



Teaching and Cultural Institutions (A Dialogue)

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ABSTRACT

Despite the radical and immediate changes that the pandemic imposed on teaching models, over time the general impression is that the trend in foreign cultural centres is to return to the same pedagogical models that were in place before 2020. However, beyond appearances, reality appears to be much more complex, and the experiences lived have undoubtedly altered our perspective on crucial aspects of our work, such as collaborative teacher training, student autonomy, widespread use of technology, or the possibility of advancing in distance language teaching. Understanding the new challenges that have arisen, addressing students' new needs, providing them with real blended learning opportunities, and doing so in a context that fosters the exchange of experiences among professionals from different foreign cultural centres in the United Kingdom are topics that lie at the heart of this dialogue.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:
Martinez Gila, Pablo, Xavier Lavry, Martha Papaspiliou, Andrea Pfeil and Catherine Xiang 2023 *Teaching and Cultural Institutions (A Dialogue)*. *Modern Languages Open*, 2023(1): 37 pp. 1–15.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.493>

One of the main functions of foreign cultural centres in the United Kingdom is the promotion of the language or languages of the countries and cultures they represent. Language classes, certification and teacher training are thus key activities in the work of these institutions, and most likely they were also the ones most affected by the pandemic between 2020 and 2022. The situation did not differ much from that of any other educational institution: a sudden transition to online classes, the urgent and on-the-go development of digital competence for students and teachers, and, ultimately, a new scenario in which, in the words of the Spanish researcher Fernando Trujillo, teaching ceases to be *performative* and becomes *connectivist*: the content, tasks, processes ... everything depends on the connection established through the network. In the case of cultural centres, moreover, this situation occurs in an educational context in which, in most cases (although there are exceptions), the students are adults who voluntarily choose to learn a language during hours that are compatible with their work activity.

From here, the participants in this dialogue set out to share ideas about the role of technology in the development of student autonomy, collaborative teacher training and, in general, to debate a possible paradigm shift in language teaching for adults.

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Dr Catherine Xiang is the Director of the Confucius Institute for Business London and the East Asian Languages Coordinator at the Language Centre of the London School of Economics. She is an executive member of the British Chinese Language Teaching Society and the author of various publications, including *Mastering Chinese for Complete Beginners of Mandarin*, which emphasises a communicative and cultural approach.

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Xavier Lavry has been the Director of the Alliance Française in Manchester and the coordinator of the Alliances Françaises in the United Kingdom since 2019. He has extensive experience in six different countries in executive management, including leading multicultural teams and implementing educational and cultural projects.

As for myself, Pablo Martínez Gila, I currently hold the position of Head of Studies at Instituto Cervantes in Manchester. I have worked at Instituto Cervantes in different countries since 1994 and have extensive experience in teaching Spanish, teacher training and material development. I have contributed to the creation of resources such as *Gente*, *Bitácora* and *Gramática Básica del Estudiante de Español*, among other books.

The specific circumstances of each foreign cultural centre (its formal status in the United Kingdom, its dependence on a central headquarters in the home country, the relationship with other centres in its network, etc.) are, as we will see, different. However, the reflections generated during the post-pandemic period have many similarities, and this dialogue is a good example of the fact that sharing thoughts and experiences is the best way to make progress in developing effective proposals for the future.

AUTONOMY AND DEPENDENCE OF FOREIGN CULTURAL CENTRES IN THE UK

Pablo Martínez

There are notable similarities and differences between foreign cultural centres, and we won't get into that here, but there is a common element that I think is important to highlight, which is that most of us work in institutions that depend on central offices, where academic, administrative and sometimes political decisions are made for centres in very diverse parts of the world, which

are far away (geographically, but not only in that sense) from these workplaces. I highlight this here to pose a question that can serve as an introduction to the rest of the questions: when the pandemic began, the centres had to take emergency measures to continue with courses, keep students, make sure that teachers did not lose their income, etc.

In your case, do you think that what happened then has affected in any way the balance in the relationship of the centres with their headquarters in the metropolis? Are we more autonomous now? Or, on the contrary, have new forms of collaboration and work been generated with your headquarters and with other centres in your network?

Xavier Lavry

I think the situation of the Alliance Française in Manchester is a little different from the other centres for two reasons. First, although our network shares a common name, mission and quality framework, each Alliance Française is in fact a locally registered charity that is under the responsibility of a Board of Trustees, who are all volunteers. We do not depend on a central office for our day-to-day activities. As long as we respect the basic rules of the functioning and philosophy of a charity as defined by our status – which have been approved by our headquarters, the Fondation des Alliances Françaises based in Paris – we benefit from a great deal of autonomy and independence in our general functioning, whether it be with regard to our administration, course offer or cultural programmes. On the other hand, our collaboration is not limited to our network alone, as we are also lucky to have a “sister network”, that of the Institut Français, which is the governmental body with which we share the mission of promoting the French language and Francophone cultures.

From this observation, I would say that the pandemic has not greatly affected the autonomy of our centre and has not profoundly changed the relationships we had with the other Alliances Françaises and Institut Français in the UK. We were already working closely together on joint projects, mostly locally, it is true. What working remotely and the associated communication tools have developed are opportunities for collaboration. For example, we benefit from more training courses or webinars organised online by the Institut Français in Paris. A platform has also been made available by the Fondation des Alliances Françaises, which allows us to have more direct access to all the members of our network around the world, and thus to increase the sharing of experiences and the possibilities for collaboration. For the UK network, we have also been able to develop online cultural conferences labelled “AF in the UK network”, we have developed the habit of meeting more often than before via alternating online and face-to-face meetings, etc.

Pablo Martínez

Thank you very much, Xavier. The relationship of the Cervantes Institutes with our headquarters in Madrid is somewhat different from what you mentioned about the Alliance Française; and, in addition to a certain autonomy that already existed before the pandemic for cultural programming, for example, we do try to have common academic lines among all the institutes in didactics, evaluation, teacher training models, etc. I am particularly interested in what you mentioned about the opportunities that have arisen from remote work, because I think that's what is shaping a new landscape, with positive elements and others that we still don't know what effects they might have in the future: on the one hand, more possibilities for exchanging didactic experiences and developing common projects among centres from different countries, it's true; but, on the other hand, some elements of uncertainty appear that force us to be more independent: each Cervantes Institute is autonomously solving in its programming the conflict created by the combination of face-to-face and online classes, or hybrid, for example. Due to the opportunities that connectivity opens up, the needs and demands of students are also changing, as well as their possibilities for accessing L2 information. However, these changes are not homogeneous; they vary from country to country, even among cities in the same country, and different answers have to be sought in each context. I don't know if you all share these same impressions.

Catherine Xiang

I don't think there has been much change in the balance of the relationship between CIBL (Confucius Institute for Business London) and the Chinese International Educational Foundation. CIBL has always been independent, with great autonomy in its activities and

management – echoing what Xavier says. In terms of safety measures and risk assessment, CIBL needs to follow LSE guidance and seek advice where relevant. CIBL had to lead and respond according to the local legal and health framework. What has been helpful is the support and COVID protection materials sent by Chinese counterparts, such as masks etc. This provided peace of mind to Chinese teachers.

In terms of teaching, again, CIBL has to decide on the best mode of delivery in line with LSE guidance. Challenges seemed to arise from the different perception of the seriousness of COVID. For example, when LSE decided to go back to campus, some Chinese colleagues found this difficult as they felt the restrictions and protection were not strict enough.

Xavier Lavry

I totally agree with you Pablo when you say “these changes are not homogeneous, they vary from country to country, even among cities in the same country, and different answers have to be sought in each context”. It is what we experience within our local network. Each of our centres have implemented their own solutions according to their resources (human, financial, premises, etc.) and according to the needs of their audiences (or what they understood to be their needs).

Andrea Pfeil

Even before the pandemic, the Goethe-Institut already offered elaborate online courses that allow learning independently with the guidance of a tutor, and with frequent live sessions in a group. Our online course offers varied widely around the world before the pandemic. When we needed to make the transition to online learning only, some institutes already had a lot of experience in teaching these courses. Teaching staff offered training, and info sessions and materials were shared worldwide to help with the switch to online courses. Colleagues around the world started to work even more closely together, at least in the early stages of the pandemic. The fact that our head office in Germany is providing online materials and our learning platform makes cooperation much easier. Nevertheless, there are many countries and institutes that provide language courses catering for local needs.

Pablo Martínez

It is interesting to note how the relationship between the language centres and the role of their headquarters, more or less active during the pandemic, has been different in each of our institutions. It is also revealing that we all highlight how the ties and possibilities for cooperation between different centres have been strengthened.

Martha Papaspiliou

Well, in terms of function, the case of the HC (Hellenic Centre) is quite different from the other cultural centres. The organisation of the HC shares similarities mostly with AF (Alliance Française) Manchester. The HC has been registered as a non-profit, non-governmental organisation with established working relationships since its very beginning, with three patrons, namely the Archbishop of Thyaeteira, the Ambassador of the Hellenic Republic and the High Commissioner for Cyprus. Similarly to AF Manchester, the HC is overseen by the trustees of the Hellenic Community Trust and its executive board made up of volunteers. In that sense, the HC enjoys great independence and autonomy in its functions, comparable to the independence and autonomy that governs the operations of AF, as described by Xavier.

However, unlike AF Manchester (and the other cultural centres), the HC does not have a headquarters in Athens or in any other city in Greece. It is a London-based cultural organisation that does not depend on a central office based elsewhere. The cultural events and the language courses organised by the HC are aligned with the three purposes of its function: to bring together the Hellenic diaspora and provide a “home” for the Hellenic community in London, to promote awareness of Hellenic culture in the UK, and to nurture a close relationship between Britain and the Hellenic world. The COVID pandemic did not affect or change drastically the way in which the HC functions. My trajectory of experience is more teaching-related and, in that context, the HC, when the pandemic began, retained its autonomy, while also adjusting to the changing circumstances that would permit it to continue to deliver its mission.

Pablo Martínez

I believe that in all of our institutions, the debate about face-to-face and virtual instruction persists: What do we offer virtually? What do we offer in person? If there is a hybrid model, which is more effective? I have the feeling, I don't know if it's shared with you, that what we've done during the pandemic has been primarily an attempt to replicate virtually the pedagogical characteristics of face-to-face instruction: face-to-face classes with a camera and using many online applications. Therefore, my question is, based on your experience, now and then, to what extent are we facing a true paradigm shift and, if so, what would be its main characteristics?

Xavier Lavry

I agree that what we did during the pandemic was mainly an attempt to replicate virtually in the emergency what we were doing face-to-face. As the situation went on, we adjusted the pace of the online courses a little (reduced synchronous teaching time, two shorter classes per week instead of one longer one), but nothing very fundamental.

At AF Manchester, we have not implemented a hybrid model such as HyFlex (where a class would be given by a teacher to onsite and remote learners at the same time), which has been tried in our network in some countries, sometimes with some success it seems. On the one hand, we were not convinced that it met a demand and/or that it was adapted to our learners and what they are looking for (cultural influence maybe?). On the other hand, the significant investment required to make it work satisfactorily for us and for the learners (costs in equipment but also in training) did not seem justified to us in this uncertain period.

With the "return to normality", now that restrictions have been lifted and the public is ready to resume face-to-face activities, what we are experiencing is a demand for face-to-face courses as we did before the pandemic. It seems that our learners, who are mostly adults seeking an intellectual leisure activity, and to a lesser extent professional skills development, are also seeking face-to-face social contact.

We continue to offer online courses because some of our audience appreciates this flexibility, but it is now a minority that seems to be gradually shrinking. With experience, we have adapted this online offer to make it more compatible with this mode of teaching (especially by significantly limiting the duration of this type of course, for example). So, I am still struggling to see whether there has been a real "paradigm shift".

Catherine Xiang

Our way of working has changed. First of all, we follow the practice of LSE, which is a hybrid model of working. Teaching activities are required to be in person on campus. Colleagues can work from home on other days in agreement with their line manager. These new ways of working have provided flexibility to most staff and were welcomed.

As CIBL works with companies and external clients, some of the activities also need to reflect the working practice of these organisations. For example, our in-company teaching at HSBC has remained online instead of reverting back to being at the bank in person.

I feel the change is here to stay. I do see a paradigm shift in our approach to teaching and working in general.

Xavier Lavry

Indeed, Catherine, our ways of working have changed a lot and I would say that it may be the most prominent paradigm shift we experience. With the hybrid model of working, a number of communications between colleagues and between members of staff and students are now predominantly done remotely: for example, initial assessment tests for new students are now fully done over the phone or through video call (whereas we were only doing them onsite in the past); and some colleagues do not see each other as often as before (so there is less informal conversation in the corridors, for example).

I believe the experience provided to the students and the overall work is of a similar quality. However, I am not sure we can yet truly see the impact of that shift.

Pablo Martínez

Some of my colleagues at the Cervantes Institute would argue that the paradigm shift is actually here. In fact, it had already started before the pandemic and what it has done is accelerate it: distance language learning was not something so new, right? In fact, it took very little time to make the change: the tools were already there at our disposal.

But my personal vision fluctuates between Catherine's and Xavier's: on the one hand, there is undoubtedly a new culture of flexible work that is reflected, as Xavier mentions, in the new ways of virtually interacting at work, but also in our teaching practice: online classes, hybrid models, platforms for sharing materials, etc. But, on the other hand, many adult students in cultural centres are demanding a return to classroom dynamics, to face-to-face social contact as a driving force for learning. Perhaps this is a logical and even necessary pendulum movement before stabilising at some point...

Andrea Pfeil

Digital media offers fantastic opportunities for second language acquisition. The Goethe-Institut has been working on concepts and ideas to improve language learning through digital media for many years. We have developed a learning environment that supports learning; for example, listening, reading and writing skills asynchronously but with the support of a tutor. The pandemic has accelerated the shift; however, we found a blended learning approach seems to work best in many countries. Learners individually or in a group prepare and revise their live sessions online and focus on speaking when they meet online or at the Goethe-Institut. However, this approach to learning not only requires teacher training, it also needs to take into account different learning cultures. Learning autonomously is often a skill that needs to be addressed as part of the course and be closely supported by a tutor.

Catherine Xiang

I think it is fair to say that there are mixed needs and desires from both teachers and students. Such preferences are also subject to the course type. This year is the first time we can offer study trips to China. The demand has been higher than ever. Students cherish the opportunity to return to China after the pandemic. There is no doubt that cultural immersion and exposure to the target language environment remain key in language and cultural learning and exchanges.

Martha Papaspiliou

I agree with the initial observation and the experiences that most of you had at the beginning of the pandemic. From the start of the first lockdown, the main objective was to create online classes to replicate virtually the pedagogical characteristics of face-to-face teaching and learning. At the HC, before the beginning of the pandemic, we did not offer the option for online classes: all classes and one-to-one lessons were taught exclusively face-to-face. In the limited time we had to shift from face-to-face to online classes, it is true that online applications and the presence of a camera were the only characteristics that set apart our usual face-to-face teaching from our new online teaching reality.

As the pandemic was unfolding around us, I observed, first-hand through the classes I was teaching, three main trends. First, there was an increased interest in learning Greek expressed by learners who were not based in London. Online classes were joined not only by learners who were previously students of face-to-face classes offered by the HC, but also by learners based in different cities in the UK and others who were living abroad (e.g., Belgium, Sweden, Spain and the US, among numerous other countries). The interest of the learners belonging to the two last categories remains strong today, which is one of the reasons that online classes are still offered as an option alongside face-to-face classes.

The second trend is, again, related to accessibility, and comprises learners who cannot leave their homes for a number of reasons (mainly because of health problems and caring responsibilities) in order to attend a face-to-face class. During the pandemic, I got a number of

students who had health issues themselves that limited their mobility and ability to commute or were caring for family members who depended exclusively on them. Still today, I have online students who prefer online classes because they give them access to a service that would have been otherwise inaccessible to them.

These two trends demonstrate in the most eloquent way that online classes make language learning accessible to learners who would have been deprived of the opportunity to learn Greek if online classes were not an option for them. Of course, this is a need that existed before the pandemic, but we became aware of it after the onset of the pandemic, which is the reason why the online teaching triggered by the pandemic constitutes a paradigm shift. In my understanding, accessibility to knowledge is a component of the democratisation of knowledge, and online classes play, undoubtedly, a great role in this process.

The third trend is quite different as it springs from a large group of learners who developed “screen fatigue” and favour face-to-face over online classes. Classroom dynamics and face-to-face social contact as a driving force for learning, as mentioned by Pablo and Xavier earlier, are definitely the main components that make these students prefer face-to-face classes. However, when these students miss a class or two because of illness or travel, they often ask whether they can join an online class instead. Blended and/or hybrid classes are not an option at the moment at the HC, but these requests certainly demonstrate that there is space and potential for these options. I agree with Andrea that teacher training is required for blended learning, and I believe that this might be a necessary step for us to take in the future in order to accommodate the diverse student needs that constantly shift between the virtual and the face-to-face worlds of learning.

NEW FORMS OF COLLABORATION AMONG TEACHERS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Pablo Martínez

After carefully reading the interventions of Andrea, Catherine and Martha, I have the impression that the future of language teaching in cultural centres, following the path opened up by the pandemic, will be mainly determined by the obligation to respond more than ever to the students' needs. The three trends highlighted by Martha (students who live far from teaching centres, students with reduced mobility, and students who, despite preferring in-person teaching, demand the possibility of taking classes remotely) lead us towards the implementation of hybrid models. It seems that the Goethe-Institut has made more progress in this direction. The Cervantes Institute is also starting to pilot hybrid courses, and colleagues from centres in Germany, Tokyo and Madrid have recently shared their experiences with the rest of us.

Andrea raised a very relevant aspect of this type of teaching, which is that it not only requires teacher training, but also needs to consider awareness of different learning cultures. I would add that raising this awareness should also be an integral part of teacher training. Moreover, I believe that it will be necessary to work towards making it a part of the teaching culture in our institutions.

The connection between teachers, and even between teaching teams from different centres, was crucial to achieving the necessary training in the transition from face-to-face classes to Zoom or Teams. Surely, we can all recall some collaborative training experience in this sense that was particularly significant during the pandemic. In fact, there are experts who claim that collaboration among teachers will become an important element in their professional development. Do you think this is the case? If so, what can we do?

Xavier Lavry

I think that communication and collaboration between colleagues in general, and therefore between teachers, has always been a primary factor in professional development, even before the pandemic. For example, within a centre, the “teachers' room” played an essential role in this area insofar as it was a place where teachers could meet and exchange informally views on their practices, their resources, etc. This manifested itself even more clearly with the pandemic when teachers were deprived of this space.

Similarly, at the AFM, but I imagine it was the same thing in your centres and networks, teachers' professional development also happened more formally through regular internal

pedagogical meetings and more occasionally through participation in onsite training organised by our network (but for a few and less frequently because it involved some costs).

With the pandemic, teachers have requested more opportunities for training and exchanges (maybe because they did not have the teachers' room any more?). And over time, we have actually seen that rather than traditional training where an expert deals with a theme, teachers were looking for exchanges between peers (a bit like what they did in the teachers' room, but the more obvious use of video conferences made it possible to expand this with colleagues from other centres).

All that is to say (sorry if I'm a bit long) that yes, I think that the links and moments of connection between teachers from different centres in the same network have become essential in professional development. In our network, we encourage this in a variety of ways. Looking more broadly, both the AFs Foundation and the Institut Français in Paris which coordinates those global networks, respectively, have made digital exchange platforms accessible to teachers, who therefore have the possibility of connecting with colleagues from all over the world. Webinars are also regularly offered. On a national level, our network organises regular online meetings for teachers from UK centres where they are invited to discuss in small and large groups topics they have chosen in advance. A last example, we are also developing joint educational projects (such as the creation of educational resources to be shared) which involve teachers from different centres who have to collaborate. This allows them to strengthen their skills and showcase their know-how. I'm interested to see what my colleagues come up with!

Andrea Pfeil

I agree with everything Xavier said; collaboration among teachers has always been the key to Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and the improvement of teaching quality. We offer very similar training opportunities as AFM to our teachers. Long before the pandemic, we had virtual teachers' rooms and even worldwide digital conferences for teachers.

One of our key principles in CPD is reflection on your own teaching and collaborative work on teaching skills. Our training programmes follow the action research approach, where teachers identify an area they want to focus on (e.g., more interaction in the classroom) and collaboratively develop ideas on how to change your teaching by, for example, introducing new methods. To promote this, I think it is important that teachers get support right from the start, learn to teach "with an open door" and let others in their classroom (virtually or in-person) get feedback. An open feedback culture is key to more collaboration among teachers.

Catherine Xiang

Collaboration among teachers is useful and important for staff development. As Xavier mentioned, this has been the case in general. We have regular staff development sessions, allowing colleagues to share their best teaching practice. Sometimes we invite guest speakers. At other times we invite teachers to develop a lesson plan for the same class, and then compare and contrast such practices. If we consider the above as a form of collaboration, I think it is helpful.

At CIBL, there are many one-to-one executive students. This makes collaboration among teachers difficult in terms of material sharing. What tends to work well is the teaching methodology and best practice.

In the past, we have had incidents of teachers using other teachers' slides without any modification or consideration of students' needs. This is an area which is still very controversial within the institute. Some teachers feel that they would like to see other teachers' materials as a way of course preparation. They even expect the institute to have standardised teaching materials or course PPTs ready. Whereas some colleagues feel this is not the best practice to encourage creativity and ownership of new teachers. I'd love to hear your thoughts on this.

Martha Papaspiliou

I agree with all the opinions expressed above: collaboration among teachers is of pivotal importance for staff development. At the HC, collaboration among teachers takes place both formally and informally. Formal internal meetings encourage teachers to discuss pedagogical

tools and teaching and/or learning methodologies, while also allowing them to exchange views, practices and resources on these matters. Occasionally, these meetings acquire a training character and involve a specialist (who sometimes can be one of the teachers) who presents a new method. Informal collaboration among teachers takes place in the context of the “teachers’ room” that Xavier mentioned in his comment. These informal meetings are more spontaneous and are triggered from emerging problems, ideas and/or questions that teachers might have before or after teaching a class or a one-to-one lesson.

In my experience, these informal collaboration opportunities between teachers are more dynamic compared to the formal development staff meetings, as Xavier also mentioned. A reason for this is that the spontaneity that characterises them creates a sense of openness among teachers that subsequently fosters feelings of peer support and mutual understanding. Sometimes these informal meetings can even result in organising a more formal meeting, when an idea needs to be communicated and discussed more broadly. In that sense, I also agree with Andrea’s view that “teaching with an open door” from the beginning is extremely beneficial for teachers’ development.

During the pandemic, the lack of in-person contact deprived teachers of the support, brainstorming and collaboration that the pre-pandemic “teachers’ room” provided. The online meetings organised during the pandemic were definitely helpful as they guided teachers through the shift from face-to-face into online teaching; however, their character was formal and structured, lacking the spontaneity and dynamics of the informal teachers’ meetings. Once we returned to face-to-face teaching, most teachers felt more connected again as the informal meetings gave us back a sense of community that encourages collaboration and shared knowledge of methods, practices and resources.

Something that is currently missing is perhaps teachers’ participation in educational projects and training opportunities that involve teachers from different centres. Unlike many other cultural institutions, the HC is small in size, as it has just one office based in London. It does not have offices in different locations that would enable us to create teachers’ collaboration opportunities similar to the ones described by Xavier and Andrea. In addition to this, we are lacking a national, state-funded network comparable to Institut Français, Instituto Cervantes or the Goethe-Institut, which creates some limitations for teachers’ collaboration and training opportunities outside the realm of the HC.

Pablo Martínez

I think it’s very interesting to see how in the field of teacher training or, using the more global term proposed by Andrea, Continuing Professional Development, there is a trend of change in all our institutions: from a vertical model of transmission of knowledge to a horizontal model of knowledge construction through interaction with colleagues. Xavier mentions joint educational projects (such as the creation of educational resources to be shared) that involve teachers from different centres who have to collaborate in the teaching of French; Andrea highlights action research projects based on classroom observation among teachers and a more open feedback culture. I totally agree that this culture of collaboration and learning based on shared reflection is crucial to advance in a CPD model that is in line with the new realities in language teaching. It is not easy to reach all teachers, and perhaps that is at the root of some of the conflicts and disagreements you mention, Catherine, that occur among some Chinese teachers.

I have to admit that I had never considered the dichotomy that Martha highlights between informal and formal meetings during and after the pandemic, and how as formality increases, the effectiveness of shared information among teachers decreases. But I think she is quite right, and something similar happened at the Cervantes Institute in London when we tried to transform the initial urgent work meetings at the start of the lockdown into a more organised and institutionalised training model. But I would like to share here two very positive online collaboration experiences among Cervantes Institute teachers, one resulting from that urgency in March 2020 and another that has continued until now.

During the first few weeks, with all courses online, confusion and doubt were the most common feelings among teacher teams, and it was interesting to see how quickly work meetings were generated to share experiences between teams of teachers from different centres: Cairo and Delhi, for example, or Berlin and Lisbon. And how proposals arising from those meetings

quickly reached colleagues in other countries. Those were very difficult days, but extraordinarily productive. Later, our Teacher Training Department in Madrid picked up on this idea and created an annual virtual meeting where, over two days and following a show-and-share model, teachers who wish to can share in 15 minutes some practical experience from their classes, both online and face-to-face. From these meetings (the next one will be in September 2023), unexpected collaborations also arise between colleagues working in different countries. It has become the most followed training event by Cervantes Institute teachers and, I believe, a good example of how a horizontal model of CPD can be fostered from the headquarters of a multinational institution, like ours, to its centres abroad.

Martha Papaspiliou

The concept of horizontal transmission of knowledge described by Pablo is particularly interesting, especially if considered in the context of CPD mentioned earlier by Andrea. Joint educational projects that bring teachers from different centres together, action research projects (e.g., teaching observations) that encourage open peer-to-peer feedback, informal teachers' meetings that foster a sense of peer support, and annual meetings based on collaborations between teachers of different countries highlight that a culture of sharing (teaching practices, knowledge, experiences etc.) between teachers who teach the same language is necessary for their career development. Exposure to a variety of practices and teaching models can make teachers more receptive to their students' educational needs and more capable of meeting them to the highest standards.

To this, I would add the importance of expanding the above-mentioned opportunities for horizontal transmission of knowledge and extending them beyond the limits of individual cultural centres and institutions. Certainly, sharing experiences and knowledge about teaching techniques, technologies and practices is easier between teachers of the same language who belong to the same cultural institution. However, I am confident that teachers of different languages who teach in different cultural institutions could benefit from this process too. Teaching, after the end of the pandemic, emerged as more globalised than ever due to our heavy reliance on online applications, resources and methodologies that continue to evolve in order to meet the needs of an international body of learners. Cross-institutional training opportunities that would allow teachers of different languages to exchange experiences and knowledge about teaching and learning are in line with the developments that the pandemic brought in language teaching.

NEW DIGITAL RESOURCES AND MORE INDEPENDENT STUDENTS

Pablo Martínez

And finally, focusing on our students, for many months (and at the same time as their teachers) they have learned to work with Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as Blackboard, Moodle or Canvas, with applications like Padlet, Google Docs, FlipGrid, Kahoot, etc. In addition, for some time now, younger students (but not only these) have been getting familiar with second languages through Duolingo or similar platforms. Furthermore, the sources of input have been diverse for many years, including resources such as TV series with subtitles, song lyrics that are immediately accessible, etc.

My question is whether you believe that we are making good use of all of this didactically to create more autonomous and independent learners, and in general, what we can do from our institutions and in our adult courses to ensure that technology truly becomes an element that enhances language learning.

Xavier Lavry

This is an interesting question which I feel has continually arisen in the history of language didactics when new technologies have appeared and been integrated in the classroom. I do believe that previous experience helped us make good use of all those resources you mention.

As with previous developments, I think the best way to effectively integrate technology into language learning is to have a strategic approach that prioritises pedagogy over technology (and not the other way round). I think the following points are key to ensure that technology

enhances language learning (and does not become something we use because it is “trendy”), and in the end will help create more autonomous and independent learners:

- We need to establish clear learning objectives and decide which tools can support effectively these objectives (for example, creating interactive speaking activities with Flip or Kahoot).
- We need to ensure that our teachers are properly trained both in the use of the technology and in how to integrate the tools in their teaching practice in a way that supports the above-mentioned objectives.
- We can also use technology to provide our students with more opportunities for practice and feedback outside the classroom. For example, using online shared documents where students can practise writing and receive feedback from the other students and from their teacher.
- Finally, we need to regularly assess the effectiveness of the use of technology to see what worked well and what could be improved. This can be done through feedback from students and teachers but also through data collection on student engagement and learning results.

Keeping a close eye on the advancing academic research on the subject and reading specialist journals is very important of course, but difficult to maintain with a workload that seems to be constantly increasing.

Andrea Pfeil

Again, I agree with Xavier. Digital tools often shift the focus and the learning objective often moves to the background. We often hear that “students really love it” instead of “students really learned something new”. Teacher training is, as Xavier said, key to making sure that the fun element is not the only reason why digital tools are being used. Solid lesson planning and following a clear progression is fundamental to successful teaching. The (interactive) material – digital or analogue – follows. Well-structured learning environments can help students and teachers to follow the curriculum and guarantee progression. It is not a matter of using many different digital tools but utilising specific tools to cater to learner needs. Reading, listening and writing is best done asynchronously and gives learners space to individually work on their skills. Pronunciation can be practised online as well and live sessions can provide time to practise speaking. Again, the teacher’s support is crucial; supportive feedback and questioning learning success continuously will enable students to get more independent.

Catherine Xiang

I think this is an interesting and relevant question. In reality, adult learners tend to have much clearer goals and more established learning strategies. On the one hand, when it comes to technology, they tend to compare and choose the ones that work well for them. I feel adult learners tend to be more independent in that sense.

On the other hand, they may have less time to explore and be less tech savvy. It would be really interesting to see how many adult learners are trying out ChatGPT for their language learning. I know many LSE undergraduate students are using it for checking grammar and translation purposes.

Martha Papaspiliou

That is a timely question, as our students increasingly incorporate technology in their language-learning journey. My experience aligns with Catherine’s view on that matter: I teach mostly adult learners whose goals are clear and whose learning is independent. A great majority of them have indeed established learning strategies and do not necessarily seek teachers’ advice in the way they use technology to study Greek in their own time. During the pandemic, I saw more and more often adult learners experimenting with the new learning tools that technology has to offer, and this is something that continues to this day.

My understanding is that adult learners use technology (mainly Duolingo and other platforms as such) for practising purposes as a method of practice-based self-study that works alongside the in-class teaching and helps them to repeat vocabulary and basic grammar structures taught in the virtual or face-to-face classrooms. The main reason they use these specific platforms is the fact that they comprise small activities that are not as intense and/or intensive as actively participating in an in-class activity or doing homework as set in the classroom. The incorporation of such tools in the adult students' learning journey might be beneficial to them to a certain extent and cannot always be controlled or regulated by a teacher, since they are the product of the learners' choice.

What teachers can and should control though is the incorporation of technology in their teaching practice. In that sense, I wholeheartedly agree with Xavier and Andrea that technology should be used and assessed purposefully, consciously and within the frame of specific learning objectives that need to be achieved. The goal should not be to employ every possible tool, but to integrate the right tool in the right context in order to meet a specific learning objective that would allow learners to progress. Technology can undoubtedly support learning in particularly creative, engaging and fun ways, but the best outcome can be achieved when technology is used by trained teachers in the context of a well-planned and well-structured learning environment.

Pablo Martínez

I believe that what you have all highlighted is very important: ensuring that digital tools are instruments that generate learning, not just amusements or excuses to return to methodologies already left behind. In fact, I think that if we all agree, it is because we know that behind some proposals in the form of apps or web pages, there is practically no solid pedagogical basis, but only activities and linguistic explanations typical of 1970s textbooks (although with very attractive designs!) Therefore, I fully agree with the idea that the development of teachers' digital competence must be accompanied by solid pedagogical training and should not be independent of it. This teacher training should encourage reflection on our own teaching practice, and also critical thinking to distinguish what is truly effective from mere optical illusions in the digital materials we use for ourselves and our students.

On the other hand, Catherine and Martha highlight the idea that, in general, adult students are quite autonomous in technology and know what to use to improve their language level, such as ChatGPT for translations or feedback on text correction, or Duolingo (an application used by almost all adult students who start learning a language in this country now...). Therefore, students do not need too much explicit support from teachers. It is true that we cannot control the tools that independent adult learners use, but I think we have a very broad pedagogical field open to give them hints on how to use them. Xavier mentions some ideas in this regard: we can use technology to provide our students with more opportunities for practice and feedback outside the classroom, for example, using online shared documents where students can practise writing and receive feedback from other students and their teacher. At this point, I would add a proposal that we are trying to implement at the Cervantes Institutes in Manchester and Leeds with the collaboration of students: joint sessions with students from different groups, where, based on activities guided by teachers, students share their experiences of autonomous learning with technology (although not only this). The idea is that through this interaction, students can take away new ideas and strategies to apply to their Spanish learning. And very interesting ideas are being raised, such as how to create Spanish-language WhatsApp groups, how to take advantage of the best series with Spanish subtitles or applications to make language exchanges with English students in Spain. If our students are becoming increasingly technologically autonomous, why not take advantage of what they have discovered and encourage them to share it with other students?

Martha Papaspiliou

I completely agree with Pablo's comment. In addition to this, and in reference to Instituto Cervantes' initiative to incorporate students' autonomous learning experiences with technology in teaching, I would like to share a similar idea that I started to implement during the pandemic. With some advanced-level learners (belonging to the same class, so that they felt more familiar with each other), we created WhatsApp groups in which students started communicating in Greek between themselves and with me. These WhatsApp conversations are not part of the

formal teaching itself, but I see them as a way to support teaching outside the context of the classroom and as a medium that aims to improve students' oral and written communication in Greek via informal day-to-day conversations. Students ask each other and myself questions about Greek cultural events taking place outside Greece in London and globally, Greek history and traditions, Greek cuisine, etc. Conversations are sometimes structured by me based on a specific topic and at other times emerge spontaneously from students' questions. Although answering and sometimes correcting everyone requires a lot of time, I am finding the formation of such WhatsApp groups quite useful: they constitute immersive linguistic environments that allow students to practise their communication skills, while also making them more confident speakers, as WhatsApp messages increase students' daily exposure to the language. Also, students, in that way, learn proverbs, sayings and slang that are particularly useful to them when they spend time in Greece and are surrounded by native speakers. I am aware that some other teachers at the HC implement the same idea based on WhatsApp messages and we all find it brilliant.

Pablo Martínez

Thank you very much for sharing your experience, Martha. I believe it is a great example of how technology can be used to generate genuine communication and respond to the real needs and interests of students. It also illustrates well the four principles that Xavier highlighted earlier: it responds to clear learning objectives; it also responds to the everyday life of students, and the teacher knows how to integrate it into their teaching practice; it offers opportunities for practice outside the classroom; and it is easy to integrate assessment, both of student productions by the teacher and of the activity itself by the students.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Now, before closing our dialogue, I would greatly appreciate it if we could make a final general assessment of the topics we have shared, and most importantly, based on what we have discussed in these pages, the challenges that will arise from now on in foreign language education in cultural centres in the United Kingdom.

Catherine Xiang

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced language education centres to rapidly adapt their teaching methods and strategies, while maintaining their core mission and autonomy. Centres have demonstrated resilience in the face of uncertainty, embracing new technologies and adjusting their operations to meet the changing needs of their students and staff. The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of collaboration and resource sharing, both within and between networks. As the situation continues to evolve, language centres will need to remain agile and innovative, embracing the lessons learned during the pandemic to better serve their communities in the future.

The future of language teaching in cultural centres seems to be driven by the need to respond to students' diverse needs and preferences. Institutions such as the Goethe-Institut and Instituto Cervantes have already begun to explore and implement hybrid models, considering different learning cultures and the need for teacher training. It appears that the post-pandemic landscape will involve a combination of face-to-face, online and blended learning approaches, all aimed at providing a more flexible and inclusive learning experience for students.

I completely agree with Martha's point about expanding horizontal transmission of knowledge and collaboration opportunities beyond individual cultural centres and institutions. In fact, there is a lot to be learned from one another, even if we teach different languages. As the pandemic has shown, the challenges faced by teachers are often universal, and sharing experiences and practices can only enrich our overall teaching techniques.

Cross-institutional training opportunities can be an excellent way of fostering this kind of collaboration, and I think that there is great potential for our respective institutions to create and participate in such initiatives. It would be interesting to see how teachers from different language backgrounds and cultures approach teaching challenges, exchange ideas and learn from each other. This would not only broaden our perspectives but also encourage more creative and effective teaching practices.

Additionally, technology has allowed us to connect with colleagues from all over the world, making it easier than ever to engage in these kinds of exchanges. We can use this to our advantage to create more opportunities for professional development and collaboration. For instance, we could organise online conferences or workshops that bring together teachers from various institutions and cultural backgrounds to share their experiences, discuss challenges and explore potential solutions together.

In conclusion, I believe that fostering a culture of collaboration and knowledge sharing among teachers, both within and across institutions, is essential for our professional development. As the world becomes more interconnected and the teaching landscape continues to evolve, embracing this approach will help us stay ahead of the curve and provide the best possible education for our students.

Martha Papaspiliou

In agreement with Catherine's reflection, I conclude that the COVID-19 pandemic brought pivotal changes in the ways in which cultural institutions approach, structure and implement the teaching and learning of modern languages. The driving force for these changes became the use of technology. The standard pre-pandemic method of face-to-face learning is still a popular choice among students; however, this now coexists with other methods such as online learning that were not largely available before the pandemic. Online learning was the only option for a learner to study a language during the pandemic, but since then it has gained immense popularity and, to this day, constitutes a much-requested method of language learning both from new and pre-existing students. To these methods, we should also add the blended and/or hybrid methods that are also often requested by students, but are not implemented to a great extent, mainly because cultural institutions need more time to explore their potential. The changes in language teaching are not exclusively linked to the possibilities and options that the use of devices or a network offers to learners, but are extended to include a plethora of ever-evolving applications, platforms, media and online resources that started increasingly to dominate the learning experience, steadily becoming teaching tools that coexist – and sometimes compete – with more traditional ones (e.g., books and audiovisual material). Some of these changes have been adopted by the majority of cultural institutions and some others need still to be debated and/or further researched for future implementation. Nevertheless, none of these changes constitute short-lived trends that emerged during the pandemic as the result of circumstantial necessity and ceased to exist after its end. Their strong presence in the post-pandemic era is evidence of a paradigm shift in pedagogies of language teaching.

Of course, the use of technology in language learning was researched and, to some extent, also implemented before the beginning of the pandemic, as in the cases of the Goethe-Institut and Instituto Cervantes. However, the globally imposed lockdowns that came as an immediate response to the spread of COVID-19 accelerated the fermentation of radical, technology-driven pedagogical shifts that had begun before the pandemic. During the pandemic, technology "opened" the teaching and learning processes fast and to an unprecedented number of learners: distance learning permitted – almost overnight – learners who previously did not have the opportunity to participate in face-to-face classes – for various reasons – to access them, making the learning of modern languages more inclusive than ever. Cultural institutions, albeit challenged by the fast-paced changes that COVID-19 brought to teaching, adapted swiftly to the new circumstances and to the changing needs of learners, facilitating the "openness" of language learning. In the post-pandemic era, we have the opportunity to reflect on this "openness" and extend it in the other direction, towards the professionals involved in the teaching of modern languages. This dialogue demonstrates that in all five cultural institutions – Instituto Cervantes, Alliance Française, Goethe-Institut, Confucius Institute for Business and the Hellenic Centre – the use of technology implemented in teaching at the beginning of the pandemic impacted the methods and strategies we employ in teaching, the resources we use and the ways we relate to each other (teachers and students alike). Encouraging relevant research in these areas within and across cultural institutions, embracing the idea of institutional and cross-institutional training opportunities for teachers and other professionals engaged with the teaching and learning processes, developing conferences and coming forward and together to evaluate, discuss and exchange ideas, methodologies and perspectives will allow the newly found and still quite raw "openness" of teaching and learning to reach its "saturation point" and mature to serve in the best possible way local, national and international communities of teaching.

I agree with Catherine and Martha and share the same feelings. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the heart of what we do, language education and cultural promotion. It forced educators to adapt quickly to new methods of teaching and learning, including distance and virtual learning. This transformation has led to a reassessment of curriculum design and assessment, as well as a greater emphasis on the development of digital literacy skills. However, while the pandemic presented challenges, it also encouraged creativity and innovation from all of the people involved, teachers and administrators. It also highlighted the importance of collaboration and conversation between colleagues, and this conversation is a good example of how positively it can be done. I join Catherine and Martha again to say that more conversations and exchanges between our institutions, sharing experiences and resources, would be really helpful to enrich our practices.

Andrea Pfeil

Agreeing with the conclusions above, I think the COVID-19 pandemic prompted cultural institutions to reassess and modify their teaching methods and pedagogies. These transformations have opened up many opportunities to improve language acquisition and collaboration. However, the process of change for institutions has only just begun and accelerates continuously. Being adaptable and agile will be critical to navigating the future successfully. With the advances in AI technology, cultural institutions are again being forced to revolutionise their teaching methodologies and rethink language acquisition to an unprecedented degree. It is essential that human collaboration and reflection remains critical in achieving a comprehensive understanding and effective implementation of this new stage. By combining the strengths of AI with human expertise, we can continue to build a more learner-centred, efficient and productive learning environment.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Martinez Gila, Pablo, Xavier Lavry, Martha Papaspiliou, Andrea Pfeil and Catherine Xiang 2023 *Teaching and Cultural Institutions (A Dialogue)*. *Modern Languages Open*, 2023(1): 37 pp. 1–15.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.493>

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Modern Languages Open is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Liverpool University Press.