



Providing a more compassionate and equitable world language education to learners of color during and after the pandemic: An example from an early college program

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ABSTRACT

This article describes how a world language educator learned to create a more compassionate and equitable curriculum for students from low-income and historically underrepresented communities in her early college during the COVID-19 pandemic. Resources and ideas are shared in the hope of fueling continuous endeavors in world language education, especially for those from minority ethnic and racial groups.

Keywords: Social and emotional learning, compassion, equity, world language education, students of color

INTRODUCTION

The global COVID-19 pandemic exposed inequities and challenges in education that demand a different response than in the past. In response to making college more accessible to at-risk and underrepresented populations, an early college that received Title I funds was founded in 2019 to serve economically disadvantaged student populations – 93% black, 5% Hispanic/Latino, and 2% multiple races (the 2020-21 school profile). The mission of my early college institution is “to improve the transition from high school to college and increase access and success in higher education. We do this by offering high school-age students, particularly those from low-income and historically underrepresented communities, a tuition-free college program of study in the liberal arts and sciences, and by working to influence and lead a national movement for early college education focused on quality and equity” (School website). The 2020-21 academic year was the most challenging year to address the school mission, as we were not only fighting

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the challenges that already existed before the pandemic, but also learning to acquire a new set of skills to overcome the challenges created by the pandemic. Due to COVID-19, many students expressed their frustrations and suffered discomfort in remote learning in the spring 2020 semester, such as limited internet access in attending and completing their assignments, lack of social-emotional and academic support, etc. These issues related to systematic educational injustice continue to impact and are more likely to be exacerbated among students of color, which calls for institutional and curricular change (Mize & Glover, 2021). As a newly hired founding faculty in Chinese language and culture from the World Language Department at this early college in fall 2020, I was expected to continue carrying out the school mission by providing a rigorous course of study that emphasizes critical thinking through writing, discussion and inquiry during the pandemic when implementing the world language curriculum. Working with my school district, school leadership team, and colleagues, I, as a world language educator, planned to provide a more compassionate and equitable world language education to my students while maintaining a rigorous college-level curriculum during the pandemic in the 2020-21 academic year.

PROVIDING A MORE COMPASSIONATE WORLD LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has steadily gained popularity in educational settings (Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015) for creating a more “compassionate” environment, which was especially needed during the pandemic as we, representing a great variety of racial and economic backgrounds, learned to cope with various situations in our lives. In my school, all the faculty and students were part of this new SEL curriculum (CASEL, 2020) to enhance interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive competence through five core SEL skills – self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills (McClure, 2019). Specifically, all the faculty attended SEL trainings hosted by the school district and leadership weekly on Wednesdays for an hour. With a ratio of two faculty members to 10 students, a safe and private space was created for us to build a trusted relationship. The faculty ran a 30-minute advisory course where SEL classes were offered to students every Monday and Friday, and provided individual help on Wednesday. Noting the fact that faculty have their expertise in certain fields and students have their own specific needs, our SEL curriculum, as opposed to the traditional SEL curriculum, has the freedom to tailor and accommodate diverse voices. As a world language educator, I took this opportunity to discuss topics associated with current news, such as Black Lives Matter during the fall 2020 semester and Asian hate and Asian crimes during the spring 2021 semester, where “compassion” was emphasized. This reflection

process encouraged both teachers and students to actively examine the privilege and biases within ourselves in relation to our social environments. I then took it one step further to discuss why learning a different language and culture is essential as global citizens in the 21st century, living in an interconnected world (ACTFL, 2014). Please refer to Table 1 and Table 2 for an example.

Table 1.

The SEL Curriculum (adapted from McClure, 2019, p. 88)

Self-Management

SEL Prompt 1.12

Jose was pushing Martin in the pool and splashing him. Martin asked Jose to stop, but Jose didn't stop. The lifeguard made the boys sit out of the pool for ten minutes.

Question 1: How do you think Martin feels? Why?

Question 2: Why did Jose keep pushing and splashing Martin after Martin asked him to stop?

Question 3: Why did the lifeguard make the boys get out of the pool?

Table 2.

Providing a more compassionate world language education

The author and the co-teacher asked the students:

1. Do you think that it is fair when the lifeguard made "Martin" get out of the pool & why or why not?
 2. Divided students into two groups – one group that answered "yes" and another that answered "no." Do you think that people in your community (e.g., Asian, African American, Caucasian, Mexican, etc.) would have the same answer as yours & Why or why not?
 3. Please keep "Martin's case" in mind when reflecting on the recent news "Asian hate or Asian crime."
 - a. Why do people discuss "Asian hate or Asian crime?"
 - b. Do you think that world language education at your school would foster your understanding among different ethnic groups and prepare you as a global citizen & Why or why not? Please share 1-2 examples.
 - c. What could you do to respond to the racism against Asian people in your community? Please share 1-2 examples.
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More importantly, knowing the critique of traditional SEL programs is that dominant white culture and school-expected performers are reinforced (Dauphinais, 2021), our SEL curriculum was built based on the student-led discussion model—we are here to listen to our students' voices—which is a

much-needed educational change for compassion, especially for our most marginalized students.

PROVIDING A MORE EQUITABLE WORLD LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Unfortunately, only 20 percent of K-12 students are learning a foreign language, and even fewer students have the opportunity to learn less commonly taught languages (Mitchell, 2017). Our early college aims to make world language education, including both common and less commonly taught languages, more “equitable” to our students, who are from “low-income and historically underrepresented communities” (School website). I, as a founding faculty in Chinese language and culture, joined the World Language Department at this early college in fall 2020 to continue carrying out the school mission toward educational equity for all during the pandemic. By doing so, our school hosted workshops to guide us in reflecting on how we can change our school systems for equity (Lee, 2017). I then adopted the “equity as an approach” that I learned from the workshops and integrated the “Equity Code of Conduct” (Table 3) from the early college network into my world language classroom to bridge students’ learning gaps into goals.

Table 3.

Equity code of conduct (adapted from the early college network)

In our commitment towards proactive inclusion, we actively strive to:

1. Be aware of the discomfort that occurs in a learning environment.
 2. Attend to the needs and perspectives of marginalized groups in our initiatives and assignments whether they be directly or indirectly related to equity.
 3. Examine our own biases, recognizing that our privileges give us blind spots that we need to engage with rather than ignore or deny.
 4. Seek out opportunities to become more culturally fluent and support one another's growth towards this goal.
 5. Restore relationships when harm arises.
 6. Exercise cultural humility.
 7. Engage in proactive problem-solving when issues arise.
 8. Recognize that institutionalized biases have marginalized members of our communities and work to proactively correct that bias.
 9. Seek to remove barriers to inclusion.
 10. Hold ourselves accountable when confronted with how we have exhibited bias.
 11. Create honest and equitable community conversation between parents, students, and [our] faculty and staff about educational needs and how they could be met, and to use these conversations to adjust current [school] practices and/or develop new practices.
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12. Uphold the dignity of all identities in our communities through our language and behavior during the school day, as well as on social media and with other students and faculty members in public outside of school.
 13. Promote and provide access to clear and consistent opportunities for training for all staff, faculty, and student members in our equity agreements.
 14. Listen to one another.
 15. Be sensitive to the needs of our community.
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Specifically, during the fall 2020 semester, as most of my students had little to no background in the Mandarin Chinese language, checking for understanding through in-class activities (adopted #1) was crucial for each procedure to ensure students and I were on the same page when I could only hear (not see) my students. I also presented the same learning materials in different ways—both daily lecture videos and written instructions were provided—to accommodate students’ various learning styles (adopted #13. see Appendix 1 for an example). The audio and video features of the e-textbook functioned as a supplemental tool to assist students’ language learning after class (adopted #4. see Appendix 2 for an example). In addition, as suggested by school leadership, all faculty invited low-performing students as well as students’ parents/guardians to their office hours (adopted #2, #7, #9, #11 and #15) to ensure students could keep up with the schedule. During the spring 2020 semester, reflection assignments were designed for 1:1 support (see Appendix 3 for an example), which not only allowed more open and productive conversations between students and the instructor (adopted #5, #7, #12, #14 and #15), aiming to de-emphasize the teacher-student hierarchy (adopted #3, #8 and #10), but also facilitated differentiated instruction (adopted #2 and #9) to make world language more equitable to students. Students’ reflections constantly mentioned how modeling with a caring attitude was key for them to build their confidence and master learning materials in a new, virtual learning environment. Relation building with an empathic attitude was also frequently highlighted in students’ reflection assignments, as they need an included and supported learning environment. During this challenging time, we all listened, learned, and walked through these hurdles to make a better change.

NEXT STEPS

As we transition to in-person instruction in the 2021-22 academic year, the combination of SEL and subject-specific instruction (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013) continues to play an essential role in our post-pandemic community. In doing so, working with my colleagues, the faculty from the World Languages Department linked local, national, and international resources in collaborative

efforts to support our students in the spirit of social justice and equity. At the local level, my school initiated the 2021 summer bridge program and invited all students to be part of it, where students are going to build relationships with their peers, teachers, and everyone in our communities, and get acclimated to school culture, climate, and academic expectations. For the world language curriculum, students are expected to sample different world languages during their first semester and make their decision on a world language during their second semester in ninth grade. Students are expected to continue with their chosen world language in tenth grade. Students are required to take two college courses in language and culture to earn their associated degree – Intermediate I level in Year 1 (eleventh grade) and Intermediate II level in Year 2 (twelfth grade). Students might be able to earn these credit hours through different programs and institutions. At the national level, promoted by our early college network, I encouraged students to participate in the StarTalk program (2021), funded by the National Security Agency, to bridge the learning gap between the local and national levels. As suggested by the early college network, our school might consider such an opportunity for students to get credit recovery over the summer with these 45 seat hours plus asynchronous work. At the international level, recommended by my school counselors, I introduced the State Department’s National Security Language Initiative for Youth (NSLI-Y) to my students. Through overseas critical language study opportunities, I strive to make global education more equitable to my students, who are racially minoritized population in the study abroad context (Goldoni, 2017), as I see my students have the potential to achieve high levels of academic success; too often those students miss out on these great opportunities due to their background, social and economic status, and lack of connection to the program.

CONCLUSIONS

Admittedly, adopting new teaching and learning strategies, as well as making these contingent changes, is not easy during normal times, much less during a pandemic, as we were all new to this modality. Looking forward, I hope that my first-year experience as founding faculty in Chinese language and culture from the World Languages Department at an early college will fuel continuous endeavors to provide a more compassionate and equitable world language education to students from minoritized ethnic and racial groups in the coming year as the pandemic continues to create hurdles in academia.

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Appendices

1. Presented the same learning materials in different ways – both daily lecture videos and written instructions were provided.

Introduction: You have to complete three assignments (initials, finals, and L1 Dialogue I) by recording yourself speaking Chinese. Please see below for **step-by-step guidance**.

I. Assignment I (initials)

1. Log in to your e-textbook (<https://app.chengtsui.co/auth/login>), go to **page 3**.
2. Click the “audio” icon, and practice speaking these initials by repeating after the audio.
3. After you feel comfortable reading these initials by **YOURSELF** (please do **NOT** repeat after the audio while you record your assignment), please go to “Assignments” page in Canvas.
4. Choose the file “initials” and audio-record yourself reading these initials.
5. Click “Submit” after you finish recording yourself reading these initials.

II. Assignment II (finals)

1. Log in to your e-textbook (<https://app.chengtsui.co/auth/login>), go to **page 2** for simple finals and **page 7** for compound finals.
2. Click the “audio” icon, and practice speaking these finals by repeating after the audio.
3. After you feel comfortable reading these finals by **YOURSELF** (please do **NOT** repeat after the audio while you record your assignment), please go to “Assignments” page in Canvas.
4. Choose the file “finals” and audio-record yourself reading these finals.
5. Click “Submit” after you finish recording yourself reading these finals.

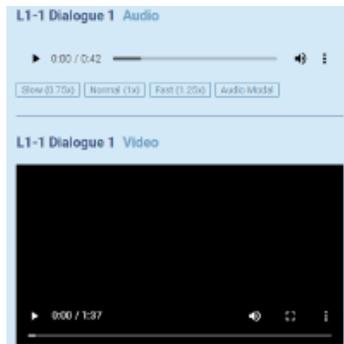
III. Assignment III (L1 Dialogue I)

1. Log in to your e-textbook (<https://app.chengtsui.co/auth/login>), go to **page 22**.
2. Click the “audio” icon, and practice speaking the dialogue by repeating after the audio.
3. After you feel comfortable reading the dialogue by **YOURSELF** (please do **NOT** repeat after the audio while you record your assignment), please go to “Assignments” page in Canvas.
4. Choose the file “L1 Dialogue I” and audio-record yourself reading the dialogue.
5. Click “Submit” after you finish recording yourself reading the dialogue.

Please watch the **video instruction**

(https://dcps.instructure.com/courses/195200/files/18292020?module_item_id=7528132) if you need clarifications on assignment submission.

- The audio and video features of the e-textbook functioned as a supplemental tool to assist students' language learning after class.



- Reflection assignments were designed for 1:1 support which not only allowed more open and productive conversations between students and the, aiming to de-emphasize the teacher-student hierarchy, but also facilitated differentiated instruction.

Lecture Video	
2/4	gain the access to the online textbook & syllabus
2/5	assignments through Google Doc & How to get an A/improve your grades for the Chinese class
2/8	Initial (group 1 and 2) & Chinese New Year Celebration & Complete assignments through Google Doc every Tuesday
2/9	Complete your assignment through Google Doc (revise #1 and answer #2)
2/11	Initials: Group 3-5
2/12	Initials (Group 6) and simple finals & 2/16 assignments & make up for the missing work
2/16	Complete your assignment through Google Doc (revise #2 and answer #3)

Please note that you have to type at least **100 words** and provide at least **one example** for each question. **If you really cannot reach the word count, feel free to share anything about your Chinese learning.**

- (2/5/2021) Why did you choose Chinese, instead of Spanish, for your foreign/second language learning? Whose decision on this language choice? Were the people around you (e.g., your friends, parent/guardian, etc.) supported this language choice & Why or why not?
- (2/9/2021) What is the most **memorable experience** you had in the Chinese class during Term 1/Term 2 & Why? Was it a **positive/negative/neutral** experience & why? How that might affect your "current" Chinese language learning in Term 3?
- (2/16/2021) What is the most challenging part for you to learn **initials** (p. 3 in your electronic textbook)? Which **initial(s)** is the most difficult one for you to pronounce & Why? How do you overcome this difficulty? Do you think that re-learn **initials** would help you improve your Chinese pronunciation & Why or why not?

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