

Teaching Languages Remotely: Issues, Hurdles and Successes

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic forced countless colleges and universities worldwide to switch to online teaching, and many language instructors delivered their course content the usual way but remotely. This synchronous solution was motivated by the urgency of the situation but also by the common belief that languages cannot be learned efficiently without the simultaneous presence of the teacher and other learners. However, new technologies at our disposal increasingly dispel this myth by rendering asynchronous language teaching very efficient despite a few challenges. This paper presents data from Université TÉLUQ, the world's oldest French-speaking distance university, offering remote language courses for more than 40 years in a minority setting, namely a French-speaking province in English-speaking North America. We present challenges posed by teaching asynchronously in remote settings and various solutions to circumvent or overcome these challenges.

Keywords: second language teaching, online language teaching

Streszczenie

Zdalna nauka języków: problemy, przeszkody i sukcesy

Pandemia COVID-19 zmusiła niezliczone uczelnie i uniwersytety na całym świecie do przejścia na nauczanie zdalne, a wielu nauczycieli językowa prowadziło swoje kursy w zwykły sposób, choć zdalnie. To synchroniczne rozwiązanie było motywowane pilnością sytuacji, ale także powszechnym przekonaniem, że języków nie można efektywnie uczyć się bez jednoczesnej obecności nauczyciela i innych uczniów. Jednak nowe technologie, którymi dysponujemy, w coraz większym stopniu obalają ten mit, sprawiając, że asynchroniczne nauczanie języków jest bardzo wydajne pomimo szeregu wyzwań. Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia dane z Université TÉLUQ, najstarszego na świecie francuskojęzycznego uniwersytetu, gdzie nauczanie prowadzone jest na odległość, od ponad 40 lat oferującego zdalne kursy językowe w środowisku mniejszości, a mianowicie we francuskojęzycznej prowincji, która znajduje się w anglojęzycznej

Ameryce Północnej. Przedstawiamy wyzwania stawiane przez nauczanie asynchroniczne w systemie zdalnym oraz różne rozwiązania mające na celu obejście lub przezwyciężenie tych wyzwań.

Słowa kluczowe: nauka języka obcego, zdalna nauka języka

1. Introduction

1.1. Historical overview of remote language courses

Distance education originated several decades ago to provide learning opportunities to people who had no easy access to traditional classroom instructional settings. Archer and Harrison (2010) pointed out that there have been three generations of distance education.

The *first generation* consists of asynchronous teaching, formerly referred to by the term *correspondence education*. Learners would receive a complete course package by mail, sometimes with a phone number to call if they had questions. They would mail out their assignments to a given address. The main advantage of that type of distance education is that it addresses the issue of geographical distance. In Quebec, university learners who lived 100 or even 1,000 km from the nearest university did not have to move anymore to get a post-secondary education. In some cases, the main disadvantage of such courses is that they did not involve two-way interaction, except for the questions asked over the phone. Due to shipping delays, distance courses could only offer delayed feedback. Within this first generation, there were three major stages: (1) starting in the 18th century, written documentation could be mailed back and forth across long distances in order to inform the recipient about scientific developments, (2) starting in the 1920s, information of that nature could be broadcast over the radio and in the 1970s by television, and (3) starting around the 1980s with the advent of multimedia, the courses' written content could be accompanied by recorded vinyl discs, tapes, cassettes and CDs.

The following figure shows an example of a first-generation English course for non-native speakers, dating back to 2004.

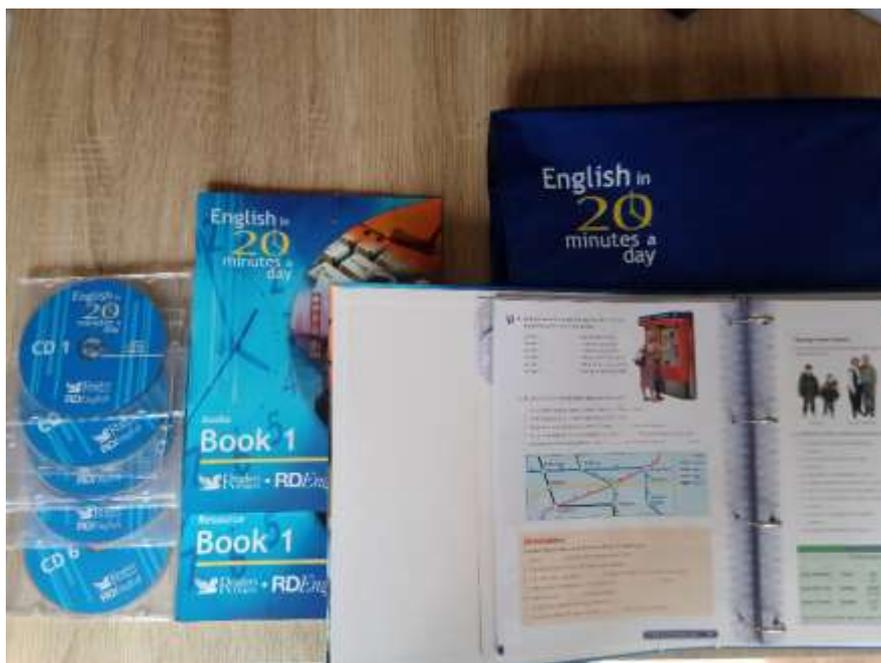


Figure 1. A first-generation ESL course (Reader's Digest, 2004). Photo by authors.

The *second generation* consists of synchronous teaching. In remote areas with no access to traditional classes, pupils would go to a classroom and watch their teacher broadcast live on a screen, teaching remotely from a different city. It is worth noting that this change in generation did not imply going from completely asynchronous to completely synchronous teaching. In the early stages of this second generation, the teacher was teaching on TV, but the signal was unidirectional and learners could not ask questions. After introducing more frequent contact between instructors and learners and greater personal support, including two-way communication and group interaction, distance courses ceased taking significantly more time, as barriers to completion were easier to overcome. Such courses also required much less preparation on the instructor's part than the previous and the following generations. The main disadvantage is that all learners and instructors had to be available simultaneously.

The *third generation* has become the most current type of distance education in Western countries. It consists of online teaching aided by various technological resources at our disposal. Its main advantage is that it facilitates the transmission of learners' and instructors' input via the Internet. However, its main disadvantage is that this type of teaching has become a victim of overinflated expectations: asynchronous courses do not always allow learners enough practice.

1.2. Historical overview of remote language courses

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, countless teaching institutions were forced to switch to remote teaching, including for their language courses. We witnessed numerous options to

offer education using different media, but despite the growing number of media possibilities for distance education, a lack of preparation time and sometimes a lack of digital skills had many instructors continue teaching as if they were in class, but remotely. This type of second-generation synchronous teaching is not the topic of this paper, which focuses mainly on asynchronous or partly asynchronous distance teaching.

Third-generation methods have had a major impact on course design. Various models of remote teaching emerged, such as (1) "exclusive" remote learning, by which courses can be made available online for learners to watch at a specific time or convenience, (2) blended (hybrid) learning, which is a combination of face-to-face and remote learning, and (3) Hyflex (for *hyper-flexible*) learning, where a course is taught simultaneously in-person and online through the use of a webcam in the classroom, with the support of various software. It consists of integrating technology and web-based resources into "traditional" teaching.

Many language instructors have experienced more than one of these models during the pandemic. Tools available at the various institutions also had an impact on instructors' decisions in terms of course design. For example, some instructors had access to a learning management system (e.g. Moodle) and/or video platforms (Teams or Zoom) to fulfil the communication needs of language courses. These tools allowed instructors to create breakout rooms for learners to interact or work in smaller groups. As a result, the platforms and the learning context can impact course design.

1.3. Overview of Quebec and TÉLUQ demographics

According to the 2021 Canadian census, out of an estimated Canadian population of 36 991 981, the province of Quebec numbers 8 501 833 residents (Statistics Canada, 2021). Teaching second languages is made particular in a place like Canada's province of Quebec. Despite being surrounded by English-speaking North America, and part of an officially bilingual country, Quebec has French as its only official language. The following figure displays the rate of bilingualism for that French-speaking province. It is worth noting that in this context, "speaking a language" means having the ability to conduct a conversation in that language.

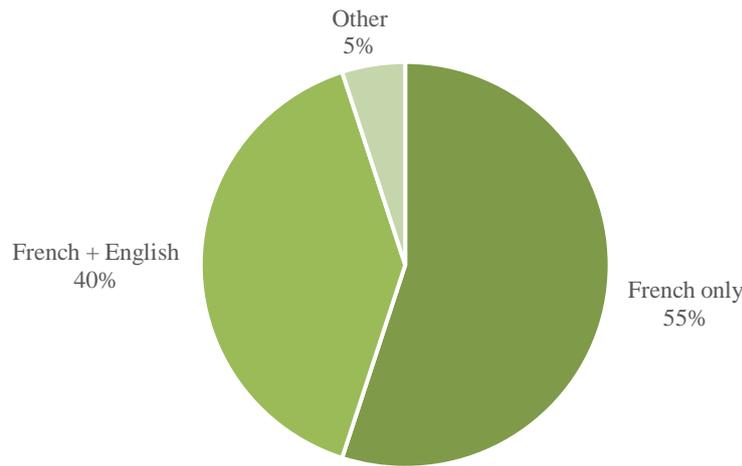


Figure 2. Languages spoken in Quebec (in percentage).

The percentages shown in Figure 2 can be misleading, since the percentage of bilingual people varies substantially across regions. Among its population of 8 million, 78% speak French as their L1 (MSSS, 2021), but Montreal's cosmopolitan population brings down this percentage. All the major cities outside the Greater Montreal Area are mainly francophone, with above 90% of the population speaking French only. For example, the percentage of native speakers of English in the Capital –Quebec City– is only 1.4% (Leclerc, 2020). Regarding bilingualism, it has crossed 35% among French speakers (id.), but again, this is primarily due to the Greater Montreal Area, outside which that percentage is much lower.

In the late 1960s, when the province of Quebec decided to create a network of universities (UQ, for *Université du Québec*) in order to offer higher education over a much larger geographical area, an additional branch was created in order to reach the rest of the population living in remote locations. The Télé-Université was then founded as the first French-speaking distance university in the world. Created in 1972, it celebrated a half-century in 2022. Better known nowadays as Université TÉLUQ (Henceforth *TÉLUQ*), second language teaching has been offered remotely for more than 40 years. In 1979, the first English and Spanish courses were offered after purchasing them from France's national correspondence teaching center ("Centre national d'enseignement par correspondance"). Those were "paper" courses developed for a French audience, with British form and content for English and Spanish form and content from Spain. As soon as it became possible, replacement courses were developed to offer versions based on North-American varieties (Canadian English; Standard American English) of those languages. The first French as a second language course was created that same year.

Standard Quebec French was chosen as the variety to teach. This decision might seem obvious today, but until the 1960s, faculty members from Europe were preferred to avoid Quebecois French being taught to second language learners (Auger, 2003).

Three second languages (L2) are currently taught at TÉLUQ: French, English and Spanish. It took time for language courses to appear and expand, and their expansion has been slower than most of the university's other fields or disciplines. This phenomenon is due to two widely held beliefs related to language courses, namely that (1) languages cannot be taught or learned efficiently in distance learning settings and that (2) distance language courses must be synchronous. In fact, synchronicity is seen as an important requirement for language learning success, more so than for other academic matters. As Wang and Chen (2007) stated, "The provision of synchronous interaction to support effective online learning is a key issue addressed by many researchers." (p.2) This wide support for synchronicity is anchored in what we know about the importance of social interactions for language learning (Gass, 2003, Sert, 2019) and is shared by instructors and learners alike (An & Thomas, 2021). However, even though L2 learning may be boosted through interaction, much learning can also occur through non-interactive practice (see gains reported using Duolingo, extensive viewing, gaming, etc.). New technologies at our disposal increasingly dispel this myth by rendering asynchronous language teaching very efficient, which is the topic on which this paper will focus. Table 1 shows figures for language courses and learners since 1983, when such data compilations began.

Table 1. Number of language courses and learners, TÉLUQ.

Domain	Number of courses		Total number of learners	Learners registered (2021)
	1983	2021		
English L2	4	12	42,000	521
Spanish L2	4	9	10,000	236
French L1/L2	5	11	36,000	1237

1.4. Learner profile

Around the turn of the century, distance education exploded. In Quebec, between 1995 and 2005, the number of people taking distance courses increased by 80% (Pilon, 2006, p. 9), while the general learner population increased by only 7.5 % over the same period (Crépuq, 2005, n.p.). At the same time, the percentage of TÉLUQ learners under the age of 30 rose from 39.5 to 45.3% (TÉLUQ, 2004, n.p). Learners' sociodemographic profiles thus started resembling more and more those of traditional classroom learners (Pichette, 2009). The dichotomy between classroom and distance learners also began to disappear: In 2009, 35% of the more than 20,000 distance learners at TÉLUQ also took classroom courses at other universities (Pichette, 2009), and that number had almost doubled to 68% by 2019, just before the Covid-19 pandemic hit. That trend is widespread: In 2016, almost half (43.1%) of American university students were also taking online courses (Snyder, Brey, & Dillow, 2018). The percentage of distance learners taking traditional classes has continued to increase constantly.

Nowadays, some differences still exist, the most noticeable being that distance learners remain, on average, slightly older than campus learners. Figure 3 presents the learner profile with data from the university registrar's database.

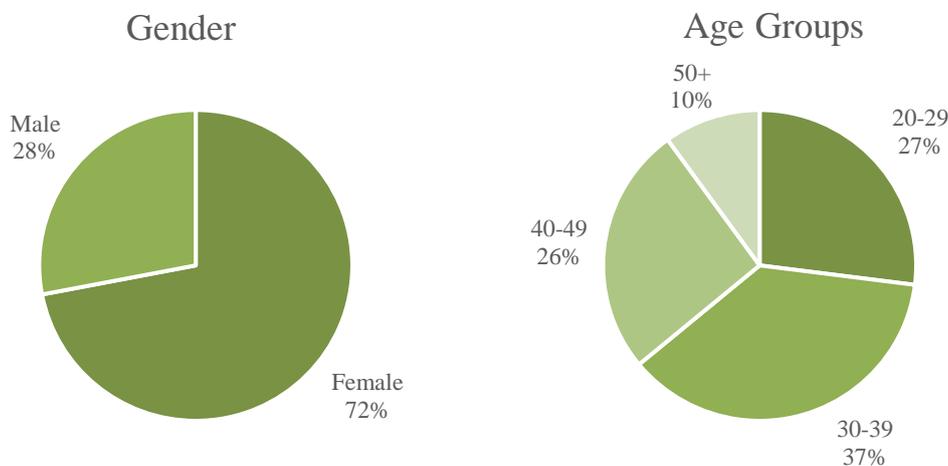


Figure 3. TÉLUQ learner profile 2022.

As evidenced in Table 2 (below), in the late 20th century, learners took distance courses mainly for reasons of accessibility. Above everything else, distance courses were chosen for the lack of universities in the learners' region of residence. That reason is now a thing of the past for most distance learners: For about ten years now, most of our learners have been from major cities (Loisier, 2013). As of 2022, 45% of Teluq students reside in either Montreal or Quebec City,

and 77% reside within 50 kilometers of a campus university. A couple of decades ago, the second main reason learners opted for distance courses was that they were not available during regular work hours. Lack of availability is represented here by the term *schedule*, which combines two situations: Not being available either because of a work schedule that overlaps classroom hours (34%) or not being available due to a family situation (18%; MEES, 2015). It is worth noting that this reason of unavailability has become the main one that learners invoke today. Currently, the second main reason is that distance courses are selected for simple convenience and preference. Easier access to distance courses plays a lesser role since it concerns a relatively low percentage of learners, whose physical limitations make it difficult to physically go to class or with psychological limitations that make them prefer to study from home.

Table 2. Reasons for taking distance courses.

2000	2015
1. Accessibility	1. Schedule (52%)
2. Schedule	2. Preference (34%)

As Table 2 also suggests, distance learners tend to be or claim to be quite busy, hence their choice of online courses. For the same reason, a high percentage of them request deadline extensions; it represents 27.5 percent of our students over the 2017-2022 period. Among the drawbacks of distance learning, studying on our own requires more self-discipline and autonomy, and this reality explains that the drop-out rates are higher in distance learning than in classroom learning.

2. Creating an online language course: Challenges and solutions

2.1. The main challenges

Language instructors aiming at teaching languages remotely face various challenges. We grouped the challenges into four main categories: student diversity, language practice, language assessment, and feedback.

- **Student diversity.** Second language groups are often heterogeneous when it comes to their academic profile. Since language courses are required in different programs, language instructors face more heterogeneous groups than their colleagues in terms of background, expertise, and expectations. This is further amplified in remote learning by the broader range of learners' sociodemographic profiles, as discussed earlier in this article. Moreover, in remote settings, there is the possibility of an increasing number of learners who do not live in the same province or country. Having learners in various time zones also poses challenges.
- **Language practice and interaction.** The language learners' desire and need to interact orally in the target language poses various challenges for remote teaching. At our university, for example, learners can begin a course at any week of the year. In the absence of cohorts like in classroom settings, and the fact that each learner progresses at their own pace, we cannot ask a group of learners to work on specific content at a specific time, but we must offer them opportunities to practice. As a result, compared to classroom settings, we tend to give learners more individual practice than in classroom teaching, but slightly less time for group practice. Learners get to prepare presentations and interact with their professor or tutor¹ more than with their peers. With regards to interaction, we cannot require learners to simply record their voice in the form of presentations without any interaction with an interlocutor at any time. Monologic tasks elicit significantly different performances than dialogic tasks in terms of fluency (Gagné, French & Hummel, 2022). Promoting interaction in distance settings between learners and instructors and among learners is then a major challenge, and it implies creating communities, networks and groups.
- **Language assessment.** Assessing spoken production and spoken interaction is another important challenge. Spoken interaction requires setting appointments, and this synchronous aspect of distance teaching is usually the most challenging part for both instructors and learners. In addition, even though most universities set up smaller language course classes to enhance production and interaction, such a rule for more efficient progress does not apply to asynchronous online teaching.
- **Feedback.** Feedback can serve various functions, such as (1) supporting learners in their learning endeavour (also referred to as *supportive feedback*), (2) allowing them to adjust

¹ Tutors are university employees who assist professors with answering students' questions and assessing them. Since a single course can have hundreds of registered students simultaneously, the students that the professor does not supervise directly are assigned to tutors.

their production (*formative feedback*), or (3) assessing them. Remote learning and online environments affect how feedback can be delivered. *Formative* feedback is the main challenge in that context. In a regular classroom, the teacher can quickly provide learners with immediate feedback (orally, when errors impede comprehension), but only delayed feedback can be provided if learners submit voice recordings. This highlights the importance of providing synchronous opportunities for learners to have their output assessed.

In sum, creating an efficient online language course requires addressing the main challenges listed above, but before even addressing these challenges, there are important factors to take into consideration when planning online language learning courses. The instructors first need to determine: (1) if they will teach entirely online, or if they will alternate between distance and classroom, (2) if they offer the content entirely synchronous or asynchronous, or in a hybrid setting, (3) how they will establish communication between them and the learners, and among learners, and (4) the tools that are made available or imposed by their organization, such as a digital environment or a learning management system.

The four considerations above are not independent of one another. For example, the type of interaction offered to the learners, making them work in smaller sub-groups, will depend on the group composition, and the feedback will depend on the task type.

2.2. Asynchronous language courses: Addressing the main challenges

The next section will address the main challenges and highlight practical and pedagogical considerations to promote learning in online language learning courses.

2.2.1. Addressing group heterogeneity

The first challenge listed above is that of group heterogeneity. Since online language instructors usually face heterogeneous groups regarding their program and background, that challenge could be overcome by selecting various topics and themes in distance learning settings to best suit their learners' needs and interests. As a result, using the STEAM education approach may be a good option to provide learners with thematic flexibility and interesting options. STEAM stands for *Science, Technology, Engineering, the Arts and Mathematics*. By combining disciplines and integrating various access points, the approach may support student's motivation for learning. Those domains of knowledge are used for guiding learners' inquiry, dialogue, and critical thinking (Madden et al., 2013; Perignat & Katz-Buonincontro, 2019).

In addition to addressing group heterogeneity through the STEAM approach, which allows transdisciplinary work, instructors can go one step further and address their learners' frequent wide range of geographical locations through careful thematic choices within the STEAM approach. As the approach allows for developing critical thinking skills, the selected themes are generally "non-local". Instructors should avoid allusions to local people and events. In a classroom setting, those allusions are suitable since learners live in the same area. In distance courses, some learners live abroad and might have little or no knowledge about life in your area of residence, and there might also be sociocultural differences at play.

2.2.2. Addressing the need for language practice

Among spoken interaction activities, the main ones that come to mind are live group chats and paired conversations. Live chats are a good option if your group allows for it in terms of size and location (time zones). Other factors that make it challenging to organize oral interaction activities include continuous registration and the fact that learners progress at their own pace (students are not necessarily at the same unit/module at the same time). As an alternative, instructors can arrange an appointment to allow students to have an authentic conversation (between learners or between a learner and an expert speaker with a similar profile). Such conversations require a learning management system or a platform to support videoconference and –most importantly– a scheduler to set up appointments. The discussion should also be carefully and thematically planned to best promote oral interaction among learners/facilitator and learners.

In terms of system, different platforms are allowing us to combine the advantages of all three generations of distance education types. Learning management systems (LMS) or Digital learning environments (DLE) enable instructors to offer courses online in which users can upload or share different types of content (audio, video or text). They can also use different communication tools (chat, videoconference) and create learning and evaluation situations. Learning management systems such as Moodle, Canvas or Blackboard may be used to create and structure content. Instructors can add various documents (text, images, pdfs or slideshows) to trigger group discussions and enhance interaction in the course.

In a more learner-centred approach, digital learning environments offer an online environment that includes both services and tools to support the teaching and learning needs in all modes (i.e., face-to-face, blended/hybrid, and fully online), allowing instructors and learners to manage videos, content, quizzes or just-in-time learning capsules, for example. DLEs are not based on only one application but on multiple technologies and services, providing learners with

more flexibility. DLEs usually come with a digital curriculum, a learning management system (e.g. Moodle or Canvas), devices, personalized learning and various opportunities for collaboration (synchronously or asynchronously). In sum, using a DLE means you will create groups, networks, and communities, design content and scaffold instruction, offer guidance (synchronously and asynchronously) and use multiple devices such as an LMS and different tools such as Facebook or LinkedIn to promote interaction. These tools allow learners to have access to various opportunities to practice.

2.2.3. Addressing language assessment

Most second-language speakers want to have conversations in the L2, which means being able to interact orally in the target language rather than only producing strings of language or monologues. Assessing oral performance can be done using various task types. Voice recordings allow instructors to assess oral proficiency only partially. Generally, a task like a recording (monologic task) can be used to assess spoken production and aspects of the performance such as pronunciation or range of vocabulary. Other aspects of oral proficiency, such as the interactive process, the capacity to maintain real-time interaction, bound to place and moment, and link the production to the interlocutor, require spoken interaction such as a dialogic task. As a result, to fully assess spoken interaction, interactive tasks are needed. As assessing oral interaction can hardly be done asynchronously, learners need an appointment with an evaluation facilitator. Depending on the level, task types may vary, and learners may have to prepare a presentation, a debate or discuss a specific topic. When preparing such an assignment, one has to bring to bear all the skills learned and go beyond what was seen in class to use it in an authentic conversation. To overcome the challenge of language assessment in asynchronous remote learning, instructors can combine different tasks to allow learners to perform various task types.

2.2.4. Addressing language feedback

Formative feedback greatly contributes to learner success (Hattie & Yates, 2014). Feedback in all learning contexts may focus on content or form. In a synchronous mode, we may question our learners to elicit more language or ask for clarification. We also want to offer correction if, for example, a formulation impedes comprehension or if we want to focus on accuracy. Some instructors tend to correct everything but also want to encourage students. Therefore, feedback could be supportive or corrective. In remote learning contexts, instructors and learners must

also consider that learners will not always get immediate feedback. In an asynchronous learning mode, instructors will provide learners mainly with delayed feedback and comment on various aspects of spoken or written production. Using a rubric after the activity is a strategy instructors can use to provide students with delayed feedback. The challenges are different between writing and oral activities. As delayed feedback is expected in writing, providing feedback in remote learning settings does not pose any particular challenge compared with regular settings. However, providing feedback on oral performance might be more challenging. For example, an asynchronous activity done orally, such as a recording, can only elicit delayed feedback. Integrating synchronous activities will allow instructors and learners to access a broader range of feedback. The challenges instructors face are then similar to those encountered in a regular teaching context: What to correct? When to correct? What feedback type to use? Finally, combining task types and offering students feedback of various types, delayed or immediate, supportive or corrective, will allow instructors and their learners in remote learning contexts to address language feedback more efficiently.

2.3. Finding a balance: An example

Language instructors face various challenges in teaching languages remotely, especially in an asynchronous mode. Considering heterogeneity in the group, simultaneously addressing practice assessment and feedback is demanding for language instructors. Figure 4 is an example of an ESL course at TÉLUQ on advanced academic productive skills (writing and oral communication). The course is divided into four modules, each consisting of three units, with their themes along with the STEAM approach to address student heterogeneity. The course targets advanced learners using a textbook called *University Success (transition level)* by Christina Cavage (2017), designed for English for Academic Purposes. The content is aligned with an online management system (MyEnglishLab), through which students can access online lectures and various learning activities. The first sections of each module are based on activities that allow students to explore fundamentals and critical thinking skills for each theme, following which they finally use the extended context in an authentic task (in writing or orally). The structure is integrated into an LMS platform (Moodle), since the material is used in an asynchronous context. In addition to what the platform offers, we added an appointment scheduler for synchronous activities to address the students' need to practice in an asynchronous mode. Various task types are offered to students. First, there are monologic tasks such as impromptu presentations on familiar and unfamiliar topics and scripted presentations. These tasks target spoken production and are tied to the course objectives while allowing students to

analyse their performance in different contexts. To address the objectives related to spoken interaction, interactive activities with synchronous oral interaction tasks (e.g. extemporaneous presentations and process presentations to a targeted audience) are also part of the learning progression in this course. The combination of task types offers multiple opportunities for language practice while allowing flexibility, an important factor to consider when students choose asynchronous learning courses. At the same time, while using various task types promotes second language development, it also allows instructors to benefit from different performance types to assess language production and learners have access to the advantages of immediate and delayed feedback.

Figure 4. Course *Advanced oral and written productions*.

3. Conclusion

The post-pandemic era will hopefully allow language instructors and learners to overcome widely-held beliefs that language courses are hardly compatible with remote learning settings. Several challenges await language instructors regarding distance teaching if they want to offer

efficient and motivating courses, especially in an asynchronous mode. As the challenges are mainly related to the need for learners to practice and for instructors to assess and provide learners with feedback in an authentic context to allow language development, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a positive impact by somehow having the language learning instructors and learners embrace remote language teaching. We hope that implementing the few solutions suggested in this paper will facilitate their task. In the end, we can also hope this may allow more non-traditional learners to access second language learning in remote learning settings.

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