



## L2 Chinese language teachers' cross-cultural adaptation in teaching online courses using videoconferencing tools in a foreign country during the COVID-19 pandemic: a case study

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**Abstract.** This case study is based on teachers' personal observation of students of Oberlin College, Ohio, US, and students' feedback, and addresses cross-cultural communication of Chinese as a foreign (L2) language teacher, who is also the first author of this article. The study was conducted during the global pandemic; L2 language teaching methods in Oberlin College had to be shifted from face-to-face lectures to online teaching using videoconferencing tools, particularly Zoom. It was used not only as the online class platform, but also an additional live communication tool in other activities. The case study presented in this article was conducted mainly through observations in daily classes before and after the pandemic. The results suggest that reserved personality and inadequate cultural contact are factors of acculturated difficulties for L2 Chinese language teachers when working in the US. This paper proposes solutions for preparations for a cross-cultural adaptability for Chinese language teachers teaching L2 Chinese abroad, especially in conditions like using videoconferencing tools in online teaching classes.

**Keywords:** TCSOL, cross-cultural communication, L2 Chinese language teaching, L2 Chinese teachers abroad.

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## 1. Introduction

Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (TCSOL) has gradually become an important field of L2 language teaching after China's Reform and Open Policy. Since then, some Chinese universities started a TCSOL study major and recruited students to become L2 Chinese language teachers. Most studies of TCSOL teachers have focused on their teaching pedagogy of language itself, and there are relatively few discussions on their cultural adaptation when working in a foreign country. Some scholars indicate that teaching ability of teachers of L2 Chinese abroad includes at least three aspects: professional knowledge, working ability, and rich experience in teaching practice (Lv, 1989). The working ability includes the communicative ability, which mainly refers to the proper behavior and language in formal occasions and classroom teaching. It also includes a strong communicative ability in organizing, adjusting, and dealing with emergency situations.

When reviewing this from a cross-cultural perspective, the communicative ability could be an independent and important aspect. It may not only be an attachment of L2 language teachers' teaching ability, but also the embodiment of the teachers' cross-cultural communication skills. One famous theory is the u-curve theory of cultural adjustment, which is a framework that focuses on how people adjust to being in a new culture (Lysgaand, 1955). The u-curve theory of adjustment consists of four stages of adjustment (honeymoon, culture shock, adjustment, and mastery). We have an assumption that the influence of L2 language teachers' current stage is as vital as their teaching approach. Therefore, this paper focuses on the obstacles faced by L2 Chinese language teachers in cross-cultural teaching.

The two research questions are as follows.

- (1) What are the pros and cons online teaching classes have brought to L2 Chinese language teachers working in foreign countries?
- (2) How can we help novice L2 language teachers to improve the accultures experience when using videoconferencing tools in online teaching classes?

## 2. Design of the case study

Observation and experience: The first author was one Chinese language teacher of L2 Chinese in Oberlin College in the US. The observation was taken in daily

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teaching for half a month before turning into online class, and also another half-month's observation after having online class via Zoom. What was mainly observed included daily activities in L2 Chinese classes: daily lesson and Chinese table twice a week (a lunch time when language teachers and students gathered and the students were asked to chat in Chinese, or at least act out their newly learned dialogue). The observation experience was recorded by the teacher in teaching journals. The teacher observed their own actual experience in teaching and daily life, noted down different cross-cultural situations before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and experienced the practical effects of the online conferencing tool Zoom.

Evaluations and interviews: The students' evaluation was a form which was released to students at the end of one semester. It contains study effect self-rating and one commenting question at the end. With the help of students' evaluations in May 2020, students' comments were collected, and the students agreed to release them to teachers. Also there were two students who were consent to talk about their feelings during the Chinese table. Ongoing analysis was employed to analyse the data. The researcher analyzed the data by repeatedly reading and recalling the recorded experience.

### **3. Results and discussion**

The results showed that online L2 Chinese language teaching has both pros and cons for L2 Chinese teachers' cross-cultural experiences.

From self-observation, the interactions between the teachers and the students before the pandemic was not limited to classrooms, but after the pandemic, the communication space became sharply compressed to the Internet only. Although digital face time can still be guaranteed with the help of Zoom or other videoconferencing tools, students have lost most of the opportunities to directly contact and interact with their teachers. Teachers would no longer have other cultural communication scenarios except for the online class time. Following [Lysgaand's \(1955\)](#) u-shape curve theory of acculturation, online teaching greatly extends the current stage of acculturation for teachers.

However, the videoconferencing tool Zoom also offered a great help to language teaching. The monitors hinder face-to-face communication between teachers and students, but indeed expand the space compared with the traditional classroom. For example, Oberlin College has the Chinese table activity. Before the pandemic,

students were asked to take their lunch boxes to the venue to eat and chat in Chinese, but after teaching online, teachers could show a simple Chinese dish in their kitchen, and teaching assistants could display necessary Chinese vocabulary in the chat box. By the end of the activity, some of the students were able to briefly introduce how to make a Chinese dish by using the grammar and new vocabulary. Such examples show a great benefit to a multimedia assisted language study as well as to the process of acculturation.

Students also mentioned that in previous face-to-face teaching, in addition to speaking, eyes and gestures were used by teachers intentionally or unintentionally to convey additional information, which added to students' understanding and attractions. In the screen time, however, only the upper body of the teacher could be seen from the screen, and less body language would be perceived by students when the teacher's image was restricted into a small window of videoconferencing tools. According to students' evaluations in May 2020, descriptions like *enthusiastic*, *motivated*, *humorous*, and *lively* were mentioned in the commenting, but appeared as the comparative good things of their native US college lecturers' online performance. Students addressed these words to indicate that without face-to-face or eye-to-eye contact, L2 language teachers needed more passion to create a lively atmosphere. A lively atmosphere, in students' opinions, turned out to be an important attraction during online class.

#### **4. Conclusions**

This case study showed that the cross-cultural experience of L2 Chinese language teachers in foreign countries has actually been weakened by online distance teaching to a certain extent, but a new and positive perspective should provide insights about the benefits of using videoconferencing tools in online teaching classes. The experience of the first author and her students showed some of the possibilities, such as using Zoom in the Chinese table activity, to break the space limit of a traditional classroom and shift the study environment to anywhere that could motivate students' expressions.

Moreover, it is a useful way to utilize videoconferencing tools to create a sense of community in order to maintain a good bonding of teachers and students. Another possible approach is that, when teaching the module 'positions of objects', if consent, teachers and students could show their own room and talk about the position of anything in it. With the help of Zoom, the students could learn more about each other, find more topics for discussion, and improve their own interest in

learning a foreign language. This may require teachers' recognition of local culture and an open, inclusive mentality. This kind of literacy would be acquired from teacher training preparation before leaving their own country to teach in a foreign country. Therefore, TCSOL teacher training institutions should pay more attention to personality adaptation by creating typical cultural scenes and avoiding potential conflicts. To be more specific, preparing the teacher to use their bodily language fully on screen when teaching online using videoconferencing tools. Training institutions could organize online teaching training modules where teachers could review their screen recording in order to experience the teaching during an online class scenario before the actual practice.

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