

12 Online training of prospective language teachers: exploring a new model

Hang Zheng¹ and Lianyue Zhang²

Abstract

This chapter reports on a language teaching practicum course of a Master of Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (MTC SOL) program in China in Fall 2020. Driven by the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, this report presents a model to guide practice in online language teacher training via virtual learning communities. In the course, native and nonnative students in the MTC SOL program formed study groups in which they conducted discussions regarding the lectures and completed teaching demonstrations through videoconferences. All students provided online feedback on their peers' teaching demonstrations. The content analysis of post-task interviews revealed that both native and nonnative students benefited from online interactions. Nonnative students had opportunities to practice language and professional skills, while native students developed intercultural communication competence. Peer feedback was also highly rated, as feedback receivers had different perspectives on how to improve their teaching, and feedback providers learned from their peers' strengths and weaknesses. We argue that the model can (1) promote learning autonomy and cultural exchange and (2) boost teachers' self-confidence, which could thus become a desirable new model for language teacher training.

Keywords: COVID-19, online language teaching, virtual community, feedback, Sun Yat-sen University, Zhuhai, China.

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1. Introduction

With the global spread of the COVID-19 epidemic, many countries have implemented border controls. This change has massively impacted international education and student exchanges. The consequences of this shift are particularly evident in second language (L2) teaching and learning. In China, for example, because most international students (Chinese degree pursuers or short-term Chinese learners) were unable to return to China after the winter recess, all Chinese classes for international students were moved online for the 2020 Fall semester. This change posed severe challenges for MTCSOL programs designed for international students. As professional degree programs, MTSCOL programs must, on one hand, introduce theories and, on the other hand, cultivate the ability to solve practical problems in the classroom by providing students with knowledge and training on teaching skills and techniques. For international students, attention also needs to be paid to the improvement of their target language. The contemporary curriculum also includes the goal of cultivating student teachers' intercultural competence and their ability to integrate foreign cultures in classrooms (Gay, 2013).

Nonnative MTCSOL students opt for programs in the target language environment because immersion learning contexts can rapidly increase their language proficiency (Xiao, Taguchi, & Li, 2019) and enrich their target cultural understanding (Taguchi, Xiao, & Li, 2016). Immersion programs also often provide hands-on training by allowing students to participate in experienced teachers' classrooms.

Turning to online learning poses major obstacles to nonnative MTCSOL students' linguistic and professional development. First, most MTCSOL programs have not been prepared for the rapid conversion to online teaching, either technologically or pedagogically. Second, hands-on teaching practicums are difficult to conduct in online environments. Third, isolated learning environments significantly affect students' target language use. Consequently, international students have limited access to natural language learners to practice their teaching skills and native speakers to improve their language proficiency.

2. Objectives

The example we present below is from an online teacher practicum course for MTCSOL students at a Chinese public university. The purpose is twofold: to adapt to the new teaching and learning settings and to explore the possibility of establishing a new model for language teacher training.

As a compulsory course for the MTCSOL program, the teaching practicum course introduces junior graduate students to various aspects of Chinese L2 classroom teaching through critical discussions of prominent theories, interaction with experienced teachers, and engagement with fellow students' teaching demonstrations. The goal is to expand students' expertise as Chinese teachers in the classroom and other learning settings and to develop their ability to make informed decisions in future instructional contexts.

In the program that we are investigating, Chinese Native Students (NSs) and Non-Native Students (NNSs) complete the course in separate sections. Both sections are taught by the same instructor using the same syllabus.

In the 2020 Fall semester, NSs resumed regular on-campus classes. However, all NNSs' classes were converted online. Due to this situation, both NS and NNS classes changed, as demonstrated in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Class design for NSs and NNSs before and after COVID-19

	Native student class	Nonnative student class
Before COVID-19	Whole-class tasks (Classroom) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lectures and discussions • Watch expert teacher videos • Teaching demo in front of the whole class 	Whole-class tasks (Classroom) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lectures and discussions • Watch expert teacher videos • Teaching demo in front of the whole class
	Practicum (Classroom) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observe and teach an actual Chinese class 	Practicum (Classroom) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observe and teach an actual Chinese class

After COVID-19	Whole-class tasks (Classroom) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lectures and discussions • Watch expert teacher videos • Teaching demo in front of the whole class 	Individual tasks (Online) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asynchronous lectures • Asynchronous expert teacher videos • Asynchronous Q&A with the instructor
	Small group tasks (Online) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussions with 1 NS and 1 NNS peers • Prepare teaching demo with 1 NS and 1 NNS peers 	Small group tasks (Online) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussions with 2 NS peers • Prepare teaching demo with 2 NS peers • Make teaching demo video with 2 NSs
	Peer feedback (Online) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anonymized feedback on NS and NNS demos 	Peer feedback (Online) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anonymized feedback on NNS demos

Table 1 shows that major changes occurred to NNSs’ classes, including individual tasks, small group tasks, and peer feedback. The following section will explicate the rationales of these tasks and how they are operationalized.

3. Method

3.1. Instruments

For both international and Chinese students, the course materials are published on the course website built on Chaoxing, an online learning platform (similar to Moodle) designed for and widely used by higher institutions across the Chinese mainland.

Students who enroll in the course may access the system with their college account. International students in our study reported no difficulty logging onto the system. Students must also use videoconferencing platforms, such as Tencent, Voov, or Zoom, to perform group tasks.

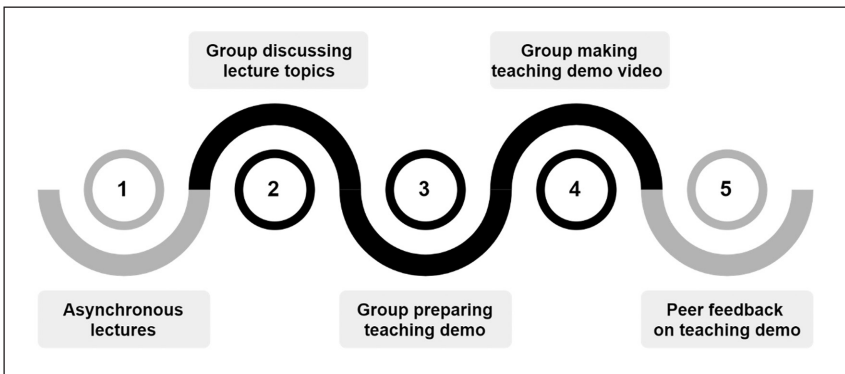
3.2. Participants

Seventeen NNSs are advanced Chinese learners from ten countries: Egypt, Russia, the Czech Republic, Thailand, Poland, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, France, and South Korea. The 17 NNSs and 34 NSs are assigned to 3 member mixed groups. Each group includes one NNS and two NSs. The three students complete all group work together.

3.3. Course tasks

The NNS course primarily involves five sequenced tasks, as shown in [Figure 1](#). Tasks 2 through 4 are all group work.

Figure 1. NNS course tasks and procedure



3.3.1. Asynchronous lectures

Task 1 involves students watching asynchronous lectures and participating in the asynchronous discussion forum. The main function of the asynchronous task is that teachers can remain present and attend to students' needs, so students can feel a sense of belonging to a learning community (Meskill & Anthony, 2005). In this course, asynchronous lectures are brief and focused audio-visual PowerPoint presentations created and uploaded by the instructor. Students can

only watch the lectures on the platform, which enables teachers to monitor students' learning processes, as the system can track the total time each student spends on a lecture. After watching the lectures, students can post their questions on the discussion forum. The instructor responds to all questions in a timely fashion.

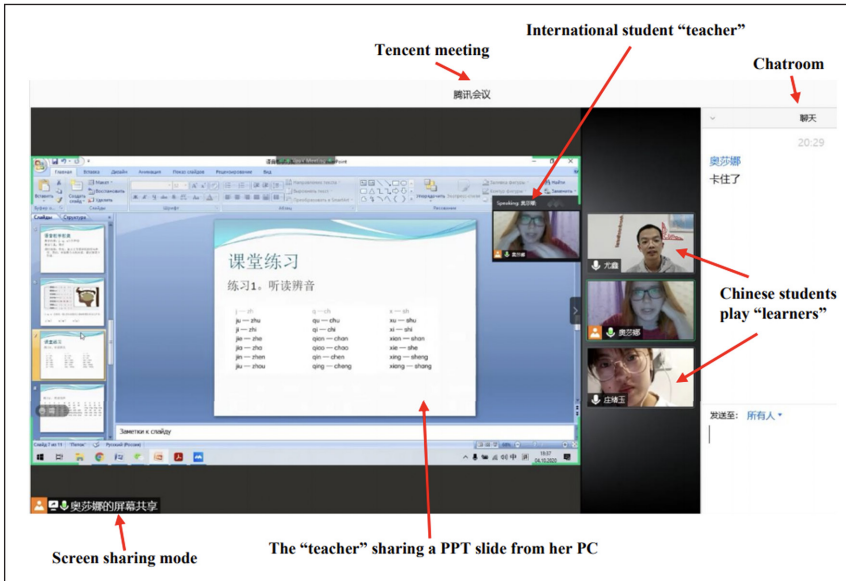
3.3.2. *Group work*

As shown in [Figure 1](#), most course tasks (Tasks 2 to 4) are group work. Small group interactions between learners are often used in L2 classrooms. The interaction hypothesis states that learner interactions may draw learners' attention to their ungrammatical utterances, stimulate learners to practice language forms in meaningful contexts, and promote autonomous learning ([Gass, 1997](#)). The output hypothesis suggests that interactions between NNSs and NSs can stimulate learners to notice the distance between interlanguage and target-like forms and reflect on their own language use ([Swain, 2000](#)).

In Tasks 2 and 3, students are required to conduct group meetings by videoconferencing, discussing lecture-related topics, and preparing teaching demonstrations. Videoconferences create a virtual face-to-face situation which allows remote interlocutors to synchronously exchange both verbal and nonverbal information. Nonverbal information, such as gestures or facial expressions, can be captured by the interlocutors fairly clearly, even with minor signal latency. All videoconference sessions are recorded by the team leader and submitted to the instructor.

In Task 4, NNSs are required to make a teaching demonstration video with their NS partners using videoconferencing. The purpose of teaching an artificial lesson is to demonstrate approaches and techniques that students have learned in class. In the video, the NNS 'teacher' teaches two NS 'students' a 10-minute lesson assigned by the instructor. Some groups choose to use the full-screen model to present the PowerPoint slides without showing the speakers' faces; other groups choose to present the slides as well as show all interlocutors' faces (see [Figure 2](#)).

Figure 2. Screenshot of a teaching demonstration (reproduced with kind permission from the students)



NNSs’ teaching demo videos are uploaded to the course website for both NNSs and NSs enrolled in the course to watch.

3.3.3. Peer feedback

After watching each teaching demonstration, both native and nonnative students are required to provide feedback on each other’s teaching demos. In L2 acquisition, peer feedback was proven to improve feedback givers’ awareness of their own performance and provide feedback receivers with different perspectives (other than the teacher’s perspective) on how to make improvements (Rollinson, 2005).

The review-reflect-revise process can also encourage students to be more independent learners. In this course, students are asked to provide feedback on the following three questions.

- What do you think are the best parts of this teaching demonstration?
- Do you have any suggestions on how this teacher can improve his or her teaching?
- What have you learned from this teaching demonstration?

The instructor collects and anonymizes the feedback, compiles it in a Word document, and then gives it to the student ‘teacher’.

3.4. Data collection and analysis

Because the course began in August 2020 and is still in progress, we report our observations and reflections on the online section as of the date of manuscript submission.

Thus far, four groups have completed all group tasks. The instructor initiated a one-on-one online text interview with these students using the following questions.

- What do you think about the remote teamwork learning model?
- Which changes would you suggest to improve the model?
- Which major difficulties have you experienced in using this model?

Students’ peer feedback and interview responses were analyzed using exploratory content analysis.

4. Findings

Overall, both native and nonnative students hold a positive opinion of the online group interactions and peer feedback.

4.1. Online group interactions

Regarding the group discussions, as demonstrated in Excerpts 1-3, nonnative students had opportunities to practice the Chinese language and understand Chinese culture, and NSs developed intercultural communication competence.

- **Excerpt 1 (Thai student)**

“我喜欢，因为我一边练习汉语一边更好了解中国人，中国文化什么的。我觉得我的组的中国学生很热情。我有不懂的地方，她们给我解释，很清楚。” (I like it, because I can practice Chinese while better understanding Chinese people, Chinese culture, and so on. I think the Chinese students in my team are very enthusiastic. They explain to me, very clearly, the places that I don't understand).

- **Excerpt 2 (Czech student)**

“其实不管怎样我都喜欢，因为我比较想跟中国学生交流。现在疫情的问题没办法当面，能在网上讨论已经是很不错了，我对线上讨论没有什么不满的。” (In fact, I like it anyway because I do want to communicate with Chinese students. Currently, there is no way to discuss face-to-face because of the epidemic. It is good enough to be able to discuss online. I have no dissatisfaction with the online discussion model).

- **Excerpt 3 (Chinese student)**

“能锻炼我和留学生交流的能力，为以后课堂教学做铺垫吧。” (I can practice my communication skills with international students, thus paving the way for future classroom teaching).

4.2. Peer feedback

Regarding peer feedback, as demonstrated in Excerpts 4-6, feedback givers provided both comments (see Excerpt 4) and suggestions (see Excerpt 5) and often made self-reflections when giving feedback (see Excerpt 6). After reading

feedback, receivers also made self-reflections on their teaching performance (see Excerpt 7).

- **Excerpt 4 (a native student to a nonnative peer)**
“一开始直接了当复习上节课内容，这种导入承前启后，也挺自然的。” (In the beginning, (the teacher) reviewed the content of the previous lesson directly. This kind of introduction serves as a link between old and new knowledge and is also quite natural).
- **Excerpt 5 (a nonnative student to a nonnative peer)**
“老师可以用母语或者英语来解释新词，也多做一点互动。” (The teacher may use learners' native language or English to explain the new words and have more interactions).
- **Excerpt 6 (a native student to a native peer)**
“我学到了在讲生词的时候应该讲它的适用范围，让大家会认的同时会用。” (I learned that when teaching a new word, we should teach its scope of application so that everyone can recognize it as well as know how to use it).
- **Excerpt 7 (Russian student)**
“关于例子，很多同学说少。我自己先也写比较多例子，但是我故意地把它们删除，因为这是学生的第二课，他们除了‘你好’以外什么都不知道，所以我把简单的一两个例子放在PPT上。” (Many students said the examples were too few. I wrote many examples initially, but I deliberately deleted them because this is just their second lesson. They don't know anything except 'hello'. So I put one or two simple examples on the PPT).

4.3. Challenges and suggestions

Both native and nonnative students reported challenges in technology use and time differences among group members. Nonnative students also conveyed challenges in language proficiency, stating that “I feel I could not fully express

my opinions” or that “I don’t always know how to express my ideas. That’s why I particularly value the opportunities to talk to Chinese students”.

When asked about their suggestions, nonnative students expressed the fact that they liked the model as it was, saying that “nothing needs to be changed” and that “I do not think there is any problem with it”. The other two stated that they had no opinion on the model. Some NSs expressed that they hoped to have larger-scale meetings or additional meetings in the future. For example, students stated: “I hope to add more team members, especially foreign students”, “it would be better if the instructor could join us occasionally, so it could help us to answer difficult questions”, and “I hope to have more chances to talk to international students”.

5. Discussion

Based on our observations of students’ progress and our evaluations thus far, we believe that the course design we have developed can offer a desirable permanent model for remote language teacher training rather than just a temporary change. There are three major potential achievements of this model.

5.1. Promoting learning autonomy

When classes are suddenly moved online, students are forced into a situation where they must rely more on themselves to learn. One desirable outcome is that online learning fosters learning autonomy (Little, 1991). The question is what instructors can do to promote and monitor autonomous learning processes. In regular classrooms, autonomous L2 learning comprises learners’ engagement, self-reflection, use of the target language, and collaboration (Little & Brammerts, 1996). Our study shows that these aspects can be achieved via virtual learning communities created by instructors. The native-nonnative teamwork ensures peer collaboration and the use of the target language. Peer feedback encourages students to reflect on their teaching behaviors. Each task is monitored by the instructor through online platforms, which ensures learner engagement.

5.2. Developing teachers' beliefs

Meijer, Verloop, and Beijaard (1999) highlighted that teachers' beliefs about their teaching stem from classroom practice and that these beliefs continue to guide their behavior in future classrooms. Combined with theoretical knowledge and teacher expertise, these beliefs are the premise for teachers' further refinement of their teaching practices (Verloop, Van Driel, & Meijer, 2001). In our study, the three integrative and reflective training practices allow prospective teachers to “critically examine their own beliefs and teaching styles and to explore other avenues of professional development” (Lord & Lomicka, 2007, p. 514).

5.3. Stimulating cultural exchange

Modern language teaching aims to engage in various forms of communication across cultures and communities (Huhn, 2012). In this unprecedented period, when countries tend to shut their doors to one another, the successful implementation of global understanding and cultural tolerance depends upon classroom teachers. Thus, it is important to cultivate students' global perspectives and intercultural communication competence before they become teachers. In this study, native-nonnative interactions not only improve students' professional skills but also enhance their intercultural awareness, which will mobilize their future students' cultural resources and cultivate the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion in their future classrooms.

6. Conclusion and future classes

In response to the worldwide COVID-19 crisis, we initiated an attempt to develop online teacher training classes. The model is still being tested, and the observations reported here are by no means conclusive. However, we believe that the model can be more than a temporary adaptation and has potential for application to language teacher training programs in the future. The virtual communities built for nonnative and native student teachers can promote

learning autonomy, help shape teachers' beliefs, and ultimately train foreign language teachers with global perspectives. The computer-assisted teaching model also archives longitudinal data, which enables us to trace and analyze learners' progress over time and to uncover the complexity of student teacher development.

Despite the positive feedback regarding this new model, some obstacles and drawbacks of the model must be noted for future classes to consider.

First, different countries may use different desktop videoconferencing tools. Thus, international students may have to spend time adapting to new or less familiar platforms to complete group work. Students reported that unstable connections could sometimes be “a waste of time” and “interrupt our discussion”. One principle proposed for online synchronous L2 learning tasks is *practicality*, referring to “the fit between the task and the capability of the videoconferencing tool(s) to support task completion” (Wang, 2013, p. 593). Future classes may consider choosing one fixed videoconference platform with a relatively larger user base and providing a training session on how to use that platform before the group work begins.

Second, at the beginning of the course, we found that some international students were not as open as others to peer feedback, particularly critical feedback from Chinese students. To address this situation, the instructor wrote a letter to all students that addressed some points of giving and receiving feedback guided by the three key attitudes proposed for teacher reflection, namely, *open-mindedness*, *responsibility*, and *whole-heartedness* (Dewey, 1933). To feedback providers, the instructor wrote,

“[p]lease be honest as well as respectful so you can help your classmates improve their teaching without hurting your peers' feelings. Remember, you will also receive feedback from your classmates, so put yourself in others' shoes”.

To feedback receivers, the instructor wrote,

“[p]lease be open-minded because your classmates only mean to help you make progress, and your classmates’ perspectives are unique as they are both teachers and learners and can be more thorough than I can. Remember, you will receive feedback – probably more reserved – from your students in the future. An important quality of a good teacher is the ability to embrace different opinions”.

One cause of the situation could be that native and nonnative students may have different standards and perspectives regarding what is ‘good’ versus what is ‘poor’ performance. Future classes involving collaborations between native and nonnative student teachers should consider *learner fit*, which emphasizes the individual proficiency level and the way in which the interlocutor aligns with that level (Wang, 2013).

Finally, one component missing from the model is interactions between NNSs. Because nonnative students come from countries in different time zones, finding a mutually convenient time to meet online is not always feasible. However, interactions between nonnative learners are important in L2 acquisition. Research has found that different partnerships may influence students’ perceptions of the learning experience and even affect learning gains (Tocaimaza-Hatch & Santo, 2020). Partnerships among NNSs can reduce learners’ anxiety and provide them with more time to speak the target language (Brown, 2001). Our interviews also revealed that some international students felt nervous when interacting with two Chinese students simultaneously. Future classes may consider developing another form of group work involving students in matched partnerships.

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