Utilizing video conferencing software to teach young language learners in Hong Kong during the COVID-19 class suspensions

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Hong Kong schools, like many around the world, suspended face-to-face classes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with teachers instructed to provide learning opportunities to learners remotely. Although the use of technology in elementary school face-to-face English language lessons has grown (Bai, Wang, & Chai, 2019), the suspension required adoption of alternatives to face-to-face instruction. This led teachers to utilize video conferencing software (VCS), such as Zoom, to deliver synchronous live lessons (Moorhouse, 2020). Using VCS to teach is demanding (Rehn, Maor, & McConney, 2018). Teachers need to be able to design and facilitate real-time lessons across a screen effectively (Peachey, 2017). If teachers have no related training or experience, they may feel unprepared and anxious (Rehn et al., 2018).

This study reports on one Hong Kong elementary school English language teacher’s (the second author) experience of trialling the use of VCS to teach for the first time. In early March 2020, the teacher taught a single 40-minute lesson five times to five different Grade 5 (10–11 year olds) classes (~25 learners per class) of mixed proficiency English language learners. The study draws on his observations, post-lesson reflections, and learners’ post-lesson comments collected on a learning management system (LMS). It ends with lessons learned, which may be useful for teachers using VCS for the first time.

2 | LESSON SEQUENCE: PRE–LIVE-LESSON TASK, LIVE LESSON, AND POST–LIVE-LESSON TASK

At the beginning of the school suspension in early February 2020, the teacher wanted to help his learners continue learning remotely. To do this, he regularly uploaded learning tasks on the school website for learners to download and complete. However, he was dissatisfied with this asynchronous approach, as it was difficult to gauge learners’ performances and provide feedback. Learners also lacked oral interaction—important for young learners’ language development (Butler, 2018). Therefore, he
decided to trial the use of VCS to conduct synchronous live lessons as part of a sequence of learning. The teacher designed a three-stage lesson sequence including pre–live-lesson task (offline), live lesson (through VCS), and post–live-lesson task (on a LMS).

Because this was the first time that the teacher and the learners had used VCS for an English language lesson, the teacher felt it was important to ensure the lesson was not cognitively and linguistically demanding (Butler, 2018). To do this, he selected a familiar topic: global climate change. The learners had explored the topic in other school subjects. The teacher based the lesson sequence on an upcoming event: *Earth Hour 2020*. This is a global event organised by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) initiated to raise awareness of climate change.

In the pre–live-lesson task, the learners watched an 8-minute video about Earth Hour 2020 and answered five questions. This helped to activate their preexisting schemata about the topic, build their understanding of Earth Hour, and prepare them for the live lesson. The task and instructions were uploaded to the school website for learners to access five days before the live lesson (see Figure 1).

In the live lesson, the teacher began by explaining some basic features of the VSC. He then played the video about Earth Hour again and asked the learners to orally share their prepared answers from the pre–live-lesson task. After that, the teacher used presentation software to introduce four effects of global climate change and five areas in which people could change their habits to reduce it. The learners were then asked to provide examples of how they could change their own behaviour, using the areas introduced by the teacher. Other learners were asked to give oral feedback to their classmates’ ideas. Finally the teacher introduced the post–live-lesson task, which was for learners to make a pledge to change their behaviours for Earth Hour 2020 and present it in a mode of their choice (e.g. video, poster, or drawing). Language scaffolding was provided through exemplars, images, whole class brainstorming, and sentence stems (Butler, 2018). Parents/guardians were invited to join the live lesson to help with technical difficulties.

In the post–live-lesson task, learners created and uploaded their work to the LMS. The task was open-ended. The post–live-lesson task provided an opportunity for the learners to engage in independent work that could be viewed, liked, and commented on by their classmates and teachers (Moorhouse & Beaumont, 2019). It also provided the teacher with feedback on the learners’ understanding.

3 \hspace{1em} \textbf{REFLECTING ON THE LESSON SEQUENCE}

Based on the teacher’s observations and learners’ comments, the teacher believes the lessons were implemented successfully. Learners’ post-lesson comments collected on the LMS suggest that they enjoyed interacting with their teacher and classmates in real time, and using VCS was “an interesting experience” and a platform they would like to use in “future lessons.”

The teacher found that having the live lesson, in addition to the asynchronous pre– and post–live-lesson tasks, was beneficial. Assigning the pre–live-lesson task meant the learners came prepared for the live lesson. By asking the learners to share their answers to the pre–live-lesson task at the beginning of the live lesson, the teacher was able to check their understanding of the task. With hindsight, he saw it would have been useful to have the learners submit their work ahead of the lesson through the LMS or on an student response system (see Figure 2 for an example). This would have allowed the teacher to see a greater number of the learners’ responses and tailor the lesson content based on their responses.

Introducing the post–live-lesson task during the live lesson meant the learners were able to ask clarification questions. For example, one learner asked, “Can we use special effects and video editing software?” The teacher was able to guarantee that all learners saw exemplars of the post–live-lesson task. The teacher thought that this helped make expectations clear. This is something that could be more challenging through
Pre Task for Zoom Lesson on 25th or 26th March, 2020

BEFORE your Zoom lesson with Mr ______, please watch the following video and think about the questions below.

How to play the video:
Earth Hour 2020 (Click to Play)

OR Copy and paste the link: http://y2u.be/dZjhzP7oVD8

OR Scan the QR Code:

QUESTIONS

Watch the video and listen for the answers to the following questions:

1. How many years ago was the world’s first Earth Hour?
2. Which country was the first Earth Hour in?
3. What global problem does Earth Hour draw attention to?
4. Which day and time will Earth Hour be in 2020?
5. What is the main thing that people do to celebrate Earth Hour?

You will be expected to answer these questions during your Zoom lesson. Please write notes on A4 paper and bring the notes to your Zoom lesson.

REMEMBER: Bring some paper and a pen for taking notes during the Zoom lesson.

FIGURE 1 Example of the pre-live-lesson task
asynchronous only approaches (Peachey, 2017). Indeed, learners’ understanding was evident in the range of pledges uploaded to the LMS. They produced attractive posters or created unique videos (see Figure 3 for an example).

The teacher observed that lesson success depended on the learners’ ability to manage the VCS effectively. It was important that learners muted their microphones when not speaking to stop ambient noise. The teacher noticed that when using “share screen” mode, there was a lack of paralinguistic

FIGURE 2  Example of using a student response system for the pre–live-lesson task

FIGURE 3  Example of student's work
communication because he could only see six participants. This made observing learner engagement or understanding difficult (Peachey, 2017). Paralinguistic cues are useful when teaching young language learners because they may not understand all verbal instructions (Butler, 2018). The teacher found it useful to switch between the “share screen” mode to present information and the “gallery view” to communicate with learners. Although this took more time, it allowed the teacher to use questions such as “Everyone who thinks X, raise your hands”—giving the teacher vital feedback.

4 | LESSONS LEARNED

The teacher learned several lessons from the first attempt at synchronous teaching through VCS:

- Keep it simple—do not teach new topics or language so the focus is placed on familiarization of the VCS and its features (e.g., microphone mute / raise hand).
- Utilize various VCS features such as “share screen” and “gallery view” modes
- Include the VCS lesson within a sequence of learning:
  a. Assign a pre–live-lesson task so the learners can come prepared for the live lesson (Butler, 2018).
  b. Design a post–live-lesson task to allow learners to continue their learning after the VCS lesson and provide feedback on learning (Moorhouse & Beaumont, 2019).

FIGURE 4  Example of a Game-based Learning Platform used during a live lesson
The teacher was encouraged by his first attempt, but recognises the potential for improvement. In subsequent lessons, combining the VCS with additional tools such as a student response system (e.g., Mentimeter) or a game-based learning platform (e.g., Kahoot!) through the “shared screen: function to increase the variety of activities, will be explored (see Figure 4 for an example).

Although there are aspects of teaching using VCS that are more challenging, such as facilitating learner-to-learner interaction, gauging interest, and giving individual feedback (Rehn et al., 2018), the authors believe young language learners benefit from them. They can interact with their teachers and classmates in real time (Peachey, 2017), providing a sense of normality, social contact, and opportunity to use English during unprecedented times. Further research should explore the effective use of VCS with young learners.

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