

**BEST PRACTICES IN TEACHING SPANISH IN HIGHER EDUCATION  
DURING COVID-19**

**Clara Burgo**

*Loyola University Chicago*

**AUTHOR NOTE**

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Clara Burgo, Loyola University Chicago, Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, Chicago, IL, 60660. E-mail: [cburgo@luc.edu](mailto:cburgo@luc.edu)

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**ABSTRACT**

One of the main challenges for educators during the pandemic has been successfully transitioning to online teaching, in some cases without adequate training. This article will address these issues and suggest effective practices for teaching Spanish online, especially in emergency remote teaching situations. Given these circumstances, instructors should conduct self-assessments through self-reflections and portfolios. In order to carry out these activities, universities should invest in professional development on teaching synchronous and asynchronously, the advantages and challenges of both types of sessions, and the role of the instructor in an online setting. Finally, suggestions for instructors are offered to improve effective online instruction.

**Keywords:** synchronous learning, asynchronous learning, emergency remote teaching.

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### Introduction

Due to the pandemic, both educators and students have been forced into an emergency remote situation. As Kozimor (2020) explains, emergency remote teaching is not the same as online teaching. The former is a temporary shift to an online modality, basically moving face-to-face courses to a digital format. However, the latter is much more than that. That is why it is now time to look back and learn from our mistakes in order to teach effective online language courses.

First and foremost, instructors should select measurable learning objectives and foster collaborative learning for the sake of interaction and community building. After the emergency experience, we have learned about the importance of being flexible due to all the unpredictable factors that may have an impact on our online setting, and we should be able to move from emergency online teaching to informed online teaching through intensive faculty training. Since these are exceptional circumstances, expectations may differ, and a pedagogy of compassion and care must have a central role in these courses (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). If students feel the need to express themselves about the personal and academic challenges that this pandemic has put them through, as instructors, we should leave some room for this either during the synchronous or asynchronous sessions. Learning is social, so the instructor has to make sure to be present online so that online learning is successful. Beyond synchronous live sessions, instructors can be present through timely individualized feedback (Rapanta et al., 2020). According to these researchers, a continuous assessment model should be adopted. Given the emergency remote situation, instructors should conduct self-regulations through self-reflections and portfolios, and in order to develop these tasks, universities should invest in professional development.

One of the main issues for educators during the pandemic has been successfully transitioning to online teaching, in some cases without adequate training. Thus, we have needed to attempt to find a balance between synchronous and asynchronous sessions, taking into account that many students spend too many hours on platforms such as Zoom, or they are just unable to be online if they or their families fall ill.

This article will address how we can facilitate self-access learning, how we can make our class communicative on Zoom, and we will suggest effective practices for teaching Spanish online, especially in these emergency remote teaching situations. Additionally, this research will consider students' perspectives on this transition. We must be able to conduct a class that has the same rigor as face-to-face instruction, and we should be able to guarantee opportunities for interaction so that acquisition can take place. Additionally, we cannot forget about students' feelings during this transition, how they are adapting and how we can help them to overcome their frustration and anxiety about this new learning setting, and, in general, the challenges we are facing as educators. It is also time to rethink our academic policies after listening to our students and giving them a voice (Alvarez, 2020), since we are trying to adapt to this new situation in record time.

On the other hand, it is important to benefit from the advantages of both synchronous and asynchronous sessions. Most online classes are preferred to be taught synchronously via platforms such Zoom, since it is more similar to in-class instruction. Among the advantages, we could include the fact that students get instant feedback from instructors and peers, they can have a fixed schedule

and interact directly with the class, and as instructors, it is easier to engage the students than in asynchronous sessions. Furthermore, these classes can be recorded for students who were not able to attend class or even for those who would need to re-watch them later. Asynchronous classes are prepared ahead of time (e.g., recorded lectures, videos), and students can access them when needed. They work better for faculty who are creative and also for larger classes. Both instructors and students can view and respond at any time. The asynchronous format allows time for reflection and discussion by participants (Andriessen, 2006). It is also more focused and task-directed than face-to-face instruction (Jonassen & Kwon, 2001). While asynchronous sessions allow instructors to record videos that students can re-watch as many times as they need for their convenience, they can also alter the pace of learning. Synchronous sessions may be more effective for group discussion or office hours. Additionally, this is an exceptional time where most universities around the world are teaching online to encourage virtual exchanges between native speakers of Spanish from Spanish-speaking countries and second language learners of Spanish from the United States. In order to deliver efficient live streaming, instructors must be well-informed regarding technology, how to create digital materials, and coaching students during these sessions (Feyen, 2020).

With regard to the mental health issues related to the effect of the pandemic, as instructors, we should support and facilitate some type of orientation to our students. Stress management programs could help them cope with this difficult situation. Some institutions offer webinars and psychological support that could be of much help. The stress that they experience can be the consequence of difficulties dealing with technology, lack of face-to-face interaction with their peers and their instructors, but also perhaps due to the uncertainties derived from the pandemic (Salimi et al., 2021).

One cannot forget that faculty is also mentally and emotionally affected by the pandemic, and they have been struggling to cope with the emergency remote teaching situation as well as with their family responsibilities. Unfortunately, faculty may have felt alienated due to the lack of consideration of the trauma they experience (Kozimor, 2020). Despite all these issues, there are many advantages related to online learning if we have the appropriate resources and training to give these courses efficiently.

### **Advantages of online learning**

Online courses can increase attendance and participation because students do not need to be in a specific physical location (Kim, 2020); they may feel more comfortable speaking in public. Online classes are more student-centered; students have more control of what they learn (Didenko, Filatova, & Anisimova, 2021). On top of this, the emergency remote instruction caused by COVID-19 accelerated the use of digital technologies and of institutional Learning Management Systems. Therefore, diversity is another benefit of online learning. This opportunity allows students to be open and think outside the box, which may even present them with more career options (Al-Odeh, 2020).

It is logical to think then that the use of technology is the basis of online learning. One of the main benefits is that it can be used to customize student learning, adapting instructor's lesson plans. Besides, it saves a lot of time and provides students with access to a tremendous amount of information. However, it may present some drawbacks such as loss of human connection or distraction (Singh, 2020).

Additionally, there are multiple benefits for faculty as well. The flexibility provided by online teaching can help the instructor to conduct research and use technology more efficiently. It is also important to highlight that there are many challenges as well, as we have mentioned earlier.

### **Challenges of online teaching**

It is obvious that emergency remote teaching has been challenging for both instructors and students. What are the main student complaints? According to Rosario-Rodríguez et al. (2020), students criticize instructors' lack of expertise in online teaching, problems with internet connection, stressors caused by the pandemic, difficulty staying focused, and lack of social interaction, among others. Some students may have limited experience with technology, and need support, such as online tutorials (Akhter, 2020). If they develop negative feelings towards technology, there is a risk of a detrimental impact on their learning, and this can affect their performance due to low motivation. Furthermore, the privation of social interaction may lead to feelings of loneliness because of the lack of physical presence of both their instructor and peers.

What are the main teacher complaints? Technical issues, student participation, and the online teaching experience itself (Rasmitadila et al., 2020). We cannot forget the concern for the digital divide that has affected many families in the online setting (Vijil, 2020). Since the transition has been so sudden due to the pandemic, instructors have felt under pressure to adapt their courses, and they have sometimes felt that they lack training and support to conduct effective online courses; all this has led to a lack of communication between instructors and students that inevitably has had an impact on their attitudes towards remote courses (Tsai, et al., 2020). In fact, faculty who have pursued professional development have changed their teaching practices (McQuiggan, 2012).

One of the problems of online learning is understanding the content of the course. Due to the emergency remote teaching situation provoked by the pandemic, instructors have been obligated to adapt their courses in record time. Unfortunately, this is no guarantee that students are able to learn (Moser et al., 2021). Students were also obligated to adapt to a format that they did not choose. Therefore, they may require more explanations and accountability. Also, we cannot ignore the fact that they may miss the interaction with their instructors and peers (Parker et al., 2021). In general, the lack of engagement and interaction can be considered the main drawbacks of online learning, especially in the case of language courses. What if we implement mobile learning? It can encourage learning, but it may overwhelm the students' cognitive load if the learning strategies are not adequate (Suartama, 2020). Beyond all of this, online collaborative learning activities can also be challenging due to lack of time, a different work pace, and even lack of interest (Cotán Fernández et al., 2020).

In order to combat all of these challenges, instructors should redefine their role as the leaders of socialization (Suoranta, 2020). Opportunities for meaningful interaction and discussion should be granted. In fact, students who are not ready for digital learning may suffer from isolation and stress. While technology can foster socialization, social interactions are what students need to feel at ease, not technology itself (Händel et al., 2020). Furthermore, institutions could provide students with a hotline for technology issues and regular check-ins by instructors (Kumar & Pande, 2021).

On the other hand, instructors have difficulty monitoring students' progress. Thus, students need to rely more on autonomous learning (Iswati, 2021). Assessment becomes an issue, and instructors struggle with online correction, especially with informal assessment. Along these lines, concerns about academic integrity are also apparent (Tyagi & Malik, 2020). Online courses can combine both synchronous and asynchronous sessions. In the next sections, both formats will be thoroughly described.

### **Synchronous sessions**

Synchronous sessions are live classes, so instructors need to learn about online class management. They could consider chatting with students regarding connecting to Zoom, asking students to turn on the camera to facilitate interaction, sharing the lesson plan or class structure, asking questions to get students' attention, conducting surveys, managing class time, and maintaining an active pace (García, 2020). One of the main challenges of synchronous sessions is combating the lack of interaction. This is sometimes increased when students do not turn their camera on. Instead of imposing it, we should encourage students to turn it on by explaining why that is important to foster an inclusive, engaging, and interactive environment. Furthermore, there are additional features to increase interaction such the use of the chat or discussion boards as an alternative.

One of the main advantages of synchronous sessions is the immediacy of support and help provided for the students. Zoom can aid in creating a community and reducing feelings of isolation (Lowenthal et al., 2020). One way of doing so is through the effective use of breakout rooms. This is important because Loughheed et al. (2012) found that students with a higher GPA did not benefit as much from breakout rooms as those with lower GPAs. An interactive digital and synchronous portfolio could be implemented as an innovative strategy for self-assessment. There are multiple benefits of this, especially facilitating the analysis of and reflection on the learning process (Tipán Renjifo, 2021).

### **Asynchronous sessions**

There are two main advantages of asynchronous sessions (self-control and self-directed learning) and four main challenges (isolation, lack of interaction, course load, and technology issues), according to Lin and Gao (2020). Students must be ready to be responsible for their own learning. Asynchronous sessions adapt better to students' personal needs such as time flexibility and internet issues, and they are more conducive to reflection and deep learning, since students can take as much time as they need (within certain limits) to complete the course assignments. In Engaging

students in these sessions is more challenging than in synchronous sessions. Therefore, it is recommended to use tandem projects as exchange activities, such as language exchanges, to enhance students' communicative skills (Ross & DiSlavo, 2020).

Asynchronous sessions are particularly challenging in second language courses because of the importance of instant interaction among students. This scenario may lead to a negative attitude or conflict with peers (Azer, 2001). Nevertheless, asynchronous sessions help combat Zoom fatigue. Online discussion boards, for example, have multiple benefits such as promoting student engagement and collaborative work (Gonzalez & Moore, 2020). Social networks such as Twitter can also be used as an instructional tool to disseminate information and to summarize readings using authentic materials (Vázquez Cano, 2012) as well as to follow experts in the field (Nicholson & Galguera, 2013). Twitter not only helps with improving academic skills, but also with the interaction between instructor and students. It seems to be an effective tool to create an educational community in the online classroom and beyond it (Jerónimo & Martin, 2021).

### **The role of the instructor**

The role of the instructor is key in overcoming the challenges of online teaching. First, the instructor must be present virtually to compensate for the lack of physical presence. Second, the instructor must be authentic and vulnerable. Finally, how the instructor interacts with the classroom is paramount (Lomicka, 2020). They must be encouraging and inspiring throughout. In order to do so, the instructor has to be not only the curriculum designer, but also the facilitator and the mentor.

The roles that the instructor undertakes are evolving during the pandemic. Teaching can be considered a form of social influence, increasing students' knowledge, and therefore, having an impact on students' learning. Instructors can design their teaching practices considering all this, and they can even become mentors to facilitate social change (Butera et al., 2021).

Beyond this, we cannot ignore how the pandemic is affecting students' and instructors' mental health. Smoyer et al. (2020) found that when the instructor engaged in understanding student concerns about their experience dealing with the coronavirus, students were more satisfied. Being more available, flexible, and guiding them through assignments as well as offering online resources and support with time management and independent learning can really make a difference (Mollenkopf et al., 2020).

How can the instructor facilitate online interaction? Hsiao (2012) argued that providing clear guidelines and rubrics and monitoring student discussions can facilitate online interaction. Discussion boards are their space. Additionally, instructors should find a way to be present without disempowering students like by acknowledging their contributions to value their participation and to boost their confidence (Payne, 2020).

Assessment is particularly important in remote teaching. According to Freedman and Voelker-Morris (2020), instructors should be crystal clear about the way students will be evaluated. Bringing written assignments to the online discussion can create a bridge between

synchronous and asynchronous learning. Additionally, these assignments should be available to students well in advance so that they can plan accordingly.

Finally, collecting student feedback is crucial in connecting with students. In the following section, suggestions are offered to improve our online teaching experience.

### **Suggestions to improve online teaching**

The first aspect to consider is how to compensate for the lack of physical presence of the instructor through student engagement. In order to engage students, we need to create an environment with successful communication, a combination of both synchronous and asynchronous sessions, and to offer continuous assessment and feedback so that students do not feel alienated or frustrated. The combination of synchronous and asynchronous sessions allows students and teachers to take advantage of the benefits of both. While synchronous sessions simulate in-person classes by promoting social support, asynchronous sessions stimulate reflective thinking (McMullen, et al., 2020). Asynchronous sessions should have a clear structure: an introduction, connection with the previous material, and an explanation of how objectives will be met (Kimmel et al., 2020). In general, instead of just transferring our in-person class into an online setting, educators should take advantage of this opportunity to make students more autonomous and responsible for their own learning, to make classes more flexible, to make more programs more attractive and adapted to students' needs, and to update the instructor's role (Area-Moreira et al., 2021). Considering that this new scenario forces us to gain some command of technology in the classroom, educators may make use of certain strategies, such as being open to learning and using technology as a means, not an end; the end should be pedagogy and engagement regardless the form of instruction (Bloomberg, 2020).

Online classes should be accessible to students. Thus, we need to make sure that students are ready to communicate and interact with both their peers and instructor (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2019). One way of doing so is by using the chat feature. If we do, we should avoid correcting errors explicitly to prevent students from feeling inhibited to use it to communicate with the class. We should treat it as informal writing (Payne, 2020). Additionally, we should provide students with additional materials to supplement their learning. Even in online learning, it is crucial to establish guidelines of effective instruction.

To engage students, instructors must create a community and support the students along the learning process. The objectives have to be very apparent and aligned with a clear assessment through which the instructor can track progress. Active learning activities for interaction with integrated technology should be accessible to all students (Khan & Abid, 2021). Instructors must facilitate connection beyond interaction both academically and non-academically, and they must incorporate collaborative work where the instructor takes a role by leading discussions or guiding students. Additionally, it is crucial to provide opportunities to check the course progress, opening a line of communication (Kaufmann & Vallade, 2021).

Online teaching only works if students have access to internet and technology and instructors receive good training and support on how to deliver an online course (García & Weiss,

2020). Administrators should make sure that high-speed internet is accessible to all students, that e-learning platforms are user friendly, and that they provide technical support to students and faculty (Maphalala & Adigun, 2021).

In sum, the administration should invest in online education and provide instructors with adequate training, introducing instructors to resources to be able to blend pedagogy, technology, and content. At the same time, both synchronous and asynchronous should be implemented. Support communities are needed for emotional help. Instructors should avoid overwhelming students and focus on their wellbeing (Hussein et al., 2020). Therefore, responsive instruction is strongly recommended so that there is a social presence in the classroom. A responsive instructor is a facilitator of the interaction among students, one who fosters engagement and gives the feedback that the student needs (Evans, 2021).

### **Conclusions**

Emergency remote learning has become the norm during COVID-19. Consequently, both instructors and students have been forced to adapt to this format in record time, and countless challenges have arisen, such as the need for intensive training to teach online and to use technology efficiently and the need to keep students engaged. There are advantages and disadvantages to both online learning itself and in synchronous and asynchronous sessions. Ideally, both types of sessions should be used in online courses. Nevertheless, the role of the instructor as a facilitator is key to engaging students and being present for them so that they do not fall behind, as well as helping with language anxiety and providing support with mental health issues derived from online teaching. Finally, suggestions have been offered so that instructors can improve their teaching strategies to promote effective instruction in a successful environment, to combat Zoom fatigue, to assess students fairly, to implement a pedagogy of compassion and care, and to make online classes accessible to all students. In short, the administration must provide resources for adequate training for instructors to implement the best practices in online teaching and emotional support.

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