



## Adaptability 2.0: Tackling the challenge of the COVID-19 crisis

*Marylise Rilliard, University of Texas at Austin*

**Keywords:** *COVID-19, foreign language teaching, graduate research, international students*

**APA Citation:** Rilliard, M. (2020). Adaptability 2.0: Tackling the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis. *Second Language Research & Practice*, 1(1), 179–182. <http://hdl.handle.net/10125/69853>

### Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has deeply affected many aspects of our personal and professional lives. Despite the countless messages we have received from our universities, colleges, and departments commending us for how well we have been handling the crisis, the reality is that we don't always feel as though we are successfully meeting the challenges. Most of us wear different hats in our institutions and adapting to the COVID-19 crisis involves finding solutions to different problems. As a member of the foreign language academic community, this crisis has affected me in three major ways: as a language instructor, as a graduate student in a language department, and as an international student. Each of these perspectives comes with particular challenges, and I responded to those challenges in different ways: by being present and intentional as a teacher, by remaining focused on my academic path amid the uncertainty and anxiety as a graduate student, and by prioritizing self-care, especially as an international student caught in a cross-fire of travel bans.

### Teaching During COVID-19

Being a language teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic has been no easy task. On top of trying to process the chaos myself, I had to manage my students' anxiety and questions, many that I did not have answers to, especially as we transitioned to online classes. I tried my best to communicate everything I knew to them as quickly as possible, but the different leadership and pedagogical teams could only work so fast to provide answers to all their legitimate concerns.

That said, when the remainder of the semester was finally set up, most things went rather smoothly. Most of our curriculum was already on Canvas, the learning management system used at my institution, which made the transition to Zoom fairly easy. Zoom is a practical and user-friendly online tool, and our online classes went better than I had expected. I was able to conduct my class in much the same way as I would have in person, especially thanks to the breakout rooms. Keeping students motivated to come to class and engaged in class activities was a bit more challenging. My students didn't like online classes, as they expressed several times. Moreover, the attendance policy was dropped in our language program. Thus, as weeks went by, attendance became quite unpredictable as fewer and fewer students attended class. I kept taking attendance for my own records, and if I had not seen a student in class for about a week, I would email them to offer my help and encourage them to come back to class as soon as they could. I also made sure, during class time, to be as present as I was before in the classroom. I would go back and forth between the breakout rooms to listen to them practice, provide help when needed, and answer questions. It was easy to start doing my own thing when students were all in their breakout rooms, but I made it a point to be

present, and to devote class time to them, just like I would during in-person meetings. In general, I tried to be extra-available, even outside of class, via email or on video call. Beyond keeping students engaged, I also wanted to set a good example of professional engagement, and I was very intentional with my actions.

I asked my students to also be intentional with their actions: come to class prepared, dressed, and not in bed. I also told them to be intentional with their attendance, as coming to French class was no longer just a means to an end, i.e., completing the course successfully, but also an end in itself, as daily classes were a way for them to engage socially during these isolating times. The language class in particular was very important in that regard. A lot of classes became partly or entirely asynchronous as we moved online, and for some students, our daily language class was the only class that was taking place synchronously and where they got to engage with their peers, and the only *place* they had to *go* to on a daily basis. Additionally, sticking to a schedule with regular routines is beneficial to mental health, which I explicitly voiced several times.

The COVID-19 crisis was anxiety-inducing for most of us, even more so for those who already suffered mental health issues prior to the pandemic. I made sure to provide resources that I found useful, to implement these resources as materials for meaningful class activities when I could, to be understanding, and to check up on my students via email when they stopped coming to class. They always appreciated my efforts and felt comfortable talking to me about what they were going through. I did not want mental health to be a taboo topic in these unprecedented conditions. Therefore, I tried to be more transparent about myself and to talk to my students about what I was struggling with, and what I was doing to help myself through the difficult times. What they needed from me at this time—expressed in their personal emails—was not just a teacher, but a human being. And there is nothing more human than being vulnerable. It was my way of telling them that it was okay to struggle, and that there was no shame in it. I believe it also helped establish a trusting and caring atmosphere in an online environment that can otherwise be impersonal and cold. Additionally, we were all getting to know one another a bit more personally, since we were all attending class from our homes, which is an intimate setting, so sharing some of my concerns with my students did not seem inappropriate, especially when these concerns related to my role as a fellow student.

## Academic Research During COVID-19

Remaining a research-focused graduate student in such an anxiety-inducing context was the most challenging aspect of this crisis for me. First, the lack of structure, the disruption of work and home spaces and routines, and the uncertainty and great changes brought about by COVID-19 exacerbated mental health issues. Research became a lower priority, while taking care of myself became a higher priority. In addition, self-care, managing the online transition, teaching, and other duties—such as course supervision in my case—left little time, energy, and mental space to work on my own research.

Other disruptions caused by the pandemic also affected my academic and professional development, as everything was put on hold. I was accepted to three professional conferences in Europe during the summer and early fall of 2020, which were great opportunities for me, and I was looking forward to them. However, only one moved online while the others were cancelled or postponed. Not only did these disruptions rob me of promising academic and professional opportunities but also the feeling of accomplishment I would have gotten from presenting my work. It felt as if I had done nothing all semester, as if my work was lost, a frustrating experience indeed. This frustration was also accompanied by the anxiety that came with waiting to hear back from conference organizers about whether the conferences would be moved online, postponed, or simply cancelled, as well as the anxiety surrounding summer funding, which for me was tied to these conferences. Eventually, I had to write another proposal to maintain my summer funding.

The anxiety related to funding and how this crisis is affecting my academic path extends to fall and dissertation considerations, too. I am on fellowship for the 2020-2021 academic year, and my plan was to use this time to go to France for the fall semester to collect sociolinguistic data for my dissertation. Naturally, this project was called into question and still is, since, as of August 2020, we are still waiting on

decisions from the university concerning research-related travel. At the start of the fall semester, I will be at a point in my research project where I *need* data to stay on track to graduate on time. Not knowing if I will be able to obtain the data has put my project on hold and made me question a lot of things. It took me a long time in my graduate career to come up with a dissertation project that I felt passionate about and that brought together all my research interests, and I was not ready to abandon it. I knew that I needed to rethink my project, but I was not willing to compromise to the point of doing a project I was half-hearted about. I even considered taking a leave of absence in fall 2020 if I was not able to go abroad to collect my data. As an international student, this would have meant losing my student status and not being allowed to stay on United States territory. Thus, I quickly gave up the idea and started thinking about ways to accomplish my initial project without altering it too much. I talked to my supervisors, and while we were still waiting on decisions from the university concerning research abroad, I made backup research plans so that I would be able to move forward even if my original plans fell through. And it felt good to have a backup plan. Yet, having to suddenly rethink my dissertation project made me realize that I might need extra time to graduate. It felt as though I was losing control of my situation and that was hard to accept.

Most of what we do in graduate school is preparation for landing an academic job. Attending and presenting at conferences, networking, trying to publish, completing portfolios, and taking on other duties are all means to an end: having a CV that will lead to a job after graduation. The same is true of the dissertation project; every step of the process is important for the completion of the final product, but in isolation, these steps are not very valuable. As a graduate student, I am very much used to thinking ahead, developing my own academic projects, and monitoring my progress. Losing control of my dissertation project during the pandemic and not being able to see a way forward have been difficult challenges indeed, but I have learned that patience, flexibility, acceptance, and resilience are my best allies in this crisis, as well as in academia and in life.

## **Being an International Student During COVID-19**

As an international student from France, I have been personally affected by this crisis more profoundly than many American students. First, the COVID-19 epidemic hit Europe a couple of weeks before the United States. Thus, when the crisis hit in the United States, it felt as if I were reliving a trauma I had already endured having previously watched my family and friends back home go through the experience. Additionally, reading the French and American news, constantly checking on people both in France and in the United States, and keeping up with and looking forward to the different waves of reopening in both countries reinforced the feeling of experiencing this crisis twice, as if I were in two places at the same time. Obviously, worrying about loved ones, as well as wondering what I would do if someone in my family got sick, were constant concerns. Would I be able to fly home? If I went to France, would I be able to come back in time to vacate my house? Tragic things happening to loved ones is always something we think about when we live so far away from home, but for once, it did not seem like fiction, and that was, and still is, really frightening.

Without going into the most catastrophic scenarios, this crisis has still been hard to deal with on a personal level. For the past six years, I have been going back to France twice a year for one to two months, as I still have very strong links with France. However, my time back home is not simply a fun time to visit family and friends and indulge in French culture and food, but an essential part of my recovery process. Graduate school is intense and very demanding, and each semester is more difficult than the preceding one. Going back to France twice a year allows me, through physical distance, to take a real break from graduate school. It has been one of the major ways I have been able to cope with graduate school and preserve my mental health for as long as I have. And for the first time, it looks like I am not going home for the summer, and I am not sure how to start a new academic year in the right condition without getting that break. Moreover, on top of dealing with my own frustration and disappointment, I must deal with my family's frustration and disappointment as well, when my plate is already full.

## **Conclusion**

Looking back, I believe we have a lot to learn from this unprecedented challenge on both the institutional and personal levels. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the academic community has acknowledged that it is okay to not be okay. Such concern for the mental health and well-being of students, staff, and faculty in institutions of higher education should be permanent, not just event-based. A lot is asked from graduate students in large, Research 1 universities. While there are mental health resources widely available to us, using them is still negatively perceived. This taboo surrounding mental health makes me feel at times as if I am not fit for graduate school, which certainly hinders my progress and success in academia. Moreover, the qualities we have had to practice so much during this crisis—patience, flexibility, acceptance, and resilience—are qualities that we should bring with us into the post-COVID world, especially for graduate students like me who are going to enter an academic job market greatly affected by the economic impact of COVID-19. Finally, this crisis has reminded me of the extra challenges international students must overcome on a daily basis. Yet, despite the hardships, this crisis has turned out to be an important learning experience: Whatever the challenges may be, we have the ability to adapt and to overcome them, as individuals and as a community.

## **About the Author**

**Marylise Rilliard** is a fourth year French Linguistics PhD student in the French and Italian Department at the University of Texas at Austin. She is bringing her interests in sociolinguistics and L2 teaching and learning together in her dissertation and hopes to develop the emerging field of Applied Sociolinguistics.

**E-mail:** [mrilliard@utexas.edu](mailto:mrilliard@utexas.edu)