

Switching to a Synchronous Mode of Chinese Calligraphy Teaching During the Period of COVID-19 Pandemic: An Experience Report

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The purpose of this report is to describe how a teacher utilized technology to teach elderly learners Chinese calligraphy and how they learnt. Before the incidence of COVID-19, six sessions of Chinese calligraphy were conducted in a community services centre for elderly learners in Hong Kong from 9:00am to 5:00pm on a weekday every week, with each session lasting 75 minutes. There were about 20 learners aged above 50 in each session, and they were naturally grouped in pairs and sat together in a classroom equipped with a data projector. At the very beginning of each session, a teacher of Chinese calligraphy explained the contents of Chinese poems or mottos on the handouts he gave, and he also discussed the Chinese fonts he would use. He then wrote on a piece of paper with illustrative use of Chinese calligraphy brush strokes, alignment, spacing, connectedness, geometry, coherence, etc. After the demonstration, he marked assignments and gave feedback in front of the learners, and subsequently monitored classwork and provided scaffolding assistance. Apart from uploading the video of his demonstration to the YouTube channel which learners could watch, he also employed the augmented reality (AR) technology in a way that learners could choose the word they wanted to watch how to write it rather than going through the entire demonstration sequentially.

During the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, the class was suspended; the teacher kept teaching Chinese calligraphy via a WhatsApp group and YouTube broadcast but the learning outcomes were not very successful. The learners found learning alone difficult, gave few responses and did not submit assignments because they were not socially connected with their classmates in a classroom. The teacher thus switched to a synchronous mode of teaching delivery using Mobile Apps, the learners attended the online class and became motivated because they met each other regularly in order to have social interaction (see Figures 1 and 2). Besides, the learners asked questions and showed their classwork and the teacher could respond promptly. After class, they did assignments and submitted work for evaluation and the teacher gave feedback via WhatsApp. Most learners were satisfied with the synchronous mode of teaching delivery because it enabled more verbal exchanges and social interactions.



Figure 1: Attending an online class in a café



Figure 2: Online class

In the Chinese calligraphy lessons, the teacher taught how to read a word and subsequently form a perceptual image by decoding the visual information encoded on words including the patterns, clusters, gaps, spreads, and variations in brush strokes thus establishing a mental representation. This representation determines which parts of the word position along a common aligned scale on a vertical line or a horizontal line as well as the length, direction, angle, area, and curvature of each brush stroke (e.g., Figures 3 and 4) when reproducing the word on a piece of paper. The teaching pedagogy was grounded on Carpenter and Shah (1998) and Friel et al. (2001).

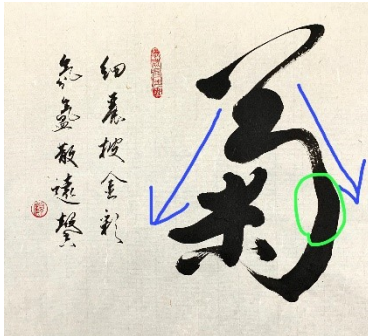


Figure 3: Direction and curvature

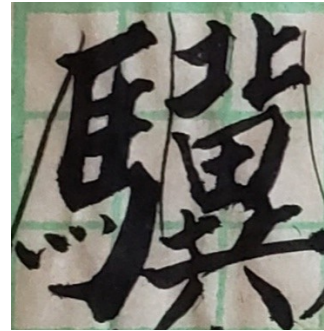


Figure 4: Shape and division of areas

The teaching pedagogy the teacher adopted in this technology-enriched environment took a learner's perspective involving a set of parameters, teacher, learners, and the inclusion of technology. Learners' motivation for learning within a technology-enriched environment would be related to the social context of learning around two major issues, peer interaction and learner-teacher interaction, and that is evident from the online classes.

Concerning the inclusion of technology, the teacher demonstrated concepts with the aid of a data projector, the AR technology, the YouTube broadcast, and WhatsApp. The learners benefited from watching the illustrative demonstration synchronized with his talk and brush strokes. The teacher prepared handouts in both hardcopy and softcopy. Although some elderly learner found it difficult to read a digital screen, especially when decoding the graphical information of a Chinese word, they could study the softcopy anytime and anywhere.

The teacher in this report is a keen Chinese calligrapher and has completed undergraduate education. He showed keen interest, confidence, and competency in integrating technology into classroom teaching and learning. He has positive attitudes, as well as sound interpersonal and relationship skills. His manner with people is warm, pleasant, and caring, and he can build rapport with people. His personal abilities and pedagogical beliefs, as well as subject content knowledge, are of paramount importance because student learning is sensitive to a knowledgeable teacher who prepares lessons to ensure a successful learning process.

The above model of pedagogy of teaching Chinese calligraphy in a technology-enriched environment was successful with the justifications in accordance with research studies in Bozkurt and Ruthven (2017), Drijvers et al. (2010), Geiger (2014), and Jeong and Hmelo-Silver (2016). In addition, the learners gave positive feedback, and expressed sincere thanks for their teacher's devotion to Chinese calligraphy teaching especially in the period of the epidemic of COVID-19. First, they felt better and connected because they were brought together having social interaction and being engaged in the online classes. Second, the teacher fostered a pleasant climate for learning and utilized technology to conduct online classes although some elderly learners encountered technical problems which were solved with their grandchildren's assistance. Third, the teacher was conscientious in organizing learning in the classroom and learners felt confident, competent, and autonomous. Fourth, the teacher was responsive by facilitating discussions, providing timely feedback to learners and motivating them to excel at Chinese calligraphy. Last but not least, learners were appreciative of the teacher's time and passion because the learners needed not to pay any tuition fee.

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