Teaching the Chinese Language Remotely

Global Cases and Perspectives

Edited by Shijuan Liu

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Teaching the Chinese Language Remotely

"What do you do when there is not enough knowledge available to solve the problems you face in challenging educational situations? This book provides an overview of efforts by colleagues around the world to meet the challenges of teaching Chinese remotely during the pandemic, to learn from the experience and to pass this knowledge on to others. Real educational engineers in the truest sense of the word."

—-Dr. Jozef Colpaert, *University of Antwerp, Belgium;*
Editor-in-chief of Computer Assisted Language
Learning (Taylor & Francis) since 2002

Shijuan Liu
Editor

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Learning Chinese Online in the Age of COVID-19: The Cases of Two Italian Universities

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1   Introduction

One of the consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak was the nearly worldwide closure of schools and universities. Instruction at all levels has undergone a huge change, and this sudden and unplanned shift has found the main actors, that is, teachers and students, unprepared. The challenge faced by all instructors has been particularly hard for language teachers; while many of them were most certainly familiar with the usage of platforms and digital resources already, the prevalent form of teaching at the university level has always been face-to-face with an ever-increasing attention to learners' needs and questions. In this respect, Italy boasts a long tradition of in-class lectures, and university-level instruction is

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generally linked with face-to-face lessons. Online training, and online universities, is a relatively young phenomenon in Italy, started and officially recognized less than 20 years ago[1].

Providing didactic material online and moving all didactic activities onto a platform are obviously different things. As shown by the few official reports available, the evaluation of this experiment has been overall positive but problems and weaknesses were impossible to avoid.

The aim of this chapter is to describe the situation of online Chinese teaching at the university level in Italy during the COVID-19 period. In order to do so, we first provide some reference on online teaching and we then describe the main research results on Chinese language online teaching. These paragraphs are followed by the illustration of the figures related to Italian universities courses, with particular attention to two very different public institutions, one in Rome and the other in Milan. The last two sections are focused on the data collected in these two universities in order to verify how learners perceived online teaching and which are the main critical issues. Data have been collected by an online questionnaire, completed by 156 participants belonging to 5 different language levels.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Online Teaching

Many researchers (Braun et al., 2013; Schwienhorst, 2002; Weerasinghe et al., 2009) state that designing an online course means investing time and money. Generally speaking, behind an online course there are different professional figures: not only teachers but also other professionals such as instructional designers, curricula planners, content designers, and art directors. An online course therefore should be carefully planned in advance (Piras et al., 2020). Weerasinghe et al. (2009) provide the following suggestions in design of an online course: display the learning

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[1] Italian Ministry of Education recognized online universities in 2003 and in the following year, the first Italian public online university was officially founded, the Università Telematica Guglielmo Marconi.

outcomes at the beginning of the course and display the related learning objectives at the beginning of section; order the learning content according to the syllabus; add activities to each unit of the learning content; add at least one quiz to the end of each section of a course to let students evaluate their learning achievements after completing a section of the course; add discussion forums and chatrooms. As for the contents and materials, the content should be built with different types of media such as text, graphics, audio, video, and animations. Similarly, some scholars (e.g., Chen, 2018; Hua, 2018) advise to provide mini-lectures for self-study through a series of videos followed by specific and targeted exercises to guarantee understanding.

Concerning the courses presented in this paper, they had been carried out as face-to-face courses during the first semester and the syllabus, which students could find on the institutional website, had been planned accordingly. The emergency situation did not allow extra time for carefully planning out the online course; therefore, the greatest concern was to try and maintain a degree of interaction as high as possible, since students had enrolled to an in-class course and it was our intention to keep the course as close to the in-class mode as possible. The teacher's presence, the social presence, and interaction are among the main concerns about online courses, and a key point in avoiding high drop-out rates (Crews et al., 2015; Goral, 2013; Griffith & Charles, 2009; Hua, 2018; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2016; Panagiotidis, 2019; Weerasinghe et al., 2009). This is even more true in the case of language learning: "In distance language courses input can be easily provided but not output. Learners must have the opportunity to interact in the target language to negotiate meaning, make input more comprehensible, get feedback, and recognize the need to change their language to achieve successful communication" (Perifanou & Economides, 2014, p. 3563). Also Panagiotidis (2019) states that "learning a language is not comparable to learning other subjects, as it demands a high level of interaction with other speakers and the use of higher order thinking skills" (p. 286).

Sun (2011) suggests one-to-one synchronous online meetings with the instructor or sometimes with small groups. Due to the large class size and the difficulty to manage individual meetings, unless the universities employ a higher number of tutors, one-to-one synchronous online

meetings cannot be the case for our university courses. Many other scholars (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2016; Means et al., 2014; Moreira Teixeira & Mota, 2014), therefore, suggest a mix of synchronous and asynchronous teaching to ensure student-teacher and student-student interaction. According to Burgerova and Cimermanova (2014), a way to increase social presence is to organize activities focused on critical review, expressing opinions, reflections and idea sharing, small groups to collaborate, and problem solving to make activities more authentic. As Vygotsky (1986) states, humans learn through interaction. In an asynchronous course, such interaction can be achieved through discussion threads and wikis, which require cooperation and mutual work, being a shared space in which participants can write and edit at the same time. It is also possible to resort to tools for synchronous online chat and discussion or online conversations such as role-playing, virtual office hours, or inviting an online guest lecturer to name but a few. The final suggestion is a mix of synchronous and asynchronous, uploading texts in PDF and PPT to present theoretical material, animated presentations, wiki and thread discussion for asynchronous discussion and chat for synchronous communication (Burgerova & Cimermanova, 2014). Jolliffe et al. (2001) suggest different tools for various interactions, such as using quizzes and forums for asynchronous interaction on a topic, and using videoconferences and face-to-face tutoring for synchronous interaction. Such interactions help reduce sense of isolation for students. Other scholars underline the importance of using synchronous tools such as both videoconferences and computer mediated communication to enhance interaction (McVay Lynch, 2002; Salmon, 2000). A commonly appreciated tool for written synchronous interaction is chatrooms, through which students can receive immediate feedback. Chatrooms also facilitate those students who tend to be shy and do not participate actively in face-to-face classes (Balboni, 2006; Chini & Bosisio, 2014; Payne & Whitney, 2002; Wang & Bellassen, 2017).

Another solution proposed by various scholars (e.g., Means et al., 2014; Picciano, 2017) aiming at overcoming the shortcomings of online courses is blended learning, which is a mix of in-class synchronous teaching and asynchronous online learning. Blended learning involves additional instructional resources and activities that encourage interaction

among learners. One type of blended learning is flipped classrooms, which is gaining growing popularity. As described by some scholars (Hua, 2018; Means et al., 2014), in flipped classrooms, learning materials (such as web-based videos to introduce new concepts) are given to students online before the class, during class students engage in practical activities and interaction with the teacher and their peers, based on what they have studied. This method gives more chance to teachers to interact with students individually or in small groups, since the class could be split into two groups rotating, one working in class and one working online from home.

2.2   Online Teaching of Chinese Language

Chinese universities can be considered pioneers in online courses, and especially in MOOCs (Massive open online courses). According to *The New York Times*, 2012 was the year of the MOOC, when different platforms such as Udacity, Coursera, and EdX were launched in the United States (Means et al., 2014). Chinese universities joined right after. In 2013, major universities in China such as Beijing University, Qinghua University, and the University of Hong Kong launched their first MOOCs, some of which including Chinese language courses. One can now find a plethora of free Chinese language courses and resources online. One such example is the possibility to access a wide range of free teaching materials as well as online courses through the *Confucius Institute Online* website[2]. At the same time, there are numerous online tools which both students and teachers can resort to when teaching or practicing oral and written Chinese (Navarre, 2019).

However, one of the main problems is still interaction. In analyzing the use of MOOCs, Lin and Zhang (2014) underline the fact that, due to the high numbers of students enrolled, teachers cannot have individual conversations with each of them; therefore, forums are the main means of interaction and discussion. They point out that in order to solve the problem of teacher-student interaction, some teachers can decide to have

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[2] https://mooc.chinesecio.com/index.html

a time online to meet students or use synchronous tools such as Google Hangouts to hold online conversations to interact with students and answer their questions. Obviously, this kind of teacher-student interaction is problematic in MOOCs, considering the high number of students enrolled. Other researchers also highlight the fact that the only form of interaction possible with MOOCs is asynchronous written interaction through forums and wikis (Wang & Pei, 2016; Xin, 2019). Some Chinese researchers analyzing Chinese language courses for beginners and intermediate courses offered by Beijing University note that all lessons are teacher centered: the video-lesson is recorded inside a classroom, where the teacher gives explanations but there is no interaction with students. The interaction is left at the end of the video-lesson, where students have to complete some quizzes and exercises (Wang & Pei, 2016; Wei, 2017). This is student-content interaction, but it lacks that kind of social interaction between student and teacher and among students. Some student-student interaction can be achieved through peer-reviewed exercises. For example, students record themselves and upload their recording, which is corrected by other students (Wang & Pei, 2016). The efficacy of peer review at beginner levels is questionable, however, since beginner students are not equipped to provide good feedback in a field in which they themselves are a novice (Means et al., 2014).

Another issue to be considered is writing. Chinese is a morphosyllabic language (DeFrancis, 1984). The phonetic analysis is traditionally based on the syllable, each of which corresponds to a character and to a morpheme. But while each character corresponds to a syllable expressing a certain meaning, the same syllable pronounced in the same tone does not necessarily correspond to a single character and therefore to a single meaning, due to a high presence of homophones. As such, in case of monosyllabic words, the transcription in characters can play an important role in disambiguation. Learning characters is thus fundamental in Chinese language. Some of the above-mentioned online Chinese language courses for beginners include the teaching of characters while others only focus on oral Chinese, while separate courses are offered for learning Chinese characters. However, these courses merely show the selected characters' stroke order and students are required to copy them (Wei, 2017). The challenge posed by writing is also highlighted by Sun

(2011), especially for elementary courses, where students should learn characters' handwriting and recognition: video clips which capture the movements of the writing of characters stroke-by-stroke are not enough, "many students at the end showed poor ability in recognizing and writing characters. Compared with the on-campus students, online students overall character reading and writing abilities were lower" (p. 434). Wang and Bellassen (2017) also agree that writing cannot be excluded from an online Chinese language course. They suggest the following types of exercises for the acquisition of Chinese characters: (1) visual recognition (Chinese character recognition, radicals' combination, Chinese character decomposition); and (2) Chinese character handwriting practice (handwriting Chinese characters with the teacher).

3 Italian Universities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

3.1 General Situation in Italian Universities

Following the outbreak of COVID-19, the Italian government on 4 March 2020 ordered the closure of all schools and universities nationwide. For many universities, that period coincided with the beginning of the second term, and the shift from classroom to distance teaching highlighted both potentialities and critical issues. It is worth mentioning that a number of university courses included e-learning through different platforms well before the global health crisis. Nevertheless, the activities of teaching, assessment, final examinations, boards and committee meetings, students' guidance services, and tutorship in the vast majority of cases took place only in the classroom and within the university public spaces. Even the transcription of the examination result is considered a public act in Italy and has always been done in person with witnesses. The closure of universities has therefore caused a dramatic change and has necessarily found most of the institutions unprepared to face new didactic, technical, and administrative challenges.

According to the data provided by CRUI (Conference of Italian Universities Rectors) at the end of March, 88 out of the 97 universities existing in Italy have transferred the vast majority of instructional activities online with more than half of the universities providing 96% of courses through distance teaching, thus potentially reaching 1,300,000 students[3]. The universities used different platforms such as Microsoft Teams (40%), Google Meet (10%), Webex (5%), and others (Adobe Connect and Zoom).

Another useful, although not unbiased, source to have an idea of the conditions under which this huge change took place is the investigation carried out by the CGIL (Italian General Confederation of Labour), the largest labor union in Italy. The sample included in the CGIL questionnaire comprises less than one thousand participants and is therefore rather small, but nevertheless, the participants come from over 60 Italian universities, mainly public, and include professors, assistant professors, and lecturers, thus representing a variety of different perspectives. The vast majority of participants, 809 out of 914, have provided online teaching, either because they wanted to do it (63%) or because they were strongly encouraged by the university (25%). As for the lesson duration, for more than half of participants (62%) it has not changed after the passage to online courses. The differences reported for this aspect have to be linked to the instructor position and to the geographical areas: for more than 75% of language lecturers, the distance teaching time has not changed compared to that of the classroom lessons, while the percentage for professors is lower (62%). As for the difference related to the geographical area, in the north west of Italy 65% of instructors provided online lessons for the same time as classroom lessons and the percentage decreases to 55% in southern Italy.

Another interesting fact emerging from the CGIL investigation is related to the existence of guidelines and training regarding distance teaching. As for the existence of guidelines, a positive answer has been given by one-third of participants whereas stated that the guidelines they

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[3] Data provided by the CGIL report are available at http://www.flcgil.it/files/pdf/20200420/l-universita-nell-emergenza-covid-19-report-forum-docenza-universitaria-del-15-aprile-2020.pdf.

were given were not useful enough. In addition to this, only a small proportion of participants have been trained on the pedagogical and technical issues that arise during distance teaching, and the lack of continuous support has caused discontent among instructional personnel.

A more recent and comprehensive picture is the one provided by Ramella and Rostan (2020). The two scholars collected the data drawn from a sample of 3398 professors and researchers in order to (i) know how Italian academics faced the challenge of distance teaching and (ii) highlight critical issues and share experience. According to this research, the evaluation of the instructional activities in the age of COVID-19 is overall positive; less than one week after the order imposing the closure of schools and universities, 72% of instructors activated distance teaching and, as shown by CGIL's report, online lessons duration, in the vast majority of cases, has not reduced from the allotted time of the classroom lessons. Ramella and Rostan (2020)'s report also offers some details on the course content and instructional methods. According to their investigation, 80% of professors completed the objectives listed on syllabi, 11% reduced the amount of content, and 9% added content making it available online.

As for teaching strategies, 67% of instructors partially modified the course's structure and content, only 24% did not change anything, and 9% took this opportunity to considerably modify their teaching practice. One of the issues pointed out in § 2.1 and § 2.2, that is, the tendency of distance teaching to be teacher centered, has also been confirmed by the participants in this investigation; in their view, online teaching marked a backward step in didactic practice. Although Italian universities classes have often been labeled as very traditional, pedantic, and top-down, they actually imply much more interaction than online lessons did.

In this respect, the same report provides some figures on the possibility to interact with teachers during lessons. It emerges that 66% of classes were given live-streaming, and as for student participation, according to 53% of instructors, the number of students during distance teaching has remained the same.

3.2   Chinese Language Courses at Two Italian Universities

In the following paragraphs, we will consider the cases, and data, related to two Italian universities: one in Milan, La Statale (The University of Milan), and the other in Rome, Roma Tre. Although the two institutions are very different in terms of history and number of students, the Chinese programs in both institutions are rather similar and therefore the data drawn from the different samples can be compared.

When the COVID-19 epidemic outbreak spread through Italy at the end of February 2020, Chinese language courses at both universities had just restarted after the winter break, and all classes had to be interrupted and taken online. Therefore, classes which had undergone in-class face-to-face teaching during the first semester had to move to online teaching and learning during the second semester. The shift was sudden and not planned, so it implied taking some quick action and teachers had to re-formulate part of their teaching programs and materials in order to suit the new teaching environment.

Both universities previously had only one asynchronous teaching platform, which was used merely in support of classroom teaching. The platform provided teachers with a space where they could upload some additional materials for students, such as further readings, as well as classroom notices. There was also a forum where students could ask and reply to questions. However, the platform was not powerful enough to support all courses going online, so on the one hand, the universities decided to enhance the existing platform for asynchronous courses, while on the other, they provided all teachers with a Teams account in order to carry on synchronous lessons.

3.3   Chinese Courses at Roma Tre University

Founded in 1992, Roma Tre University is one of the youngest public universities in Rome and has rapidly grown in terms of enrolments as well as in the number of academic courses offered: by the 2019-20 academic year, there were more than 30,000 enrolled students and 101

different courses. Roma Tre University is organized in 12 departments offering Bachelor's and Master's degrees, Postgraduate and Advanced courses, PhDs, and Specialization Schools.

Chinese language and culture courses are taught within the BA degree program in Linguistic and Cultural Mediation (LCM) and the MA degree program in Modern Languages for Communication and International Cooperation (MLCIC). As in most cases in Italian universities, each language course is made of two parts: one delivered by the Italian instructor, the other by the mother-tongue lecturer. The first, who is responsible for the course, provides theoretical explanation on the linguistic aspects taken into account, while the second proposes exercises to master the target language.

The data collected for this study are drawn from the first-, second-, and third-year courses, all of which had already completed one semester of in-class instruction at the time of the COVID-19 outbreak.

The lesson duration has not changed as a result of the transition to online teaching; therefore, first-, second-, and third-year students respectively follow 8, 12, and 12 hours of weekly instruction for these classes. The instructional materials selected for first- and second-year courses are *Il cinese per gli italiani*, volumes 1 and 2, which is a textbook specifically targeted for Italian students learning Chinese (Masini et al., 2006). In addition to this textbook, instructors integrated material selected from other sources in order to help students improve vocabulary size and communicative ability. The content of lessons delivered by Italian and mother-tongue teachers is strictly connected for first- and second- year courses, which are designed to allow students to reach the elementary and pre-intermediate levels respectively. The third-year course content is more challenging since it presents students with authentic material (Chinese press articles illustrated by the Italian teacher) and communicative functions linked to work life (taught by the mother-tongue lecturer who based her exercises on the textbook *Discover China*, vol. 4 edited by Ding et al., 2011).

Since interaction was found to be critical, all teachers decided to primarily rely upon the use of Microsoft Teams to deliver synchronous online classes and to keep them as similar as possible to in-class lessons. Part of the interaction that could not be done orally was carried out via

synchronous chat: Microsoft Teams allows participants to interact both orally and through the chatroom. Teachers tried to keep the lesson interactional and active by assigning small tasks to students right after each explanation. One way to do so was to explain a new grammar point and then ask students to build sentences using the newly learnt structure. Many students used the synchronous chat to propose their solutions. The teachers had conducted the same kind of activity previously during in-class face-to-face lessons and did not find students overly willing to participate. As mentioned previously, this may be due to the fact that being at home and "protected" by a computer screen, students feel less shy and more relaxed, and therefore are more confident to give their answer and receive immediate feedback from the teacher. Nevertheless, the feedback on written and oral production was not as effective and regular as that provided during in-class lessons. One reason for this critical aspect is that whereas the instructor feels they have enough time for every learner's question in class, it is harder to properly react online where two channels are simultaneously employed by participants, the oral one used for direct questions and the written one through chat.

3.4   Chinese Courses at the University of Milan

Founded in 1924, the University of Milan counts over 60,000 enrolled students and is organized in 33 departments offering Bachelor's and Master's degrees, Postgraduate and Advanced courses, PhDs, and Specialization Schools. Chinese language and culture courses are taught within the BA degree program in "Language Mediation and Intercultural Communication" (LMIC) and the MA degree program in "Languages and Cultures for International Communication and Cooperation" (LCICC).

The data collected for this study are drawn from the first- and the second- year courses of the MA degree program. Since both courses at the University of Milan had already been carried out in class for one semester, as stated above, instructors decided to continue using the already selected textbooks, adapting them to online teaching. As for course programs, the first-year Chinese language course at the Master degree course in LCICC

at the University of Milan focused on the textbook *HSK Standard Course. Level 4* (Jiang, 2016), which included grammar points, conversation, reading, and writing exercises. The second-year course focused on the acquisition of Business Chinese language and the development of writing skills, which included the writing of formal and informal letters, instructions, and business correspondence. Part of the materials were switched to video-lessons which were made with PPT and voice recording for students' self-study.

Also in this case, teachers decided to rely mainly upon the use of Microsoft Teams to deliver synchronous online lessons and facilitate oral interaction as in onsite classes. One finding worth noting was that, due to technical problems, such as poor Internet connection for some students, it was not possible to have the same amount of oral interaction as in class. This was also due to the fact that both classes had quite a high number of students (over 50 and over 30 respectively). Teachers then resorted to a wider use of screen sharing and PPT to explain the lesson in order to offer students a visual aid. Since Chinese is a morphosyllabic language, especially in a situation in which oral interaction is made more difficult by the online tool, which may cause the communication to be at times unclear, having a visual support to read characters on top of listening to the teacher speaking is crucial. Similarly for Roma Tre, teachers for the first-year Master's degree course often used the synchronous chat to carry out written interaction and found students more willing to participate than during onsite lessons. For the second-year Master's degree course, since students were required to write longer assignments, teachers gave coursework at the end of each week, which was sent to the teacher via email for asynchronous feedback.

Finally, all the synchronous videoconferences were recorded and made available among teaching materials on the university platform, in order to help students review, as well as give a chance to catch up with the lesson at their own time and pace to those students who were unable to follow the synchronous lesson. The possibility to review, stop, and play again is one of the main benefits of video-lessons (Griffith & Charles, 2009).

4   Method

The research questions that the present study aims to answer are:

1) How do Chinese language students evaluate online lessons?
2) Given the specific features of Chinese language, is online training on speaking and writing effective?
3) Which are the main challenges encountered?

In order to gather students' opinions on how the emergency remote teaching had been handled, students from Roma Tre University and the University of Milan were asked to fill out an anonymous online questionnaire on a voluntary basis. The questionnaire was divided into two parts.

The first part included the following seven questions. The first six questions were based on a Likert scale (from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree"), and the last one was a yes/no question.

1) Is the platform practical and simple to use?
2) Can you easily follow the teachers' explanation?
3) Can you interact with the teachers?
4) Can you exercise speaking?
5) Can you practice writing?
6) Are the materials shared by the teachers clearly displayed?
7) Would you take another online course? (Yes/No)

The second part of the questionnaire included three multiple-choice questions on advantages and disadvantages of online teaching and on suggestions for improvement, which are illustrated in detail in the following section.

Thirty-three students out of 50 from the first-year Chinese course (Lin1) and 26 students out of 30 from the second-year Chinese course (Lin2) of the master's degree course in LCICC at the University of Milan filled out the questionnaire during the last day of course.

The questionnaire was also sent to Roma Tre University students at the end of the course: 52 out of 80 students from the first-year Chinese course (Roma1), 26 out of 60 students from the second-year Chinese

course (Roma2), and 19 out of 40 students from the third-year Chinese course (Roma3) of the bachelor's degree course in LCM filled out the questionnaire.

Our sample therefore includes 156 participants
from 5 different language levels.

5   Results

Our findings showed that the remote online teaching, even carried out in an emergency situation, was appreciated overall, while the main challenge was to guarantee the same type of interaction as in face-to-face lessons. The first seven questions can be grouped into the following three primary aspects: (1) platform and course delivery, (2) willingness to follow another online course, and (3) possibility to practice speaking and writing.

5.1   Platform and Course Delivery

Platform and course delivery refers to questions 1, 2, 3, and 6. In particular, with regard to Teams platform usability and access to materials, which sum up questions 1 and 6. Figure 4.1 below indicates general satisfaction of the students on the emergency remote teaching during the COVID-19 lockdown period.

The dominant answers are (a) "strongly agree" and (b) "agree". This is made evident by grouping together the positive answers, with a+b ranging from 74% to 100% for platform usability and from 79% to 100% for access to materials. It can also be noted that nearly none chose "strongly disagree".

As for the possibility of understanding the teacher's explanations and interacting with them, which refers to questions 2 and 3, there is also positive feedback; in this case, positive answers (a+b) range from 75% to 96% for the teacher's explanations and from 77% to 92% for student-teacher interaction, with the only exception being third-year students at
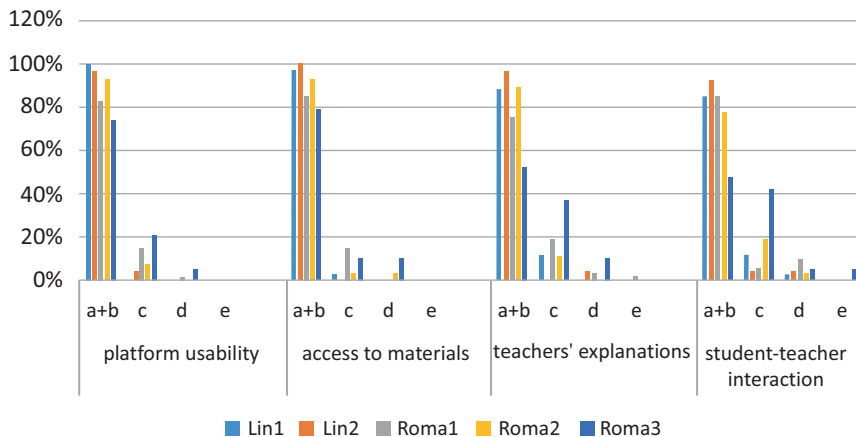
Fig. 4.1 Platform and course delivery. (a: strongly agree, b: agree, c: neither agree nor disagree, d: disagree, e: strongly disagree)

Roma Tre University (a+b around 50% in both cases). Strongly negative answers (e) are almost null as well.

5.2   Willingness of Taking Another Online Course

When participants were asked whether they would take another online course (question 7), the positive answers confirm the substantially positive opinion: about 80% for Lin1 and Lin2, 70% for Roma1 and Roma2, and almost 60% for Roma3.

The answers regarding the possibility to practice speaking and writing (questions 4 and 5) are, however, not as positive compared to the previous questions as can be seen in Fig. 4.2.

5.3   Possibility to Practice Speaking and Writing

As for the possibility to practice speaking, most classes (Lin1, Lin2, Roma1, and Roma2) gave a lower level of positive feedback (a+b) as it ranges from 36% to 54%. The situation is even more critical with Roma3
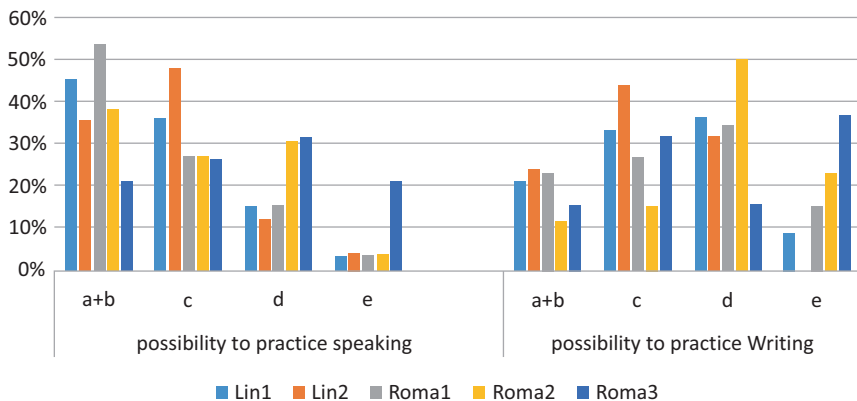
Fig. 4.2 Possibility to practice speaking and writing

students, where positive feedback (a+b) is 21% and strongly negative feedback (e "strongly disagree") is 21% as well.

Regarding the possibility to practice writing, the responses are even more negative. Positive feedback (a+b) is between 12% and 24%, while the percentage of negative responses (d "disagree") is between 32% and 50% compared to speaking exercise (12%-31%). Also in this case, Roma3 students are more critical, giving a higher percentage of e "strongly disagree" (37%).

5.4   Difficulties, Advantages, and Suggestions

This consequently highlights a problem in the two most important activities crucially required in language classes. It can be further confirmed by examining the multiple-choice questions shown in Fig. 4.3, regarding difficulties, advantages, and suggestions. Students were asked to indicate the main difficulties and advantages of online teaching and give suggestions, having the possibility to choose more than one option from the provided choices below:

Main difficulties encountered:
d1   Internet connection problems
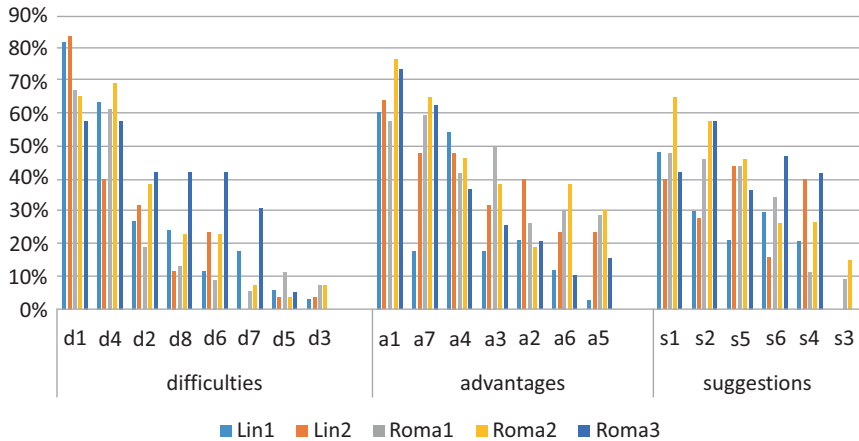d2   little chance to interact with the teacher and other students

Fig. 4.3 Difficulties, advantages, and suggestions

d3   materials are not clear
d4   little opportunity to practice writing
d5   difficulties in following the teacher's explanation
d6   little chance of speaking orally
d7   materials are not suitable for an online course
d8   little chance of doing exercises in the classroom

Main advantages:
a1   lesson from home is more comfortable
a2   I feel less embarrassed and am more willing to take active part in the lesson
a3   writing exercises are easier at the computer
a4   it is possible to answer the exercises via chat
a5   additional materials for self-learning are useful for individual studying
a6   I can concentrate more and follow the teacher's explanations better
a7   screen sharing of materials and PPT makes it easier to follow the lesson

Suggestions:
s1   provide more self-learning materials, such as readings, videos, listening exercises

s2   produce multiple PPTs with recorded voice or video-lessons in support of synchronous lessons

s3   during the lesson, the teacher should devote more time to explanations with PPT

s4   during the lesson, the teacher should devote more time to oral interaction with students

s5   during the lesson, the teacher should dedicate more time to writing exercises, also using chat

s6   assign multiple tasks or intermediate tests to monitor the level of learning

In Fig. 4.3 above, answers have been ordered according to the total of students' choices. By further analyzing the chart, it can be noted that:

Difficulties. The most noted difficulties encountered, after connection problems (d1), were little opportunity to practice writing (d4), ranging from 58% to 69%, with the exception of Lin2 students (40%), and little chance to interact with each other (d2). About the possibility to practice speaking, the situation seems more controversial; little chance of speaking orally (d6) was not considered to be one of the main difficulties overall, with the exception of Roma3 students, since over 40% of them found it difficult to interact orally. The most positive feedback is given by Roma1 students, where only 10% found it difficult to interact orally.

Advantages. The comfort of studying at home (a1), the fact that screen sharing of materials and PPT makes it easier to follow the lesson (a7) and the use of the chat to carry on written exercises (a4) are the most appreciated aspects of online teaching; the comfort of using the computer for writing characters (v3) was more appreciated by Bachelor's degree students, and especially first and second-year students (50% and 38% respectively).

Suggestions. Students mainly required more materials for asynchronous self-study (s1 and s2), with percentages ranging from 40% to 65% and 28% to 58% respectively. During the lesson, the teacher should dedicate more time to the writing exercises, also using chat (s5) shows notable percentages for four out of five classes (37% to 46%), with the lowest percentage being that of Lin1 students (21%). Students also required to assign multiple tasks or intermediate tests to monitor the level of learning (s6), ranging from almost 30% to almost 50%. The only result which is

not in line with this is that of Lin2 students (16%). About speaking practice, here the situation seems more controversial too. During the lesson, the teacher should devote more time to oral interaction with students (s4) shows lower percentages. However, also in this case, Roma3 students seem to be more critical, with over 40% of them suggesting to devote more time to oral interaction, as well as almost 40% of Lin2 students. The most optimistic are again Roma1 students, where only 12% felt it was necessary to dedicate more time to oral interaction.

6   Discussions

The answer to the first research question, aimed at asking how students evaluate online lessons, is overall positive with some differences to be connected to the student's level, class size, and to the course-specific content. The highest degree of satisfaction about platform and course delivery has been expressed by higher-level students. It is unsurprising that having already experienced the usage of similar tools, they find it easy to access and participate to online classes whereas BA students were more unprepared. In particular, for platform usability, some problems have emerged due to the high number of participants in BA courses which sometimes caused a poor operation of the platform to share video and audio material. In many cases, students had to turn off the camera so as to improve video meeting quality, thus reducing the interaction opportunities. The low percentage concerning third-year student figures can also be explained by the absolute novelty represented by the content proposed, especially that illustrated by the Italian teacher which certainly required additional explanations, often provided after lessons by email or via Skype. The authentic material presented during the second term was in fact very stimulating for students since it was all connected to the outbreak of COVID-19: students were given official press articles, short videos, and more spontaneous commentary to the health disaster, such as writer Fang Fang's diary. This type of input caused not only linguistic clarification but also stimulated discussion among students, which was not always possible within the limits of online classes. The different approach taken by the students to distance teaching is also confirmed by

the intention to follow another online course: as previously shown, higher-level students reacted more positively to the possibility of following other online courses.

The answer to the second research question about the efficacy of online training on speaking and writing was not a positive one. Satisfaction degree toward the possibility to practice speaking and writing was overall lower than satisfaction toward platform usability, with some differences among students of different level. Apart from the highest-level students, all others complained about the lack of opportunity to practice writing, an aspect found to be very critical by second-year students whose program includes a number of new grammatical and lexical items usually the object of written training and assessment. It is not surprising that almost all levels students therefore suggested devoting more time to writing exercises during online lessons, also using the chat function. Interestingly, first-year students find typing characters easier than writing them by hand although at the beginning of the course they were requested to only use pens and pencils and they had been taught *pinyin* just three months prior to the start of online lessons.

As for speaking training, there was a general concern about the insufficient number of occasions to practice speaking, although only a small percentage of first-year students (10%) found it difficult to interact orally. This result can be explained by the fact that this class has been divided into two groups during mother-tongue lecturer's training. Being less numerous, the online oral interaction was more successful than it was for other groups, for instance third-year students, who mostly complained about this issue and therefore suggested to devote more time to oral interaction and add audio material to the PPT provided by the instructor. Dividing the class into smaller groups for more student-student and student-teacher oral interaction is in line with suggestions from Burgerova and Cimermanova (2014) and Sun (2011). It is possible to use tools such as Zoom's Breakout rooms or Teams channels to split students into small groups to facilitate interactivity and group work.

As for the last research question regarding the main issues encountered and suggestions, almost all groups of students had Internet connection problems and reported the diminished opportunity to practice writing. Other problems that have been signaled especially by third-year students

have to do with spoken interaction, time devoted to exercise in classroom and quality of instructional material.

By further analyzing answers on difficulties and suggestions, the fact that the most noted difficulty encountered, after connection problems, was the lack of opportunity to practice writing and that the suggestion "during the lesson, the teacher should dedicate more time to the writing exercises, also using chat" (s5) also shows notable percentages, once again demonstrates more need for active writing. The lowest percentage of Lin1 students for s5 was probably due to the fact that teachers resorted to the use of the chat for Lin1 students systematically. This would make the lesson more interactive and would give chance to the students to immediately practice the newly learnt concepts, receiving an immediate feedback by the teachers, which is in line with previous research (Balboni, 2006; Chini & Bosisio, 2014; Payne & Whitney, 2002; Wang & Bellassen, 2017).

Students also proposed the assignment of multiple tasks or intermediate tests to monitor the level of learning. The only result which is not in line with this is that of Lin2 students. In this case, while written interaction was not exercised synchronously during class, since the writing tasks required longer and more elaborated productions, students were given written tasks to carry out autonomously on a weekly basis, which were corrected by the teacher, giving them periodical asynchronous feedback. Therefore, while Lin2 students resented the lack of synchronous written exercise, overall, they felt they had enough intermediate exercises and even though 40% of them still considered little opportunity to practice writing one of the main difficulties, this percentage is relatively smaller compared to other classes. This leads to the suggestion that mixing synchronous and asynchronous exercise and interaction is the best solution, which is in line with previous research.

The fact that, on top of doing more written and oral exercise, students mainly required more materials for asynchronous self-study, together with the comfort of studying at home, is in line with the major literature on the topic. This further highlights the notion that the lack of space and time restrictions is an advantage of online courses (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2016; Piras et al., 2020).

7 Implications and Conclusions

The provisional conclusions that we can draw from the data presented in this work have to be linked to the specific conditions under which online lessons have been delivered. The positive approach expressed both by instructors, willing to engage to a new form of teaching, and by students, willing to participate and try new forms of learning, certainly gives hope to explore the potentialities of online pedagogy. Nevertheless, the unplanned and unexpected shift to remote teaching has also made it difficult, if not impossible, to find the necessary time for instructors to adapt instructional content to a different communication channel. Presenting the same content with the same strategies used for onsite lessons is simply not feasible and could affect crucial factors such as interaction, training of specific skills, and motivation. In order to obtain better results and more satisfaction in e-learning activities, it could be advisable to check instructor and learner familiarity with the resources and tools provided by the platforms and train the instructor to adopt what are most suitable for course content, student level and class size. It could also be recommended to regularly use platforms for self-assessment tasks in order to increase learner awareness of their own learning process and stimulate self-monitoring activities. In general, instructors should be aware of all the potentialities of e-learning in order to conceive it not as a solution to resort to in cases of emergency but as a useful and regular way to integrate both teaching and learning activities. Since e-learning is becoming increasingly popular and there is an ever-increasing number of learners of Chinese, it is of the utmost importance and urgency to share experience and collected data to bring distance teaching closer to students.

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