EMERGENCY REMOTE TEACHING IN THE EARLY TIMES OF COVID-19: an experience in Portuguese as a Foreign Language in China

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Abstract: The teaching of Portuguese as a Foreign Language in China was among the pioneering experiences of emergency remote teaching when distance learning has become global and essential. The contingencies of the epidemic in China made it a forerunner in this experience since the implementation of online classes in Chinese higher education started before Covid-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization. This study aims to analyse the consequences of emergency remote teaching and its impact on students learning and teacher's performance during that sensitive period. The methodology is based on questionnaires and interviews with college students of Portuguese who took online classes and who expressed their perspectives on the setbacks and the advantages of this experience. The introduction of this emergency remote teaching did not result from planning, structure, or prior intention, but was the result of exceptional contingencies. Therefore, the conclusions of this study focus on the positive arrangements that can be drawn from this experience. In the future, those procedures may be implemented with proper organization and consultation to enrich the teaching and learning of Portuguese as a Foreign Language in China.
Keywords: Portuguese as a Foreign Language; China; Emergency Remote Teaching; Media Literacy; COVID-19.

Resumo: O ensino de Português Língua Estrangeira na China esteve entre as experiências pioneiras de ensino remoto emergencial num tempo em que o ensino a distância se tornou global e imprescindível. O ensino superior chinês foi pioneiro nesta medida, dado que instituiu o ensino remoto antes de a Organização Mundial de Saúde declarar a COVID-19 como uma pandemia. Esta pesquisa tem como objetivo estudar as consequências do ensino de emergência no desempenho de professores e alunos durante esse período sensível. A metodologia é baseada em questionários e entrevistas a estudantes universitários de português que frequentaram as aulas online e que expressaram as suas perspetivas sobre as dificuldades e as vantagens dessa experiência. As conclusões deste estudo destacam os fatores positivos que emergem deste tipo de ensino. Futuramente, alguns destes procedimentos poderão ser adaptados com a adequada organização e orientação a fim de contribuir para o ensino de Português Língua Estrangeira na China.
Palavras-chave: Português Língua Estrangeira; China; Ensino Remoto de Emergência; Competência mediática; COVID-19.

1. Introduction

Pandemic times have posed an unprecedented challenge for all school institutions since remote teaching has suddenly become the main and only model of education ruled by the Ministries of Education of several countries with the support of various international organizations (Ferri, Grifoni & Guzzo, 2020) when most of the world population was in quarantine due to Covid-19 pandemic. The lockdown measures affected about 90% of the world's students (UNESCO, 2020a). This situation gave institutions, teachers, and students no time for training or prior specialization to prepare and structure this new format of interaction. The players in the teaching and learning process had to find out and explore, together and in real-time, new methods and teaching platforms.

In the case of China's higher education, online classes began to be implemented some time before the World Health Organization declared Covid-19 a pandemic on March 12, 2020. The Chinese Ministry of Education announced officially on February 5, 2020, measures for higher education institutions to implement online education, in cooperation with local and national authorities, during the period of lockdown aimed at the prevention and control of the pandemic. According to Zhu and Liu (2020), these guidelines recommended the recognition of teachers' online work hours as corresponding to the workload of face-to-face classes, encouraged the fostering of greater autonomy with digital teaching methods by teachers and students, and encouraged universities to develop strategies for assessing and crediting students' online learning. Within this framework, the second semester of the 2019/2020 academic year was postponed for two weeks, and the Chinese higher education classes restarted on February 24, 2020, in an online learning environment to cope with the restraining measures in force.

Teaching Portuguese at the university level in China was no exception, the Portuguese courses present in more than 50 institutions of higher education (Yan & Albuquerque, 2019) went through the same need to adapt to a new paradigm in which teachers and students have learned how to work and live together in an exclusively digital format. The present study focuses on the influence of emergency remote teaching on Portuguese students' learning at Sun Yat-sen University, located in the Chinese province of Guangzhou. For this purpose, the perspectives of students from a second-year Portuguese class at Sun Yat-sen University were collected to analyse the impact of these early days of remote learning caused by the Covid-19 outbreak.

This study aims to understand the particularities of teaching and learning Portuguese as a Foreign Language in China during the world's first emergency remote teaching experience caused by the Covid-19 pandemic; to examine the main difficulties encountered by students in this process; to analyse the interaction between teacher and student in remote teaching; to understand the added value of this teaching experience from the students'

perspective; to analyse the procedures that can be drawn from this experience and applied beyond the emergency remote teaching context.

Moreover, this investigation aims to contribute to the understanding of the singularities that Portuguese as a Foreign Language in China has faced amongst troubled times that have forced the teaching players (institutions, decision-makers, teachers, and students) to transform themselves and find new ways of working and interacting. Given the global dimension of this subject, this study also intends to gather students' opinions, experiences, and feelings that can be compared across different countries or contexts to provide a more comprehensive view of the problems faced by teaching during the early Covid-19 lockdown and the responses to overcome these common challenges.

2. Literature Review: Emergency Remote Teaching

The pandemic has probably generated the greatest disruption in education worldwide, directly affecting the people's lives and the prospects of their communities OECD (2020). In this context, education decision-makers took unprecedented and immediate measures to implement strategies to mitigate the educational impact of the pandemic. As the authorities throughout the world have declared isolation measures and advised against physical proximity to prevent the spread of the virus, educational institutions had to resort to non-face-to-face teaching, fostering Emergency Remote Teaching (hereafter referred to as ERT) as an immediate response to the COVID-19 outbreak.

According to Hodges et al. (2020), ERT is characterized by a temporary shift to an alternate teaching delivery model due to exceptional circumstances such as crises or catastrophes. ERT involves the use of wholly remote teaching solutions that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face (or in a hybrid format) but will return to its previous format once the crisis or emergency has subsided. The main objective in these circumstances is not to recreate a complete educational context, but rather to provide a temporary and quick alternative that is reliable and easy to put into effect during an emergency state (HODGES et al., 2020, p. 6). The choice of the term remote, rather than online, to define this type of teaching is because online learning can also occur in the same physical space in the interaction between teacher and student while ERT requires a physical distance, i.e., an effective remote interaction. Hodges et al. (2020, p. 8) also summarise the main differences between ERT and online learning. Accordingly, online learning requires the existence of carefully planned and structured curricula; courses designed to take place online; a previously prepared and organized implementation in terms of teaching materials, student follow-up, assessment, etc.; face-to-face contact whenever necessary; a high level of student's autonomy through new strategies and learning; teacher preparation

to design and facilitate online learning; the development of the online learning process sustainably and proactively. By contrast, ERT is defined by the little or no adaptation of the curriculum to the online teaching format, no courses previously designed for this type of teaching, and often defective implementation because of its urgent and temporary nature, the impossibility of face-to-face contact, and the lack of specific preparation both of teachers and students. Moreover, the ERT development takes place reactively, i.e., according to the problems and issues that arise at each moment. Regarding the theoretical delimitation between ERT and online learning, Gusso et al. (2020, p. 4) defend that these are not dichotomic categories with defined borders because in some university institutions the emergency response is closer to the characteristics of online learning, but in other institutions, a poor structured ERT is established owing to the lack of infrastructures, resources, teachers, and students training or an emergency pedagogical plan. Educational institutions with different resources and structures enable different online teaching conditions, just as they do in a face-to-face teaching format. Similarly, the living conditions in families and communities also influence the quality of ERT, since it is an unpredicted situation for which there is no preparation in terms of resources or knowledge.

The literature associates ERT with some advantages, namely saving time and travel, a broader teaching range, and more flexibility in learning. However, the main advantage is that it provides an alternative so that teaching doesn't stop throughout a global crisis. Consequently, during the pandemic, remote teaching should focus not only on the achievement of learning outcomes but also on developing a social, emotional, and humanitarian plan aiming to protect the physical and mental health of students and teachers. (Ferri et al., 2020; Gusso et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2020; Zhu and Liu, 2020). According to Bozkurt and Sharma (2020), ERT requires the cooperation of different players (for example, families, psychologists, sociologists, therapists, etc.) since in times of crisis, it is essential to care for and support students, while teaching content plays a secondary role (p. iv). The authors draw our attention to the need to teach how to share, collaborate, and support students during the isolation period, taking classes in inadequate physical spaces, and in an atmosphere of anxiety, stress, and psychological pressure as families and communities face serious problems.

The literature illustrates other problems that remote teaching faces, mainly the lack of technological devices and poor internet access, since the "lack of appropriate technology and expertise on online learning platforms are the main challenges faced by educators and academic institutions worldwide (Mohmmed, Khidhir & Nazeer, 2020, p. 3). On the other hand, many teachers and students have shown little confidence in digital teaching strategies owing to a lack of motivation caused by the loss of human

interaction, including the loss of nonverbal communication established through emotions, posture, or facial expressions (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Ferri et al., 2020; Moreira, Henriques & Barros, 2020). This non-face-to-face approach introduced by remote teaching is one of the main challenges caused by changes to traditional teaching practices. Although distance relationships, regardless of physical or spatial proximity, are increasingly common today, there was no general distance teaching process. However, it is worth pointing out that the non-face-to-face approach is not the only problem facing remote teaching. There are regions of the world where classrooms have large numbers of students and where little or no interaction between teacher and student exists, particularly in China where classes can comprise several tens or hundreds of students, and teaching methods tend to be less communicative (Liu, Zhang & Yin, 2014; Pires, 2019). Since the pandemic and its consequences extend indefinitely over time, there is the need to make the transition from emergency education to a sustained and well-defined distance education, designed to make full use of online media at the service of education and to make the online classroom an active space with its dynamics and not just a repository of content.

In accordance with Moreira et al., (2020) the main measures include providing teachers with more support and technological training, encourage students to develop their self-discipline and autonomy while learning, adjust curriculum objectives, and define digital assessment strategies. Student assessment is also one of the problems associated with remote teaching. According to Ferri et al. (2020, p. 15), some alternatives to improve summative assessment in online environments, can be assignments that the students may present or upload in the digital platforms or automated or manual assessment tests, including synchronous, in real-time exams. Due to the need for an emerging transition to sustainable online teaching, an ongoing and planned construction is required that encompasses these aspects and others such as equity and inclusion to ensure that all students have access to distance learning programmes or improved security and data protection. Reflecting on all these issues is imperative because as Bozkurt e Sharma (2020, p. iv) argue the causes for the education disruptions are not limited to pandemics; wars, conflicts, and natural disasters can be part of the future agenda as potential sources of disruption and make online education an ongoing reality.

The temporary and immediate characteristics of ERT have consequences on the quality of teaching, therefore this is not a long-term solution, but the temporary response to an immediate problem. ERT is sometimes the only solution to prevent the education of millions of students from being at a standstill or limited by the doubts and fears of today. In this sense, despite the instability and constraints, the Emergency Remote Teaching and especially the means that enable this type of education on a global scale, is a

symbol of the power of education, science, and the development of humanity, making it possible for learning and knowledge further advancing even among a crisis of colossal proportions. A product of education, *sensu lato*, in the service of education that demonstrates the creative and transforming capacity that humanity needs to face the future with hope.

3. Methods

The methodology of this study is based on questionnaires and interviews. First, questionnaires were given to 21 students from a second-year class of Portuguese, at the Sun Yat-sen University, in May 2020. To obtain the data more quickly and thoroughly and perform a more thorough analysis of the results, the questionnaires were completed through the online platform *Survey Monkey*. After answering the questionnaires, the same students were remotely interviewed during part of an online class to deepen the discussion about the main topics raised by their answers. The questionnaires comprised ten questions aiming to collect the students' views on some aspects which are approached by the literature on the subject, namely, the students' internet access conditions, the technological resources used, the teachers' preparation and performance to use this type of tools, the students' motivations to learn, and both the advantages and disadvantages of this type of teaching.

The sample selection was facilitated by the set of people consisting of a class of students, a "natural grouping of the population previously formed in which all elements are chosen". (Sousa & Baptista, 2000, p. 76). The questionnaire consists of closed-ended questions, simple or multiple choice from among the alternative answers, and open-ended questions, in which the participants answer in their own words. This is a mixed questionnaire, assuming the research process as a mosaic that describes a complex phenomenon and that needs to be open to new ideas, questions, and data, using both qualitative and quantitative procedures (Günther, 2006, p. 202). The language level was adequate for the sample, composed of students with an intermediate level of Portuguese. Before administering the questionnaire, a pre-test was carried out to review words that students might be less familiar with to "avoid non-response due to lack of understanding or serious errors in data collection" (Sousa & Baptista, 2000, p. 100). This pre-test enabled to improve the wording in some questions and assure the necessary conditions towards objectivity, clarity, and simplicity of the questionnaire to guarantee that it would be easy to complete and well understood by the students, key conditions for the answers to be systematized and analysed.

A focused interview was carried out allowing a longer and deeper dialogue about the researched subject. According to Gil (2008), the informal interview is used in experimental situations to explore experiences lived under specific conditions, addressing groups of people who have undergone a specific experience.

The topics for the interview were based on the main results obtained from the questionnaires and were addressed in a free and informal way. The interviewees openly exchanged their opinions on the topics. The questions followed a semi-structured script, giving freedom to the interviewees without letting them drift too much from the topic, to collect information focused on an individual or small group that "without time frames or with complete freedom, exposes their views" (Sousa & Baptista, 2000, p. 81). The three topics of the interview were the technological media and digital platforms, the interaction between teachers and students, and the qualities and difficulties of remote teaching. During the interview, the researcher wrote down the statements. Afterwards, the answers were coded, and a qualitative analysis of the topics covered was made.

4. Results

The results of the questionnaires are presented below with a brief and quantitative description of the answers, as well as the number of students and their percentage:

Table: Summarized questions and students' answers (in percent)

Question topics	Answers
1. Quality of Internet access.	Good: 75% Fair, with some interference: 25%
2. Communication/understanding problems due to the quality of the internet during classes.	Yes: 50% Sometimes: 25% No: 25%
3. Teachers use different methods or content in remote teaching.	No: 50% Yes, easier content: 25% Yes, drifted from the programme content, teach things not included in the plan (culture, festivities, etc.): 17% Yes, more informal: 8%
4. Ease to understand the content or subject matter of the classes	Face-to-face classes: 67% Remote teaching: 33%
5. Ease to ask questions or ask doubts	Face-to-face classes: 58% Remote teaching: 42%
6. Most used platforms, applications, or websites (each student could mention more than one).	*Tencent Meeting*: 80% *Seesaw*: 80% *UMU*: 55% *DingTalk*: 32% *Yuketang*: 22% *Zoom*: 16%
7. Motivation for remote teaching.	High: 8% More than in face-to-face classes: 8% The same as in face-to-face classes: 8% Less than in face-to-face classes: 68%

	Low: 8%
8. Teachers' performance in remote teaching	Better than in face-to-face classes: 16% The same as in face-to-face classes: 76% Worse than in face-to-face classes: 9%
9. Main positive aspects / Advantages of remote teaching.	Saving time (commuting and travelling): 42% Putting questions in writing to the teacher (in the chat boxes): 31% Reviewing the subjects (class recordings): 11% Improving the use of Internet tools: 8% The teacher can use Google: 8%
10. Main negative aspects / Disadvantages of remote teaching.	• Lack of interaction (absence of face-to-face contact, inability to concentrate for long periods, distractions due to side conversations with colleagues or home environment: 61% Lack of motivation: 15% Causing Laziness: 6% Internet Failure: 6% No breaks between classes: 6% Complex form of evaluation: 6%

Source: Author

5. Discussion

After collecting the questionnaires and performing a general reading of the results, the main topics were discussed with the students in a round-table interview that was held remotely during part of a Portuguese class. This discussion was divided into the following three topics: technological media and digital platforms, the interaction between teachers and students, and qualities and difficulties of remote teaching, thus providing a deeper understanding of the results.

Technological media and digital platforms

In general, students said they had good individual access to the Internet, except for some sporadic interference. However, students reported communication failures during classes that prevented them from hearing the teachers and forced them to turn off their cameras to ensure connection quality. If on the one hand, the individual access to the internet posed no problem while following and understanding the classes, on the other hand, difficulties would arise with the simultaneous presence of several people on the same platform. This situation led to communication failures, and some students became distracted and lost focus on the class during certain periods. Some students emphasized remote teaching as an opportunity to develop

computer skills on some online platforms and the fact that teachers could use Google whose access is not allowed on campus. The most used applications during remote teaching pointed out were *Tencent Meeting*, which has functionalities similar to the *Zoom* platform, as well as the tools *Seesaw*, *UMU,* and *Yuketang*. Among the applications, the students most enjoyed discovering and exploring are *Seesaw*, which allows students to do research and present assignments in various formats (written, audio, video, etc.), and *UMU* which is a multi-featured teaching platform in which users can prepare classes on different topics, create activities including gamification, or establish evaluation criteria tailored to classes and activities.

These platforms permitted teachers to upload videos or documents in audio format so that students could work on different language skills such as reading comprehension, oral comprehension, and production. Students were able to upload their reading aloud of texts or their oral responses to the requested tasks. The students pointed out that working oral and audio-visual skills have positive aspects in contributing to foreign language learning. However, they also confessed some exhaustion with these platforms and tasks over the semester since they meant extra work beyond the time of the remote teaching. The *Yuketang* application implemented in the university to control final exams is used to monitor the students in real-time while doing their exams. The students said that this application made them nervous because they were recorded, and if they opened a page or a programme on the computer, their teacher would be notified, causing the students even more pressure. This is an example of the questions requiring discussion in terms of security, privacy, and data protection, as argued by Ferri et al. (2020), Gusso et al. (2020), or UNESCO (2020a).

Interaction between teachers and students

Regarding the teachers' teaching methods and content during the remote teaching, the students said there were no significant differences from the face-to-face classes because the same teaching style and materials, namely textbooks, were used, though in digital format. However, they emphasized that the content of remote teaching was lighter or easier than in face-to-face classes and that teachers sometimes talked too much about other topics (culture, geography, sports, traditions, etc.) drifting away from the syllabus. These arguments are in line with the literature about the ERT and the emergence of an immediate shift from the face-to-face model to the digital platform without previous training in managing class time or prepare specific methods and materials. Students declared that teachers sometimes had difficulties with technology because they were using some digital platforms for the first time and needed the students' support to adapt to their functionalities. This mutual sense of discovery and support between teachers

and students resulting from the ERT is a peculiar aspect that makes the teaching process participative and collaborative.

The students also mentioned the lack of interaction with the teacher, regarding this as negative and demotivating. Nevertheless, many of them recognised feeling more comfortable to ask questions and doubts from their teacher. These students claimed that because they are shy, they avoid interrupting the teacher to ask questions in face-to-face classes but in remote teaching they do it more often (and discreetly) through written messages or in the chat box of the applications. The distance implied by remote teaching generally demotivates students and teachers. However, distance is regarded as positive among Chinese students. In face-to-face classes, Chinese learners tend to ask questions individually after the end of the class, not only due to the generally more reserved personality of the students but especially due to the Chinese learning culture, which instructs not to interrupt the teacher during the lecture. (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; Liu, Zhang & Yin, 2014; Pires, 2019).

Qualities and difficulties of remote teaching

This part of the study aims to discuss some particularities which the students have mentioned about remote teaching. In general, they declared that these classes allow them to follow the teachers' explanations and the materials used (such as textbooks or PowerPoints) more attentively. However, the learning environment change meant being unable to see their classmates, not being in a physical class, and the lack of competition among classmates made them feel demotivated or caused them many difficulties finding encouragement to study. The lack of study motivation was one of the main problems pointed out, increasing over the semester, and students ended up admitting that this semester they studied less than usual. Students also revealed the fatigue caused by the number of tasks and assignments that the teachers gave throughout the semester besides the remote teaching classes. From the students' perspective, teachers considered remote teaching less demanding but gave students more assignments to do, which made them feel overloaded with work.

It is also worth pointing out that students said the remote teaching and pandemic situation caused them a lot of physical and psychological exhaustion and made it very difficult to study for the exams. Students acknowledged that they found it very difficult to focus on learning and establish a study discipline. For these reasons, some admitted that they sometimes undertook other activities while the teachers were teaching remotely, such as playing computer games, tidying up their rooms, talking on the phone with other people, etc. Moreover, students stated that since class participation was based on the student's presence on the digital platform,

having the camera off, it was easy to deceive the teacher and do other things during classes.

Accordingly, the students found that the lack of motivation, interest, or focus on content, and self-discipline in studying were the main difficulties encountered, especially as the semester progressed and exhaustion from remote teaching built up. Still worth pointing out that two students who stayed on the university campus and admitted suffering from a heavier burden of worry and psychological exhaustion as they went through this phase alone, away from their families. The epidemic in China started during the Chinese New Year holiday period when most students were at home, where they remained - as ruled by the authorities and the university - for the entire semester. The situations experienced by these two students are clear examples of the need to make students' physical and mental health a priority (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Gusso et al., 2020; Hodges et al., 2020).

There are other relevant issues, although not directly part of the roundtable script. Within this context, students mentioned that in the university's Physics, Mathematics, or Chinese Language degrees, both students and teachers found remote teaching more difficult since classes comprised around 120 students, which caused huge problems as far as remote teaching interaction and management are concerned. Another disadvantage mentioned in learning Portuguese, not because of remote teaching but because of the pandemic context, was the fact that students could not take the student exchange programme, as usual, in the third year of the course. Usually, students have the opportunity to study for one year in higher education institutions in Portugal or Brazil, but this year, students cannot do it due to circulation restrictions. Unlike other areas of knowledge, language learning is particularly influenced by the context of immersion, not only linguistically but also from a sociocultural point of view. This is an opportunity that these students will not have and that they consider being a disadvantage compared to students from other years, causing demotivation given the expectations created about the exchange. In fact, this is one of the many consequences that the pandemic times have caused in higher education.

6. Conclusions

The emergency remote teaching in China generated by the pandemic was limited to the timeframe between February and June/July 2020, corresponding to the second semester of the academic year 2019/2020. Since the beginning of the 2020/2021 academic year in August of last year, classes have been running as usual, i.e., face-to-face. In some countries, on the contrary, classes have been held online since the beginning of the pandemic, and in others, online teaching restarted after the disruption caused by the aggravation of the spread of the virus. In China, perhaps because of measures such as border restrictions or a mandatory two to three-week quarantine

period upon entry into the country, there has been more control of the spread of the virus resulting in the non-existence or very few cases of transmission. These aspects mean that the range of remote emergency teaching is, to date, limited only to the above-mentioned months of last year. However, some consequences are arising from the emergency teaching that can be empirically verified in the face-to-face teaching at Sun Yaen University, such as the increase in the use of online platforms to explore content, prepare presentations or do homework, namely *DingTalk*, *UMU,* or *Seesaw* which enable to work with materials in different formats; the live broadcast of lessons for students who cannot be in the classroom due to force majeure, namely international students who are not yet allowed to enter the country; the recording of the lessons which allows students to study and review content later on; more frequent uses of online applications through which students discuss topics among themselves or present doubts and ask questions to the teachers; the more participative and significant role of the online aspect with influence on the students' final evaluation.

Presently, education systems and higher education institutions face some of the most impressive changes in their history. Taking advantage of the significant role of the pandemic, which has pushed the world into the unexpected need to embrace remote teaching, our current challenge is to shift from emergency teaching to online learning with an adequate structure and consolidation producing a regular and productive counterpart to classroom teaching and an alternative in terms of supply and learning possibilities. The emergency remote teaching enhanced the role of technology in education, allowing new ways for discovery and the interaction between teacher and student. For these reasons, emergency remote teaching does not introduce a contrast or opposition between online and face-to-face classes but precipitates compatibility or complementarity between the physical and the digital format that must necessarily continue to be built. The regular implementation of technology is a means through which the students can express themselves, interact, and explore their learning needs. The teachers' importance is highlighted by the technology while extending the classroom boundaries and developing new teaching models and reaching the students.

Technology does not threaten the role of the teachers nor their importance. On the contrary, it helps teachers gathering more skills to represent an even richer source of motivation and inspiration for today's and tomorrow's students. The pandemic has shown that despite the flexibility and accessibility that technologies enable, online teaching is complex and highly demanding for students and teachers. The students stated in the interview, convergingly and conclusively, that face-to-face can never be replaced by online teaching. Therefore, once this crisis is over, universities will not disregard their efforts, nor the investments made. Society and education require technology as a changing and inclusive means representing an ally for

education, solidarity, interaction, and human connection, which are urgently needed values nowadays.

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