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# An Evidence-Based Practical Guide to Designing and Developing Chinese-as-a-Foreign-Language (CFL) Courses Online

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to give an overview of what is needed for creating and teaching an online Chinese course and some systematic recommendations for what a Chinese language teacher needs to know in order to continuously succeed in the new teaching context. An exhaustive review of empirical studies published in the past seven years is used to reveal what makes an online language course successful. Twelve studies were located. The findings of these studies were summarized around the four themes, online course development, teaching roles, learner support, and course evaluation. Examples were given to illustrate points based on the literature.

## **Keywords**

Teaching Chinese online, Chinese as a foreign language, Design online Chinese courses, Chinese language teacher education, Online foreign language education

## **Disciplines**

Chinese Studies | Educational Methods | Other Teacher Education and Professional Development

## **Comments**

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# An Evidence-Based Practical Guide to Designing and Developing Chinese-as-a-Foreign-Language (CFL) Courses Online

Shenglan Zhang  
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The purpose of this article is to give an overview of what is needed for creating and teaching an online Chinese course and some systematic recommendations for what a Chinese language teacher needs to know in order to continuously succeed in the new teaching context. An exhaustive review of empirical studies published in the past seven years is used to reveal what makes an online language course successful. Twelve studies were located. The findings of these studies were summarized around the four themes, online course development, teaching roles, learner support, and course evaluation. Examples were given to illustrate points based on the literature.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the past years, teachers have been responding to more and more calls for online instruction from students and administration. Some language teachers have started to teach both face-to-face courses and online courses. Some people have the misconception that a teacher who is good at teaching in a face-to-face class can easily switch to the new medium and therefore succeed in online teaching (Davis & Rose, 2007; Wood, 2005). The online context of language learning provides many possibilities, but it also has constraints. For teachers who are transitioning from face-to-face to online teaching, it is very important to know what are needed, both technologically and pedagogically, to be successful in teaching online (Blake, 2009; Comas-Quinn, 2011; Hampel, 2009; Hampel & Stickler, 2005; Hubbard & Levy, 2006a; Levy et al., 2009). Given the complexity, online teaching can present and its difference from face-to-face teaching, there is an urgent need to prepare language teachers for its challenges.

Online language teaching requires new sets of skills and approaches, with which teachers can harness the advantages of the online platform in order to give online language learners a positive and constructive learning experience. In the face-to-face learning

environment, time constraints force teachers to give different language skills different levels of priority. For example, many students spend the majority of their time in class improving their speaking and grammar. Listening comprehension, reading, and writing skills are often treated as collateral, and sometimes even skipped. For learners to master a foreign language, they need the opportunity to read, write, listen, and speak it. The tools and resources available online offer the chance to practice all these skills at a more individualized pace with more authentic materials. They can thus develop the five C's (communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities) emphasized by the American Council on Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) in a uniquely efficient way. Moreover, to teach successfully, instructors must consider the online format and develop strategies that use all available resources efficiently.

Chinese as a less commonly taught language has its special features. The Foreign Service Institute (FSI) of the U.S. State Department has compiled approximate learning expectations for a number of foreign languages based on the length of time it typically takes to achieve a certain level of proficiency. Chinese is in the fourth category, which indicates an exceptional degree of difficulty for English-speaking students. Much of this difficulty can be attributed to its logographic system of writing and heavy reliance on tones and word order to differentiate meaning.

Researchers have been aware of the differences in learning logographic languages and alphabetical languages (White, 2014). Learning languages online is harder than learning knowledge and skills in other content areas online (Oliver, Kellogg, & Patel, 2012). If we accept this premise, then we can infer that learning Chinese online is even more challenging than learning phonetic, non-tonal languages by the same means. Accordingly, teaching Chinese in an online environment requires special skill sets and a well-considered approach if it is to benefit learners maximally.

There are various forms of online teaching, including using synchronous chat as the main channel, one-on-one tutoring, blended (or hybrid) courses, and fully online courses (which are mainly asynchronous). Here this article will mainly discuss creating and teaching courses to be given entirely online. There has not been any systematic account of how to approach teaching Chinese online. The purpose of this article is to give an overview of what is needed for creating and teaching an online Chinese course and some step-by-step recommendations for what a Chinese language teacher needs to know in order to succeed in the new teaching context. At the end of the article, three methods that could help teachers to develop professionally are proposed.

## **METHOD**

### *FRAMEWORK*

White (2006) pointed out four key pedagogical themes in online language teaching: Course (design and) development, Teaching roles, Learner support, and Course evaluation. The four themes were used as an organizing framework to outline what an online language teacher needs to consider when they start to create and teach a new online course. In the overview, course design and development was the focus.

### *SEARCH CRITERIA*

To develop solid step-by-step recommendations, an exhaustive review of literature was done in order to find examples of what makes the online language course successful. Two questions led the literature review: "What does the literature say makes an online language course successful?" and "What does the literature say makes an online Chinese course

successful?” The questions were deliberately posed in broad terms, with the intent of finding articles that could encompass different aspects of online language learning.

Digital technology advances rapidly. Most often, new technologies offer new opportunities in online courses; some technologies may become outdated as new and more efficient ones appear. For these reasons, this review mainly focused on peer-reviewed articles that have been published in the past 7 years. Therefore, the search criteria include: (a) empirical studies (b) peer-reviewed and (c) published after January 2006.

A systematic and extensive literature search focusing on what makes an online language course successful in general was undertaken using five international databases: (a) Computer and Information System Abstracts (CISA), (b) Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), (c) JSTOR, (d) Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts (LLBA), and (e) PsycINFO.:

### *SEARCH METHOD*

The search process was carried out in three stages. In Stage 1, included in the review, the keywords, *online, language, distance, learning, and teaching* were used. The search was confined to empirical articles written in English or Chinese and published in academic peer-reviewed journals between January 2006 and June 2013. The automated advanced search of each of the five databases was conducted to identify potentially relevant studies for use in the review. In Stage 2, three major journals in the field of teaching Chinese as a foreign language were searched individually to make sure none empirical studies on teaching Chinese online is missed. These journals are Journal of Chinese Language Teaching and Research, Journal of the Chinese Language Teachers Association and Journal of Technology and Chinese Teaching. In stage 3, the articles identified through database search were read individually to be screened further. In this stage, the references of the articles were also looked through for identifying those that the database search did not yield.

### *STUDIES FOUND*

The search resulted in twelve articles, which include research on blended courses because findings about such courses can also shed light on teaching courses entirely online. The 12 articles cover a wide range of topics related to teaching foreign languages online, such as online language teacher training, teaching English as a foreign language, teaching Spanish, teaching Greek, and teaching Latin online. Among the 12 studies, only one, a survey study, involved teaching Chinese online. Another study involved teaching Chinese, but did not focus exclusively on any language. It was a survey study on reported differences between online foreign language instruction and instruction in other content areas (Oliver, Kellogg, & Patel, 2012). Mandarin Chinese was only one of the featured foreign languages that some participants learned online. Table 1 shows detailed information about the 12 studies.

### **REVIEW ANALYSIS OF THE TWELVE STUDIES AND ITS IMPLICATION**

To make the results of the studies a better guide for Chinese online teaching practice, the elements that make online learning successful were reported as examples. These examples were used in the review analysis organized around White’s four pedagogical themes. Since few studies on teaching Chinese online were published, the reviewed articles’ findings were reconstructed, and related to teaching Chinese.

All the studies were based on the concept that online teaching does not deliver learning materials, but instead helps learners establish their learning environment and negotiate meaning (White, 2006). Using different research methods and design, the twelve studies showed many different aspects of what successful online (or blended) courses need.

*DESIGNING AND DEVELOPING AN INTERACTIVE, STUDENT-CENTERED COURSE*

Given that online instruction is mediated through a computer and the Internet, an online Chinese course needs to be constructed from scratch. As when teaching face-to-face, online course design needs to consider many elements, such as how to make it student-centered and interactive. Online course design and development, however, involve much more than what a face-to-face course requires.

*Table 1. Reviewed Articles*

Authors & Date	Article Title & Source	Research Method	Languages Involved	Course Format	Teacher Training
Bañados, E. (2006)	A blended-learning pedagogical model for teaching and learning EFL successfully through an online interactive multimedia environment. <i>CALICO Journal</i> , 23 (3), 533-550.	Descriptive	English	Blended	No
Bustamante, C., & Moeller, A. J. (2013)	The convergence of content, pedagogy, and technology in online professional development for teachers of German: An intrinsic case study. <i>CALICO Journal</i> , 30 (1), 82-104.	Case study	German	Online	Yes
Chenoweth, N. A., Ushida, E., & Murday, K. (2006)	Student learning in hybrid French and Spanish courses: An overview of language online. <i>CALICO Journal</i> , 24 (1), 115-145.	Experimental study	French & Spanish	Blended	No
Comas-Quinn, A. (2011)	Learning to teach online or learning to become an online teacher: An exploration of teachers' experiences in a blended learning course. <i>ReCALL</i> , 23 (special issue 13), 218-232.	Descriptive	Spanish	Blended	Yes
Hampel, R. (2009)	Training teachers for the multimedia age: Developing teacher expertise to enhance online learner interaction and collaboration. <i>Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching</i> , 3 (1), 35-50.	Mixed method	Italian, German, Spanish, Welsh	Online	Yes
Huang, X., kas, C., & Walls, J. (2011)	Using multimedia technology to teach modern Greek language online in China: Development, implementation, and evaluation. <i>European Journal of Open, Distance, and E-Learning</i> .	Case study	Greek	Online	No

Levy, M., Wang, Y., & Chen, N. (2009)	Developing the skills and techniques for online language teaching: a focus on the process. <i>Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching</i> 3 (1), 17-34.	Case study	Chinese	Face-to-face & Online	Yes
Lewis, T. (2006)	When teaching is learning: A personal account of learning to teach online. <i>CALICO Journal</i> , 23 (3), 581-600.	Descriptive	English	Online	No
McCloskey, M. L., Thrush, E. A., Wilson-Patton, M. E., & Kleckova, G. (2008)	Developing English language curriculum for online delivery. <i>CALICO Journal</i> , 26 (1), 182-203.	Descriptive	English	Online	No
Oliver, K., Kellogg, S., Patel, R. (2012)	An investigation into reported differences between online foreign language instruction and other subject areas in a virtual school. <i>CALICO Journal</i> , 29 (2), 269-296.	Survey	Chinese, French, German, Latin, Spanish	Online	No
Yang, S. C. & Chen, Y. (2007)	Technology-enhanced language learning: A case study. <i>Computers in Human Behavior</i> , 23, 860-879.	Case study	English	Online	No
Zhang, X. & Cui, G. (2010)	Learning beliefs of distance foreign language learners in China: A survey study. <i>System</i> 38, 30-40.	Survey	English	Online	No

Beyond its technical features, each technology has both potentials and constraints that could have an impact on its use. Teachers need to know how to harness the collaborative potential of different types of technology for language learning, such as Web 2.0 tools. At the same time, they need to know how to deal with the challenges—such as the inability to use body language as part of instruction.

One basic rule in designing online courses is that effective online strategies tend to be rooted in student-centered, constructivist teaching methods. The traditional model of teaching, with the teacher as the sole source of knowledge is not effective online. Encouraging multiple ways for connecting to content, interacting with each other, and communicating with the teacher is key. Learners should be able to actively create and participate in a community and network of learning. Figure 1 helps to illustrate this point.

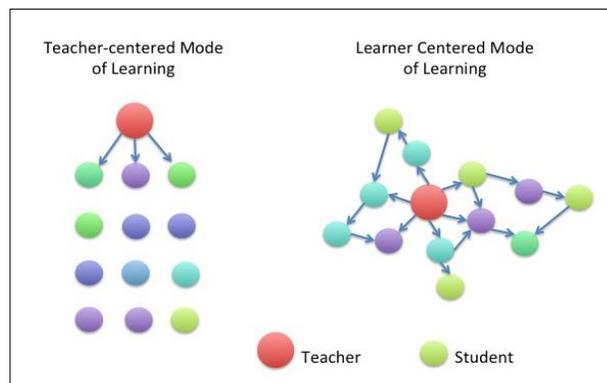


Figure 1. Teacher-centered learning vs. student-centered learning.

Learning should be active, constructive, intentional, authentic, and cooperative (Jonassen, Howland, Marra, & Crismond, 2008). All online activities should be designed with the five attributes of meaningful learning in mind. Being student-centered, being interactive, and being collaborative in an online community could help establish an environment that is good for a meaningful learning experience.

*Who are the students?* To make a course student-centered, we need to think about who the learners are. Teachers normally know what level the majority of their students have reached in the target language and are able to decide on the content or the learning objectives for the students (c.f. Backward Design by McTighe & Wiggins, 1998). Thinking about who the learners are is to ask the following questions:

1. What are the students' ages, cultural backgrounds, interests, etc.?
2. What are the needs of the students in terms of how the students are going to apply what they learn?
3. What is the level of familiarity of the students with the instructional methods and technological delivery systems under consideration?

The answer to the first question helps the teacher decide how many visuals to use. For instance, the younger the students are, the more visuals are needed to attract their attention and interest. (This article focuses on learning Chinese in post-secondary schools.) Simple games are also very appealing to young students. For example, for younger students, visuals could be used in vocabulary learning (see figure 2).

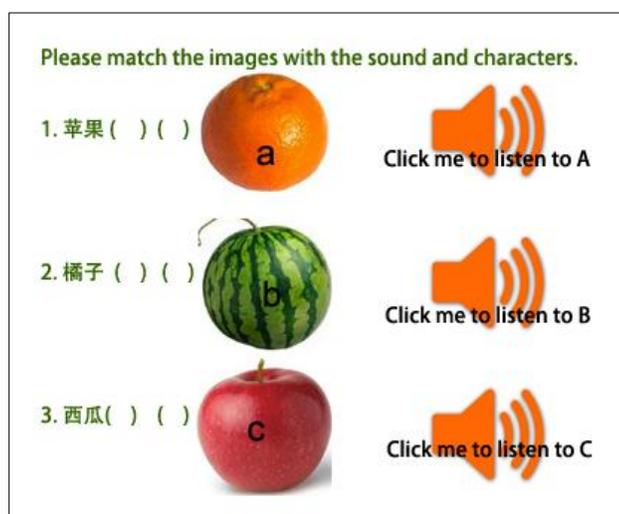


Figure 2. An example of vocabulary exercise with visuals.

The answer to the second question will help the teacher decide what topics to teach or what aspects of the four skills the course should emphasize in order to meet the needs of the students. For example, if the students' learning purpose is to be able to conduct simple conversation in Chinese-speaking regions, the focus of the course should be on listening and speaking. The choice of learning themes should be focused on the most critical ones, such as exchanging greetings, introducing oneself, shopping, taking a taxi, bus and subway, dining out, and dealing with emergencies. However, in most contexts, the students' learning purpose is to acquire all four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing.) Therefore, all four skills should be emphasized.

The answer to the third question helps the teacher decide how much assistance and what assistance you need to provide for the students. It is very common for students to feel anxious when they take online courses, especially at the beginning of the course. The

anxiety is usually not caused by their lack of familiarity with computers, but rather their lack of familiarity with a specific online learning environment. Typically, these environments do not provide the same degree of reassurance students find in a live classroom, with a person nearby to answer questions (Ushida, 2005; Zhang & Cui, 2010).

Furthermore, distance learners at different stages of the learning process possessed different beliefs (Zhang & Cui, 2010). The result of a survey study investigating online learners' beliefs shows that the first-year online learners expected more help from teachers and other people, and still believed that the teacher should tell them how to learn, offer help when they need it, and provide feedback about their progress (Zhang & Cui, 2010). To reduce the anxiety and provide more help, a letter to the students before class starts is very necessary. The letter can contain the following information:

1. Course dates
2. Class delivery modes (whether it is wholly online, blended, or meeting face-to-face only once or twice)
3. Textbooks (if required)
4. Virtual office hours and instructor contact information. (It would help if multiple communication channels were given, such as Google Hangout account, email address, Skype username, QQ number, WeChat number, phone number, etc.)
5. Where to start: where the course is located and how to enroll in the course if a passcode is needed for the Course Management System (CMS)
6. How to type in Chinese characters (for both PC and Mac)
7. A tentative syllabus describing course procedure, assignments, and schedule
8. A short video guide to using the course site (i.e. where to find assignments, grammar explanation, listening comprehension, games, quizzes, etc.)
9. Reminders of etiquette for online discussion and collaboration

*What are the learning objectives?* After finding out who the learners are, learning objectives, that is, what the teacher wants the students to achieve should be decided. For Chinese language learning, teachers need to make it clear what level of proficiency in the four skills the students should achieve by the end of the semester, what topics to include, what sequence of the topics is the best, and what book or books work best to help students achieve the learning objectives.

Most times, once a textbook has been chosen, the topics and the sequence of the topics have already been determined. For each chapter or unit, the learning objectives should be given at the beginning, so that the students understand what is expected of them. Furthermore, learning objectives should be written in terms of the intended learning outcomes, not in terms of the teaching or learning procedure. Below is one way to present intended outcomes using chapter 1 (Greetings) as an example.

Toward the end of this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. Greet a person you meet;
2. Do simple dialogues to ask and answer questions about your name, profession, and nationality;
3. Introduce yourself using your Chinese name, profession, and nationality in Chinese characters;
4. Use correct stroke order to write the self-introduction.

Course objectives for first-semester Chinese may read like this:

1. Interpretive Objectives  
Interact socially by discussing familiar topics;  
Write simple, authentic texts about some daily situations.
2. Presentational Objectives  
Give rehearsed oral presentations in simple with limited reliance on notes;

Write simple essays in Chinese character using correct stroke order;  
Talk about results of an inquiry into the target culture;  
Compare Chinese culture to your own culture orally and in writing.

*What teaching strategies do we want to adopt?* Once it is clear, who the learners are and what learning objectives set for the students, strategies need to be specified so that the teacher can use these strategies to help the students achieve the learning objectives. The key principles of activity design are (a) designing various activities (b) being interactive (c) structuring tasks well to help students effectively use various resources (d) giving clear instructions and effectively sequencing the tasks and activities.

*Differentiate instruction.* Differentiate the instruction to meet the needs of different learning styles. Different learners prefer different learning styles; some of them are auditory learners, some are visual learners, and some are hands on learners.

An activity addressing auditory learners can record a video or audio file to explain points of grammar and give for example, presenting the vocabulary with images or video clips. Those who prefer hands-on learning can talk with a native speaker, record the conversation, and analyze it to see how it might be improved. Another hands-on learning method is to have students make e-books on a topic that interests them. These various kinds of activities could not only cater to different learning styles, but also support students' learning in general. Green & Youngs (2001) found that contextualized text and images support vocabulary acquisition. In addition, the hands-on activities give the students an opportunity to apply what they learn in class to the real world (Oliver, Kellogg, & Patel, 2012). As one of the participants in Oliver's study commented, "It is difficult to practice while staring at a computer screen. Real life experiences help people of all learning types gain knowledge."

*Be interactive.* Interaction can potentially develop learners' linguistic skills as well as give them a sense of community. Interaction can mean interaction with learning objects (e.g. using games in online language learning, see Pasfield-NeofitoU, 2014); peer-to-peer or student-teacher interaction is focused here. Interaction will enhance students' higher-order critical inquiry ability (Hopkins et al., 2008; Jones & Youngs, 2006). Oliver's aforementioned study featured a survey investigating the reported differences between learning foreign languages online and learning other content areas online. The findings show that online study of languages leaves students less satisfied than online study of other content areas. One of the main reasons for this discrepancy is the lack of personal interaction among peers and with the instructor. Interaction with the instructor will be discussed when teaching roles are discussed. Here, the focus is on interaction with peers.

Collaboration is the principal form of interaction with peers. It is also increasingly becoming part of communicative competence in a modern society where communicative technology is making communication from a distance possible. A constructivist view of learning stresses collaboration (Vygotsky 1978; Warschauer 1997). Through peer-to-peer, technology-enhanced interaction and collaboration, meaningful learning can occur and result in "knowledge construction, not reproduction, conversation, not reception, articulation, not repetition, collaboration, not competition, reflection, not prescription" (Jonassen et al. 1999, p 16).

Theories of second-language acquisition promote tasks that motivate learners to use and process the language they are learning. In the process of interacting with peers, Chinese learners can build up what they want to express with what they have learned, and get more opportunities to use Chinese to communicate (Hampel & Stickler, 2005; Oskoz & Thorne, 2008). The interaction in the target language encourages collaborative learning opportunities (Raskin 2001; Felix 2002; Lamy & Hassan 2003; Zhang, 2014a), supports the learning process and reduces isolation (Shield & Hewer, 1999; Shield, Hauck & Kotter,

2000), as well as developing social presence within distance language courses (Grosse, 2001).

Here are some suggestions on tool usage and activity creation in order to make the class interactive and full of opportunities for collaboration:

1. Use Web 2.0 tools such as YouTube, blogs, and wikis, which have all been proven helpful in language learning, especially in speaking and writing (see Lin & Griffith, 2014).
  - a. YouTube can be used as a publishing tool to publish group video project. Groups of three to five can work to write a skit, perform it (if they live close), or using voice-over with images (if they do not live close) with a video-editing program, post it on YouTube, and invite family and friends to watch it.
  - b. Blogs can be used as a tool for practicing writing as a group or an individual project with comments from the teacher and the peers.
  - c. Wikis can be used to write collaboratively on one topic. Groups of three to five students can be assigned to write one story (or another genre) using one wiki.
2. Write letters to pen pals. This can be achieved not only through email exchanges, but also by different IM tools, such as Google Talk, QQ, Skype, and WeChat. If pen pals are native speakers of Chinese in China, QQ, and WeChat are suggested because almost everyone in China is using those two applications in their daily lives.
3. Use conference calls (Google Hangouts, Skype, QQ, etc.) to promote synchronous sessions with peers (and with the instructor). These applications and resources can support authentic conversation online.
4. Use the discussion board or chat room functions embedded in most of the Learning Management Systems to promote writing in Chinese.

***Help students use various resources.*** Structure tasks well to help students effectively use resources. Researchers have found that it can be risky to ask students to take responsibility for finding useful online materials for their language learning. The reason is that most times they do not know how languages are learned. Furthermore, beginning students still need knowledge about their target language to be able to discern which online materials are beneficial.

Teachers need to play a role in structuring tasks and helping students effectively utilize different resources (Compton, 2009; Doughty & Long, 2003; Ushida, 2005; Zhang, 2014b). For example, some researchers recommended that teachers record children's books in the target language "to increase their vocabularies and to model reading strategies" (Hall & Campbell, 2007, p. 35). Teachers can also find some short clips in Chinese movies and post them on a relevant topic site (password protected for copyright concern) for the students to practice listening (Zhang, 2014b), as well as learning Chinese culture.

Special consideration should be given when activities or tasks are designed for the beginning Chinese learners. The Chinese language is logographic and tonal. Being non-alphabetic, it is totally new to English-speaking learners. Beginning their study of Chinese, most learners find it overwhelming when they try very hard to connect a character (image) with its corresponding sound, tone, and meaning. Any new information is simply excessive at this learning stage. It is often very challenging for the students to understand the meaning of the text, even when it is composed of simple sentences. Human working memory has a limited capacity to hold information (Cowan, 2005). Accordingly, well-designed multimedia materials should not overload the learners' cognitive capacity.

To reduce the cognitive load, Huang, Dedegikas, & Walls (2011) recommended two types of assistance: sentence translation and word-by-word annotation. Sentence

translation can be shown or hidden by clicking on certain button. This is intended to help students comprehend the text without much difficulty while they gradually adapting to the target language. The word-by-word translation (which can be revealed by dragging a cursor over a given word) is intended to give students assistance whenever they have difficulty in understanding certain words. These student-controlled forms of on-demand assistance are expected to help the beginning learners better manage their cognitive load at their beginning stage of learning a language (Plass & Jones, 2005).

Huang, Dedegikas, & Walls (2011) cautioned that these methods of assistance should not be provided continually, for fear that the students may not make any effort to explore meaning of the words and sentences themselves. This type of assistance should gradually fade out, so the experienced learners can assume their responsibility for their own learning and be exposed to a pure target-language environment. Assistance provided at different learning stages is illustrated below (see 3).

Stage 1: Assistance available at all times

Stage 2: Mouse-over or clickable translation assistance available when needed

Stage 3: Assistance gradually withdrawn

**Stage 1:**  
 我 喜欢 看 电影。  
 Wǒ xǐhuān kàn diànyǐng.  
 I like watching movies.

**Stage 2:** **Jiǎozi: Dumplings**  
 我们想去他们家吃他妈妈做的饺子。  


**Stage 3:**  
 在那里住的人都习惯了那里的生活。

Figure 3. An example of reading practice with assistance provided at different learning stages

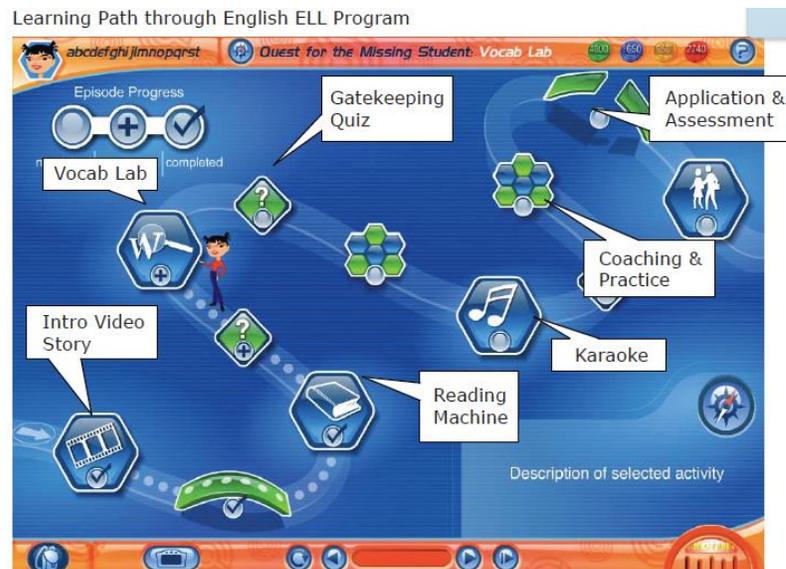


Figure 4. A Sample Visual Aid Connecting Course Components. (McCloskey et al., 2008, p. 187)

**Give clear instruction and sequence tasks well.** Instructors should give clear instruction (Palmer & Holt, 2009); sequence tasks well, and structure the course so neatly that students know precisely what to do at a certain time. "As with any activity, instructions must be clear and the relevance of the activity to classroom goals must be obvious" (McCloskey et al., 2008, p. 108). Lee (2005) also attributed foreign language students' satisfaction with online tasks and student motivation to the well-structured nature of the tasks within a logically organized course management system interface. Figure 4 features visual directions for ELL learners from a study by McCloskey, et al. (2008).

**Design and develop a supportive online community.** Community is a place where the members have the feeling of belonging. Researchers and theorists have used the term *social presence* to explain the sense of connectedness learners share with their peers and teachers in online courses. This sense is important because it has been found to influence learner satisfaction, retention, and learning (Newberry, 2001; Rourke et al., 1999; Shin, 2002). Community formation is somewhat intuitive in face-to-face classrooms. In online settings, however, it takes a concerted and consistent effort.

Building a sense of community in the online classroom should receive explicit attention (Jones & Youngs, 2006). Research findings support the view that the online environment is uniquely well suited to communicative interaction with learners, native speakers, and teachers. It should not be used as a platform where learners primarily interact with online content through self-instructional modules (Fleming, Hiple, & Du, 2002). However, meaningful interaction between learners does not necessarily reflect a shared sense of community on their part. There might be no opportunity for the sense of community to develop outside of assigned course tasks. The creation of social spaces within a course requires consideration (Fleming, Hiple, & Du, 2002).

The sense of belonging and well-being most conducive to online learning does not arise on its own. The key to cultivating it is engaging students in collaborative activities. Choosing your tools carefully, matching them to your learning objectives and assignments are very crucial to any successful collaboration. Here are some suggestions on how to best use the tools you select.

何睿恩的自我介绍 (Ryan Henry' s Self-Introduction)	
	<p>我出生在美国俄亥俄州的一个很小的城市，八岁的时候跟父母来到芝加哥。我现在跟我的父母，姐姐和 Clara(我的狗的名字)住在芝加哥。平常我喜欢跑步，打篮球，看电影。我最想做的事就是去体验在热带雨林生存。我最喜欢浏览的网页就是 <a href="http://...">http://...</a> (I was born in a small city in Ohio and came to Chicago with my parents when I was eight. Now I live at our home in Chicago with my parents, my older sister and my dog, Clara. I like jogging, playing basketball and watching movies. What I wish I could do is to live in the tropical forest for a few days. My favorite website is <a href="http://...">http://...</a>)</p>
Email address: ryanhenry@gmail.com	
Phone number: 123.456.7890	
所在国家 (The country where you are)	美国 (U.S.A.)
所在城市 (The city where you are)	芝加哥 (Chicago)
Skype ID	ryanhenry007

Figure 5. An example of a student profile page

First of all, every online course should allow students to build a profile page. Each learner should have his or her own profile page including his or her name, hometown, major, hobbies, experiences in the target language, future language-learning goals, future plans, and, some favorite websites. The students should be required to read other classmates' profile and say hello to two or three classmates to be connected. If the class is

for beginning learners, a profile page written in English is preferable. For intermediate or advanced learners, a profile page written in Chinese is better, as it helps to create an authentic Chinese learning environment (see Figure 5.)

Another way to build online community is to have an area where students can exchange information. You can call it Tea House, Coffee House, Lobby Area, Chinese Garden, or any other name you consider appropriate. In this forum area, students can talk about learning methods and strategies, their experiences in Chinese learning, their knowledge about Chinese society. They can even talk about information unrelated to the study of Chinese (Figure 6).



Figure 6. "Tea House"

A discussion forum is also a good place to enhance the sense of community. The class can be divided into groups of three to five. You can assign group work and they can use the group forum to work together. Felix (2001) reported that students strongly preferred working with partners (35%) or in groups (44%) to working alone (21%).

As well as helping the students gain a sense of community, group discussions allow students to express themselves with much less stress than in a traditional classroom. They encourage all students to develop successful writing or speaking habits with respect to grammar usage, appropriate vocabulary choice, and textual editing for clarity. In forum discussion, students can be encouraged to record their voice and use audio files. They also gives students who are shy an opportunity to be heard as fully as their more extroverted classmates. As Sullivan (2002, p. 394) comments, "Because of time restraints in the traditional classroom setting, it is often just not possible to provide opportunities for all students to respond in the depth and detail that they might wish, especially if the discussion is lively and there is a great deal of interaction."

In designing and developing an online course, four steps - finding out who the learners are; determining what the learning objectives are; deciding on what strategies to use in order to maximize students' learning; and building an online community—must be taken. Omitting any of them may negatively affect student learning.

*INSTRUCTOR ROLES: PROVIDING FEEDBACK, FOSTERING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY AND ENCOURAGING STUDENT AUTONOMY*

Online teachers play an important role in helping students learn. Online teachers need to plan what to teach and how to teach it, how to get students to interact with each other, and how to help the class build an online community. They also need to provide guidance, scaffolding, and assessment. Online teachers should make extra efforts to do more. A few things are too important to be ignored.

First, the online teacher should be available, approachable, and promptly responsive. As Hampel & Stickler (2005) wrote, “there is no guarantee that even the most jovial and well-liked tutor of face-to-face courses can become a successful online teacher at this level.” Instructor’s facilitation included guidance, assistance, and constructive feedback (Lee, 2005). In face-to-face meetings, students can always see the teacher. In the online environment, to compensate for visual absence, the teacher needs to take extra care to provide opportunities to be socially present. Ushida & Igarashi (2001) investigated the learning experiences of two online students who kept learning diaries while taking Elementary French and Elementary Spanish online. Content analysis of the journals revealed that a few factors influenced learners’ experiences, and one of the factors was the nature of the teachers’ feedback. Students studied by Zhang & Cui (2010) saw insufficient communication among peers and teachers to be their greatest obstacle to learning online. Weiner (2003) concluded that a high degree of interaction between students and teachers was necessary; without it, students would feel, as he wrote, “ignored, lonely, and lost in their course” (as cited in Rice, 2006, p. 436). Hara & Kling (1999) found lack of prompt feedback and immediate assistance to be a major source of frustration among graduate students in an online language course.

Second, a teacher should take initiative to foster a sense of community and lower students’ anxiety. One prime way of doing this is to use empathy (Donahoe, 2010). Donahoe pointed out that the online teacher plays four roles in any given course: facilitator, person, linguistic authority, and classroom authority. While these roles are separate, they are not discrete; they often overlap. As a facilitator, linguistic authority, and classroom authority, the teacher plays the role of “teaching.” As a person, however, the teacher appeals to the students on a human level and discloses some personal information. Along the same lines, Lamy & Goodfellow (1999) identified two tutor styles: the *social tutor* and the *cognitive tutor*. The social tutor encourages socialization and places emphasis on the socio-affective needs of students while the cognitive tutor is subject-knowledge oriented and focuses on syllabus content. An online teacher should place emphasis on both roles and keep in mind the social tutor role by using empathy. For example, in talking about eating in China, the teacher could tell the students how well he or she cooks certain dishes and how well his or her family likes them. By thus doing, students see the teacher as a human being and may feel less anxious.

Zhang & Cui (2010) did a survey study investigating learning beliefs held by distance learners studying English in China. The findings of this study show beginning online learners can easily become frustrated and experience their level of anxiety rising. Showing empathy is very important as a means of lowering their anxiety level. As Hurd (2000) pointed out, learning online is not supported by the standard university infrastructure: it often lacks on-site teachers and it is not like in a face-to-face class where students are close to peers from whom they could seek help in a straightforward way.

Third, online teachers should take on enforcing learner autonomy (self-regulation and self-directedness) as one of their responsibilities. A report on a Europe-wide survey on the impact of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in teaching and learning foreign languages (commissioned in 2002 by the European Community Directorate General of

Education and Culture) argued that a “shift of paradigm” is necessary in online teacher and learner roles. It called for co-operative, collaborative procedures in order to utilize the wide range of possibilities the new media offer. The online teachers should abandon traditional roles and act more as guides and mentors (Fitzpatrick & Davies 2003).

Fostering learner autonomy is challenging, but it should be a primary pedagogical objective. The development of learner autonomy centers on course design, which should facilitate strategy development, encourage critical reflection, and foster student awareness (Hurd, 2001; Harris 2003; Vanijdee 2003; Hurd 2005; Yang & Chen, 2007). For example, as mentioned in the section about how to build an online community, the teacher can open a social area, such as a virtual café where students can share their learning strategies. Another way to do this is to ask students to write simple reflection paper at the end of each topic or unit talking about what they have learned, the most difficult part of it, how they overcame the difficulty, and what aspect they want to learn more about. In a study with Taiwanese college students enrolled in a freshman English course, reflection papers proved helpful for students to learn. In the aforementioned study, a Web-based prompt was used that asked students to monitor their own learning with inputs, such as time on task, adapted processes, and predicted test scores (Chang, 2007).

#### *PROVIDING TIMELY AND SUFFICIENT LEARNER SUPPORT*

Online learning provides unique advantages as well as challenges for learners. To provide timely and sufficient learner support is one of the very important elements to consider in online teaching. What needs special attention is interacting with learners about their needs, concerns, and interests. It is equally important to identify the difficulties students experience early on in the course (Hurd, 2001; 2005) and give feedback, affective, and motivational support as soon as the course starts.

Procrastination has been frequently reported as one of the critical problems for online students (Gilbert, 2001; Murday & Ushida, 2002). In designing the course, it is very critical to make activities and tasks interactive, collaborative, and interesting, so students can be actively involved. Another way to alleviate the problem of procrastination is to remind students of deadlines on a regular basis and use the aforementioned strategies to improve the learner autonomy.

There are some special challenges in teaching Chinese as a foreign language online. For example, typing Chinese characters in the beginning level courses may cause anxiety. Each student has a different ability to adapt to new learning technology. Teachers should give students enough time to practice necessary skills before assignments that involve typing are assigned.

Learning to write characters is also a very challenging task. Perhaps the most convenient way is to ask students to use writing software to practice on the screen and on paper (See Figure 7 in next page).

Students can take a photo of the sheets they have written on and upload them to the course site. They can also write on the paper using the character workbook that shows stroke orders, if any, take a photo of the written assignment, and show it to the instructor. There can even be an exhibit on the web to highlight the best handwriting.

Pronunciation and tones are two of the most critical elements of speaking Chinese, especially for students just beginning to study it. It is thus necessary to have synchronous sessions. These allow teachers to interact with individual students, providing enough help to ensure the correctness of their tones and pronunciation. Students can be encouraged to use some kind of audio recording software, such as Audacity, to track their pronunciation. Doing so allows them to record their own tone and pronunciation on individual audio tracks, which can be compared with tracks of recorded by native speakers.

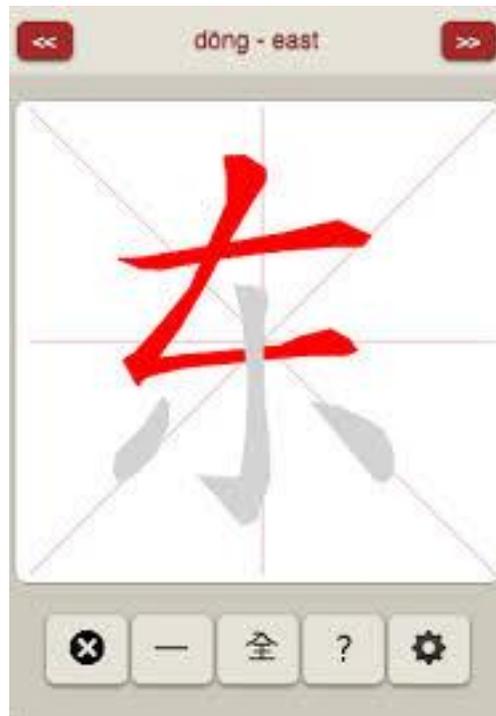


Figure 7. Writing software demonstration (An image taken from Clavis Sinica)

*EVALUATING COURSES ON A CONTINUOUS BASIS*

For course evaluation, we can use the guidelines provided by National Council of State Supervisors for Languages (NCSSFL, 2014). In online language education, proficiency is emphasized. Whether a course is successful or not depends on the degree to which the course has improved the learners’ language proficiency. As the NCSSFL puts it,

For distance learning to be a viable alternative to conventional classroom instruction, it must be consistent with current research and practice that focus on developing the learner's language proficiency. Proficiency, that is, what the learner can do with the language rather than what he or she knows about it, is the major principle around which today's foreign language teaching and curricula are organized. Distance learning programs must, therefore, provide a mechanism for a major portion of class time to be devoted to meaningful language use and practice and to authentic communication. (NCSSFL, 2002, p.1)

To evaluate a course’s degree of success, we may use the following checklist:

Table 2 *Course Evaluation Checklist*

Categories	Elements	Indicators	Y/N
Design	Learner analysis	You know learners’ age, needs, prior knowledge, and degrees of familiarity with technology.	
	Learning objective	Learning objectives are written based on your knowledge about the learners and are written in terms of intended learning	

		outcome.
	Instructional activities (1)	They are engaging and motivating. Some of them are “hands-on” activities that make students to connect to real life.
	Instructional activities (2)	The activities are designed to differentiate, catering to learners’ different learning styles and the practice of the four language skills.
	Instructional activities (3)	These activities are collaborative and interactive.
	Instructional activities (4)	These activities give learners opportunity to practice the four skills and increase their cultural awareness.
	Course navigation	Clear task instruction is given and it is easy to navigate the course.
Teaching roles	Interaction	Teacher and the students have personal and pedagogical interaction.
	Feedback	Teacher gives detailed, constructive, and timely feedback.
	Learner autonomy	Teacher helps learners to achieve learner autonomy.
	Online community building	Teacher helps to build a supportive learning community by asking learners to create profile and discuss in an open forum or space.
Assessment	Learning resources	Teacher provides useful and appropriate online learning resources.
	Alignment with objectives	Assessments are aligned with the learning objectives.
	Focus on use of language	Focus of the assessments is not knowledge <i>about</i> the language, but the use <i>of</i> the language.
Learner Support	Coverage of four language skills	All four skills are assessed.
	Coverage of culture	Culture is also part of the assessment.
	Writing	Support for Chinese writing is provided.
	Pronunciation	Support for pronunciation and tones are provided.
	Tech problem	Students are aware of how to get tech support when it is needed.

## CONCLUSION

Researchers adopted different methods, such as experimental studies, descriptive studies, case studies, survey studies and mixed method, examining various dimensions of language teaching and learning online. The foci of the studies vary and cover almost all the aspects of language learning around the four pedagogical themes pointed out by White (2006): course development, teaching roles, learner support, and course evaluation. These studies explored online language teaching and learning from two different angles: (a) how to prepare language teachers to teach online and (b) what the best ways are for the online language learners to learn the target language efficiently. The efforts made to get the

teachers ready for online teaching include equipping teachers not only with necessary technological skills such as all different interactive tools, but also with knowledge and awareness of how to deal with constraints and possibilities that the medium bring to language education in the online learning environment. The findings of the research on how to teach students language online emphasize the importance of interactive and collaborative activities and teacher's guidance.

Research on online language teaching is still in its infancy compared to the rapid growth of the online language teaching practice. Future studies are needed to explore related issues more in depth as well as in width. Answers to many questions are still unknown. For example, how different language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and different language aspects (pronunciation, vocabulary, sentence structures/grammar) can be acquired more efficiently in the online learning environment? How a successful online language learning community can be built? What are the best ways to teach online language students self-regulation? What are the online language learning strategies adopted by successful online language learners? In the case of Chinese language teaching online, there are even more unanswered questions: What strategies can be adopted to better teach tones? Should any pronunciation software/programs be integrated, if yes, what one(s) would work great in improving learners' tones? For some very challenging grammar points (e.g. ba-construction), how to use multimedia in supporting grammar learning? What are the best ways to teach Chinese culture in the online learning environment? What online platform works better for teaching Chinese online?

While we are looking forward to reading results of more empirical studies on all the above unanswered research questions, language teachers are encouraged to improve him or herself professionally through multiple ways. As Richard Smith (2000) puts it, "teacher-learning in general is inevitably a career-long, largely self-directed enterprise" (p. 96). As well as improving themselves the way they teach, online language teachers should also improve themselves in understanding how technology should be used in teaching. As the technology develops, new technologies and new functions for certain old technologies are appearing. They have great potential to enhance learning if used appropriately. Knowing how different types of technology work do not necessarily mean that one can use them effectively to improve students' learning. As the TPACK framework (Technological, Pedagogical Content Knowledge) attests, "merely knowing how to use technology is not the same as knowing how to teach with it" (Bustamante & Moeller, 2013; Mishra & Koehler, 2006, p.1033). Cosma Quinn (2011) argued that both teachers and learners alike should know not only how to use new technologies but also why they should use those (Kirkwood & Price, 2005).

One of the ways online language teachers can use to improve is through critical analysis and reflection (Bustamante & Moeller, 2013; Kassen, Lavine, Murphy-Judy, & Peters, 2007; Levy, et al., 2009; Schön, 1983). Baran (2011) stated that it was through critical reflection that personal empowerment is achieved. Through critical reflection, one can challenge assumptions rather than simply accepting them. Transformative learning involves "transforming frames of reference through crucial reflection on assumptions, validating contested beliefs through discourse, taking action on one's reflective insight, and critically assessing it" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 11). Bustamante & Moeller (2013) in their case study found that critical reflection could be in the format of writing a teaching journal, which might be used in combination with observation by a "critical friend."

In addition, online Chinese language teachers can work together with colleagues in the same field to form a community of practice. The Chinese Language Teachers Association (CLTA) is a good starting place for those who wish to foster such a community. A forum can be established in which Chinese language teachers who have the opportunity to teach

online could come together to share successful experience and post questions about their online teaching.

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