Chapter Three
How to Choose a Platform

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The adoption of a post-summer STARTALK program relies on selecting an appropriate online platform that satisfies several basic needs to successfully complete the set curriculum. The post-summer program is an extension of the established summer course, and it should integrate the learning goals to maintain and expand upon the skills acquired during the face-to-face sessions. During online classes, students will be able to focus on personal interests and needs to maximize their learning outcomes by receiving level-appropriate challenges and individualized error corrections.

An important additional benefit is that online platforms allow students to access materials and complete assignments as their schedules permit. Overall, students perform best when they are encouraged to be independent learners. Manageable assignments and clear instructions with accessible materials allow students to take responsibility for their learning outside of class and to prepare to participate in online instruction.

Technology, when properly aligned with instructional strategies, can be an effective tool that opens opportunities. However, student motivation decreases when the technology is superfluous and does not contribute to the learning goals. It is therefore imperative that the technology chosen be easy to use, without distracting, unnecessary bells and whistles.

The Correct Platform for Post-Summer Programs

There are hundreds of online learning management systems available to choose from, and it can be a daunting task to select the system that best fits your program. When selecting a LMS platform, it is important to consider multiple factors such as cost, class size, methods of use (such as live classrooms versus asynchronous individual work and assessments), and forums to provide students with timely feedback. It is also important to keep in mind that the online component is simply a tool that will allow further collaboration toward an already established learning goal. Under the blended learning model, students should be able to access online learning in both synchronous and asynchronous modes. At a minimum, the following features should be included for whichever platform is selected.

Synchronous Learning Features

- Students should be able to use all modes of communication (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) to allow for performance-based tasks to be accomplished in accordance with ACTFL standards.

- The software platform should not require specific devices or a high level of technical ability to operate. This allows greater accessibility and convenience of use. Depending on the age and level of the students, parents may also need to be present to monitor online classes.

- Technical support should be available in some form for both student and instructor.

- Audio and video capabilities facilitate authentic communication tasks in real time.

- Chat functions should allow either typed and/or handwritten messages.

- Ideally both instructor and student should be able to upload images and video for live analysis, and should be able to highlight parts of text and images for greater communicative comprehension in dealing with presentational, interpersonal, and interpretive tasks.

Asynchronous Learning Features

- An online library of multimedia content that allows a student to work at his/her own pace and review material previously covered should be available. Full-time access to this library allows students to prioritize and schedule their language learning during the busy academic
year. Additionally, there are evidence-based studies that show students perform better when they have the ability to pause, rewind, or re-watch online videos to review parts that are of particular interest, or that are harder to absorb on a first viewing.

• A location to upload and share assignments and materials is needed. This can be beneficial for peer assignments designed to develop critical collaborative skills.

• The ability of instructors to collect assignments and provide timely, appropriate feedback with markups and/or audio commentary is necessary. A benefit of online feedback is the inclusion of specific links to learning resources that cater to a student’s personal learning style.

• Tools that allow students to monitor their progress by accessing past work are especially useful.

The Right Fit for Your Program

If the STARTALK program is affiliated with a school that already uses a LMS, it would be advantageous to adopt that system for a few reasons. The upfront cost will be minimal, students will be familiar with the platform and will not require training, and teachers can integrate the coursework into the regular academic modules. Your school administration should be consulted to check if there are any restrictions before using their LMS.

If no LMS is available, your STARTALK program will have to look elsewhere. The charts below feature a few exemplary major tele-conference and LMS tools. As previously mentioned, there are hundreds more to choose from and conducting your own up-to-date research is strongly encouraged. The top chart refers to systems that can be adopted at no cost to the user and satisfy some needs for online teaching, whereas the bottom chart provides more robust solutions.

I think that my online teacher was awesome! She definitely gave me enough time to practice new topics and get the sentences right. And she corrected my speech if I said something incorrect. I really enjoyed when we went over how to write different Chinese radicals and characters.

- Student Participant

What I like about the online learning is that it gives a one to one opportunity to work on private matters/struggles like tone. The online learning sessions also keep you attentive because of how fast and how much material for the lesson there is to obtain.

- Student Participant
Synchronous Learning

- Share Learning Materials
- Conduct Live Sessions
- Use Virtual Whiteboard
- Languages

Online Learning Management System

- View Online Gradebook
- Explore Web-based Materials
- Upload Assignments
- Access Learning Modules

Asynchronous Learning
## Free Platforms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Synchronous Features</th>
<th>Asynchronous Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Skype                  | Skype is an instant messaging app that provides online text message, video chat, and VOIP services. | • Up to 25 users meet online  
• Take part in live video discussions  
• Mobile access across devices  
• Upload text, pictures, and videos to share  
• Instant messaging with text | • None                                                                              |
| Google Hangouts        | Google Hangouts is a communication platform developed by Google which includes instant messaging, video chat, SMS and VOIP features. | • Up to 25 users meet online  
• Take part in live video discussions  
• Mobile access across devices  
• Upload text, pictures, and videos to share  
• Instant messaging with text | • Chat text histories are saved                                                  |
| ooVoo                  | A video chat and a messaging app developed by Microsoft.                     | • Up to 12 users meet online  
• Take part in live video discussions  
• Mobile access across devices  
• Upload text, pictures, and videos to share  
• Instant messaging with text  
• Desktop sharing | • None                                                                              |
| ChineseForAll.org      | Website developed by the Hunter College Chinese program tech team.           | • There’s no limit in terms of number of users at a time, but to ensure stable connection, we suggest no more than 10 - 15 sessions at a time.  
• Take part in live discussions  
• Write on a virtual whiteboard  
• Upload text, pictures, and videos to share | • Upload assignments, tests, and materials  
• Collect homework  
• Keep track of student grades and attendance  
• Web-based instructional materials for literacy development  
• Task-based learning modules |
## Paid Platforms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Cost</th>
<th>Synchronous Features</th>
<th>Asynchronous Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adobe Connect</strong></td>
<td>$370/month</td>
<td>• Up to 200 students and teachers meet online</td>
<td>• On-demand classes&lt;br&gt;• Efficient training management and tracking&lt;br&gt;• Record classroom sessions&lt;br&gt;• Create custom reporting based on live sessions&lt;br&gt;• Central content library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Mobile learning across devices&lt;br&gt;• Take part in live discussions&lt;br&gt;• Upload text, pictures, and videos&lt;br&gt;• Screen / document sharing&lt;br&gt;• Breakout rooms to divide students into groups</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Canvas LMS</strong></td>
<td>One-time implementation fee plus an annual fee that varies based on size, training, and support.</td>
<td>• Take part in live discussions&lt;br&gt;• Write on a virtual whiteboard&lt;br&gt;• Upload text, pictures, and videos to share</td>
<td>• Rich LMS suite&lt;br&gt;• Upload assignments, tests, materials, syllabus, calendar, and more&lt;br&gt;• Audio and video message feedback on assignments&lt;br&gt;• Real-time grade book that can be shared with students and parents&lt;br&gt;• Collaborative workspaces&lt;br&gt;• ePortfolios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Schoology LMS</strong></td>
<td>Free for individuals, premier content requires additional fees</td>
<td>• Take part in live discussions&lt;br&gt;• Write on a virtual whiteboard&lt;br&gt;• Upload text, pictures, and videos to share</td>
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It is not always easy to predict what tools will be necessary if an online component has never been taught before. Before a program determines which platform suits their needs best, it is important to take careful account of the instructional requirements of the post-summer curriculum. It may be beneficial to complete some trial lessons with the lead instructors to draw up a wish list of features, and then compare with usable platforms. Administrators should not feel that they have to commit a large percentage of their resources in order to have a successful blended learning model, but they should expect some growing pains in the first year. If possible, collaborate and share with STARTALK programs that already have an online component to find the best solution for you. We strongly encourage administrators to search the STARTALK programs list for programs that have adopted online and blended learning to learn more about their models and experiences.
We are the parents of Brendan and Madeline, who have taken part in the Chinese Flagship Program this year. We must say that we are absolutely thrilled with what the program has had to offer and amazed at how receptive our kids have been to learning Chinese through the interactive online classes.

To provide some additional context here, we had tried to put Brendan and Madeline in a traditional Chinese school on the weekends in the past - the results were abysmal and we pulled them out of school before they grew to resent the language on a broader basis.

More specifically, our kids appreciate the individualized teaching approach based on their respective interest and proficiency level. The use of monthly in-person classes to supplement the online sessions was also very well-received. And, they were so fortunate to have Ms. Lu (‘Lu Laoshi’) as their teacher, who they consider to be their ‘favorite teacher ever’ despite the fact that they have never met in person! Lu Laoshi was simply wonderful in keeping our kids fully engaged yet challenged with the many different exercises she worked with them on over the past months. They literally looked forward to spending time and learning Chinese with Lu Laoshi online every Sunday morning! We'd like to sincerely thank you from the bottom of our hearts, Lu Laoshi! :)

- Shirley & Fred