Renewing the teaching of Mandarin Chinese – The power of using e-Tools

A Case Study By

Haiyi Wu
Wide Bay Institute of TAFE, Queensland, Australia
Email: haiyi.wu@deta.qld.gov.au
Telephone: +61 7 41206265

Abstract

Traditionally, second language teaching is delivered in a face-to-face classroom environment. The teacher and students only have limited contact time to complete a number of teaching and learning tasks. A student's progress can be handicapped by the inability to access additional pronunciation drills with the teacher after class. Educational institutions in small cities are also facing the challenges of recruiting LOTE students locally and delivering economically viable language courses.

This case study will examine a number of e-Learning tools that have been used in teaching Mandarin Chinese at the Wide Bay Institute of TAFE. The presenter will show his renewed teaching experience of using video conferencing, video streaming, online learning management systems and web conferencing to deliver Mandarin programs flexibly to students across Queensland.

Introduction

The Mandarin Chinese language was introduced first time as a vocational training program at the Wide Bay Institute of TAFE in 2008. The program consists of two units of competency (SITXLAN115A and SITXLAN215A) endorsed under the National Training Package for Hospitality, Tourism and Event (SIT07).

The program has been studied by the students participating in Certificate IV and Diploma in Hospitality as well as from the general community. In order to cater for the needs of distance learning, the program has been delivered through video conferencing (VC) and e-learning technologies. During the last two years, around 70 students across the Wide Bay region have successfully completed the program via VC and my.TAFE, an online Learning Management System.

This paper will discuss the implementation of using various e-learning technologies in teaching Mandarin in the VET sector.

Mandarin as a LOTE subject in the vocational education and training (VET) sector

Mandarin Chinese is one of the six UN working languages and is spoken by almost one fifth world's population. China is rapidly becoming a major economic and political powerhouse in the world. It has overtaken Japan as Australia's number one trading partner (AsiaPlus News 31/08/07).

In the tourism industry, China is also becoming our number one tourist source market in Asia. According to the forecast by Tourism Queensland, visitor's arrivals from China will reach one million per annum by the end of Year 2017 (Fig 1).
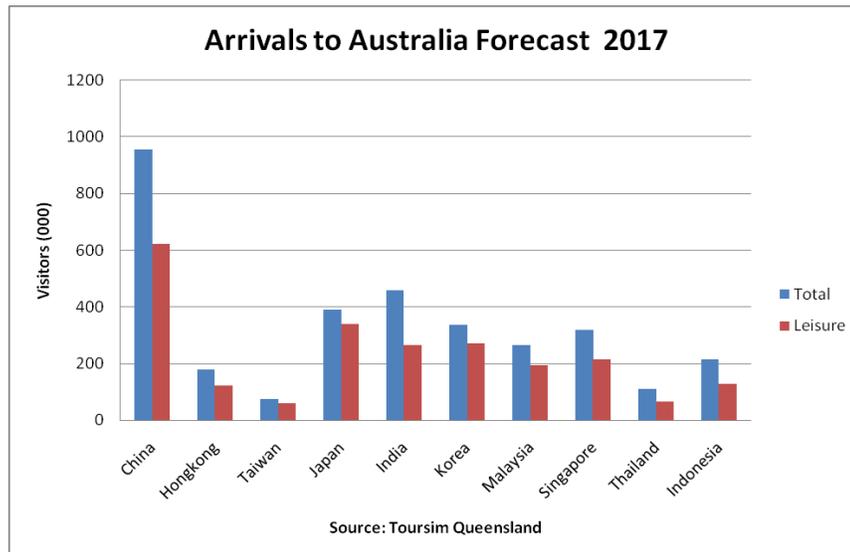
Fig 1: Asian Arrivals to Australia Forecast 2017 (June 2009)

From this perspective, the Mandarin Chinese language can certainly play a role in training our future workforce to become more Asia literate in both language and cultural understanding. The Federal Government announced a major policy on National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP) in 2008. The Government has committed $62.4 million over 2008-2009 to 2010-2011 for this project.

Mandarin Chinese as a LOTE (Language Other Than English) subject is not widely available in the VET sector, especially in Queensland. A small number of certificate courses in Chinese and Cantonese are being offered at TAFE institutes in New South Wales and Victoria.

The National Training Packages for Tourism, Hospitality and Event (SIT07) has included six LOTE units of competency for Mandarin. The Wide Bay Institute of TAFE has developed courses for the first two oral communication units (SITXLAN115A and SITXLAN215A). These two units are offered as electives for the Cert IV and Diploma in Hospitality students across four campuses.

E-Learning and VC delivery strategies

In order to achieve an economically viable outcome, the Mandarin programs have been designed to cater for long distance learning. It was planned that the programs would allow the teacher to deliver face-to-face lessons at the Hervey Bay Campus via video conferencing to other three campuses in Maryborough, Bundaberg and Gympie. Students would be able to access all learning materials in the forms of text, audio, video and other media on the Internet. It was also aimed that the program will be eventually available to students beyond the Wide Bay region.

- **Janison - Learning Management System (LMS)**

    There was no existing resource available to use for the program. So it was decided that an electronic form of textbook would be written using the Janison online Learning Management System.

Podcast

The 'online textbook' is designed to suit a self-paced learning style and consists of podcasts (audio and video) for Mandarin pronunciation of vocabulary, sentences and dialogues. The program is written into 30 language topics (e.g. greetings, shopping, hotel bookings, etc.) in relation to the tourism and hospitality industries. Each topic is taught as a lesson including sections of Vocabulary, Language Notes, Cultural Awareness, Key Language, Lesson On Video and Language Activities (Fig 2).

Fig 2. Language topics and audio examples on Janison

The audio clips were recorded in MP3 format using 'Hi-Q Recorder', a software program for audio recording which is free downloadable at http://www.roemersoftware.com/free-sound-recorder.html. Its user-friendly interface is favoured by both the teacher and students.

Fig 3. Hi-Q Recorder user-interface

Video Streaming

The 'Lesson On Video' is a video streaming recording teacher's lesson presentation in Powerpoint slides and is produced by Videolinq.

Video streaming has an advantage over normal Internet video clips in terms of loading speed because there is less buffering problem regardless bandwidth. It also provides dual-screen interface with the presenter and slides side by side (Fig 4).

It is also cost effective. Each lesson is recorded in approximately 15 minutes for $25.00. Each streaming video has a permanent web link. The videos are hosted by Videolinq and can be stored for future use.

Fig 4. Videstreaming screen

Interactive Communication Tools

The Janison LMS provides tools allowing students to submit work (files) online (Fig 5). This mechanism enables students to complete online language activities in the formats of text, audio or video and to receive teacher's feedback online. It also stores students' works electronically for reviewing and auditing purposes.
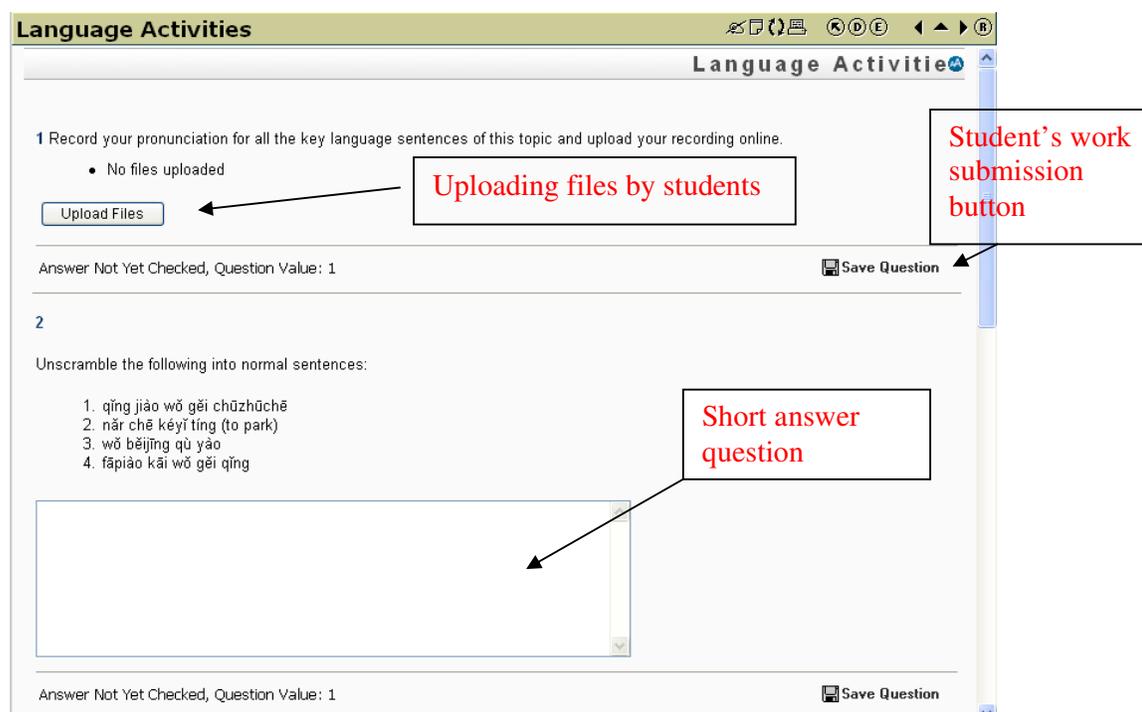
Fig 5. An example of online language activity page

A number of interactive communication tools such as announcements, a discussion forum, an online chat room and a group wiki are available on the Janison LMS (Fig 6). These tools allow the teacher and students to form a learning community sharing each other's teaching and learning experiences.
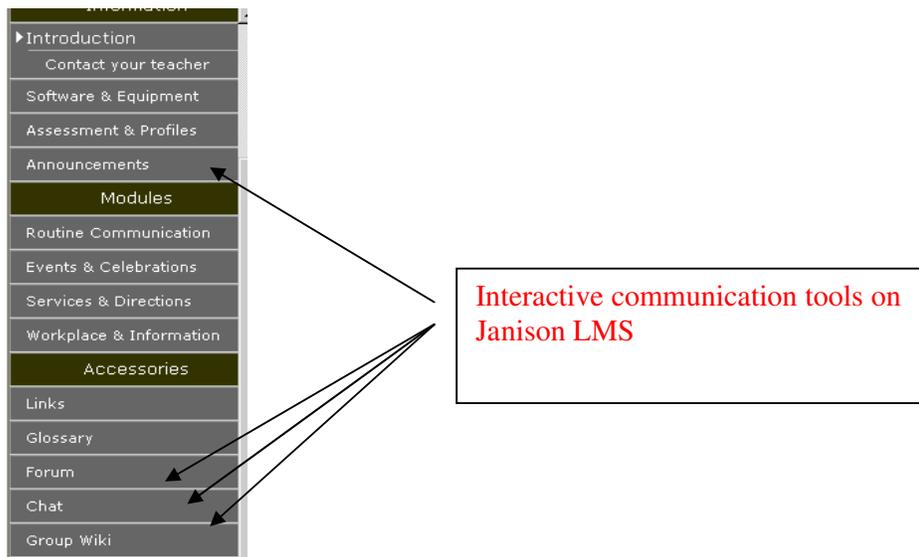

Fig 6. Interactive Communication Tools on Janison LMS

The group wiki is a particularly useful tool allowing students to make concerted efforts and contributions for language tasks. The following screen image shows an example of students' contributing to a conversation in Mandarin about a hotel reservation.
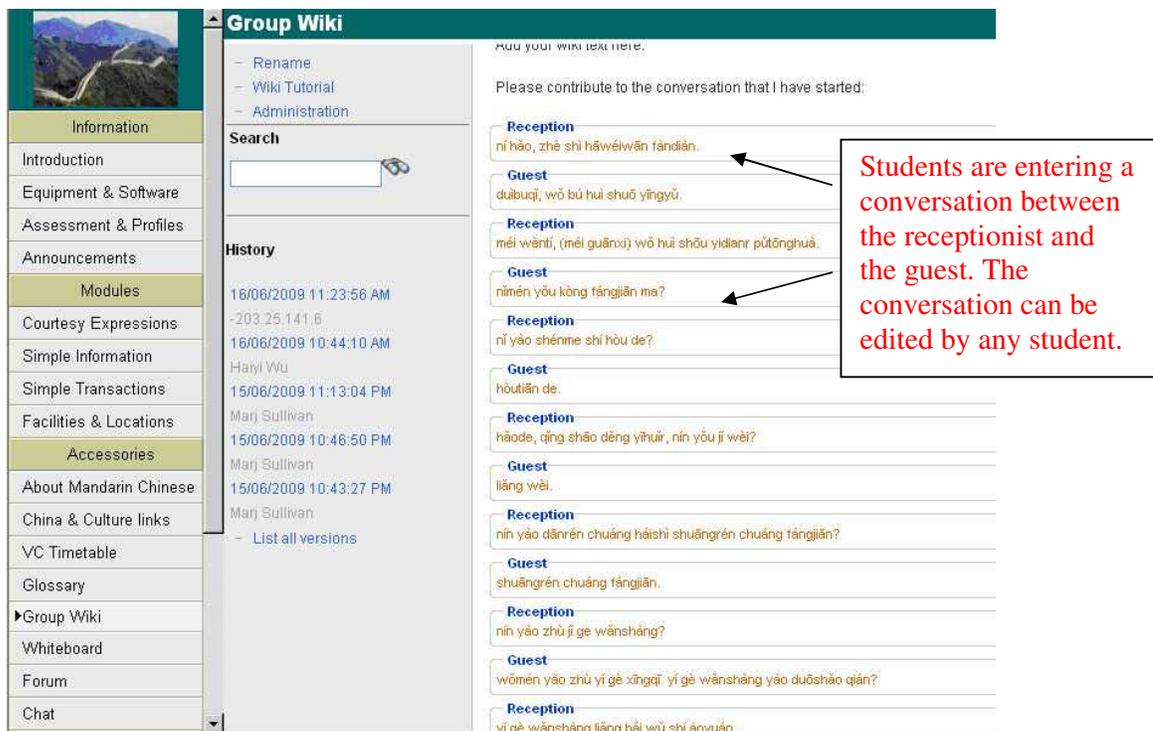
Fig 7. An example of group wiki activity

Student Progress Report

Monitoring students' progress online is another important feature of Janison LMS. The Inspect User option provides an overview of the study group's online usages (Fig 8)

Fig 8. Review of students' login history

A more detailed report for each language topic including completion date, last visited, number of visits, time spent etc can be generated for teacher's reviewing (Fig 9).

Fig 9. A more detailed information on students' login history

- **Video Conferencing (VC)**

Effective language learning requires face-to-face communication and interaction between learners and teacher. The video conferencing lesson is one of the main delivery strategies used in this program. It provides an opportunity for students to have direct contact with the teacher and other students regardless of their geographic location. This strategy is complementary to online learning.

Connectivity and Interaction

The three-hour VC lesson is delivered weekly from the Hervey Bay Campus to other locations in the region and beyond. A range of interactive activities including PowerPoint presentations, grammar notes and group discussions and pronunciation drills are conducted during these sessions. There is a possibility of connecting VC lessons to students' PCs at home using Movi, a video conferencing delivery program. The trial of this technology is currently being conducted. This technology will have a wider implication for VC delivery as more students can be connected without having to attend lessons at each campus physically.

Fig 10. Video conference classroom

Use of VC Equipment

VC equipment such as document cameras and computers are effective tools for displaying PowerPoint presentations, photos, small objects and lesson notes on a large screen. Students can also use the equipment for group activities and presentations.

- **Web conferencing and web classroom (Elluminate)**

Elluminate, a web conferencing program, has been successfully used to deliver lessons to individual students via the Internet. Some students live in remote areas where there are no VC facilities available. Through Ellumiate, the students can still participate in language classes online.

Web Whiteboard

One of main features on Elluminate is Web Whiteboard. Using Web Whiteboard, Chinese characters and phonetic scripts can be displayed by both the teacher and students live. The teacher and students can use drawing tools or the keyboard to write or type in Mandarin. This allows the group to view the writings appearing on the board in real time and can also be corrected if there are mistakes. The whiteboard can also display PowerPoint presentations by the teacher or students (Fig 11).

Fig 11. Web whiteboard displaying images, Chinese characters and phonetics

The mouse pointers in various shapes are very effective for indicating and directing the position of items on the screen.

Audio and Video Tools

Elluminate has some great podcasting tools for language learning. The audio button provides clear and volume adjustable sound for listening and speaking activities. The video screen will display both the teacher and students. The whole lesson can be recorded by the teacher (the moderator) on video for later viewing purposes (Fig 12).

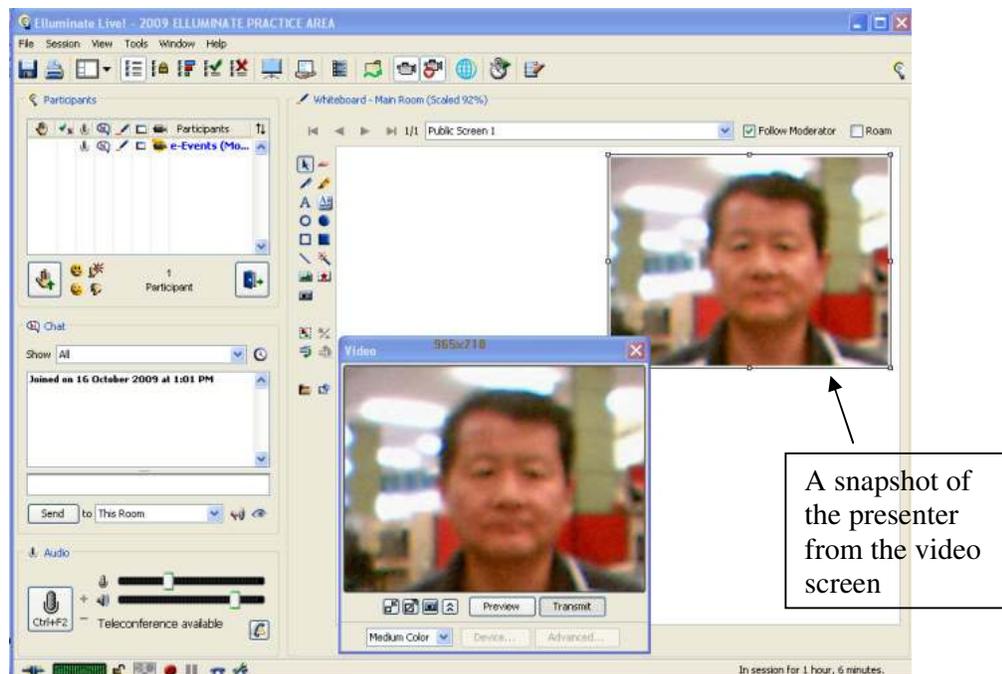A snapshot of the presenter from the video screen

Fig 12. Elluminate's podcast tools

Elluminate can be used to conduct online activities including pronunciation drills, group conversations, classroom surveys, uploading images and maps, sending message and questions in Chinese.

The benefits of a blended approach

Teaching a second language has always been a challenging task for me in terms of finding an effective teaching methodology. Previously, I have taught Mandarin Chinese in high school and university. I'm currently teaching in the TAFE sector. The conventional face-to-face classroom teaching environment produced limited success in terms of how much students were able to learn. In this kind of environment the students have a limited access to electronic learning materials and resources. Interactions between students and teacher and among students themselves are also limited within the lesson time and by the locations.

E-Learning combining with face-to-faced VC delivery strategies have solved these issues. I have found that online delivery cannot be the sole learning and teaching method. The students need to be in a synchronised learning environment in which they conduct language activities, discussions, presentations and asking questions. VC connects me and students from various locations in a learning community setting on a regular basis. The website of the program is a place where students can access teaching and learning materials, resources and complete individual activities electronically.

Another benefit of this approach is that the institute is able to recruit enrolments across the regions and beyond. Over the past two years, we have enrolled more than one hundred students from the Wide Bay region into three Mandarin programs. Apart from the students studying Certificate IV and Diploma in Hospitality, we also recruit mature aged students from the general community. Several councillors from the Bundaberg Regional Council studied a short course via video conferencing and online.

The Institute is expecting to expand the Mandarin programs beyond the Wide Bay region when the regional institutes are amalgamated.

Financially, the e-Learning and VC model is a viable approach as well. Except for the low costs involving the production of streaming videos, all technologies we've used to develop the program are free to the Institute.

To measure the success of the program, we need to use two indicators. The first indicator is the student's learning outcome. The student retention rate is 70% over the last four semesters. The success completion rate is around 80%. The accessibility to online learning and teaching materials has contributed to these reasonably good statistics according to the students. The second measure is the economic viability. The blended courses we have designed potentially can be delivered to the whole state and even beyond. Each competency level consists of 120 contact hours and will attract a considerable amount of VRG funding from the Government for the Institute.

Potential student market

To date, we have had students who are VET students, politicians, travellers, business people, teachers, public servants and retirees. It is evident that learning a second language is not limited to a client group who is specialised in a particular VET field. The e-Learning model is suitable for learners from all walks of life because of its flexibility and accessibility. It can also be used as an alternative learning model for high school and university students who study a LOTE program in a traditional face-to-face classroom environment.

References

1. National Training Information Service, the online database on vocational education and training in Australia, http://www.ntis.gov.au/

2. 'China Over Takes Japan as Australia's Number One Trading Partner' AsiaPulse News 31-AUG-07 (http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/gi_0199-6912129/CHINA-OVERTAKES-JAPAN-AS-AUSTRALIA.html).

3. National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP), Australian Federal Government, 2008, http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/

4. 'China Market Snapshot Year Ended June 2009', Tourism Queensland, Queensland Government, Australia, 2009 (http://www.tq.com.au/research/international-source-market-data/asia/asia_home.cfm)

5. Janison Learning Management System, Janison, Coffs Harbour, NSW, Australia http://www.janison.com.au/default.aspx

6. Software program: 'Hi-Q Recorder', http://www.roemersoftware.com/free-sound-recorder.html.

7. Videolinq, TAFE Queensland, Australia, http://videolinq.tafe.net/

8. Elluminate's Learncentral, The social learning network for education, http://www.elluminate.com/