

Chinese Proficiency at a Distance

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A few weeks ago, I once again had the chance to talk with some parents of my students in an open house meeting. Being a teacher of Chinese using blended learning methods, I knew to expect the questions: “Is it possible for middle school and high school students to learn a difficult language like Chinese, if they only meet their teacher once or twice a week, and are supposed to rely largely on distance learning?” and “How do your students learn Chinese without interacting with a real person?”. This time, before I could answer, a mother of my former student who after two years of blended learning is now continuing in Chinese-3 class in a completely distance learning based program, took the floor. She said, “Of course! My son enjoys learning with his classmates and by himself, posting blogs, and doing projects in Chinese”.

The parent’s question, however, is a good one, and the same I used to ask myself, having taught a foreign language using conventional face-to-face teaching for four years. Now, after experience from teaching Chinese for two years in a blended learning classroom, I see the outcomes. I firmly believe my students have learned as much as if they would have in a face-to-face class. Their language proficiencies have developed from ACTLF Novice-low to Novice-mid in listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Blended learning combines online with face-to-face learning According to Gary Harriman (2004), “the goal of blended learning is to provide the most efficient and effective instruction experience by combining delivery modalities.”

Most of my students were born around 2000. They are the first generation of the 21st century, and their whole life has coincided with the most rapid technological development during human history. As an educator, I think it is crucial to utilize contemporary technology in teaching in order to adapt to the possibilities of this era. Meanwhile, our students also need to be prepared to become lifelong learners of the 21st century. The blended online model will undoubtedly be helpful in preparing students for their learning path after high school: it’s almost guaranteed that students will take some Distance Learning or blended classes at college.

My class is a combination of in-person and online learning. Students learn Chinese on a daily basis in the Blackboard Learning System electronic classroom. I provide face-to-face instruction in person once a week. This arrangement enables me to teach the same class in multiple campuses at the same time, including both high schools and middle schools: first Chinese-1, the next year Chinese-2. Teens learn Chinese – one of the hardest languages, *online*? Some people doubt it. Below, I will share some of my experiences, highlighting how students *can* learn Chinese in a blended learning class. For practical purposes, I focus here on speaking proficiency. Blended classroom involves learning both individually and within a team; online and in interaction with other persons.

The number of useful tools for a distance-learning teacher has increased rapidly during recent years. Many of these tools are used in learning other subjects as well, and students are usually extremely savvy in taking control of them.

Tools that I use in my online course:

[GarageBand]

Students frequently use this Mac software to complete their recording assignments online. Students record reading a dialogue in Chinese with or without a partner and upload an mp3 file to Blackboard. Many students also enjoy other uses, such as singing Chinese songs.

[Voki]

Voki is an online speaking tool which is very popular among my students. The user interface appeals to students, who can personalize their portrait and choose from different voices. This seems to make learning Chinese more interesting and more fun.



[Podcast]

Podcast is a very efficient way to give a task to all students at the same time. Students can record their assignments directly online.

[iMovie]

iMovie is an excellent solution for students to practice speaking Chinese interacting with another person or persons. My students enjoy using iMovie to record their short clips or skits and posting them in their blogs. It is fun for students to see themselves in a movie and speak a foreign language. Sometimes, students are required to add Chinese subtitles in the movie.

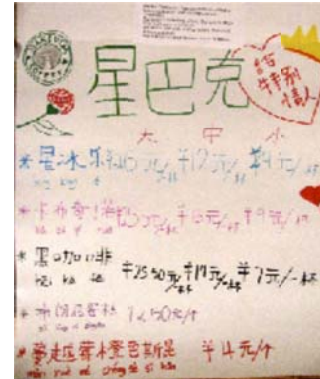
When it is a face-to-face time:

Accompanying the online practice, I focus my weekly visits on assessing and improving students' listening and speaking skills. In the face-to-face class, students are able to interact with me in real life, and they get feedback right away. Because they don't see me every day, the students tend to be more eager to work with me during these face-to-face visits, to practice what they have been learning when I am not there, and to showcase what they are able to do with Chinese. These are perfect opportunities to build a good relationship between my students and myself.

During the face-to-face classes, I try to find new ways of teaching, too. In one of my classes that turned out to be very popular among the students, they learned about Chinese cuisine. They learned online how to describe the flavors of different dishes, and whether they taste good or bad. Then, when I visited the class, we reviewed the words, and for practicing the content, I decided to let the students order their lunch on the phone from a nearby Chinese restaurant (I had made sure that the staff speak proper Mandarin). Most students made their lunch order successfully speaking Chinese only. In this lesson, students had experienced talking to Chinese people on the phone (communication); they learned to use chopsticks to eat food the Chinese way (culture); and they could order food in Chinese from a local Chinese restaurant (connection).

Novice-low level is heavily focused on more speaking and listening, but in the mean time, their reading and writing skills are developed.

Description: My Chinese-2 students did a group activity in the class in mid February last year. The topic is to open a restaurant or café in a city in China. They decided the name and the menu. This group made a menu with special offer on Valentine's Day in a Starbucks. They applied the language, connecting it with the real world.



I admit there are challenges in blended learning model for learners, especially in the beginning. These include ability to self-discipline, pacing and managing work, following instruction without a teacher next to them, and so on. However, once students are adapted to the blended learning environment, they are more self-responsible and tend to be on right track with their learning.