19 University of Cambridge Modern and Medieval Languages: response to COVID-19

Silke Mentchen[1]

Abstract

This case study will describe and analyse how the experiences of online language teaching at the University of Cambridge gained during the first UK lockdown helped to inform planning for the next academic year. Emergency measures implemented for the third term of the academic year 2019/2020 were evaluated. A curriculum of blended teaching combining synchronous and asynchronous modes was developed and is being implemented now. Particular attention will be paid to modes of examining and teaching, the role of the teacher, and the use of technologies. It will become clear that inclusive and interactive teaching will continue and that some of the newly acquired skills may stay with us. However, other aspects of language teaching such as building a sense of a learner cohort have been found to be much more difficult to replicate online.

Keywords: COVID-19, online language teaching, blended teaching, asynchronous modes, German language, UK.

1. Cambridge University, Cambridge, United Kingdom; scm30@cam.ac.uk; https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2622-2715

1.   Introduction

In this chapter, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic at the University of Cambridge will be described and analysed. The intention is to consider two teaching terms, differentiating between the required reaction during an emergency and the typical measures taken for the first term of a new academic year. The focus will be on pedagogical approaches as well as on pragmatic, technical, and medical considerations. By examining the institution's decision-making process, the intention is to show that wide consultation, albeit time consuming, has resulted in inclusive and pedagogically successful teaching programmes.

2.   Context

Modern and Medieval Languages is one of two degrees offered by the Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages and Linguistics (MMLL)[2]. Languages offered as part of the degree course comprise: French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. Students must study two of these languages and are also able to study introductory courses in Catalan, Dutch, modern Greek, Polish, Portuguese, and Ukrainian as part of their degree. French is the only language currently not available for study at *ab initio* level. Modern languages offered by the faculty can be studied as part of joint degrees in combination with languages offered by other faculties. It is also possible to study a modern language from MMLL alongside history.

This case study will concentrate on undergraduate language teaching. Modern and Medieval Languages admits approximately 160 students each year and in 2019 there were roughly 70% female and 30% male students[3].

The full-time degree takes four years with the third year spent abroad. We teach in three eight-week terms.

- Term 1: October/December.

- Term 2: middle of January/middle of March.

- Term 3: end of April/middle of June. This third term is dedicated to revision and examinations, with only the first four weeks reserved for teaching. In effect, the degree comprises 20 weeks of teaching per year.

2.1.   Staff

It is somewhat difficult to identify precisely the number of staff employed by the faculty, as we draw on a pool of university tenured staff, college based staff, post docs, and part time staff.

2.2.   Technical support

The university has a university-wide Information Technology (IT) service[4]. MMLL does not employ IT specialists with expertise in language teaching.

At the end of March 2020, when the UK entered into a first lockdown, language teachers organised many peer-to-peer conversations, either on the phone or by email correspondence. There was a clear demand for guidance on how to make the various technologies work for the particular faculties' needs. Members of staff organised themselves in groups, using platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Docs to exchange ideas and work out common ground. The university's information services reached out to individuals involved in teaching, and the first of these consultative meetings took place at the beginning of April. Each faculty within the school nominated a representative for a working group on online teaching. Meetings started at the beginning of May and were a useful conduit for information.

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4. https://www.uis.cam.ac.uk/

3. Decision-making

Cambridge University comprises over 30 colleges. Colleges are responsible for admitting and housing students, organising small group teaching called 'supervisions', and looking after students' welfare. Decisions therefore must be made at various levels. The university's vice chancellor published messages[5], starting on March 13, informing staff and students of discussions and decisions concerning COVID-19. In addition, open consultations and various working groups were set up. The Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning[6] issued guidelines and consulted staff, and several 'clinics' were organised to help teachers with practical advice. Decisions made at the highest level included the transition of all lecturing to online mode and the introduction of a 'safety net' for final year examinations.

The senior management team consulted with students and staff, and the Language Teaching Officers as a group consulted and agreed on basic principles and approaches for teaching. Surveys were sent to part time staff as well as full-time lecturers.

Expectation management was deemed important at the beginning of lockdown. The term 'emergency remote teaching' to describe the faculty's approach was used. The situation changed rapidly, with new information, for example advice about face coverings emerging. Some decisions had to be made quickly: students on their year abroad who had to return home (on travel advice issued by the UK government) urgently needed information on study requirements. All oral examinations for first and second year students scheduled for April and May were cancelled. Other issues concerned the lockdown of facilities and access of staff to their offices and to the libraries.

5. https://www.cam.ac.uk/notices/news/an-update-from-the-vice-chancellor-on-the-coronavirus-outbreak

6. https://www.cctl.cam.ac.uk/

4. Teaching and examining

4.1. Teaching for the academic year 2020/2021

The third term differs from other terms in that its main purpose is revision. Lectures have concluded and students are taught in small group supervisions where they can concentrate on topics in preparation for exams. Correspondingly, language classes, which continue, focus on revision and consolidation. Mock exams and extensive written feedback to student's work are central. It is important to note that the faculty was faced with what was very much understood to be an emergency. Both students and staff were working from home. However, all students were familiar with the curriculum and knew their teachers and peers. This helped to maintain trust, co-operation, and an overall positive attitude.

For their third term, students did not return to the university campus. The main concern here was inclusivity: access to the internet, quality of broadband, suitability of equipment, and access to a quiet study space could not be assumed for all. For this reason, a blended programme was evolved, making use of recordings combined with Q&As. The Cambridge system of detailed and individual (written) feedback was used extensively. Teaching for a number of classes took place synchronously online. Student feedback to this approach was mixed. While some expressed anxiety about having to attend online live classes preferring instead to work at their own pace, soliciting help when needed, others found live classes much preferable to asynchronous provisions.

The university introduced a 'safety net' for all final year students: any student whose marks during the end of year examinations in 2020 were lower than their results in the previous year would be classed in that higher category[7].

After consulting with students, MMLL developed a plan for examinations. Some of the language examinations, which involved testing of correct application of grammar rules and vocabulary, would not provide meaningful results if conducted

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7. https://www.cam.ac.uk/coronavirus/students/archive/assessment-201920/assessment-principles-and-policies-easter-term-2020

online as open-book exams. However, in order to send a clear signal to students that they had made progress and should continue work on their language skills over the summer, progress tests were introduced at the beginning of the academic year 2020/2021. Results of these tests would not have any effect on the student's future career as a linguist; rather, they were meant to reassure students and certify that they had reached the appropriate level of proficiency.

For translation examinations, which were to go ahead, the format was changed so that candidates were permitted to use online resources (dictionaries, for example) but were advised not to use machine translation available from Google or DeepL. A task in which students had to choose a specified number of challenges per passage and explain, in English, how they solved the problem was introduced. This could include comments on style, vocabulary, and grammar. The intention here was to confirm that students had produced their own work.

Communication with students was maintained via the faculty's webpage and via email. An FAQ page was produced and a generic email address to deal with any questions concerning examinations was created. In total, MMLL administers over 200 different examinations. Student feedback on the whole was favourable.

Plans for the first term of the new academic year evolved. Given that most students would be back on campus, synchronous online teaching delivery and some face-to-face teaching were possible. The university decided that all lectures should be online. This would free up lecture halls to make face-to-face teaching in comparatively smaller groups possible. Language classes were included in the types of teaching for which face-to-face classes would be allowed. However, for MMLL language teaching, it was decided that online teaching would be preferable[8].

After discussions considering the effects of online teaching on the health of both students and staff, it was agreed that parity of the learning experience would be guaranteed by conducting most classes online. No one would be disadvantaged

8. For a comparison of online and on campus teaching see Salmon (2020).

should they not be able to attend. Reasons for non-attendance could be the need to shield, the requirement to self-isolate, not being able to return to Cambridge, or having tested positive for COVID. Of course, it would also be statistically likely that any number of the teaching staff would not be able to teach in person. Further uncertainties about childcare infrastructure, for example, only added to the concerns.

In this context, it may be interesting to note that the UK's government advisory body SAGE released a statement on the 3rd of September 2020 in which they recommended online teaching:

> "[a] clear principle from the hierarchy of risk control is that elimination (e.g. removing in-person activities) is the most effective approach to control transmission, followed by substitution (e.g. changing the activity to substantially reduce interaction). Alongside any adjustments to enable in-person provision, it is important that access to online learning is also considered, both in terms of accessibility of materials for different students and in their ability to engage effectively including whether they have appropriate equipment, working spaces and internet connections"[9].

At the time of writing this case study, the UK's Student Union and the UK's University and College Union have launched joint campaigns to move all teaching online[10].

The need to build a sense of community for continuing students and especially for freshers was recognised. Using platforms such as Padlet and OneNote (these are just two examples from a much longer list) to enable meaningful collaborations amongst students was discussed. This was crucial for students

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9. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/914978/S0728_Principles_for_Managing_SARS-CoV-2_Transmission_Associated_with_Higher_Education_.pdf.
Also see the minutes of a meeting of SAGE on the 21st of September in which the recommendation that "all university and college teaching to be online unless absolutely essential" is included in a "short-list of non-pharmaceutical interventions. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/925854/S0769_Summary_of_effectiveness_and_harms_of_NPIs.pdf

10. https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/11035/UCU-and-the-National-Union-Students-issue-joint-statement-calling-for-action-over-university-Covid-crisis

entering university life after a school year with many disruptions and without A-levels, normally a requirement for university entry[11]. Many students in Cambridge suffer from what is known as 'imposter syndrome'[12]. They feel inferior when comparing themselves to their peers. Doubting their own abilities can lead to low motivation. Frequent and positive feedback combined with an increased number of small tests or quizzes to consolidate attained knowledge (and confidence) can help[13].

The university's virtual learning environment is Moodle, and many language teachers had been exploring the use of interactive tasks using H5P[14] for example, or else have prior experience in creating interactive online exercises in collaboration with the university's language centre[15], which were all now integrated more fully into lesson plans[16].

It should be mentioned here that the librarians worked extremely hard to offer as much online access as possible. Also, Cambridge University Press, along with other publishers, made a good number of their publications available online[17].

All concerns discussed above have produced a teaching programme using a mix of synchronous and asynchronous teaching with some hybrid teaching as well.

4.2. Examinations for the academic year 2020/2021

At the time of writing we are assuming that some in-person examination will be possible. It is intended that language examinations testing textual comprehension and production, as well as correct application of grammatical

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11. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-cancellation-of-gcses-as-and-a-levels-in-2020/coronavirus-covid-19-cancellation-of-gcses-as-and-a-levels-in-2020

12. See https://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/GroupsAndWorkshops/copy_of_studentgroups/Impsyn

13. See a study at Harvard from Reuell (2013)

14. https://h5p.org/

15. For examples see: https://www.langcen.cam.ac.uk/opencourseware/opencourseware-index.html

16. Other tools used include, for example: Mentimeter, Kahoot, Flipgrid, and Quizlet

17. https://www.cambridge.org/core/

knowledge and vocabulary recall will be conducted in this way. Translation is tested in both directions at all levels of the Cambridge Modern and Medieval Languages degree. Translation examinations will be online and open-book and will be conducted using a modified format: students will need to supply a specified number of comments explaining their translation choices. This is therefore a substantial change to our practice. The final year language exam for which students have to analyse and react to a passage of 800 words will also remain a take-home examination. Allowing a high number of examinations to be open-book and online helped to make the examination process more inclusive. Students are allowed to type, they can take rest breaks, and can demonstrate their knowledge without having to rely on recall.

Since some of the cohort had not been able to spend enough time in their intended destination during their year abroad, it was decided to make the final year oral examinations optional. The exams were carried out online and worked well.

Statistics seem to indicate that the use of open-book examinations resulted in a change of gender statistics. It seems that female students performed better under these new conditions[18].

The school paid for Zoom licences for teachers and also used Microsoft Teams, incorporating H5P and Panopto.

The role of the teacher has to adapt even more to that of becoming a curator of resources, a facilitator, and the one who puts in place a clear structure with clearly signposted learning goals[19]. Students need to learn how to become even more independent and self-reliant. New learning outcomes will almost automatically include the use of different technologies, online tools, and software.

Language classes vary greatly in delivery format, while some entail five hours a week of contact time, others only take place fortnightly. Much thought is

18. Statistics for this are not available at present.

19. For a discussion of using scaffolding in online teaching see McLoughlin and Marshall (2000).

going into using the flipped classroom approach[20] and exporting activities like watching videos, reading texts, or translating out of the classroom. All courses have clear plans for the whole term so that students can work ahead or catch up. Most resources are digital (some exceptions include languages with non-Latin alphabets where the use of handwriting and hard copies of texts are deemed essential) and students hand in work and receive feedback online.

4.3.   Student and teacher feedback

Consulting students was key. Communication (in both directions) seemed absolutely crucial to making this new teaching model work. Cambridge is particularly well prepared for such, as each student is assigned a director of studies (for academic issues) and a tutor (for pastoral questions). The intent is that early warning signs of students falling behind or disengaging be spotted quickly.

Many teachers have expressed enthusiasm for the development of new learning materials. As a team, we have learnt to rely on each other's expertise. For example, a quick call on Microsoft Teams using screen share has helped to solve many technology problems. Meetings have had to become more frequent out of necessity, and although this increase has created more time pressure, many have found this conducive to team spirit. However, we are also concerned about long working hours and occupational health issues. Additionally, difficult family situations, and the fact that many of us have family abroad, has meant an increase in anxiety and stress.

5.   Discussion

There was (and still *is*) very little, if any, face-to-face teaching. It is not possible to use team work or working in pairs because of safety distancing rules. Furthermore, the sharing of documents is not allowed. The wearing of facial

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20. See Von Lindeiner-Stráský, Stickler, and Winchester's (2020) flipping German project

coverings (even if a distance of two metres or more can be maintained) was recommended by the university in October 2020. This measure makes language teaching very difficult.

5.1.   Asynchronous online teaching

The use of pre-recordings is employed for lectures. Dividing one 50-minute lecture into 'chunks' works best. It is both easier to record these lectures and to watch them. For language teaching, asynchronous tools are used for four main purposes.

- Delivery of administrative information about the course can be presented in a video: for example how to navigate the VLE, where to find resources, and how to plan and organise work and homework. Depending on the language level, these are either recorded in English or in the target language.

- A 50-minute session can be divided into two sections: a 15-20-minute recorded session introducing a topic (grammar, topic for discussion, vocabulary, etc.) followed by a 30-35-minute live session online in which the topics are discussed.

- There are many interactive tools available to stimulate work outside the classroom: Quizlet and Phase 8, for example, can be used to make vocabulary acquisition more collective and manageable.

- What is normally referred to as 'homework', i.e. extending the lesson and delegating further work on a particular subject to the individual learner, should also be seen as asynchronous learning.

5.2.   Synchronous online teaching

Synchronous online teaching is used for most classes. A wide variety of tools is used to aid interaction during a class session. For example,

- using the chat function to try out new vocabulary, answer questions, and identify grammatical structures, etc;

- Google Docs/OneNote/OU blogs or Open Forum within Moodle: these can be used to allow students to work collaboratively on a single document. This method works well in translation classes, for example. Several groups can work in breakout rooms on parts of a passage at the same time; and

- polling/quizzes: a variety of tools are available to enliven teaching and to engage students. The main ones used are the polling function on Zoom, Kahoot, and Mentimeter.

The principal objectives of a class have not changed substantially, but its main functions of helping learners to use resources, allowing various speeds for learning processes, providing feedback and consolidating knowledge have been amplified by the new learning environment. What is missing is the interaction between people in a physical room: reading body language, sitting next to someone, meeting friends. However, a few measures can be used to replicate parts of this experience. For example, a Zoom link can be made available to students before the teacher enters the meeting. Students may use this time to chat about their lives outside the classroom. Also, tools like Padlet, Miro, and Flipgrid, for example, can be employed to encourage learners to use the target language to say something about themselves – places they would like to visit, music they enjoy, films they can recommend, and articles they have found interesting. All this can help to build a sense of community. If integrated into the teaching programme, with clearly defined tasks, these tools serve as useful additions to the learning experience and its success.

Different learner levels require different online teaching approaches. It is more straightforward to engage a class of final year students in a discussion about migration in Germany, for example, than to make sure every student in a class of beginners has understood a particular text. This has always been the case, of course, but this difference in pedagogical approach has been highlighted during

online teaching. For the teaching at beginners' level it is even more crucial to be able to give frequent and extensive individual feedback.

Teachers are also fully aware that all skills need to be addressed. Switching between utilising audio, video, and text as teaching resources **as well as** media for homework and contributions is absolutely vital. In fact, in some ways, this approach is more natural in the new learning environment.

6.   Looking ahead and conclusion

The university is developing policies on recording of teaching. For language teaching, the faculty has argued successfully that classes should not be recorded as this has proven to be inhibiting to some students. We are also discussing how long any such recordings should be kept. Should they expire after a term or should it be possible to 'binge watch' an entire series of lectures in the days before the examinations?

Which of the online options should be retained in a post-Covid world? For modern languages in the UK, the new online platforms will be used to continue work on outreach and widening participation.

Online language teaching can work well provided that all involved feel confident. This is not the case during a pandemic. Concerns about mental health and health generally overshadow much of the experience of being a student. However, first anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that most teachers and students have been pleasantly surprised by how well many classroom activities can be exported into the online teaching format. Subject-specific reasons why language teaching does not lend itself well to face-to-face teaching in the current situation have led to a mix of synchronous and asynchronous teaching. This measure has offered many opportunities to develop inclusive and interactive learning. Some of these adaptations will survive beyond the pandemic mode: the migration of introductions of topics to video recordings, using online marking, and conducting meetings online. Some of the skills developed by both teachers and students will

remain (adaptive use of technology, use of digital resources). This may be the silver lining we all need to find. However, it also seems clear that interpersonal exchanges, the development of a sense of a learning community, and an identity as a learner as part of a cohort are much more difficult to replicate. Equally, concerns about workload and the feeling of loneliness and isolation are much harder to tackle.

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