops to class and administer tests and quizzes online as opposed to on paper. It is ecologically responsible, and it prepares students for online interviews and testing they will certainly face as they move on in their careers [3. Romero-Rodríguez, Aznar-Díaz, Hinojo-Lucena, *et al.*, 2020]

Another important aspect of foreign language instruction is listening and comprehension. Technology helps the foreign language student hear others as well as themselves speaking the target language. Strategies to achieve this goal are, among others, to develop activities in which students can record themselves answering questions about an assigned movie or short video; or to assign group projects that students can pre-record and present to the class. The recorded project should be submitted to the instructor in steps for feedback so that a polished, finished project can be presented to the class. This reduces student stress from the pressure of a "live performance" and it ensures that all projects will be presented as scheduled even if one person from a group is unavoidably absent on the day of the presentation.

Pre-recorded presentations work well for projects, but students also need a more natural approach to using the targeted language; enter live, weekly conversations in the target language. Because of the pandemic, students had a more immediate need to talk. The conversations fulfilled that need while at the same time, afforded students a quick and consistent way to improve several language skills. The conversations are designed to last approximately two minutes. A series of guided questions are sent to the students ahead of time so that they focus on the grammar and vocabulary of the lesson. Students are free to prepare a "script", but they may not read from that script when the conversation takes place. The conversations are graded on content, grammar, pronunciation, and the ability to answer one or two spontaneous questions from the instructor. Grading the weekly conversations serves a dual purpose: aside from receiving real-time target language practice, students attend the instructor's office hours. The consistent interaction enhances the teacher-student relationship which in turn, increases student motivation in the class [Alonso-García, Aznar-Díaz, *et al*, 2019]. It is best if the conversations take place in-person in the instructor's office, however they can also be effectively done on zoom. Students are intimidated by this assignment at first, but by the end of the semester, they often report that it was one of their favorite class activities.

Penn State Berks faculty, in collaboration with our Center for Teaching and Learning, have developed a series of tutorials which are also employed for out-of-class instruction. Each of these tutorials focus on a specific grammatical point which students can review and practice on their own, leaving class time for practice and not for lengthy explanations of grammar. These tutorials have been in place since before 2020, and the feedback received from students and from professionals around the world has been extremely positive: [\[http://berks2.psu.edu/Spanish\]](http://berks2.psu.edu/Spanish)

It is noteworthy to mention that offering foreign language courses in a remote teaching modality resulted in a more positive review of faculty's teaching. Enrollments in summer courses have increased incrementally every year since 2016, the last year in-person summer classes were taught, reaching full enrollment with a waiting list in 2021 as shown below in Table 1:

Summer Enrollments	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
SPAN 1	6	22	22	19	22	26
SPAN 2	N/A	7	15	9	14	24
SPAN 3	6	20	20	23	23	24

Table1: Summer Spanish Course Enrollments





Remote offerings also increased our enrollment in other levels, such as our Intermediate Grammar and Composition Courses. Upperclassmen are now able to continue their studies in Spanish since the class times no longer interfere with their in-person internships.

### **3. New approaches to writing/composition activities**

The weekly conversations mentioned earlier form the basis for the writing portion of the chapter tests and the final exam. By writing a script, students practice their composition skills well as their oral-aural skills as on a weekly basis. The mini scripts further prepare the students for writing formal compositions. Since students are already accustomed to producing written content from guided questions, the nature of the assigned composition must follow suit. Compositions now become directed writing tasks. Filling a blank page is daunting for most students, even more so in a foreign language. Therefore, when assigning a writing task, it is beneficial for the professor to present the student with a series of targeted questions as opposed to an open-ended theme. The resulting work would be the same, however the directed questions make students feel more confident to fill that blank page, especially since they have consistently received this practice through their weekly conversation assignment. It is a good idea to ask the students to submit the assignment via a course management system. A rubric can be developed so that students know what is expected of them before submitting the assignment. The rubric serves to show students that all students are held to the same standard as opposed to feeling that the instructor graded based on favoritism or other factors. [5. McCarty, 2020].

### **4. New approaches to connecting with students**

The isolation the pandemic caused has created a need for feeling connected that extends into the educational institution. Students want to feel recognized and valued. Therefore, without blurring the line between instructor and friend, it is important to establish a more informal/personal connection with students. As discussed, this can be done with the notes on index cards while taking attendance. But to truly feel valorized, students will want time with the instructor. Thus, office hours are more important now than they have ever been.

An appealing variety of office hours on different days and in various modalities is an excellent approach to reaching out to students and accommodating their learning preferences. The more students feel connected to the instructor, the more they will be invested in the class. Students will be willing to try new technology or join discussion groups or watch foreign films if they know there is someone that they can turn to who will answer questions and guide them, rather than chide them. They will be willing to leave their comfort zone and use the target language in ways they would never have dared to try before as evidenced by the following comments made on the course evaluations:

- “Speaking with my professor helped me understand the course requirements which motivated me try harder.”
- “Weekly conversations were a great way to practice language. They built my confidence in speak Spanish”.

In addition to all the graded exercises taking place in the classroom or through homework, not all conversations need to be graded. At Penn State Berks we have been offering a weekly “Charlas con Chocolates” for the past seven years. These weekly “chocolate chats” are open not just to students, but to the entire campus and community. When participants arrive, they spend time in basic conversation aided by prompts to help them elicit answers. If the participants vary in ability levels, they can be separated into groups according to their level. After spending time in conversation, the activity turns to playing word games in the target language. This activity affords students a relaxing way to practice the target language and learn some culture without the pressure of being graded. Of course, chocolates are freely distributed throughout the activity to “sweeten” the experience.

When the pandemic caused the in-person chats to be cancelled, Penn State Berks converted the activity into a virtual “Dialogue on Demand”. Participants were free to log into a zoom chat during a certain time of the day to simply chat with anybody else who also logged on. Conversation topics varied; some used the time to practice vocabulary from the lessons whereas others use the time to talk about real life issues in the target language. This is an excellent tool to connect to students on a personal level. “Dialogue on



Demand” increased student interest in the target language by making them feel confident that they could use the target language in a variety of situations without the pressure of grades.

## 5. Conclusions

As described by the many reports published on the impact of the pandemic, “COVID-19 has affected learners’ language and literacy learning in different ways, so teachers have identified several strategies that work well under the new conditions to ensure that academic language is accessible to all” (Guofang et al, 2021). Similarly, our Basic Foreign Language program has benefitted from the remote teaching modalities and resources needed in the pandemic. This paper offered some examples in which our pedagogical approach was modified to engage students in a remote environment creating a better experience throughout the learning process. This is true not only in our Spanish Basic Program but also in the teaching of French and Arabic (the latter being offered completely online) where some of these modifications have also been made. “The next phase for higher education in a post-COVID-19 world is to harness what worked well during the emergency response period and use those experiences to improve institutional practices for the benefit of both internal and external constituencies in the future” (Worie, 2021).

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