Reimagining crisis teaching through autoethnography: a case of an online Japanese course

Introduction

The pandemic year of 2020 has drastically disrupted the global higher education sector, and many countries are still overshadowed by the second and third wave of COVID-19 variant outbreak. The United States, for instance, was one of the worst COVID-inflicted countries not long ago. The haphazard switch to remote teaching has challenged all the stakeholders in teaching and learning (Hodges et al., 2020). Under normalcy, online program developers and instructional designers in distance learning usually spend substantial time on piloting technology-enhanced pedagogy to ensure the effectiveness of online course delivery (Gacs et al., 2020). For example, they capitalize on multimodality (text, image, audio, video) to enhance students' online learning engagement (Author X, 2020c; Yamagata-Lynch, 2014), or synergize both asynchronous and synchronous modes to build a virtual community of practice (Watts, 2016; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). As assessment plays an integral part in any language course, they consider streamlining oral assessment to lower students' test anxiety (Author X, 2020d, 2020e; Laborda & Robles, 2017) and utilising performance-driven assessment to optimise students' online learning experience (Author X & Y, 2017; Blake, 2015).

However, the luxury of trialling and incorporating these well-intentioned approaches in an online course is deprived in the context of emergency remote teaching (ERT) (Hodges et al., 2020). Studies conducted amid the global pandemic have identified unforeseen issues confronting language educators, particularly novice online teachers. One major hurdle, for example, is the lack of preparedness and teacher training for remote teaching due to the predominant reliance on the face-to-face (F2F) delivery before COVID-19, exacerbated by low digital literacy even in a developed country like Japan (Allen, in press). Inevitably, developing countries such as Columbia and the Philippines are hit even harder by poor IT infrastructure and internet access, limited facilities and devices, let alone remote regions that only aggravate ERT (Corrales & Paba, in press; Salayo, in press). The dilemma of whether a camera and microphone should be activated during rea-time videoconferencing (Castelli & Sarvary, 2020), and how to deal with online privacy, academic integrity and adjustment of online assessment format is also reported in ERT studies (Morales et al., in press; Pál & Koris, in press). The last straw is stress and anxiety triggered by ERT, which resultantly afflict teachers' wellbeing and mental health, and students' social-emotional learning (McAlinden & Dobinson, in press).

Guided by autoethnography, this timely report touches upon related ERT issues, pinpointing the challenges, coping strategies and lessons learned through the lens of a Japanese program coordinator. The evidence-based findings will add to the body of knowledge in ERT research, and resilient innovations drawn from this case study will be of interest to world language teacher practitioners.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography has gained increasing recognition as a qualitative research methodology in the fields of social science, education, and applied linguistics. Autoethnography can be defined as "a research method that uses personal experience ('auto') to describe and interpret ('graphy') cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices ('ethno')" (Adams et al., 2017, p. 1). Through critical reflections of one's own life experiences, autoethnographers are able to reveal intricate dimensions in life events, such as struggles and anxieties, that were closely connected to and impacted by the cultural and sociopolitical factors (Ellis et al. 2011). Woven from dynamic data sources (e.g., journals, artifacts, pictures, interviews), a compelling story can be told to help readers grasp a fuller picture of not only what is going on in the autoethnographer's life, but how it plays out in a broader sociocultural milieu (Adams et al., 2017; Ellis et al., 2011). Given the impact of crisis teaching, language teachers have started to 'tell their own stories' about how COVID-19 transformed the way they teach and pushed them to create resilient pedagogy to tackle issues arising from ERT (Morales et al., in press), ranging from preempting academic misconduct in online assessment to respecting student privacy in real-time sessions (Allen, in press; Pál & Koris, in press) and grappling with teacher emotions and social-emotional learning (McAlinden & Dobinson, in press). Following the autoethnographic suit, we are restorying the ERT experience of a Japanese language program coordinator amid the pandemic year 2020.

The Teaching Context

X University is a public research institution located in the Northeastern United States. Traditionally, its Japanese program offers elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels of Japanese courses on campus. Each section is taught by a native-Japanese-speaking instructor who is assisted by one undergraduate teaching assistant (TA). All Japanese courses are designed around the five Cs (communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, communities), following the *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (ACTFL, n.d.). The beginning Japanese courses adopt a course pack that includes elements of authentic dialogues and texts, problem-solving, task-supported activities, and lesson-related explanations and vocabulary/character lists. After each semester, vocabulary words, dialogue scenarios, communicative tasks and cultural notes are updated to reflect students' interests and recent trends of the socio-cultural norms of Japan.

In 2015, the Japanese program piloted its first fully online delivery in an intensive summer Japanese course for beginners (JPN111). Since then the program has been offering JPN 111 online each summer. However, when social distancing and border lockdown started to paralyse the "F2F delivery mode," both students and instructors were forced into ERT regardless of their preparedness. Hence, ERT is a crisis by-

product to temporarily shift a F2F course to the fully online mode without rendering the teacher or course designer sufficient planning time to develop a robust online course (Whittle et al., 2020).

Reason for the Innovation

Indeed, translating well-intentioned principles into remote teaching, supported by pedagogically-sound technology, does not happen in a vacuum. It takes time to develop a robust online language course that requires continued evaluations and adjustments (Author X & Y, 2019), as opposed to an overnight shift in ERT (Crawford et al., 2020). The lack of solid understanding and foundation in online teaching has inevitably resulted in the stakeholders' sense of resistance and anxiety (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; McAlinden & Dobinson, in press). What can we learn from the ERT experience to better combat a crisis like COVID-19 in the future?

To address these burning questions, we report on the ERT trajectory of one of the authors[1], who is both the instructor and coordinator of Japanese language courses at X University. Gleaning from her journal reflections on ERT, course evaluations, student assessment outcomes, and communication records documented in Blackboard throughout the pandemic, we pinpoint key issues related to crisis teaching. Specifically, we explore and document the strengths and weaknesses of synchronous and asynchronous delivery modes, with special attention paid to content delivery, interactive tasks, online assessments, and stakeholder perspectives. These findings may implicate the primacy of evaluating the technological and pedagogical aspects of multimodal delivery in online curriculum design in order to maximize the effectiveness of remote teaching and learning.

Description of the Innovation

Online mentoring support
The first day of the spring semester seemed alarming to Akari. The COVID-19 transmission rate grew dramatically in New York State within a month, and all campus events and lectures were cancelled in early March to comply with the mandated ERT policies. Some students were already quarantined in the first two weeks. Although some instructors at the university opposed online teaching, they accepted the fact that it was the time to be adaptable given remote teaching as the only option to bypass social distancing.

Since Akari designed and taught the first online summer intensive Japanese course in 2015, two of her colleagues also followed suit. They were more prepared for ERT compared with the other Japanese instructors who had never taught a fully online

---

[1] A pseudonym was used for the sake of blind review and confidentiality.

course. As the Japanese course coordinator, Akari created a Google Docs to identify and discuss ERT-related issues concerning six instructors' decision-making, such as viable delivery mode and assessments. Akari guided her TA remotely throughout the whole process. Figure 1 illustrates Akari's email to her TA that captured the screenshot of Google Docs, advising how to make suggestions more clearly to students:

Figure 1
Screenshot of Akari mentoring a TA documented in both email and Google Docs

To illustrate, Akari suggested to the TA that she accentuate both the TA and the instructor's feedback on student errors via color highlighting (in blue or yellow) and font color change (in blue or pink). Consequently, each student received two layers of constructive feedback on their writing assignments. Not only did this online mentoring address TAs' concerns with ongoing guidance in a timely manner, but the salient feedback received from the TAs further improved student writing quality.

Selecting a suitable videoconferencing platform
Akari's institution endorses and adopts Open SUNY Course Quality Review (OSCQR) Rubric (https://oscqr.suny.edu) to guide its online courses. OSCQR-

standard #42 states that "Course offers opportunities for learner to learner interaction and constructive collaboration". Based on this standard, Akari decided to choose a videoconferencing platform that was suitable for facilitating teacher-student and student-student interactions and constructive collaboration. While the university had recommended Adobe Connect (fully integrated in Blackboard), its functions were quite cumbersome and not intuitive to her, let alone her less tech-savvy colleagues. She opted for Google Meet, which was more user-friendly and already licenced for campus-wide use for education through the university's authentication. However, the image/sound quality was less satisfactory and only adequate for "small" group conversation practices, but not sufficient enough to accommodate over 30 students in a real-time virtual class. Given the popularity of Zoom worldwide and its educational merit during the ERT, the university also procured a Zoom license. Akari and her colleagues started to experiment with Zoom and considered its sound/image quality and multiple functions viable for foreign language teaching. For example, audiovisual and image quality in Zoom was generally satisfactory regardless of the number of participants; breakout rooms are essential for small group activities; polling is useful for conducting a quiz, facilitating discussion, and taking attendance; videorecording and screen sharing are also user-friendly; gallery view brings almost everyone together (up to 25 participants in one screen under the licensing) and is useful for choral practice. Above all, Zoom requires less bandwidth than Google Meet, which increases the accessibility to the course for economically underprivileged students, especially when the university has no policy on how students should access the internet off campus, except for providing information about free hotspots and low-cost internet service providers. Accordingly, they decided to host synchronous Japanese classes via Zoom.

Just when Akari and her teaching team were ready to roll out ERT, the university administrators alerted all faculty to "Zoombombing." Despite this discouraging news, they immediately recouped to tackle Zoombombing, such as only authenticated users allowed, enabling the waiting room, and disabling early entry before the host (instructor). Videoconferencing is essential for online foreign language courses as non-verbal elements such as facial expressions and gestures (e.g., bowing and nodding) are extremely important for successful communication, especially in the Japanese culture (Author X & Y, 2017, 2019). Some students did not show their faces during Zoom sessions due to no camera installed in their devices. However, Akari and other Japanese instructors still considered it vital to activate the camera so that students could fully participate in real-time Zoom sessions while building a virtual community (Author X, 2020a, 2020b, Castelli & Sarvary, 2020). That said, some instructors from another department argued against requiring students to turn on the camera because socio-economically disadvantaged students might share the same room with their younger siblings, thus jeopardising their privacy (Morales et al., in press). Such issues could be resolved by using Zoom's virtual background or simply having the camera face the wall. In case of foreign language instruction that involves communicative activities, the value of showing faces to create a sense of

tele/copresence is conducive for positive online learning experience (Author X & Y, 2017).
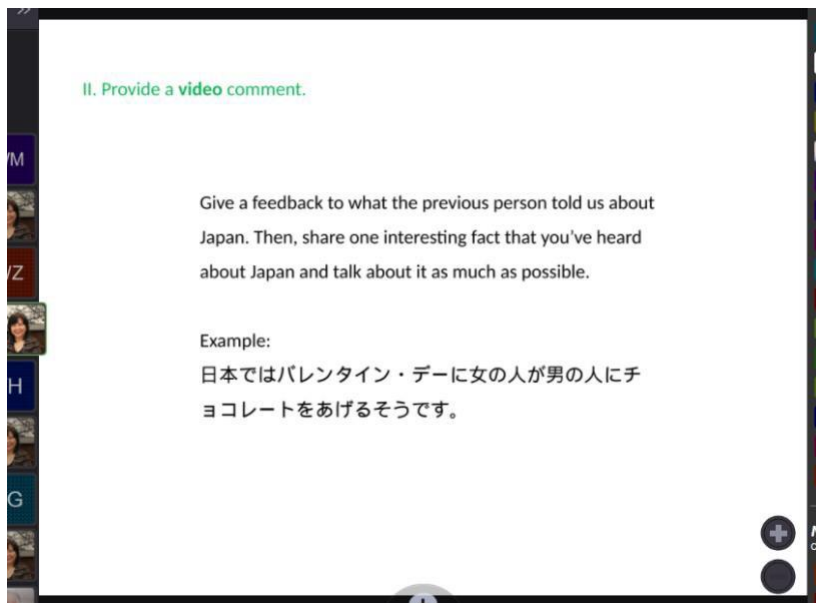
Synchronous vs. asynchronous mode
Faculty were also required to revise course syllabi and choose the mode of instruction: synchronous, asynchronous, or hybrid. Initially, a majority of instructors thought that conducting real-time sessions was more ideal than asynchronous ones. However, issues associated with the synchronous mode started to derail this well-intentioned plan. First, students located in different time zones might have to reverse their daytime/nighttime scheduling. Second, some students might have unstable internet connections or share the internet with other family members or housemates. Some students might not even have a laptop or a built-in camera.

When such adverse situations imposed on the students were considered, the asynchronous mode became a better option as also reported in ERT literature (Morales et al., in press). To illustrate, Akari and her colleagues had already used VoiceThread (VT), a multimodal platform, for both their summer intensive online and F2F Japanese courses. In order to provide equal support for students who could not attend classes, Akari used VT's video commenting feature to prepare voice-over slides to go over the dialog and word usage. Also, VT was used for rote learning and students were required to listen to a short passage recorded by a native speaker, read it aloud, and record it using VT's audio commenting. Some students practiced 50 times before sharing their recording just because they wanted to polish their speaking before their peers would hear them.

ERT also "pushed" Akari to utilise VT more creatively. Previously, she only presented a task and asked each student to perform it by leaving a video comment, followed by her video-recorded feedback. During ERT, she made VT tasks more interactive (see Figure 2), by asking students to give feedback in Japanese to what the previous student said in his/her video.

Figure 2
Screenshot of a VoiceThread Task

II. Provide a **video** comment.

Give a feedback to what the previous person told us about Japan. Then, share one interesting fact that you've heard about Japan and talk about it as much as possible.

Example:
日本ではバレンタイン・デーに女の人が男の人にチョコレートをあげるそうです。

This offered students the chance to interact with peers through VT, a step further in revamping her VT task design triggered by crisis teaching. It made Akari critically reflect on her own teaching practices: Language instructors should not be confined in one way of teaching but take any teachable moment to grow and upskill their professional repertoires (Pelaez-Morales, 2020).

Another creative use of VT was to present the solutions for problems using VT features. For student self-practice, instructors initially thought about sharing the answer key with the students who couldn't participate in synchronous Zoom sessions. However, once the answer key was distributed, it could be circulated among students in the following semesters. To mitigate this constraint, Akari numbered each question sequentially (in green) and asked each student to use text commenting to provide solutions in a sequential order. She left a text comment only if there was a mistake or misunderstanding (Figure 3). This way, sample solutions could be easily viewed by students on VT, but difficult to download and send to the others in future iterations.

Figure 3
Screenshot of a Problem-solving Task in VoiceThread

Reflection

Zoom in or Zoom out?
Because Akari had been worried about their mental health and wellbeing since the lockdown, she was overwhelmed but relieved to finally see and hear her students through Zoom. To Akari, teaching in Zoom was similar to teaching a F2F class, or even better. For example, she found it hard to see students sitting in the back or behind another student in a large classroom. A few Asian students were also wearing face masks in the F2F class, making it difficult to gauge their thoughts and feelings without seeing their facial expressions. On the contrary, no one was hiding in the back or behind someone else in the Zoom gallery view or needed to wear a face mask virtually. Counterintuitively, Zoom brought them closer and transcended social distancing amid COVID-19.

Online assessment vis-a-vis academic integrity
During ERT, Akari also created her first e-test for the online course on Blackboard. Although she did not find Blackboard's e-test functions user-friendly, she decided to utilise the multiple-choice option to allow for auto-grading and flexibility of accommodating student varied needs. She also set up a test pool to randomize question items, which also inspired other Japanese instructors to follow the e-test suit. However, one of them noticed some peculiarity in her students' test results. The top-performing student, who was always achieving higher scores (above 90), received an average score (70) for the first time. What perplexed her was that the most struggling student, who was previously on the verge of failing, received a full mark (100).

The suspected "online cheating" was immediately flagged to all the Japanese instructors. To preempt it, they decided to ask students to turn on the camera via Zoom in the next e-test. Nevertheless, Akari noticed that some students appeared to be peeking at notes on the same screen or placed in a dead spot off the camera. The instructor's inability of physically confirming academic dishonesty fueled the number of incidents evidenced in skeptical eye movements. Unfortunately, online cheating not only forestalled well-intentioned e-tests, but also caused unfairness that disadvantaged honest students (Morales et al., in press; Pál & Koris, in press). Accordingly, Akari decided to administer a one-on-one oral test for the final exam albeit more time-consuming. In fact, this oral test was similar to ACTFL's Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) (Author X & Y, 2017), the same format adopted in her first online summer Japanese course.

Virtual community building vs. Zoom ghosting
In online teaching, building a virtual community to minimize the sense of isolation has been embraced by educators (Author X, 2020a, 2020b). In a state of social-emotional isolation triggered by COVID-19, this principle even resonates with language teachers. Realizing the primacy of enhancing the sense of tele/copresence in remote teaching, Akari and her teaching team encouraged students to turn on their camera and microphone in order to participate in Zoom-enabled activities (Allen, in press; Castelli & Sarvary, 2020). However, some faculty criticized this as a move to disadvantage socio-economically underprivileged students. This became a double-edged sword in ERT. That is, some students turned off their camera once attendance or a quiz was taken, and appeared "Zoom ghosting" when called upon by the instructors in communicative activities. Some simply skipped all synchronous sessions by taking full advantage of the pass/non-pass grading option during ERT. An increased number of academic dishonesty cases were also detected, thus hampering the credibility of college credits. Additionally, technical issues such as unstable internet connection and/or platforms also overshadowed their online courses during ERT (Morales et al., in press).

Adaptability, accommodation and empathy
Despite all that, language instructors could still turn those negative situations into positive ones by being more flexible, understanding and empathetic about their students facing pandemic-related difficulties. It is also the time to revamp online assessments with innovation and adaptability, rather than simply lowering the standards. Both summative and formative assessment could still be put in place and streamlined in order to facilitate grading and student demonstration of learning outcomes in performance-driven assessments such as OPI communicative tasks (Allen, in press; Author, 2020d, 2020e; Morales et al., in press). Despite a crisis byproduct, ERT "pushed" these Japanese instructors further to redesign their F2F assessments so that they were more compatible with online delivery, more

streamlined for grading, and more geared towards ACTFL's 5C standards (ACTFL, n.d.).

Multimodal delivery
Also evidenced in the ERT trajectories of Akari and her teaching team, synergising both synchronous (Zoom) and asynchronous (VT) modes optimised online learning outcomes and experiences. To illustrate, students who missed the Zoom class could still watch the recorded session. VT as a multimodal tool (i.e., text, audio, video, and scribing) enables students to hear their peers' audio-recorded speech while seeing their faces via video-commenting. This adds a sense of telepresence and togetherness among students. VT also allows online students to listen/view their own performance and at their own learning pace, which is aligned with the ethos of distance learning. A case in point is that one of Akari's students made impressive headway as a beginner. She commented that VT motivated her to perform better (e.g., practicing speaking numerous times before uploading her oral recording) since her peers would watch and listen to her presentation. This implicates the "positive peer pressure" in a virtual community of practice supported by multimodality (Author X, 2020a, 2020b).

Student perspectives
Equally important is how students reacted to their first remote learning experience in Japanese amid the pandemic. As shown in the course evaluation survey results (Figure 4), all the student respondents agreed (or strongly agreed) that Akari had demonstrated "flexibility" in accommodating student needs during this unprecedented time and that the "overall grade" that they would give to the course was above average (A or B). Despite the drastic shift to ERT, a majority of them (82%) felt more or less "comfortable" in the online learning environment amid the pandemic.

Figure 4
Selected survey results in Akari's end-of-course evaluation (Spring 2020)
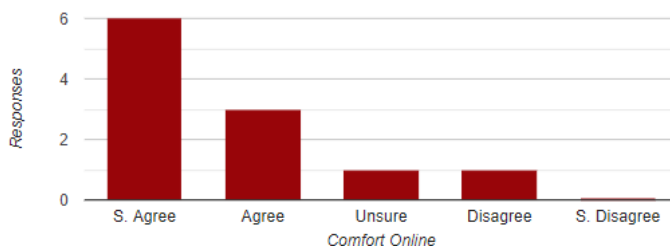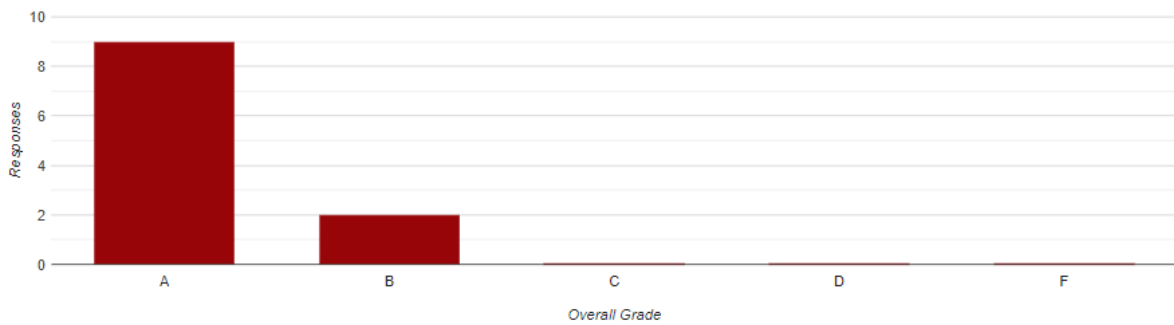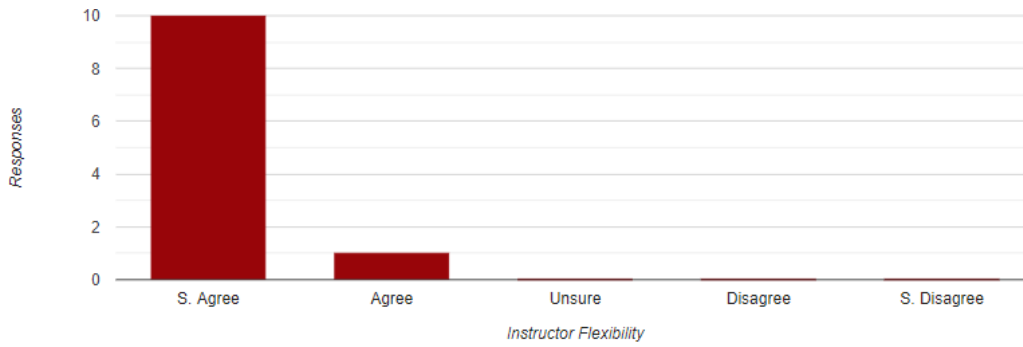
Nevertheless, students were also upfront about what did not work well in their ERT experience. One student complained about the drastic change of test format-- all questions previously required hand-written responses only, but they turned into multiple-choice items amid ERT. Some students still preferred F2F mode, though acknowledging Akari's dedication and organization skills in making the sudden transition to ERT go smoothly. This highlights the dilemma in streamlining online assessment by making tests less cumbersome, and ensuring the performance-driven, authentic assessment still put in place remotely (Allen, in press; Pál & Koris, in press). Akari's case is no exception.

Final remarks

As evidenced in this report, ERT was more "chaotic" than regular online teaching because of its adverse circumstances that disrupt online pedagogy, social-emotional learning and wellbeing of all the stakeholders (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Crawford et

al., 2020; McAlinden & Dobinson, in press; Whittle et al., 2020). Against all odds, ERT provided language educators with a pathway to not only continue language instruction remotely, but also take teacher professional development to the next level (Pelaez-Morales, 2020). More importantly, teacher resilience, empathy and innovation are the hallmarks of who we are as teaching professionals in spite of a crisis like this. Having the positive outlook, as in the case of Akari and her colleagues, has shone through their crisis teaching and will continue to flourish beyond ERT.

References

Adams, T. E., Ellis, C., Holman Jones, S. (2017). *Autoethnography.* In J. Matthes (Ed.), *The international encyclopedia of communication research methods*. John Wiley & Sons.

Allen, T. J. (in press). Infrastructure, literacy and communication: The challenges of emergency remote teaching in a university in Japan. In J. Chen (Ed.), *Emergency remote teaching and beyond: Voices from world language teachers and researchers*. Springer.

Author X (2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d, 2020e). [detail removed]

Author X & Y (2017, 2019). [detail removed]

ACTFL (n.d.). *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages.* https://www.actfl.org/resources/world-readiness-standards-learning-languages

Blake, R. (2015). The messy task of evaluating proficiency in online language courses. *Modern Language Journal*, 99, 394–397.

Bozkurt, A., & Sharma, R. C. (2020). Emergency remote teaching in a time of global crisis due to CoronaVirus pandemic. *Asian Journal of Distance Education 15*(1), i–vi. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3778083

Castelli, F. R., & Sarvary, M. A. (2020). Why students do not turn on their video camera during online classes and an equitable and inclusive plan to encourage them to do so. *Academic Practice in Ecology and Evolution, 11*(8), 3565-3576. https://doi.org/10.1002/ece3.7123

Corrales, K. A., & Paba, L. R. (in press). Transforming from off-liners to on-liners: Voices from foreign language professors in Colombia. In J. Chen (Ed.), *Emergency remote teaching and beyond: Voices from world language teachers and researchers*. Springer.

Crawford, J., Butler-Henderson, K., Rudolp, J., Malkawi, B., Glowatz, M., Burton, R., ...Lam, S. (2020). COVID-19: 20 countries' higher education intra-period digital pedagogy responses. *Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching, 3*(1), 9-28. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.37074/jalt.2020.3.1.7

Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: an overview. *Historical Social Research, 36*(4), 273-290.

Gacs, A., Goertler, S., & Spasova, S. (2020). Planned online language education versus crisis- prompted online language teaching: Lessons for the future. *Foreign Language Annals, 53*(2), 380–392. https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12460

Hodges, C., Moore, S., Lockee, B., Trust, T., & Bond, A. (2020, March 27). The difference between emergency remote teaching and online learning. *Educause Review.* https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning.

Laborda, G. J., & Robles, V. (2017). Are you afraid of taking an online foreign language test? [Online]. *New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences*, 7, 44–46.

McAlinden, M. & Dobinson, T. (in press). Teacher emotion in emergency online teaching: Ecstasies and agonies. In J. Chen (Ed.), *Emergency remote teaching and beyond: Voices from world language teachers and researchers*. Springer.

Morales, K., Romaguera, G., & Contreras, E. (in press). How to adapt in crisis: 3 auto-ethnographies of the (re)building of coursework in a Hispanic-serving institution. In J. Chen (Ed.), *Emergency remote teaching and beyond: Voices from world language teachers and researchers*. Springer.

Pál, A. & Koris, R. (in press). LSP teacher perspectives on alternative assessment practices at European universities amid the COVID-19 crisis and beyond. In J. Chen (Ed.), *Emergency remote teaching and beyond: Voices from world language teachers and researchers*. Springer.

Pelaez-Morales, C. (2020). Experiential learning in the COVID-19 Era: Challenges and opportunities for ESOL teacher educators. *Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education, 9*(1), 1-5. https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wte/vol9/iss1/12

Salayo, J. D. (in press). Online Instruction as a new learning territory for Filipinized critical language pedagogy: From the era of pandemic onward . In J. Chen (Ed.), *Emergency remote teaching and beyond: Voices from world language teachers and researchers*. Springer.

Watts, L. (2016). Synchronous and asynchronous communication in distance learning: A review of the literature. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, *17*(1), 23–32.

Wenger-Trayner, E., & Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015, April). Communities of practice: A brief introduction. *Communities of practice*. Retrieved from https://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice

Whittle, C., Tiwari, S., Yan, S., & Williams, J. (2020) Emergency remote teaching environment: a conceptual framework for responsive online teaching in crises. *Information and Learning Sciences 121*(5/6), 311-319. https://doi.org/10.1108/ILS-04-2020-0099

Yamagata-Lynch, L. C. (2014). Blending online asynchronous and synchronous learning. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, *15*(2), 189–212. doi: 10.19173/irrodl.v15i2.1778