

Advantages and Disadvantages of Online German Language Instruction

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Abstract

The shift from teaching face to face university language classes to remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic presented an assortment of difficult challenges to most educators and students around the world. Students and instructors were suddenly called upon to adjust to this new medium of instruction without any or very limited formal training and experience. In this brief reflection paper, I present the advantages and disadvantages I encountered in my year of remote teaching to students in a beginner-level German language course at a Japanese university and conclude with why I prefer face to face (f2f) instruction over that of remote teaching.

Class Background

My online class was composed of 26 students all of whom were complete novice German language learners from various departments of the university. The majority of the students were first year students, with several third-year students and two fourth-year students. There were no third-year students enrolled in the class.

I instructed students via Zoom in every lesson. I also used Google Classroom, an online learning platform, through which I managed, organized, and distributed class materials and weekly assignments to my students.

I conducted the class mostly in German but occasionally switched to English or Japanese whenever I thought it was advantageous to do so, although I always explained everything in German first. I estimate that 80%~90% of my instruction was in the target language. The class met only once a week for 90 minutes so every minute was valuable. I administered a final exam at the end of each semester via Google Forms.

In designing and carrying out my online class, I attempted to replicate the f2f course that I had taught before the pandemic as much as possible. The language goal, textbook (CEFR A1

level by the end of the year) and lesson materials remained the same, although the materials were in a digital format. My university's designated bookstore provided my students with the assigned course textbook so they had ready access to the physical textbook.

Technical Background and Devices

Like many of my fellow language instructors, I approached the whole notion of remote instruction with much apprehension. After many years of teaching I consider myself to be a competent instructor, but I have always regarded the implementation and advancement of technology in foreign language courses as unnecessary to my particular teaching needs. In the past five years, I have noticed that foreign language instruction was heading in a technical oriented direction, but I never envisioned myself becoming a part of this new wave.

To say that I lacked confidence before the start of my first online lesson would be a great understatement. I realized I needed guidance with online instruction and turned to knowledgeable friends and a community of second-language educators in online groups who had dedicated themselves to remote teaching. It was only with their help and guidance that I was able to understand how to better prepare myself for virtual teaching. I am extremely grateful for the time they spent answering my many questions, which I now realize were very basic to them. We also engaged in many Zoom sessions up to the point where I became comfortable with using it in an online class.

As for equipment, I already had a Mac laptop and two large computer monitors. For teaching remote, I purchased a handy camera and a webcam. I was not satisfied with the quality of my Mac's built in camera and thought it better to use a high-quality handy camera on a tripod. I intended to use the webcam in order to show a different view of myself, sometimes standing up. I also acquired an ATEM Mini production switcher which allowed me to switch from one camera to the next with the simple click of a button.

Advantages

In spite of the superb guidance and practice sessions I had received, I still encountered glitches when I began my online classes but these were of my own doing such as accidentally dropping the audio when moving to another screen, forgetting to turn my speaker on at the outset, or sending chats to one student rather than to the whole class. With the help of a

checklist and after a week's experience of teaching online almost every day, I was soon able to overcome my shaky start and was pleasantly surprised to see some of the advantages that teaching online provided.

Time Efficiency

Sometimes it's the little things that make a difference and this was also the case with my online lessons, but in ways that I had not anticipated. I no longer had to write on the whiteboard as I did in my f2f classes--instead I provided my online students with files that I could show them in Google Classroom and explain to them via Zoom. I realized that students in my f2f lessons spent too much class time copying my whiteboard notes into their notebooks during my instruction. It was no wonder their comprehension suffered! In my online lessons, however, students actually listened to my explanations, because they knew I would pose questions to them on Zoom. Another small but important point was that online teaching freed me from having to physically distribute papers to students. Whenever students had forgotten their papers or had been absent in the preceding lesson, I typically had to rummage through my copies and distribute them. All of this took class time. It was not surprising then to realize that I was covering more content in my online lessons and had time for more in-depth instructions or was able to cover new content. By the end of each semester, I estimate I had covered 20% more course content than in any previous f2f course.

On Task

Another positive point that came up in my online teaching was that students appeared to be more serious and intent in carrying out and completing their lesson tasks than was the case with their f2f counterparts. They could not casually talk to their classmates on Zoom. They were on their own and the focus was not on their friends but on me. This heightened classroom intensity made it more conducive for actual learning to take place instead of having to deal with the inevitable cases of casual socialization in the classroom.

The chat function on Zoom was perhaps the biggest surprise that I encountered in remote teaching. I did not initially appreciate the positive impact it would have on my lessons, but I came to increasingly rely on it to write out (chat) my explanations and questions to my students while speaking. I wrote their answers to my questions as well and challenged them by increasing the complexity of my questions at each turn. The quality of their answers revealed that they could go beyond what was expected of them at the course target level. I can only attribute this to having given them the opportunity to read as well as speak and

listen to the interactions rather than just speak and listen. The chat function was far superior to writing on a whiteboard. I can type faster than I can write and with chat I was able to face my students while I wrote.

In addition to instructing German, I also teach English as a second language, which I also taught online during the pandemic. In teaching my English courses online, I discovered that I did not have to rely on the chat function as much as I did when teaching German simply because students were already familiar with English. Japanese students start their formal studies of the English language usually when they enter middle school and so university students possess some competency in the language by the time they enroll in university. As complete beginners, my German language students benefited from being able to both read and listen simultaneously as I chatted and spoke to them at great length.

Easy Access

As I prepared for remote teaching, it became quickly apparent that Zoom would serve my immediate online class discussion needs, but that it would be inadequate as a stand-alone learning management system. I needed something to fill the pedagogical gaps and after much consultation with other instructors, I decided on Google Classroom because it allowed my students to easily access class materials and homework assignments. These functions proved to be indispensable in my course throughout the year and brought much needed structure to my online class. Google Classroom enhanced my communication with students by enabling me to post general classroom announcements outside of class and give immediate feedback on assignments. It also provided me with the means to post links to YouTube videos about topics (i.e.- introductions, family, shopping, restaurants, etc.) that I covered in the class textbook and brought a degree of realism about German language, society and culture into the classroom.

Disadvantages

After reaching an acceptable level of competency with virtual instruction and seeing that there were certain advantages to this new medium, I ascertained evident disadvantages in my remote teaching system, too.

Instructor Centered

I pride myself on providing my students with course content that engages them in communication with their classmates as much as possible even at the complete beginner

level of language proficiency. I accomplished this relatively high degree of class interaction through the use of pair and group oral communication tasks that are fun and educational. It is always a joy to witness students using German in the classroom the way it is supposed to be used. Unfortunately, I did not observe this happening in my remote classroom. I was initially excited with Zoom's breakout room function and looked forward to having my online students engage in pair and group work in the same way that I had done with my f2f students. When I joined students in the breakout rooms however, I was dismayed to see that some of them were not carrying out the tasks as I had instructed them to do. There were no problems with comprehension in my sample checks. It appeared that some students were uncomfortable in communicating with each other through a virtual medium. I scaled back the use of breakout rooms after determining that students were not benefitting from it and chose to focus more on a class discussion format.

Lack of Active Participation

I also noticed a lack of active participation among my students in my Zoom sessions. When posing a question to my f2f students, I always counted on several of them to volunteer their answers. I attempted to do the same in my Zoom classes but without success as my requests for answers were usually met with uncomfortable periods of silence or long hesitation. I resorted to calling on students to answer my questions, which worked well but it made for a relatively sterile class atmosphere.

Limited Consultation

I always make it a point to take my time for students whenever they approach me before or after a lesson or when they visit my office to ask me questions. These short talks indicate that these students are motivated and take their German language learning seriously and also reveal to me how my instruction is comprehended by students. Sometimes their questions show that there is a need for me to provide additional clarification to the class as a whole, so I gladly welcome these talks. Of course, these meetings occurred with f2f students before the pandemic. Unfortunately, I had far fewer talks with my online students even though I often encouraged them to talk to me via Zoom if they needed clarification. I did receive some emails with questions from students, however.

Conclusion

Like instructors everywhere, I turned to remote instruction because it was a backup option to f2f instruction. I appreciate that we have this luxury of choice when I consider what if the pandemic had occurred ten or fifteen years ago when internet technology was less developed. I also note that the many advantages of remote teaching will forever impact the way I instruct my lessons in my teaching future. It has made me a more efficient and organized instructor and specifically made my German lessons more modern and relevant to my students. The major disadvantage of remote instruction, however, was the lack of social interaction inherent in it. Communication is not a solo act and cannot be underestimated. It is especially important in courses in which a foreign language is introduced to students for the first time. Student anxiety levels are typically higher because they are expected to communicate in a new foreign language and this has always been the case in my German classes. I want to be in the classroom to not only teach but also encourage and support my students and I can only do that in person.