

Remote Learning: Lessons Learned

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In New Haven Public Schools, we have been remote learning since March, never returning to the hybrid model, despite many plans to do so. As a result, world language teachers have had some time to get used to the remote-only teaching space. Based on conversations with five of our amazing teachers, Trudy Anderson (Spanish), Zhanyun Chen (Chinese), Hanan Elkamah (Arabic), Odalis Mercado (Spanish), and Mary Sullivan (Latin), and recent experiences observing and listening to colleagues, we have identified three things that **both students and teachers** need to experience and feel this year: support, sharing, and success.*

Students

We need to offer **support** to students by helping them to feel *comfortable, included, encouraged, and empowered* in our classes. *Comfort* starts with familiar daily routines and structure, clear rules, and consistent use of practiced, target language cues with visuals to maintain class norms (mute, unmute, etc.). You can increase feelings of comfort by including social-emotional check-ins as part of your routine. Our teachers have also found that periodic one-on-one meetings and/or interpersonal interviews with students are key to relationship building in the remote environment (and to getting students to turn their cameras on!). Support also means that students feel *included* by “seeing themselves” in the images, examples, and language that we use in class and by accurate representations of the diversity within the target cultures. Students must be *encouraged* often by positive praise and feedback; our “re-entry” unit this year included phrases for students to praise each other in class as well. Finally, supporting students means *empowering* them, by allowing them to set their own proficiency goals for the year and self-assessing their progress. You can also include student voice by asking them to vote for the “best” (anything), suggest the vocabulary they want to include in thematic units, and by having menu choice boards for projects and assessments.

Relationships and connection are essential in the remote environment. Our teachers are finding ways to prioritize **sharing** and community building with students, as they *learn about their teachers, learn about each other, and collaborate on work*. Lessons in which teachers share photos of their own families, pets, and experiences are always successful; chat-boxes suddenly light up with comments and questions. We have found that simple polls about likes and dislikes (using Pear Deck) and short presentational tasks (using Flipgrid or Padlet) in which students express their opinions are both engaging and help them to get to know each other. Even when students are not interacting on camera or in the chat, we have seen that activities involving *collaboration* pull students into the lesson. These include tasks in which everyone adds something to a whole-class shared Google Doc, pairs work together on a Google Slide, or groups play in teams for Quizlet Live or Quizziz. NHPS teachers also saw student engagement increase in breakout rooms, after overcoming the challenges of setting them up in Google Meets. These collaborations help students to have some of the social interactions that they are missing so much.

With all of the challenges of online school, students need to feel **success** on a daily basis. We can provide that by staying *focused on proficiency, providing scaffolds* for students to “level up,” using activities that help them to *experience “quick wins,”* and clearly *defining what they need to do to succeed* in world language class. Staying *focused on proficiency* means emphasizing functions (expressing opinions, making requests, etc.), providing students with scaffolds such as visuals, choice questions, and sentence starters, and offering conjunctions, rejoinders, and other phrases that help students to say what they want to say and participate naturally in conversations. Every day, teachers can provide moments of “quick wins” for students by creating a “game-like” environment. This could mean an actual game, or just asking students to predict answers and then having a “big reveal” in which they can think (or say) “yes! I got it!” Regular praise, positive feedback, smiles, and cheers add to this feeling of success. For longer assignments, projects, and assessments, students need to know specifically what they need to do to succeed. This requires clear directions, often repeated in writing, in class, and even on a recording. Try to provide a sample product for longer tasks or one good example for shorter tasks, as well as clear rubrics, checklists, and even suggested timelines for longer projects. Just like adults right now, students are screen-fatigued, so we can’t assume or expect they will read everything we give them; instead, allow for the time to patiently and kindly repeat, reinforce, and remediate their understanding of what they need to be doing to succeed.

Teachers

Teachers also need to be **supported, have opportunities to share, and experience feelings of success** right now. Please take the time to get enough sleep, do things you enjoy, and get away from screens. Set time boundaries for when you will and won’t work. Find ways to feel included and encouraged, by having a teaching partner, even if you have to reach out

to someone in a different discipline. So many technology tools require having a partner who can act as your “student” and try it out so that you can see if it works or how it looks from the student perspective.

For more encouragement, check out [#langchat](#) on Twitter on Thursday nights, or attend some of the recent free webinars by professional organizations. Check out inspiring language podcasts like [Inspired Proficiency](#), [WeTeachLanguages](#), or [Language Latte](#). You’ll find that everyone is struggling with the same issues with remote/hybrid teaching, and there are some great suggestions out there.

This is also a time when teachers must **collaborate and share** materials and resources. Even if other teachers you know teach different languages, you can share simple resources, such as clipart for visuals, ideas for instruction, and technology teaching tips. If you can find a colleague teaching the same language/level, divide up the work and plan together. Many of our teachers have found that this kind of collaboration makes all the difference in handling the prep load of remote teaching.

How do teachers find **success** in this environment? First, maximize those hours of preparation time by finding ways to use every resource you find or material you make multiple times. A great short video can be shown to the same class with very different tasks a few days in a row, or can be shown to different levels by modifying what you are asking students to do with the video. An image-rich set of slides for introducing a unit can be used daily to review the theme of the unit. Each day, the teacher speaks less and asks the students to say more questions about the images on the slides. If you make slides for vocabulary images, one-per-slide, they can be used for flashcards, quizzes, student labeling, daily review, Screencastify recording, etc. Make once, use multiple ways!

Teachers can also find success by establishing 1 or 2-week structures that work well for their schedule and help to organize lesson planning. For lower proficiency levels, you might organize by having more interpretive/input tasks and vocabulary games the first week with scaffolded interpersonal practice, and more intense interpersonal practice and a presentational task by the end of the second week. Or, you might designate certain days of the week (in your planning) as the days that you always do breakout rooms, certain games, individual meetings with students, etc. As you identify the activities that are the most effective in engaging students and building proficiency, find ways to use those activities more often. You can also determine why those activities work so well and apply that knowledge to other activities you build.

One final piece of advice from our teachers: always have a back-up plan. We suggest a list of three things you can tell students to do if your technology doesn’t work that day. For example: have them go on Quizlet for a set amount of time, tell them to draw or find images to represent the current vocabulary, or even tell them to go into their Google Classrooms and work on any assignment they are behind on or need to revise. They will thank you for it!

This is not an easy time, and this may not be an easy year, but we can all get through this together, if we support each other, share with each other, and seek out those feelings of success, however small, every day.

*If you would like to view the graphic we are using to organize our thinking around this, go here: <https://tinyurl.com/NHPSSuccess20202021>