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What Have We Learned After One Year of Remote Teaching and Learning? A Critical Conversation between Two Language Educators

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In this critical conversation, two language educators reflect on their experiences of online instruction after nearly two years of teaching during the Covid 19 pandemic. The duoethnographers share the challenges they faced to adapt their teaching and assessment for remote delivery, as well as how their pedagogical orientations transformed to engage with learners online. The discussion focuses on teaching both synchronously and asynchronously, re-thinking language assessment, and the authors' strategies to manage a sustainable and healthy workflow. This last aspect is of significant importance given how much these two educators had to learn to teach in ways and through media they had not been trained for. By unpacking their efforts to respond to their learners' needs, the authors propose capitalizing on these challenges as valuable professional development opportunities and invite other language teachers to share their experiences.

It has been nearly two years since the worldwide onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, so it seems like a sensitive moment to pause and reflect on the challenges that remote teaching brought upon teachers during such unprecedented time. The beginning of the pandemic left many of us uncertain about what to do to continue providing our students with quality education.

A situation that was notoriously exacerbated was the inadequacy of a highly restrictive notion of literacy that privileged print-based text above digital literacies as teaching moved online. One notable example is how paper tests, which were well-suited for the "bricks-and-mortar" classroom, became mostly irrelevant or extremely challenging and resource intensive to proctor remotely. Other equally important challenges that also became salient in this regard relate to class delivery, facilitating students' voluntary engagement, merging digital literacies with traditional literacies, and online assessment.

In this article, we adopt a duoethnographic lens and narrative style to share and critically unpack our experiences and pedagogic interventions to adapt to teaching language remotely at our respective institutions. The following are four of the main transformations that our teaching underwent, and which we use as guiding topics of our duoethnography:

1. capitalizing on synchronous teaching as a tool to build a welcoming and engaging online space for collaboration
2. using pre-recorded content asynchronously to foster monitored independent learning;
3. online holistic assessment;
4. managing a healthy and sustainable workflow (for teachers' own wellness).

In the following section we introduce our contexts and our conceptual and methodological lenses before we engage in this critical dialogue.

Our contexts

Marlon is based at Glendon College, York University's bilingual campus in Toronto, Canada. He teaches content English for academic purposes to a predominantly French-speaking undergraduate student population, as well as critical applied linguistics for future English as an international language teachers.

Miguel teaches Spanish as a second language and linguistics at Bellarmine University, which is a post-secondary institution with a strong commitment to Liberal Arts. Hence, his courses help both Arts and Sciences majors meet their additional language requirements.

Conceptual lenses informing our interventions

In our efforts to adapt to remote teaching we drew on the following series of theoretical principles grounded in robust empirical research on how languages are learned. First, the notion that linguistic performance requires not only knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, but also knowledge of the strategies necessary for different communicative events and purposes (Hidri, 2008). Second, language use is contextualized and is impacted by existing relations of power amongst language users. Third, academic language and informal conversational language skills entail different kinds of proficiency (Cummins, 2009). Fourth, language assessment should not only allow teachers to test what was learned, but also make inferences on learners' abilities and needs (Swain et al., 2011). This all implies that language

learners' use of the target language must be maximized through peer-to-peer and teacher-to-student interactions where meaning is negotiated through effective communication.

On the other hand, to be effective teachers online, Russell and Murphy-Judy (2021) assert that language educators need to draw on a different set of skills. Thus, they argue that teachers need to not only know how to teach the target language and provide learners with abundant opportunities to use it while facilitating the development of rich cultural competence, but they also must know how to use technology to teach language online. Figure 1 below illustrates the 3 know-hows that Russell and Murphy-Judy refer to. In this figure successful online teaching happens in the darker green space where the three circles intersect.

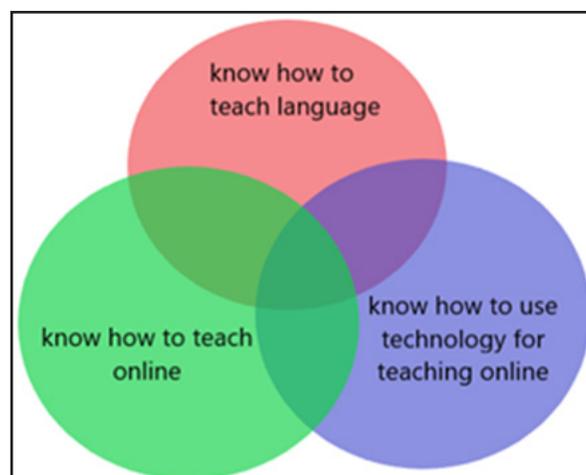


Figure 1. The 3 know-hows of teaching language online.

In addition to this model, Russell and Murphy-Judy list ten guidelines for teaching communicatively in online environments (p. 140):

1. Emphasize the notions and functions of language.
2. Focus on meaning over form.
3. Deliver 90% or more of the instruction in the target language.
4. Base lessons on professional standards and what students can actually do at the targeted proficiency level.
5. Avoid mechanical and pattern drill activities.
6. Facilitate student-teacher and student-student interaction to foster the negotiation of meaning.

7. Incorporate open-ended activities, such as role-plays and information gap tasks, where students engage in creative language use.
8. Integrate authentic materials.
9. Create a meaningful cultural context for language instruction.
10. Grade students holistically and provide appropriate corrective feedback.

These guidelines aligned well with our views and experiences of teaching online, which in our case we summarized under three encompassing ideas. First, we need to provide language learners with rich authentic linguistic and contextualized cultural content. Second, we must facilitate ample opportunities to negotiate meaning in the target language. Third, we need to evaluate learners holistically rather than focus on specific skills or tasks. Last, but not least, teaching remotely highlighted the importance of directly addressing critical literacy in digital media, which the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) already notoriously supported through its 2019 resolution. In this document the NCTE makes a call for educators to “prioritize research and pedagogies that encourage students to become critical thinkers, consumers, and creators who advocate for and actively contribute to a better world”.

Why use duoethnography?

We chose a duoethnography to share our experiences in these conference proceedings as we found its conversational approach to be quite effective and more pedagogically attuned, and thus complementary to *Pedagogicon*. Duoethnography allows two researchers to explore their self and mutual identities in a welcoming and supportive manner. It allows the authors to critically look inwards making them the researchers and the subject of research simultaneously. Moreover, duoethnography is polyvocal as it amplifies the voices, lived experiences and perspectives of both researchers. This dialogic exploration requires exposing our diverse identities to discuss our strengths and areas for improvement in a mutually consensual, accepting, and constructive manner which allows a rich re-interpretation of those same experiences (Lawrence & Lowe, 2020). Just like the importance of negotiating meaning is a key element of language learning, duoethnography allows us to negotiate mutual understandings of lived events and reflections. Consequently, the data that we used to construct the critical conversation below, comes from *Zoom* and *WhatsApp* video calls that we transcribed, emails, conversations before and after our conference

presentation and other various forms of instant messaging. Table 1 summarizes our intersecting identities and academic careers, which led to this collaboration.

Table 1. Marlon and Miguel’s intersecting identities.

Language Educator	Geographic Identities	Linguistic Identities	Education	Current academic position and research interests
Marlon	Born and raised in Cali, Colombia	Speaker of Spanish, English and French	<p>Licenciado en Lenguas Modernas (B.A. B.Ed.), Universidad del Valle, Colombia</p> <p>Visiting scholar, Spokane Falls Community College</p> <p>M.A. in Foreign Languages and Cultures, Washington State University</p> <p>M.A. In Applied Linguistics, York University</p> <p>Ph.D. in Language and Literacies Education</p> <p>Collaborative Ph.D. Program in Comparative, International and Development Education, University of Toronto</p>	<p>Assistant Professor ESL, Certificate in the Discipline of Teaching English as an International Language and ESL Open Learning Center Director, Glendon College, York University</p> <p>Research: Language learner and teacher identities, imagination and creativity in language learning, digital media literacies.</p>

Language Educator	Geographic Identities	Linguistic Identities	Education	Current academic position and research interests
Miguel	Born and raised in Cali, Colombia	Speaker of Spanish, English and French	<p>Licenciado en Lenguas Modernas (B.A. B.Ed.), Universidad del Valle, Colombia</p> <p>Visiting scholar, Spokane Falls Community College</p> <p>M.A. in Foreign Languages and Cultures, Washington State University</p> <p>Ph.D. in Spanish Linguistics, Purdue University</p>	<p>Assistant Professor of Spanish</p> <p>Research: Phonology, dialectology, Translation, Language Teaching, Computer Assisted Language Learning.</p>

Our critical conversation

Marlon: I remember at the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic, there was so much uncertainty, and all of a sudden universities began to opt for remote online teaching in both Canada and the U.S. That is when I reached out to you as my colleague and friend to see how you were coping with this new reality.

Miguel: Oh yes, that, I recall! And the big question that went through my mind was: How are we going to finish the term? Students were barely showing up to classes anymore. I had such low attendance on Microsoft Teams, and then when they showed up, students had their cameras off all the time. I felt like I was talking to a list of names on a dark screen, which was really challenging.

Marlon: I know! I was experiencing the same challenge. I always worried about how to keep students engaged. I heard so many stories from students and teachers, including one from my own nephew who goes to a different local university. When I asked him about what his professors were doing to teach remotely, and how he was responding to that, he said, 'My professors record two- or three-hour asynchronous lectures and I watch them at twice the speed, so I'm done in half the time of a regular lecture.'

Miguel: I must say that the anecdote is funny and not funny at the same time ha ha. I mean it is interesting to see that technology allows this flexibility to increase the speed of a lecture, but at the same time, I would not want my students to do that with the materials I take so much time to prepare.

But continuing with my personal experience, after the spring and the fall semesters were over, I reflected on the issues encountered during this forced instruction method change. As part of this reflection process, I created a survey in which students could offer their feedback and impressions on the different class activities and assessment practices that they used. In the survey, for example, students were asked to rate the effectiveness of the different online assignments used in their Spanish class. In addition, I asked them to offer their personal insight about assessment practices. The survey was sent out to all the students who took Spanish 101 during the fall semester. Despite having offered compensation to survey respondents, only 14 students out of 86 filled it out. Surprisingly, responses do not show a preferred online activity. The results, however, are inconclusive due the low survey response ratio of 16.28%.

Marlon: I hear what you say, and I am not surprised. My course evaluations equally suffered because of low participation. This lack of engagement made me spend a lot of time thinking about how to create a welcoming space that would keep students engaged and facilitate collaboration. I will share some of the ways in which I responded to this.

The first thing that I did was combine asynchronous and synchronous teaching, so my three-hour class block was 1 hour of asynchronous content, followed by a 1-hour meeting on Zoom, and last, 1 more hour of asynchronous work to further practice what was learned or reflect on the lesson. This schedule was also flexible and synchronous sessions could be longer when needed. I understand that you also engaged in both

synchronous and asynchronous teaching. Would you like to share some of your experiences in this regard?

Capitalizing on synchronous teaching as a tool to build a welcoming and engaging online space for collaboration

Miguel: Sure! School administrators' directive was to deliver instruction with a high component of synchronous teaching. We had the opportunity to attend a couple of workshops about Microsoft Teams, the platform we were going to use to deliver online instruction. There were a lot of expectations, but the goal was to create a sense of community as much as possible. Regarding language teaching, we knew we were going to face special challenges, and keeping students engaged and motivated was of utmost importance.

Marlon: I see what you mean. In my case, synchronous teaching was a great opportunity to build rapport with my students and I feel it also went a long way in creating a strong sense of community. Even though I constantly felt that society expected everyone to pretend life was normal, the Covid 19 pandemic had diverse implications for everyone's lives. Therefore, Zoom meetings were a good opportunity for checking in and inviting everyone to co-construct a safe community where learning and collaborating were fun and safe. On that note, I would like to mention that learning about new technologies played a big part of these efforts. For instance, I set myself a short-term goal to learn about the benefits of using a green screen during Zoom meetings, so I could present PowerPoint slideshows as close as possible to how this was done in the bricks-and-mortar classroom. You can see an example of that in Figure 3. I am pointing at the green screen and the monitor shows what students see which is me and the bullet points on the slide. This example addresses Russell and Murphy-Judy's (2021) idea that for online instruction, teachers need to be knowledgeable on teaching their subject area as well as on using technological tools.



Figure 2. Synchronous teaching with a green screen.

Miguel: I remember seeing that picture on your social media, and I was wondering how did your students respond to this?

Marlon: Luckily, I feel they responded quite well. As I did my best to include innovative uses of technology, I observed students seemed more engaged and I noticed more peer-to-peer and teacher-to-student interaction. I always thought how difficult/painful it could be to listen to someone lecture on a laptop webcam for three hours. I wanted my one hour of Zoom to feel fun and rewarding, while maximizing interaction. Now tell me about your experiences with synchronous teaching.

Miguel: At first, I was taken aback, because most students turned off their webcams. I felt like I was talking to a wall. It was too impersonal. When you're in the classroom, you can see face gestures and make adjustments to what you're doing or saying at that moment. I tried splitting my class in pairs or small groups to boost participation and maximize interaction. It worked with some students, with others, it did not. Some students complained they had technical difficulties and did not participate in my carefully planned activities. Then, I realized it would be better if I used our synchronous meeting mostly for instruction and then assign students homework that they could work on at their own pace and rhythm.

Marlon: This makes a lot of sense. Now that you mention asynchronous content, let me share how I used pre-recorded minilessons to activate students' prior knowledge, spark initial interest and get them to think about the topic of each lesson in an engaging manner.

Using pre-recorded content asynchronously to foster monitored independent learning

Marlon: For every class, I prepared a YouTube-style introductory mini lesson. These short videos were created using the ADDIE model for educational video making. Its acronym stands for: **A**nalyze, **D**esign, **D**evelop, **I**mplement, and **E**valuate (Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021) as shown in Figure 3. Accordingly, you first look at the big picture of your lesson, that is a broad idea of the outcomes that you want students to achieve with what they learn, and what they need to learn it. Next, you think about how this lesson could be introduced. Once you have that, you design and outline your plan, so you can move on to developing your lesson. For this part, it is very useful to write a script that you can read if you are going to talk in front of the camera. You can tape that script close to your camera lens so you can easily read it while looking at the camera; that way students feel you are making eye contact with them as you speak. Next, you actually do the video recording and production. In my case, I uploaded the videos to YouTube and had them embedded in Moodle within the topic of each week. I won't lie to you, this seemed like a lot of hard work to do. Also, despite iMovie being a very user-friendly software, there was still a significant learning curve. However, the more I practiced, the better I became at creating, producing, and uploading my videos. Thus, at the end of the year, I could easily produce a 5-minute video and have it posted on my Moodle in less than 30 minutes.

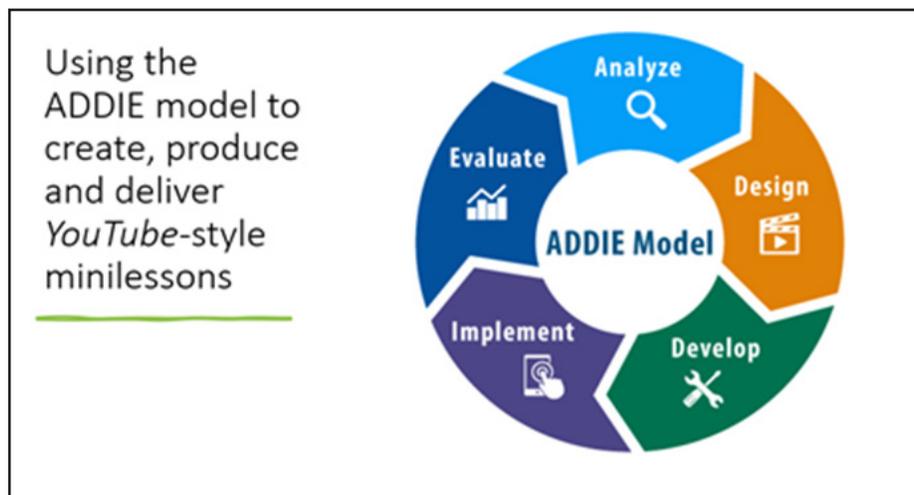


Figure 3. ADDIE model slide used on our Pedagogicon 2021 Conference presentation.

Figure 4 shows an example of a funny Halloween video that I made for one of my ESL classes. I used a green screen and put an animation in the background. You can click on the link to watch the video.



Figure 4. Halloween introductory mini lesson on YouTube.

Video link: <https://youtu.be/UYDF9igSXRE>

Miguel: Oh boy! It seems like remote teaching is making you age by the minute. Ha ha. That was hilarious! I bet students were quite entertained.

Now, let me discuss what I've done to capitalize on asynchronous teaching. I am lucky to use a textbook that already had a robust online platform that allowed for abundant monitored self-study opportunities. This platform features different types of online multimodal assignments, such as fill-in-the-blanks activities, true or false questions, ordering scrambled sentences, etc. Figure 5 shows a screenshot of the kind of online activities that students complete on this platform.

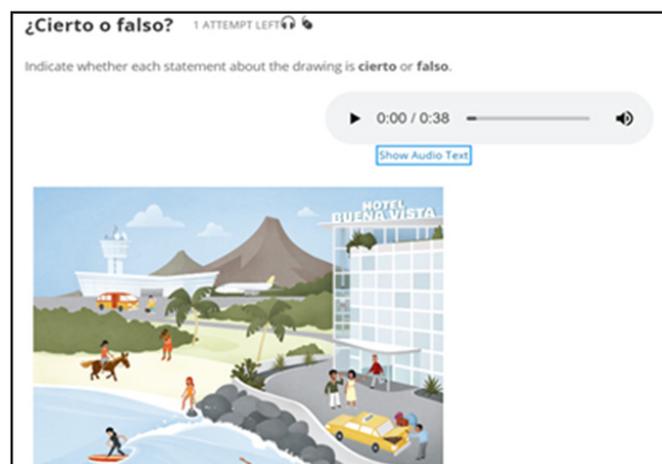


Figure 5. Asynchronous teaching with VHL interactive online assignments platform

In addition to the textbook's virtual activities, I used Kaltura, a video platform in which students prepared presentations and their own conversations where they included the content covered in class. I must say they really liked using this tool because it allowed students to effectively practice their oral skills without the pressure and immediacy of a synchronous conversation, precisely because their content was prepared and recorded in advance. Figure 6 shows a screen capture for one of my student's Kaltura videos.

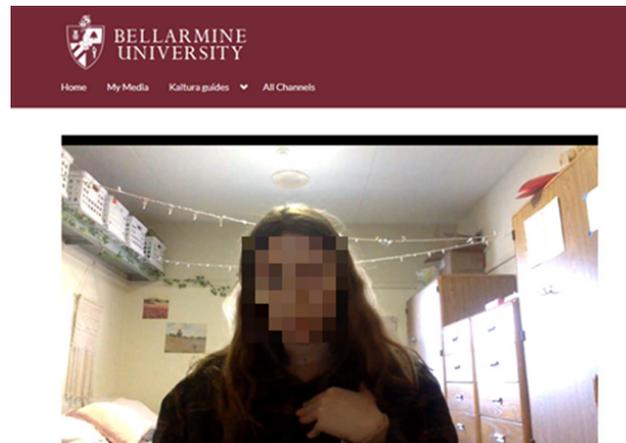


Figure 6. Asynchronous teaching with Kaltura, a video platform.

Marlon: That sounds great! I can see why you liked it. I think that this brings us to that question that we both dreaded so much at the beginning of the pandemic, which I repeat below:

How are we going to evaluate language remotely when most of our evaluation tools are paper or computer lab-based where we can easily proctor tests?

Miguel: Exactly! And I remember we discussed this and how usually oral presentation guidelines for language classes encourage students to not read verbatim. This is usually accompanied by rubrics that penalize highly scripted presentations.

Marlon: Yes! I can recall most student presentations gave the impression that everything was read from a script as you just said. I couldn't even see students' faces when they shared their screen to show slides, so I thought, this type of activities requires revisiting and rethinking assessment.

Online holistic assessment

Marlon: One example of how I tweaked my assessment is similar to what you just described with Kaltura. I used Flipgrid which is an easy-to-use tool that is freely available to teachers. It has even fun filters, like the Breaking news filter you can see in Figure 7. If you click on the link to watch the video, you can see I acknowledge that I was new to this tool and invited students to use it. My rethinking of assessment involved a more holistic view (Hidri, 2018; Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman, 2011), which moved away from specific tasks or skills to look at students' overall performance and ability to communicate/negotiate meaning in the target language.



Figure 7. Using Flipgrid as a form of holistic assessment.

Video link: <https://youtu.be/RlwJR1MBHqA>

As you see, adaptability, considering how quickly technology evolves, is absolutely necessary for teachers delivering remote instruction as Russell and Murphy-Judy, (2021) point out.

Miguel: I hear you there! I remember we discussed how to make this steep learning curve sustainable from a teacher's perspective.

Managing a healthy and sustainable workflow

Marlon: In that regard, I have been recently inspired by the work of Sarah Mercer and Tammy Gregersen (2020) to keep me grounded and remind myself that there's only one me and that there's only so much I can do. I think that we must highlight the human side of our teaching selves, and that means acknowledging that all this additional learning can be exciting, but also overwhelming. Therefore, we should never neglect our physical, mental, and social needs. Mercer and Gregersen helped me view that achievement is due to strategic effort and not some innate challenge, so

my interpretation of that for remote teaching is that we can all learn about technology if we work hard. There is no need to be an expert. Mercer and Gregersen also argue that professional growth should be framed as continual growth—not as repair, so there’s nothing wrong with feeling less tech savvy than other colleagues; au contraire, it could be viewed as an opportunity to grow as teachers. Last, but not least, these authors argue that effective time management can be viewed as making time for ourselves to be happy teachers not necessarily getting more work done.

Miguel: Those are very good recommendations. Thanks for sharing them. Mercer and Gregersen’s ideas also align well with the final slide in our presentation, which summarized our take-aways after one year of remote teaching (See Figure 8).

Marlon: Indeed! I know the slide is self-explanatory, but I would like to briefly mention how these take-aways connect to the literature and our own well-being as teachers. As you see in this conversation, there was a lot of stretching on both teachers’ and students’ ends to make this remote teaching and learning happen. Becoming proficient users of the technological tools was of course of paramount importance as Russell and Murphy-Judy (2021) argue, but this is where one must set realistic short-term goals (e.g. learning how to use iMovie) that are manageable, which is precisely the strategic effort Mercer and Gregersen talk about. Those short-term goals may lead to much more elaborate goals (e.g. using professional video production software like Final Cut Pro) and the road in between will be filled with challenges and that’s OK. As long as one does not aim for perfection, frustration will be easily avoided. Being honest, I personally found embracing imperfection quite liberating. When recording the short videos I describe above, I would often mispronounce a word or make mistakes. Then, just as it would happen in the bricks-and-mortar classroom, I would go on regardless. Also, this type of modelling helped students cope with anxiety and frustration knowing that it was OK to make mistakes when they had to do their own digital creations. I constantly reminded my students that we could always learn from mistakes about what to improve next time we tried to do a similar creation.

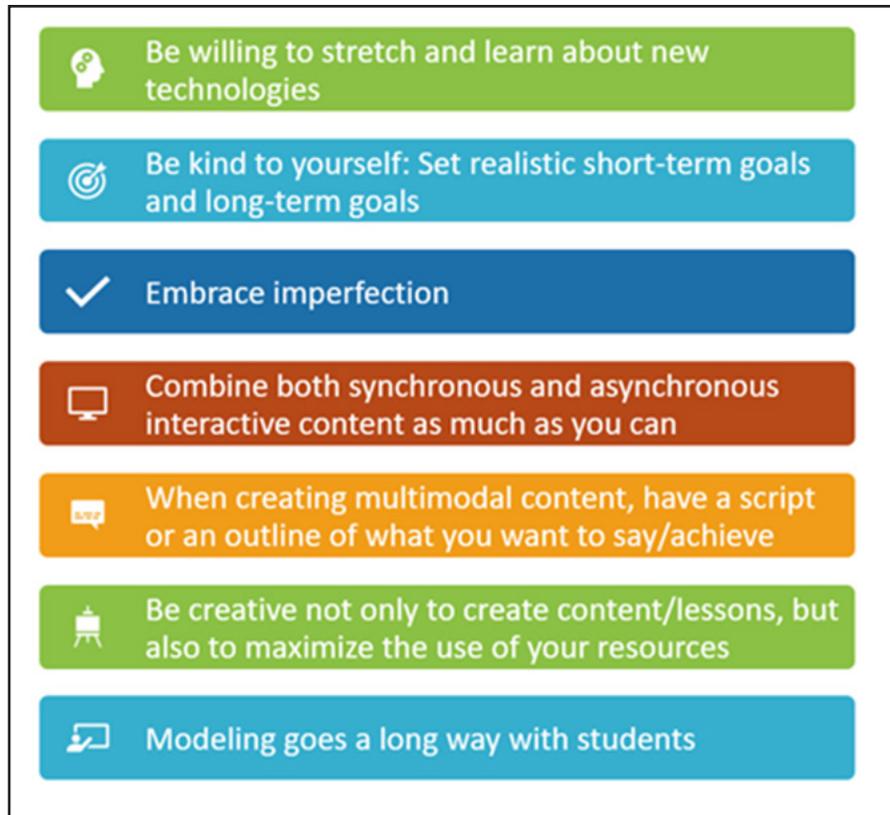


Figure 8. Our take-aways.

Miguel: I think that this last point ends our conversation on a high note, which was the whole purpose of the presentation and this proceeding article. Thanks!

Concluding remarks

With highly ambitious vaccination plans in many countries, the future regarding the pandemic and how educational institutions adapt to it still seem uncertain. Projections and regulations constantly evolve, and teachers get different instructions on public health and safety measures. However, what seems certain is that remote teaching has transformed education radically and there is no turning back. Thus, online and blended teaching are here to stay. This situation makes digital media literacies to teach online a necessary part of all teachers' skillsets. Therefore, in this brief article we shared our experiences adapting to a new reality and what we felt worked best to address the challenges of teaching language mediated by technology during social distancing. As academics, we did what we knew when faced with this uncertainty: we searched the literature, and then did what we felt was best for ourselves and our learners -- adapt. The examples that we provide in the article show that a combination of synchronous

and asynchronous content was key to keeping students engaged and creating a positive sense of community. Also, we came to terms with accepting our limitations and saw these as wonderful opportunities to learn new things and gain new skills. We understand that many colleagues may have felt anxious and burnt out about teaching remotely, so we welcome any feedback from teachers and administrators who would like to engage in this conversation. We can all benefit from learning about each other's challenges and triumphs.

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