**Communicative Values of Online Remote Learning for English Language Classes in Higher Education Context**

Dr. Ji Hye Jaime Chung

(ORCiD: 0000-0002-2032-9861)

Mahidol University International College, Thailand

Address: 999 Phutthamonthon 4 Road, Salaya, Nakhonpathom, Thailand 73170

First name: Ji Hye Middle name: Jaime Last name: Chung

Email: jihyejaime.chu@mahidol.ac.th

Dr. Simin Sasani

School of Modern Languages and Linguistics, University of Southampton, UK

Address: Building 65, Avenue Campus, University of Southampton, UK. Post code: SO17 1BJ

First name: Simin Last name: Sasani

Email: [s.sasani@soton.ac.uk](mailto:s.sasani@soton.ac.uk)

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**Abstract**

This study aims to understand how pandemic-driven remote online education has shaped foreign language learning in higher education for English language learners. Group interviews and questionnaires were used to collect data from Chinese international students studying English at a UK-based university. The results revealed that these students perceived online learning to be an enjoyable experience with added benefits. Though the data elucidated the importance of bonded relationships among teachers and peers via direct face-to-face interaction, online classes provided a relaxed environment for students to participate more. Despite the deficiency of direct interaction and communication with classmates and teachers, students’ motivation level did not decrease.

Keywords: online remote learning, class communication, class participation, motivation, peer and teacher relationship, sociocultural factors

**Introduction**

It has been nearly three years since the COVID-19 outbreak affected the global livelihood. Governments, businesses, hospitals, and schools have all worked hard to survive this challenging time, and people have learned to adapt to new lifestyles (Baker et al., 2022), largely by working and learning remotely online. Most schools and universities worldwide turned to online teaching when the pandemic broke out in early 2020, and though many are entering their fourth year of online learning, both students and educators are still facing some challenges absorbing and delivering knowledge on computer-based platforms (Yeung & Yau, 2022). Though societies have adjusted, numerous students still feel lost and left out learning remotely.

Governments and educational institutions across the world have launched and perpetually amended various policies and programs for the continuation of educational activities despite the unceasing spread of the novel virus. However, there have been disruptions and ambiguity regarding the replacement of face-to-face lectures and discussions with online platforms, which can limit certain aspects of active and collaborative learning and teaching. Depending on the nature of the subject matter, the level of impact varies; when it comes to language classes in particular, face-to-face interaction among teachers and peers has been deemed crucial in the past (Johnson & Lester, 2016). Generally, language-related classes are designed so students can directly practice with one another in class and share cultural values to enhance knowledge of the language, which improves linguistic proficiency.

The sudden changes in learning and teaching environments since the start of the pandemic have caused disruption, confusion, and frustration among students and have affected their motivations and mindsets (Subakthiasih & Putri, 2020). In order to examine international students’ challenges and needs in foreign language-related courses during this time period, data were collected for three months in a UK-based higher education institution.

**Review of Literature**

*Motivation and Online Remote Learning*

A few studies reveal that online education may have negative influences on learners’ motivations because of the lack of social interaction and a gap between expectations and the organization of the content in online settings (Lin et al., 2017; Meşe & Sevilen, 2021). However, it has also been confirmed that students’ level of motivation in online learning can be enhanced if teachers provide a relaxed classroom culture, detailed and positive feedback, and customized support (Chen & Jang, 2010; Ushida, 2005; Yantraprakorn et al., 2018). Zheng et al. (2018) found that learners with a positive future image of their language learning journey and those with an interest in learning about different cultures had higher levels of motivation and better self-regulatory capacities in online learning environments. Though online learning has its limitations, a majority of higher education students has rapidly adapted to the new ways of learning and communicating (Greenhow & Galvin, 2020); they now see remote online learning as another efficient way of building unique relationships and gaining new knowledge.

*Sociocultural Theory of Language Learning: Importance of Relationships*

Sociocultural factors play a significant role in motivation toward learning (Kazakova & Shastina, 2019; Wang et al., 2020). The notion of culture has been frequently used to explain social behaviors and norms found in groups of people (Lustig et al., 2006; Samovar et al., 2015). These social interactions are learned through a set of shared understandings that have been embedded in people's minds internally and that may or may not always be manifested in external or tangible conduct (Ellis, 2019). Hofstede (1989) suggests that there are values and customs shared by everyone; by specific groups of people; and by individuals through personal experience. Through these three layers, individuals formulate a certain set of beliefs that provide a particular worldview that eventually affects individual behaviors (Lustig et al., 2006). Thus, culture has a significant role in stabilizing individual behaviors, including interaction patterns and styles, which is clearly witnessed in classroom interactions and preferred learning styles. Therefore, it is not new to claim that there is a notable link between one’s culture and their learning behavior. There is a longstanding belief among scholars that in education and educational settings, culture strongly governs the way people learn and teach as well as how they hold unique assumptions about how to learn and what is worth learning (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Hofstede, 1989).

To link what is discussed above to the Chinese learners in this study, it is crucial to understand specific aspects of the Chinese culture, as they have significant implications for how people from this region learn, especially in remote educational settings. Confucian mindset largely prevails not only in the educational context but throughout the lives of the Chinese people (Wang, 2013; Tu, 2001). Thus, understanding the Confucian Schools of Thought is central to unearthing Chinese students’ perceptions, norms, and learning styles. According to Confucian ideology, the main goal of education is to serve the society through collective dedication (Bell, 2010; Gu, 2006; Lu & Jover, 2019). This suggests that for the purpose of fulfilling social responsibility, education has been considered an instrumental entity to raise noble citizens. This practice has long led students and their families to believe that learning is not only for the student but for society. Furthermore, academic achievement is strongly associated with social image (Chen et al., 2000; Salili, 1996; Tian & Jing, 2021). In a Confucian society where “filial piety”—behaving in a certain manner to bring honor to the family name—is the cornerstone that guides and governs people’s social behaviors, it is perceived that academic success is one of the most honorable ways to bring glory to the collective family (Chuang et al., 2018; Hämäläinen, & Wang, 2022). Families with academically successful children are seen as those making large contributions to society. Therefore, Chinese students living in a collectivist society are consciously and unconsciously nudged into maintaining and uplifting the family name by devoting their time and energy to achieving high results and earning degrees.

Related to one’s pride, prestige, and honor in society, “face” is a complex notion that is perceived as the main aspect of human interaction (Pan, 2000). It is about how one wants to be viewed by others and the way one wants to present themselves to others. Although this phenomenon exists in all societies, it is considered as a guiding principle in Chinese social conduct (Hämäläinen & Wang, 2022; Ji, 2000). Hence, it is a significant notion to be considered in understanding Chinese students’ classroom behaviors. Lee and Morrish (2012) and Tsui (1996) note that in Chinese society, students’ self-interests do not drive their learning as much as the pressure to meet their parents’ expectations. In Confucian societies, most individuals perceive “their lives as a continuity of their parents’ lives” (Han, 2016, p. 4). Family members are normally considered as one single collective body and are accountable toward other members’ achievements and failures. Strongly bonded by family name, one’s behavior represents the whole family in society. Consequently, this leads to the concept of saving face, which equates to gaining positive recognition by others in society.

Silence in the classroom has been valued in Chinese culture under the influence of Confucianism; maintaining silence is a sign of displaying enthusiasm—letting the speaker know that the audience is paying extra attention and listening carefully—and an act of respecting the teacher. This is changing slowly as students these days are open to discuss and challenge ideas. However, Chinese students are still stereotyped as passive learners who keep silent in classroom participation (Huang & Cowden, 2009; Wan, 2021; Xiao, 2021; Zhu & O’Sullivan, 2022).

This point gains additional significance when Chinese students study abroad at educational institutions. In order to avoid embarrassment and to respect teachers, Chinese students tend to stay quiet; this is largely because of the Confucian value that has governed the lives and mindsets of China’s people. This also affects Chinese students’ communication patterns. Holmes (2006) states that patterns witnessed in Chinese communication style indicate one of the most significant characteristics of implicit communication: “The receiver must correctly interpret the speaker's intent without direct reference to what he or she means; information may also convey in the physical context” (p. 22). Adding to this trait, Chinese communication is normally listening-centered (Samovar et al., 2015). Payne and Chung’s (2017) and Chung’s (2021) studies also back this notion by stating that most Asian societies are perceived to communicate indirectly and implicitly and prefer to listen rather than speak in order to retain respect and maintain social harmony.

When it comes to face-to-face classroom learning, teachers and peers can visually see one another and feel their presence; therefore, the silence may not seem awkward, since the sense of community can be seen and felt. However, in online classrooms, the silence practiced by students and/or teachers can diminish the dynamic of class participation because of the limitations incurred by their physical selves being remotely separated. Russo and Campbell (2004) highlight that in online situations, more opportunities for communication should be provided to explore ideas together and to help students feel less isolated. Similarly, Jaques and Salmon (2007) and Salmon (2000) agree that more direct communication with teachers and peers is needed during online classes to give students opportunities to fully immerse in learning from one another.

Because of the different nature of the online learning environment, both students and teachers face the need to readjust their learning and teaching styles by considering the importance of cultural values held by all participants. Considering the huge number of Chinese students in the UK (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2021) and the fact that most courses in the UK have been switched to online because of the pandemic, understanding Chinese culture is imperative to accommodating these international students who are eager to study at UK higher educational institutions.

**Methodology**

*Research design and sample*

In order to examine the perceptions of Chinese students enrolled in a UK-based university of remote online learning, this study was designed to collect data in two phases using a mixed-method approach, which took three months. Purposive sampling was used because of the focus on Chinese international students: All participants were from China, 97% of them residing in their home country of mainland China and 3% at different locations other than the UK at the time of data collection. They were between 18 and 30 years old and enrolled as either undergraduate or post-graduate students studying to gain different degrees from a UK university.

During the first stage of data collection, a survey of 15 questions was sent to 180 Chinese international students taking English language courses at a UK university. The questionnaire was designed to help researchers understand Chinese students’ perceptions of remote online learning, including their experiences, motivation levels, productivity, and overall achievement. As soon as the study was approved by the university administrator, lecturers teaching English language courses at the university were contacted; five lecturers agreed to distribute the questionnaires to their students, and they received detailed information on the research. Out of the 180 students invited to complete the questionnaire, 131 (73%) participated by returning the surveys to the researchers within the given time frame of two weeks.

The second phase of the study was conducted employing a qualitative group interview method. Three group interviews with a total of 30 student participants were directed under the consent of the lecturers and the students. Each group had 10 students, and the group interviews were held via the Microsoft Teams platform. The participants shared their stories and opinions, guided by the two researchers. The group interviews were lively and exposed rich perceptions of individual students regarding remote online learning.

*Data Analysis*

Both questionnaire and interview data were analyzed using content analysis, which is widely used to analyze both quantitative and qualitative data. Since the descriptive statistics illustrated a picture of the collected data and the stories shared by the interview participants portrayed detailed themes that related to the overall picture, content analysis was a suitable choice (Jensen et al., 2013). Content analysis is considered particularly appropriate for focus group interviews that complement quantitative data (Elo et al., 2014).

The text of the data was categorized into codes for selective reduction. Once the quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed, focusing on themes and concepts that were brought up from the narrative, they were integrated for enrichment and mutual complementation.

**Results and Discussion**

Content analysis of the data collected from both phases revealed three major themes: positive communicative experience, the importance of social interaction in language learning, enhanced motivation for communicative competency.

Surprisingly, an overwhelmingly large number of student participants perceived remote learning through online platforms as a positive experience. It served as another way of getting to know the instructor better and an effective method of reducing anxiety when participating.

*Positive Communicative Experience*

Questionnaire findings strongly suggest that the overall experience of being taught online during the current pandemic state is regarded in a positive manner by Chinese international students who were taking the language courses. Out of the 131 responses, 75% answered that they were satisfied with remote online learning (satisfied 43%; more than satisfied 32%). Only 2% replied that they were dissatisfied. The group interview data support the findings from the questionnaire, as students elaborated on the fact that they actually enjoyed live online classes because the lectures were a) more relaxed, which helped reduce their anxiety level especially in the case of communicative tasks; b) time efficient; and c) more strategic and resourceful.

By being online, the lectures were delivered with less tension and more care, students said. They perceived that the instructors were more caring and helpful online in order to reduce the stress students might be feeling from the lack of physical contact.

Student 2: The teacher was very responsible and spent more time with us.

Student 10: I am very satisfied with the online lessons. … I admire [the teacher’s] rigorous and responsible teaching attitude and the time he spent on it all.

Another interesting point mentioned by the participants was that they felt the instructors were revising the lectures by focusing more on specific cultural values. Asian students are generally perceived by Western instructors to be quiet and shy in class, upon which most of the participants agreed. The participants claimed this was because of cultural norms and values. This is in line with Zhu and O’Sullivan’s (2022) study that claims Chinese students, even those who have a good command of English, feel too shy to express themselves, as they are concerned about “losing face” or being embarrassed publicly, which is a common phenomenon in most Confucian-based cultures. Participants felt that instructors became more sensitive toward this cultural phenomenon and were more understanding. Because of the careful attitude displayed by the teachers, students were more relaxed and therefore could easily participate by using the online chat box and/or speaking up.

The participants mentioned that studying online remotely provided them with more options to express themselves and participate in communicative activities compared with face-to-face settings. They could choose how to participate based on what suited their personality and cultural traits. For example, they could share thoughts on discussion boards (asynchronously, written form), in chat boxes (synchronously, written form), in breakout rooms (synchronously, spoken form), in one-on-one tutorials (synchronously, spoken form), or through other ways of communication such as emails and various social media platforms. The participants stated they liked that their teachers were cautious about putting the students “on the spot” during live sessions, which was different from their experiences with face-to-face lessons. This could be understood as an indication that teachers—after the sudden switch to online teaching—tended to be more sensitive and showed enhanced awareness about sociocultural factors and their impact on their learners; with enhanced planning, support, and a relaxed environment that is culturally accommodated, students felt that online learning could positively motivate them to focus on their learning (Chen & Jang, 2010; Ushida, 2005; Yantraprakorn et al., 2018).

Students also expounded that online classes were time efficient; they felt like none of their time was wasted. They perceived that teachers designed the online classes to be more systematic and strategic, which made the lectures more compact and effectual.

The addition of a wide range of resources provided by the instructors and the university was another major reason why students found remote online learning enjoyable. They noticed that the instructors tried their best to share as much material as possible not only during class but also by posting more exercises and extra resources that could help the students. The recorded lectures were another favorite feature of the students.

Student 11: The recorded version of the lectures is really helpful. I can go back and listen to the lectures again. It saves my time when I review materials. We didn’t have access to this when we studied off-line.

Student 18: I feel like teachers are providing us with more online resources for us to use and consult.

Firmansyah et al.’s (2021) study of a group of Indonesian university students aligns well with the findings of the current study. It stated that implementation of online classes because of the pandemic was welcomed by the students, who believed online learning was more effective and efficient. It should be noted, however, that time efficiency and effectiveness of online courses largely depend on how carefully each class is designed, developed, and delivered (Al-Samarraie et al., 2018; Firmansyah et al., 2021). Since participants of the current study expounded that a wide range of materials were available for them to access and that clear instructions were given to them along with recorded videos they could refer to as many times as they wished, they found online remote learning enjoyable, effective, and efficient. Thus, without all these materials and preparations, the students would possibly have had fewer positive experiences while studying remotely during the pandemic.

*The Importance of Social Interaction in Language Learning*

Most of the participants (91%) perceived the relationship among peers and teachers to be crucial in language learning classrooms. During the online remote learning period, they recognized this perceived notion to be even more significant (96%) and re-confirmed their beliefs that effective language learning was largely governed by rapport among the learners and the teachers.

More than half of the participants desired emotional support (54%) over academic support (27%) from their foreign language teachers. When physically in class, having the teacher within their view gave them the comfort that the teacher would always be there for them whenever needed. However, once the classes went online, students felt like that emotional comfort was missing, though they knew the teachers tried hard to bridge that gap. Students needed extra assurance and more frequent one-on-one appointments with their teachers to reduce the fear of being left out as well as the persisting feeling of loneliness. While learning a foreign language, these international students from China needed that collective human connection for mental fulfilment. This strongly suggests that language learning was not just about learning and understanding a language; learning a language meant engaging with peers and teachers and feeling that unique connection built on a relation-based foundation (Ellis, 2019; Han, 2016; Pan, 2000). After all, language is a socially learned behavior—a social construct.

Most of the students (98%) mentioned that after the transition to online learning, their educational needs changed and they felt the need to communicate with their teachers more often than before. Although the students were generally satisfied with the support they received from the teachers and the university as discussed above, lack of socialization and interaction during class affected students’ productivity level. Seventy-one percent of the participants agreed that this negatively affected their productivity, and 93% stated that more interaction with peers, more humor from their teachers, and more one-on-one tutorial sessions would greatly benefit their productivity level. Though the participants found online remote learning efficient and interesting, they still largely craved the human relationship that online environments lack.

Student 7: Teachers are very professional and can respond to any academic needs I have. However, the online class still limited my communication with my classmates, and I hope that I could still attend the actual [on-campus] class.

Khalid and Abdul Wahab (2021) have also argued that one of the main issues with online learning is the absence of the socialization element. This point gains additional significance in language learning because communication is the main goal of learning a language and students need ample communicative opportunities to be exposed to the foreign language and practice using it. Findings suggest that in order to solve the lack of interaction during online remote study, frequent communication with the teachers was the best solution to this issue. The participants’ overall experience was positive in this research particularly because they were offered multiple ways to communicate with their peers and teachers. However, in terms of the level of productivity in language learning, it is important to note that online learning may still not be able to compete with face-to-face learning settings. The following comments from the students illustrate this point well:

Student 10: Although we can watch the recorded videos again and again online, in real life, conversations just happen and it is good for speaking.

Student 15: I believe the most eager thing for me when doing this distance learning online, as a non-native speaker of English who is going to have a degree in English-spoken country, is that I need a language environment. I mean, I can’t count on one- or two-hours online course per day to improve my spoken or written English.

Moreover, students found that even a mere conversation with teachers meant a lot to them and made them feel they were being supported; this also allowed them to practice speaking and writing English more actively. Participants particularly noted the importance of one-on-one tutorials in boosting their motivation; they elaborated that these sessions helped clarify questions they could not ask during the online classes. Tutorials had been provided before all classes went online, but students did not realize how helpful those sessions were. Participants agreed that they were much more motivated and enthusiastic about the tutorials once all the lectures went online because a) the sessions provided opportunities for the students to feel more comfortable, b) teachers offered more sessions than usual and were much flexible, and c) students took this chance to get the know more about their teachers. Some students felt they actually learned more and got more out of the online lectures supported by frequent individual tutorials. This was acknowledged by 30% of the questionnaire participants and was also elaborated by more than half of the participants (16 out of 30) in the group interview discussions. Generally, during face-to-face on-campus lectures, students tended not to ask many questions largely because of cultural reasons (e.g., not wanting to disturb other classmates by asking questions, wanting to respect teachers, saving self from embarrassment), however, when offered additional individual tutorials, they felt comfortable and enthusiastic about opening up to their teachers. They were encouraged to engage with the teachers and ask constructive questions without the risk of facing embarrassment or disturbing other peers. The participants found the one-on-one tutorials so exceptionally useful and helpful that they hoped these sessions were longer and more frequent:

Student 13: I like how the individual tutorials were arranged because I have more chance to speak English.

Student 27: I wish there could be even more one-to-one or one-to-two tutorials in distance learning. Because all students are at different levels and have different needs.

*Enhanced Motivation for Communicative Competency*

Students’ motivation for their language study was another noticeable theme the data revealed. The findings illustrate that the Chinese international students’ motivation level significantly increased from 55% to 74% after remote online study was implemented. The increase in the motivation level and increase in positive feedback on their overall experience were largely because of the higher education institution’s efforts in shifting their pedagogical approach to adapt to the changing situation and supporting online studies to make it as interesting and as productive as possible (e.g., adding more one-on-one tutorials, using discussion board tasks more flexibly, developing online platforms that allow more interactions among the students and teachers, implementing fun factors such as games). The students also stated that they even received more detailed feedback from their tutors in the online course as teachers provided not only written feedback on their assignments, but the feedback was also discussed during one-on-one tutorials. Furthermore, teachers tended to reply to students’ posts on discussion boards and chat boxes frequently. Students were positively motivated by these new approaches to meet teachers and classmates and found it interesting to study online. All these factors helped in boosting students’ motivation levels (Chen & Jang, 2010; Ushida, 2005; Yantraprakorn et al., 2018).

Additionally, different methods of participation, such as using the chat box or raising-hand function, positively affected students to participate more during class, which enhanced their motivation to communicate more actively. Owing to the chat box function that allowed them to communicate by typing their answers and opinions rather than verbally speaking up, they felt at ease participating. This suited the Chinese students well since they could participate without feeling humiliated. Participating more often during class was another considerable factor that helped the students get motivated while studying remotely online.

**Conclusion**

This study investigated the perceptions of Chinese international students enrolled in a UK-based higher education institution of online remote language learning. The results revealed that participants found more positive factors that facilitated an efficient, unique, and engaging learning environment rather than negative aspects of online classes. Though learners admitted studying online was sometimes frustrating, most of them considered this an opportunity to motivate themselves to study harder. For these Chinese international students, online remote learning did not diminish their attitude and motivation toward learning foreign languages during this difficult time.

The research findings conclude that the students’ educational needs changed after the transition to online platforms from on-campus classes: Students wanted more frequent connection with peers and teachers and wanted a diverse pool of materials and resources to complement their study. Since online classes have limitations in terms of providing sufficient social connections, most students needed emotional support (54%) more than academic support (27%), indicating the importance of communication and connectedness. They also found online learning interesting and efficient. Students’ attitudes toward foreign language learning changed as well; rather than concentrating on the pure academic side of learning, they wanted to take this opportunity to hone their practical communication skills, stressing that the online environment provided them with unique options to participate more by using such features as chat boxes, breakout rooms, and discussion boards.

Another interesting fact revealed by the study was that students’ motivation levels actually increased (57% to 75%) while studying remotely compared with before the pandemic when they had face-to-face on-campus classes, though they claimed their productivity levels decreased. Due to the unique environment in which students had to rely heavily on the screen, they tended to pay more attention throughout their lectures which led to fewer distractions. This, in turn, motivated the students to participate more—though this was done indirectly largely via chat boxes. This study also showed that while learning English remotely, most of the students were willing to participate in classroom tasks and activities more than before because they found that it suited their common cultural traits better. Chinese students, in general, are seen as quiet, reserved, and reluctant to express themselves orally in large groups because of their cultural practices. The chat boxes provided them with an opportunity to contribute and communicate without being embarrassed. They expressed that having more one-on-one tutorials with their teachers; being allowed to write down their responses to the tasks in the chat box or on discussion boards rather than having to speak to the entire group; and meeting their peers in small size breakout rooms helped them enjoy the course, leading them to be more motivated.

Increased motivation, however, did not necessarily lead to higher productivity, because it was a language course and the students needed many more real-life opportunities to be exposed to the language and to practice and use it in various situations that online environments cannot provide. Although the students were generally pleased with the remote online learning experience, the lack of social interaction was the most significant challenge they faced. By interacting and connecting with peers and teachers, the cognitive process was stimulated, resulting in enhancement in motivation. While physical classroom settings could naturally provide many opportunities to interact, fostering cognitive and linguistic development, online language learning may not create the same opportunities. Though online classes may foster unique methods of learning and teaching, it is hard to deny the fact that they lack the human touch that psychologically benefits the learning process. Face-to-face communication and direct interaction among the students and teachers are hard to duplicate in a virtual environment.

Though lack of synchronous interaction with peers and teachers was the main drawback that hindered collaboration among students, it is clear that other methods such as written communication can motivate students from different cultures to engage in class participation. It is impractical to expect that an online course could fully replicate face-to-face interaction; nevertheless, the findings of this study support the fact that appropriately using technology to enhance the capacity of online learning environments is indeed feasible.

Though the study provides detailed insights into Chinese international students’ attitudes toward online language learning, limitations in the current study exist. Because of the relatively small sample size coming from one higher education institution, we cannot suggest wider generalization of the findings. Future studies on this topic employing a larger sample size from various institutions around the world are recommended. In addition, sound educational and professional relationships, backed by emotional support, not only would help students learn a foreign language more effectively but also would boost their motivation so they could enthusiastically continue with their educational journey on or offline.

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