Chinese Language Teachers' Perspectives of Online Teaching During Covid 19 Lockdowns in the UK

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the United Kingdom (UK) implemented a series of national lockdowns throughout 2020-2021. To reduce the disruption to education at all levels, a sudden transition to online teaching was required by teachers and students nationwide. Using semi-structured interviews with higher education Chinese language teachers in the UK, we identify the challenges faced during online teaching and adaptations required to deliver classes. The findings presented suggest difficulties in several areas of teaching and present avenues for future research to continue measuring the impact of Covid-19 on education.

Keywords: *Chinese language teaching, second language, foreign language learning, remote learning, covid-19 impacts*

Introduction

In January 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) Emergency Committee declared a global health crisis following the increasing reports of a novel coronavirus (Velavan & Meyer, 2020), now known as Covid-19. On 18 March, schools across the United Kingdom (UK) were required to close, and six days later, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the first national lockdown ("Covid: UK marks one year since the first lockdown," 2021). Alongside other industries, the education sector was thrust into a state of uncertainty and forced to quickly adapt the academic terms already underway into an online format. Whilst many universities in the UK already employed online modules and teaching by way of distance learning, instructors who conducted face-to-face teaching now faced sudden disruption, having to switch their teaching to unusual, challenging conditions with little to no warning, preparation, and training (MacIntyre *et al.,* 2020).

Foreign language teachers (FLTs) faced an additional challenge in their sudden transition to, and their continued delivery of, online teaching. As reading, writing, listening, and speaking are crucial for comprehensive language learning (Sadiku, 2015), language teachers were now tasked with ensuring these skills were still effectively delivered but without having the same valuable teacher-student interactions available during traditional teaching. From teachers' perspectives, this reduced capacity for teacher-student interactions negatively impacted teaching efficiency (Gao & Zhang, 2020). During their interviews, Gao and Zhang (2020) found teachers faced a number of issues such as the inability to monitor individual students' learning and after-class assignments and, most importantly, the reliance on network device access, which is notably unpredictable for some students. Furthermore, FLTs faced a new problem in classroom management as not all students adapted to online teaching easily or successfully, which increased students' frustration and confusion with the content (Dhawan, 2020).

For effective online teaching, courses and content are planned in advance, long before the semester starts; however, the abrupt delivery of online classes that occurred due to the pandemic meant that classes were amended as the lessons occurred (Gacs *et al.,* 2020). Thus, how FLTs responded in the following semesters after rapidly transitioning to online teaching may have been significantly different from their initial adjustments implemented in early lockdown. Here we reported the responses of Mandarin Chinese language teachers (CLTs) to online teaching more than six months after the first UK lockdown in March 2020. We focused on the following three questions: (1) How did teachers respond to the sudden transition to online teaching? (2) What challenges were faced in transitioning to and sustaining online teaching? (3) What adaptations to teaching were made to effectively conduct online teaching lessons?

Methodology

These data were collected as part of a larger market research study on teaching resources in online language teaching. From October to November 2020, we interviewed 12 CLTs (M = 3; F = 9) from eleven UK higher education (HE) institutions. Teaching schedules of interviewed CLTs included credit-based courses (N = 3), courses open to community learners (N = 6), or a combination of both credit and community courses (N = 3). All instructors had at least one year of teaching experience, with the most experienced CLT having taught for 27 years.

We conducted semi-structured interviews consisting of nine items. For the purposes of this report, we focused on the responses to the following prompts/questions: (1) Please tell us about your current online teaching situation, (2) After switching to online teaching, have your lesson preparation and teaching changed? What are the main aspects? (3) Do you think the role and tasks of teachers in online teaching have changed? (4) What is the biggest challenge you are currently facing in online teaching? The remaining five items were excluded as they focused on teaching aids, resources, massive open online courses (MOOC), and sharing resources between educators, which as mentioned was part of a larger market research study, rather than specifically focusing on changes experienced by the interviewees. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese (the native language of the teachers interviewed) by co-authors C Zhou, X Zhang, and H Hou. Author C Zhou conducted transcription and translation of responses.

Data were analysed through thematic analysis, a method of transcription of responses to a written report identifying descriptive themes throughout interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through thematic analysis, we identified three themes: enrolment, motivations for learning, and lesson planning. These themes are discussed alongside the general challenges and adaptations made by the interviewed CLTs.

Findings and Discussion

Thematic Analysis

Enrollment

Of the 12 participating CLTs, seven made repeated references to their class enrolment following the move to online teaching. For both formal and informal online learning, engagement that leads to enrolment can be influenced by many factors, such as home access, self-efficacy, and the digital choices available to learners (Eynon & Helsper, 2011). CLT1, an instructor teaching credit-based HE courses, commented that the move to online teaching resulted in a complete lack

of promotion for available classes at a beginner level. Additionally, CLT1 noted that even at the time of this interview, which was then seven months from the sudden transition to online teaching, there was still no beginner Mandarin Chinese level available to students at their HE institution.

Responses from credit and community CLTs were mixed. CLT2 remarked, "The enrolment for the beginner level is lower than last year." While in contrast, CLT4 said their "enrolment is very good after transferring to online courses." and CLT7 said they saw no difference in their course enrolment numbers. Among our interview sample, the mixed feedback stemmed from the community classes, rather than the credit classes, as among the community-only CLTs there were also mixed responses to student enrolment.

Like CLT1, community teacher CLT10 said because of students not wanting to learn online, their institution simply did not promote their courses in any capacity. This lack of promotion ultimately resulted in a significant influence on their student enrolment numbers. However, CLT11 and CLT12 both noted that while some students were not interested in learning online and dropped out from their community classes, they saw an increase in students joining from other cities in the UK and from further abroad like the United States (USA). Similarly, CLT9 commented with the availability of online classes their weekend courses were more popular than previously and saw a gain in student enrolment. Such enrolment increases give additional support to Eynon and Helsper's (2011) notion of digital choice, whereby with the massive transition to online teaching, students were able to access a greater number of language resources from home.

Therefore, our CLTs' rapid transition to online teaching from March 2020 through continued online lessons in late 2020, resulted in reduced student enrolment for some. The CLTs identified two key factors: a lack of promotion and a lack of student interest in learning online.

Motivation for learning

For CLTs conducting credit-based courses, no changes in motivation for learning were reported. CLTs delivering community courses, as the whole or part of their teaching, placed a greater emphasis on student motivation after moving to online teaching. CLT9 said simply "Students have little interest in online courses." Several reasons for a lack of motivation or interest in online courses were suggested, such as students being unfamiliar with online classes and having limited experiences with them (CLT7), as well as a lack of good quality interaction between teachers and students and among the students themselves (CLT9). This difficulty of interaction is not a new problem identified by our interviewees. Dhawan (2020) noted students may often find online teaching to be boring, and the two-way interactions they would like to have were difficult to implement, ultimately affecting the full potential of online learning. CLT2 commented "On a certain level, it is the lack of the sense of community for students doing online classes.", a sentiment echoed by CLT11 who placed the responsibility for maintaining this and the overall motivation for students' learning on the teacher: the teacher must do and think more to balance the atmosphere for an online class and maintain the motivation for students. Again, the concept of community was not a unique challenge faced by our interviewees, as Song *et al.* (2004) reported both a sense of community and motivation as key challenges among their online learning interview sample.

The discrepancy between the responses towards students' motivation may stem from the simple difference in credit-based vs community courses. In credit-based courses, regardless of

the students' opinions about moving language learning online, they are still required to complete the course and receive a grade for their efforts. However, community learners engage with classes in their leisure time. This difference suggests that when student opinion is relevant to their continuation in learning, their motivation for learning can be and is impacted when the traditional setting is removed.

Lesson Planning

Only two CLTs found they had no changes to their lesson plans following the move to online teaching. This does not seem to be due to their teaching experience, which was over 10 years and just under 20 years respectively, as our other CLTs with similar teaching experience all noted substantial changes to their lesson planning. Nine CLTs said, specifically, their time spent preparing teaching slides increased, often because they were looking for more resources to help in their content delivery (CLT3, CLT4, CLT7, and CLT8). However, the increased time spent searching for resources was not negative in all comments. CLT3 noted there were several resources that could be easily and vividly used to deliver online teaching. Additionally, CLT11 commented that while the preparation is more demanding for online teaching, it is equally more efficient. In particular, CLT11 said, "because teachers will prepare the content in advance, and there is no [need for] handwriting [during class time] for online teaching."

Part of the increased time spent planning lessons for online language teaching seemed to result from the constraints of online learning. CLT10 said "The high workload on lesson preparation doesn't bring more efficient class progress. Progress is highly affected by the online limitations." Indeed, the notion of 'class progress' was repeated throughout when discussing the difficulty of lesson planning, a pattern not unlike those reported by Gao and Zhang (2020) from their English-as-a-foreign-language teachers. For example, CLT8 commented there are many activities that cannot be successfully achieved in an online class, a comment echoed by CLT7. CLT8 also mentioned that oral speaking can be difficult to ensure correct pronunciation through the screen. An additional concern raised by CLT2 was the written aspect of language teaching, particularly with Chinese characters that have a specific stroke order and shape required to produce the characters. An inability to appropriately correct a student's oral and written language skills during a lesson are only two of the skills which can impact both student and teaching progress through the curriculum.

Challenges Faced and Adaptations Required

The ability to adequately monitor students' learning has been previously commented on by language teachers (Gao & Zhang, 2020). To maintain teaching quality, several CLTs mentioned changes to their class structures. For CLT7 this meant their classes were divided into more than one class and that there were no more than 10 students in each. For CLT6, class sizes were unchanged, but the duration was shorted from 10 months to five months and included a hybrid structure of pre-recorded videos and live online teaching.

Additionally, the methods and information exchanged in communication required changing to maintain both quality and consistency across classes. CLT10 reported having to create shared folders and drives for teachers to upload teaching slides, plans, summaries, and progress recorded for each session. They note that this procedure also reduced the time needed to create teaching materials for the following, future lessons.

One insurmountable hurdle of the sudden and sustained transition to online teaching appeared for credit-based CLTs: study abroad. This resulted in an increase in uncertainty for the students but also a significant increase in workload as instructors needed to prepare teaching for students who would otherwise not be on campus that academic year. This change from study abroad to on-campus teaching was the case for two instructors:

> "Normally the second year students will go to study in China but due to the pandemic, there are no available Chinese courses for the second year students." – CLT1

> "Normally the second year students will study in China but due to the pandemic, the courses for the second year students will be conducted on the UK campus. So, the workload and class preparation for local teachers dramatically grew." – CLT3

As students' second language abilities can improve with even just one semester abroad (Hernandez, 2010), there is no doubt the transition to and sustained continuation of online teaching, versus a year abroad in China, will result in reduced linguistic capacities in Mandarin Chinese. However, this aspect was not one that was measured in these interviews, nor remarked upon by the CLTs outside of previously mentioned comments around the difficulty of making progress in oral and written skills.

Conclusion

Since the sudden transition to online teaching in March 2020, CLTs have primarily faced changes to their student enrolment, students' motivation for learning, and lesson planning. For those CLTs whose HE institutions were actively promoting their available online courses, there was an overall increase in student registration. Our teachers reported that students' motivations for learning were unaffected in HE credit-based courses. However, for those teaching community courses, further efforts were required by the teacher to recreate the same atmosphere and motivation for students. The majority of our interviewed teachers reported changes to their lesson plans and structures. These changes were perceived negatively and positively, though both viewpoints largely centered on a conflict regarding the overall efficiency and limitations of online teaching, such as the inability to correct pronunciation during oral exercises.

It is clear the delivery of online teaching for all CLTs resulted in an overall increased workload. This increase was particularly significant for those CLTs who would have sent their students abroad in the following academic year. It remained unclear from our interviews whether these teachers were provided with additional support or resources to ensure their students received the same or similar language immersion as they would have had during their time abroad. Future research should compare perceptions of CLTs towards their students who successfully completed a year abroad and those who were forced to continue their language study at their home university. It may also be worthwhile to compare the progress and outcomes of Chinese language students to other second language learners who undertook online language education during national lockdowns. This would give greater insight into the longer-term impacts the Covid-19 pandemic had on student education.

Finally, for online teaching to continue or face-to-face teaching to resume unimpeded, future research should be conducted on the student-learner perceptions of online Chinese language teaching. Such research would provide a more complete understanding of challenges faced by

online teaching and adaptations required to overcome them, ultimately advancing knowledge about the needs of online Chinese courses and the effectiveness of class delivery.

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