Exploring Foreign Teachers' Perceptions of Communication with Students in Online Learning in China: A Case Study

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Abstract. Under the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic, and with the widespread use of online learning, the way in which teachers communicate with students via the internet has attracted great attention. Online communication bears unique challenges, such as the absence of nonverbal cues and lack of social interaction, both of which are necessary to enrich and assist learning in an online setting. This paper aims to explore foreign teachers' perceptions of online communications for learning and to examine the communication challenges in that environment. Set in China, this study adopts a qualitative design using semi-structured online interviews as data collection instrument. Seven foreign teachers (non-Chinese) (three females and four males) participated in this research. The thematic analysis method was adopted for data analysis. Results showed that four themes were generated, which were effectiveness, emotional feelings, means of communication, and communication skills. In addition, three themes were discussed in terms of communication challenges in online learning, such as technical obstacles, cultural issues, as well as communication problems. Teachers are encouraged to be prepared to deal with these problems. This research brings new and practical thoughts to learners and instructors in order to optimize the effect of online learning and makes recommendations for future projects.

Keywords: foreign teacher (non-Chinese); communication; online learning; challenges and prospects

1. Introduction
Online learning can be traced back to the 1980s. With the advancement of

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technology and the emergence of this new form of education, how people learn and how human beings communicate when studying have manifested crucial changes. Reports reveal that there has been a significant growth in online programmes in colleges and universities (Albrahim, 2020). This is mainly because online learning offers more flexibility and convenience for instruction and the development of materials at any time and place. A great many university courses have been designed to be delivered fully online. This trend is expected to rise, with increasing numbers of colleges and universities initiating online courses.

In 2020, students and lecturers in universities were critically impacted by the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic (Chung et al., 2020). At the time of writing, Covid-19 has affected over 220 countries and regions, infected more than 177,400,000 people and killed more than 3,838,000 people globally. To limit the spread of Covid-19, and prevent students from being infected and to ensure continuity of education, the traditional face-to-face learning has been fully replaced by online learning in many prestigious universities around the world (Chung et al., 2020). As a result, online learning has become normalized and is deemed by many to be the best solution for the "new norm".

In response to the above, the Ministry of Education (the MOE, 2020) of China announced that all public and private universities in China are to conduct teaching and learning activities via online learning for the spring semester. Initial findings reveal that online learning accounts for 91% of the total courses in higher education, with the teachers' and the students' satisfaction rates being 80% and 85% respectively, suggesting positive experiences and communication via online learning. In addition, the downloads of online tutoring applications soared five to 30 times the numbers seen before the outbreak. It is reported by major Chinese online learning providers that there were more than 20 million new users during the second half of February 2020.

According to Teo (2019), communication, cooperation and critical thinking are among the "real global skills" critical for the 21st century. Communication is a skill entailing the subdomains of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, which can occur in various circumstances, take various forms, and serve various purposes (Metusalem et al., 2017). There are three essential components of communication: verbal (the words we choose), nonverbal (our body language) and paraverbal (how we say the words) (Windle and Warren, 2013, as cited in Garcés & Olivera, 2014). They are needed to clarify and specify the messages we send and to precisely comprehend the information we get. To perform effective communication, the messages need to be precisely decoded, and online communication skills are key at this point. Online communication must be clear, concise, concrete, correct, coherent, complete, and courteous for success in learning.

In the educational field, teaching is generally considered as 50% imparting knowledge and 50% interpersonal or communication skills. Teachers and students exchange information, ideas and emotions through effective classroom

communication. Therefore, for teachers, communication skills should be regarded as being equally as important as the subjects they teach.

As communication skills are perceived to be the most significant generic skills for university students, they are crucial not only for their professional development but also for their personal development as a whole. It is important to note the kind of issues and challenges faced in relation to underdeveloped communication skills. Reports have shown that the consequences of communication breakdown can lead to loss of interest of students, negative effects on academic achievements (Yavuz & Guzel, 2020), increase of stress (Allen and Lawless, 2003), and worse, increased student drop-out rates (Betts, 2017). Therefore, communication in online education matters more as online communication bears unique challenges, such as the absence of nonverbal cues and lack of social interaction, both of which are necessary to enrich and assist learning in the face-to-face classroom (Mukhtar et al., 2020). Communication can in fact take place without any verbal exchange in a face-to-face classroom. However, online learning may rely heavily on words, particularly through written communication. This is especially the case for students without the right gadgets for learning; for example, those without access to a video camera or a stable network that allows video streaming. Lexicon, semantics, and syntax can exert great influence over the way in which a written message is expressed and interpreted. According to Alawamleh et al. (2020), online communication between faculty and students is an important factor influencing the quality of online education. It is therefore essential to prepare teachers as well as students with the necessary communication skills to fulfil their responsibilities in the virtual environment.

It can not be denied that modern technology, as a significant component of the essence of communication, has played a vital role in the modern classroom (Khan et al., 2019; Shahbaz et al., 2016). In addition, several studies also show that a lack of communication skills can cause far more difficult problems than the technical obstacles and that communication breakdowns are inclined to cause serious problems that technology can not fix (Sorensen, 2002). Compared with technical obstacles, ill-structured and poorly planned subject domain delivery, group-oriented pedagogies, the lack of body language, and the absence of compensation under the virtual environment have led to serious communication challenges that have affected online learning (Levinsen, 2007).

So far, little priority has been given to exploring online communication skills, even though studies have indicated that communication skills are a critical parameter for the quality of online learning (Alawamleh et al, 2020; Levinsen, 2007). Alawamleh et al. (2020) studied the effect of online learning on communication between instructors and students during the Covid-19 pandemic. Yuliansyah and Ayu (2021) reported that project-based assignments in online learning are beneficial for the development of communication skills. Chiablaem (2021) investigated English communication skills using Google apps for education and announced that there had been little research on communication skills in online learning environments with English as a

communication tool. This is especially true in China, where both communication as well as online learning has gained insufficient attention, although cases are increasing amid challenges faced by teachers in this new form of learning post pandemic.

This paper aims at exploring foreign teachers' perceptions of their communication with students and the communication challenges faced in an online learning environment. Specifically it deals with the following research questions: RQ1: How do foreign teachers perceive their communication with students in an online learning environment? RQ2: What are the challenges for communication in an online learning environment?

2. *Significance of the study*

With the rapid development of online learning in this new era, the questions of how learners can benefit more from this mode of learning become a hot issue. Among the various factors affecting the quality of online learning, communication between learners and instructors accounts for the greater part (Brooks, 2003). It is anticipated that the finding of this research will provide new and practical lessons to learners and instructors as they experience the reality of trial and error in various online learning environments. It may shed some lights on the teaching of communication skills for online learning and thus facilitate the communication, both teacher-student and student-student, with the purpose of optimizing the effect of online learning.

3. Method

3.1 Research locale

This study was conducted in Taiyuan University of Technology (TYUT). TYUT is the only university that is enlisted in the national "211 programme" and national "double-first-class" plan in Shanxi Province, China. The 211 programme plan initiated in 1995 by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, was a project aiming at building approximately 100 institutions of higher education with cutting-edge research standards and national priority. In total, 112 universities are involved in the 211 programme plan. The national "double-first-class" plan, designed by the government of the People's Republic of China in 2015, refers to the goal of creating the World's First Class University and First Class Academic Disciplines by the end of 2050. This project will run in a five-year cycle, with approximately 100 disciplines being supported. TYUT began to employ online learning from March 2020 and apps such as DingTalk, QQ, WeChat, and Superstar were utilized to facilitate online teaching and learning. Now, as a result of the proper control of the pandemic, only a few lessons are offered online in TYUT and these are courses taught by foreign teachers who are held back at their home country and unable to be in China. These courses are generally related to foreign languages, such as English, Russian, Japanese, Spanish, and culture. The focus on languages being taught online leads to the research problem on the development of communication skills in an online learning environment.

3.2 Research design

This study adopts a qualitative design (see Figure 1) to achieve the research aims and objectives. The qualitative design was chosen as it offers detailed, in-depth descriptions of ideas, thoughts and experiences (Rahman, 2017). According to Chalhoub-Deville and Deville (2008), there is a general preference for using qualitative approaches in research studies related to administering, interpreting language, and assessing the quality of communication to gain profound insights. In this study, the purposive sampling method was adopted with seven foreign-teachers being participants. Semi-structured online interviews were used as data collection instruments. Thematic analysis was applied for data analysis, followed by a detailed report and discussion of the findings.
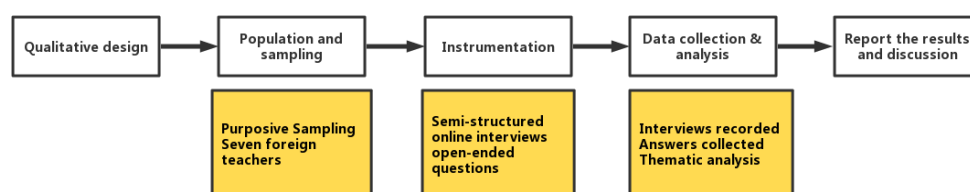

Figure 1: The flowchart of the key components of the research design

3.3 Research participants

The sample of this study was purposefully recruited and selected. Invitations were sent via WeChat to foreign teachers who are conducting online courses at TYUT stating the purposes of the study and providing a consent form. Seven foreign teachers (non-Chinese) (three females and four males) who teach undergraduates languages courses agreed to participate. These included four English teachers from the United States of America and England, one Japanese teacher, one Spanish teacher and one Russian teacher. They have between 1-3 years experiences in online teaching and teach language skills and culture. Table 1 shows the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1. Participant demographic information

Participants	Gender	Age	Nationality	Language of teaching	Teaching experiences (years)
P1	Male	45-55	English	English	3
P2	Female	25-35	American	English	2
P3	Male	35-45	Japanese	Japanese	2
P4	Male	45-55	American	English	1
P5	Female	35-45	Russian	Russian	2
P6	Male	35-45	American	English	2
P7	Female	25-35	Mexican	Spanish	1

3.4 Research instruments and data collection

Semi-structured online interviews were conducted to collect data. The interview questions (see Appendix 1) were designed collaboratively by the authors with a reference to Albalawi and Nadeem (2020), who investigated the formal communication between teachers and students, and Albrahim (2020), who elaborated extensively on online teaching and communication skills, as well as Mtusalem et al. (2017), who offered detailed definition and classification for

communication skills. The questions were mainly related to communication with students online and participants were encouraged to describe their perception, feelings, attitudes and experiences in concrete terms. There were ten questions in total and they were validated by two experts in this field. The interviews were conducted and recorded via Google meeting and the calls were tested for good audio and visual quality prior to conducting the research. The interviewees had the freedom to choose their preferred day and time for their interview. For those who could not be interviewed via google meeting, interview questions were posed via WeChat, and the participants were given approximately one week to complete and submit their responses. All the participants were informed of the nature of the study. They were clearly told that their participation was voluntary. Interview transcripts were also sent to the interviewees for confirmation.

3.5 Data analysis

This study adopts a thematic analysis method for data analysis, which provides an in-depth description of the qualitative data set (Tates et al., 2009). The inductive approach is applied and the themes are determined based on the data collected. The two authors completed their coding independently (see Table 2) then compared and discussed with each other to reached a consensus when generating themes (see Table 3). The data were compiled, disassembled, reassembled and interpreted by the authors collaboratively. Emerging themes from the data were categorized based on the main objectives of the study, which are to explore foreign teachers' perceptions of their communication with students and the challenges faced.

Table 2. Coding qualitative data

Interview extract	Codes
"Communication is equally important in online or face-to-face learning. It's crucial that you allow the student to work collectively with their classmates, and look to create knowledge and meaning together through the process of collaboration. Body language plays an important part in the classroom; it allows communication to flow easily with or without using too much dialogue to explain things. However, sometimes the absence of body language communication in [the] online environment is regarded as a drawback which leads to less effectiveness of communication. What's more, the immediate response would be face-to-face, because the classroom is a place that inspires learners, and has hands-on activities. Besides, it's something we all know! The traditional classroom can allow teachers the time to evaluate strengths and weaknesses much better through the direct sharing of queries, questions, and answers between the teacher and student. Furthermore, it's a continuous interaction which helps rid students of their fears and doubts, regardless of what is going on around them. The online experience cannot deal with the additional needs of students, such as feelings of isolation and potential problems accessing resources. Therefore, the classroom offers that immediate response through supervision and added motivation."	Importance Collaboration Body language Immediate feedback Evaluation Interaction Feeling of isolation

Table 3. Turning codes into themes

Codes	Themes	Research questions
More effective ... make progress Convenient and effective Lack of body language Lack of immediate feedback Students feeling less committed to study	Effectiveness	RQ 1
Feeling of isolation Lack of motivation Relaxed Nervous	Emotional feelings	
Typing speaking	Means of communication	
Verbal and nonverbal communication skills Four language skills	Communication skills	
Internet service Technology breakdown Poor transmissions	Technical obstacles	RQ 2
Reserved and quiet Sense of community Socialization	Cultural issues	
Feeling isolated Difficult to organize conversation-based activities Misunderstanding Lack of non-verbal cues Unwillingness to express	Communication problems	

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 Foreign teachers' perceptions towards communication with students in an online learning environment

Four themes emerged in response to research question 1: How do foreign teachers perceive their communication with students in an online learning environment? The themes are effectiveness, emotional feelings, means of communication, and communication skills.

4.1.1 Effectiveness

Most teachers perceive that online learning is not as effective as traditional learning. For instance, P6 stated:

"Online is more convenient but in person or face-to-face teaching is more effective."

According to P3:

"It is more effective to have face-to-face lessons and students can make progress easier in traditional learning."

The lower effectiveness of communication in online learning can be attributed to the following three factors: lack of body language, lack of immediate feedback and students feeling less committed to study. According to P1:

"body language plays an important part in the classroom; it allows communication to flow easily, with or without using too much dialogue to explain things. However, sometimes the absence of body language communication in [the] online environment is regarded as a drawback, which leads to less effectiveness of communication."

Most Chinese students are reluctant to turn the camera on during online learning; thus, teachers have difficulty without seeing their facial expression or other minor gestures that may give a hint of their comprehension of the learning contents. The absence of body language in online learning may hinder the understanding of each other and weaken the intimacy among participants. This echoes the findings of Oliveira et al. (2021), who found that communication and interaction in an online course are hampered by the absence of facial expressions and real-time cues generated during face-to-face interactions. Researchers have indicated that body language - including facial expressions, eye contacts, gestures and closeness - is vitally important for language teachers when they are sending and receiving messages in the classroom (Pan, 2014; Sutiyatno, 2018). Relevant excerpts below are included to support this above claim.

"What's more, the immediate response would be face-to face. The traditional classroom can allow teachers the time to evaluate strengths and weaknesses much better through the direct sharing of queries, questions, and answers between the teacher and student." (P1).

P7 also said:

"Communication is a challenge in online learning. In class, when a student has problems, the teacher can solve these immediately, but in an online lesson, the students have the idea that they can inquire later but usually they forget."

Lack of immediate feedback is also a barrier to effective communication in an online learning environment. It is easier for teachers to give direct comments through supervision or hands-on activities in the face-to-face learning environment. However, teachers and students are not urged to provide an immediate answer in online learning, as more often than not, they are allowed to offer delayed responses and this leads to less-effective communication in online learning. Chinese students are more reserved in asking questions during the lesson or in front of classmates. In face-to-face classes, teachers may get a hint from their facial expression or subconsciously raised hands that the students may have inquiries and they can call on them individually to explain. For online learning, many students prefer to keep the questions for after class, since they get a feeling that they can communicate with teachers online anytime. Therefore, there is no urge to solve problems immediately, and this may also be sometimes forgotten. In 2010, Serhan investigated the students' perspectives of online learning and they concluded that the lack of immediate feedback accounts for 51% of the disadvantages of online learning. Auld et al. (2010) proposed that feedback should be given immediately and opined that offering immediate

feedback may boost students' motivation in speaking the English language (Sallang & Ling, 2019). Immediate feedback is crucial in a virtual learning environment because it has the potential to promote autonomy, motivation, self-learning and help academic performance (Aubin, 2021).

> *"The idea of commitment and responsibility is not well taken by the students."* (P7).

This is perhaps because the teacher presence is not felt enough for the students to feel the pressure to pay attention or get to work as they would in a face-to-face class. The students may feel that the time and activities are too flexible in online learning and they can finish the activities according to their own time, unlike in a two-hour face-to-face class. Furthermore, this may lead to less-willingness to communicate during the lesson or the decreased effectiveness of that communication.

However, some other teachers suggest that the effectiveness of communication depends on factors such as the subject being taught, class size, and so on. P2 claimed:

> *"For this course (listening), the communication is better online. There is actually more interaction and I can track their progress a lot easier [in online learning]."*

This might be because in China, English listening courses and other English courses (reading, writing and speaking) are not delivered in the same classroom. For a listening course, the students are each equipped with a computer and they could easily hide themselves behind the screens, making it difficult for teachers to call on each student and observe their performance. Nevertheless, in online learning, they cannot hide as they are right there, facing the teacher and their peers. Everyone has to do the same assignments and activities, so they need to communicate with the teacher more since they are "closer"in a virtual way. In other words, for courses that require greater attention and only necessary communication, the online environment actually offers more activities and a better space for interaction between students and teachers. It is also easier to track the progress and make assessments with digital recordings too. However, for courses that demand a lot of cooperation and verbal communication, such as speaking lessons, online learning seems to be less effective than traditional learning.

P5 stated:

> *"Face-to-face can be a good option to work with big groups and an online lesson can work well with small groups."*

P1 added:

> *"Online can be effective. It can be flexible with time and location, and it can also allow for a diverse and enriching experience for students to access a catalogue of digital content [when it's allowed]."*

With proper design, communication in online leaning can be facilitated. For example, teachers can build an online learning environment that supports

engagement, inquiry and connection, and make the content interesting and relevant to motivate students in the course.

4.1.2 Emotional feelings
4.1.2.1 Feeling of isolation
Based on the analysis of data, students may experience a feeling of isolation while learning online, thus leading to a lack of motivation in communication. P1 said:

> *"the online experience cannot deal with the additional needs of students such as feelings of isolation..."*

Students may have a sense of isolation while taking online courses during which they cannot have face-to-face interaction with their instructors or other students. This aligns with the findings of Alawamleh et al. (2020), who revealed that most participants of their study perceived online courses as limiting interaction with others and students reported feeling disconnected with their instructors, the course content, and their fellow classmates. Serhan (2010) also concluded that the lack of live interaction accounts for 46% of the disadvantages of online learning. Feeling isolated may exert a negative impact on students' learning capability. Students with a sense of connectivity and psychological closeness tend to achieve higher-order thinking and further develop their knowledge (Fuller & Yu, 2014).

4.1.2.2 Relaxing or nervous
Two teachers stated that the students were more nervous when communicating online, as follows:

> *"I think they are scared to communicate in general with low confidence in their English skills."* (P6).
> *"Students are generally nervous, or shy most of the time wherever the class takes place. It's all about motivation and reassurance for the student, I think."* (P1).

This is in accordance with researchers who advocate that communication anxiety is prevalent in life and the reasons accounting for this are complex, personalized and unstable. The potential for negative evaluation from an audience can make us feel anxious, whether physically or virtually present. However, the screen does form barriers for non-verbal cues and thus hinders communications online (Irvine, 2020).

However, interestingly P2, P4, P3, P7 and P5 all perceive that students are more relaxed when communicating online.

> *"It is more relaxed for students to communicate online."* (P3).
> *"I feel students are actually more relaxed, because they do not sense they are being observed by their peers when they participate."* (P4).
> *"Um… I think, I think that they are a little more relaxed online cause they are not in front of all those people, and it is easier for them to express their idea when they are separated."* (P2).

They explained this phenomenon from the psychological perspective that the isolation formed a protection for them and they did not feel as if they were being observed, and this therefore lowered their nervousness or anxiety.

4.1.3 Means of communication
Almost all of the teachers were in agreement in this aspect. In their view, students prefer typing to speaking in online learning. They stated:

> *"Unless required, they use typing more willingly."* (P5).
> *"Type…Sometimes I require them to speak, but they much prefer typing."* (P2).
> *"Type… sometimes speaking, and I would say that a consistency is lacking."* (P1).

This can be attributed to personal characteristics such as efficacy, language proficiency and anxiety. Typing allows time to think; thus students can form grammatically and lexically correct sentences which can build their confidence in learning the language. As is indicated by Albalawi and Nadeem (2020) and Tutkun (2015), vocabulary and tense use, as well as lack of grammatical knowledge, are all crucial factors for effective communication.

4.1.4 Teacher communication skills
In respect to communication skills, all of the seven teachers proclaim that they are in possession of most of the communication skills and they have endeavored to incorporate as many communication skills as possible in their online courses.

The following are some of their responses.

> *"My major was Communications, so, I took many courses on verbal and nonverbal communication skills."* (P4).
> *"I am aware of them."* (P5).
> *"I'm familiar with them. They are vital especially for teachers that need to work with international students and teach a foreign language to transmit as many our ideas and messages as possible."* (P7).
> *"Yes, I do. I've delivered lessons using these verbal skills, and I always endeavor to cover some aspects of these four language skills during my lesson."* (P1).

Teaching and learning processes can not take place without communication, and communicating effectively will help instructors to establish a presence in the classroom that can motivate students and encourages learning. Having a good grasp of communication skills can facilitate online teaching in terms of lesson planning, content design and course delivery.

These teachers have emphasized the importance of non-verbal skills, for instance, P1 stated:

> *"I think non-verbal skills are often overlooked, and when you look closely at one's body language, for example, you forget that it can be a powerful tool. Alongside one's gestures, and voice, a better relationship with your student exists, and it's both personal and professional. Instinctively rather than consciously, the interaction with others can*

send strong messages, to the point of silence, which is still communicating non-verbally. It's an unconscious language that can reveal true feelings and intentions, and like any other communication skill, it's just as important as the verbal skills you execute as a teacher".

He pointed out that teachers might sometimes neglect the effects of non-verbal skills since on many occasions, non-verbal communication takes place subconsciously. Meanwhile, he emphasized the important role of non-verbal communication in expressing one's feelings, as well as to establish good relationship with students and promote students' professional development. Non-verbal skills are proven to have a significant positive effect on students' English achievements (Sutiyatno, 2018). Teachers with greater non-verbal communication skills will be more efficacious in teaching; furthermore, students' academic progress and their mood are closely related to non-verbal skills (Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour, 2017).

Nevertheless, all of the seven teachers concur that the students are unclear about communication skills and sometimes find them difficult to actually implement.

According to P4:
> *"I feel the students have a vague understanding of both verbal and non-verbal skills."*

P5 stated:
> *"... but my students are not [aware of them]"*

P3 argued:
> *"I think they [the students] are not so familiar [with communication skills] especially in the online learning environment. I think teachers should emphasize and teach them skills for effective communication in this new area."*

P1 stated:
> *"I think the majority of students do recognize these skills, but they have difficulties applying them. As a teacher, you are a facilitator, and you seek out the positives and empower students to use their interpersonal skills."*

This is in line with the results of Sahbaz et al. (2014), which revealed that Engineering students perceived themselves to have a low ability in communicating with others. However, numerous studies on the communication skills of undergraduates have demonstrated that they have a good level or even high level of command of communication skills (Ismet, 2018; Tan & Tan, 2016). Nevertheless, for Chinese students, especially the Engineering majors, these skills are still beyond their mastery.

When discussing which verbal skills are applied most frequently in the lessons, the teachers offered various answers. It may depend on the course contents or requirements. However, the four skills (listening, writing, speaking and reading) share an equal importance in online learning.

4.2 Challenges for communication in online learning
Three themes emerged to answer research question 2: What are the challenges for communication in an online learning environment? The themes are technical obstacles, cultural issues and communication problems.

4.2.1 Technical obstacles
Plenty of complaints about technological problems are raised during online learning. Some teachers claim that the apps intended for online learning are not very user-friendly in terms of their Chinese instructions for operation; also, the internet is not stable for many students, thus causing poor transmission, and poor communication.

P7 stated:
> "For some students their location doesn't have good internet service. And we need to prepare for technology breakdown; for example, make back-up plans."

P2 said:
> "Yeah, there are some, especially a year ago, when I actually first started, yeah, I had a lot of problems with just getting used to the technology, learning how to use it, and especially because the apps were in Chinese, so I had to learn all those settings, but by now it is much better because I understand. I am used to them. I know how to use them and I know what I want to do with them."

P4 claimed:
> "However, I did experience technological problems. Sometimes the transmissions were poor which made hearing for both the students and I difficult."

P5 stated:
> "Bad internet connection, less control for the text."

P1 argued:
> "Meanwhile, technology has its own set of problems, which can frustrate and disrupt the flow of a lesson in its stride. I'd say technology is a real challenge, because it's unexpected failure to deliver is always there."

It is a common experience to suffer from technical breakdowns during online lessons, for instance, electricity blackout, internet breakdown, connection disruption, computer crash and other technical parameters. This is especially evident in synchronous classrooms in the case of videoconferencing and virtual meetings (Vanhorn et al., 2008). Teachers are advised to make back-up plans for these situations.

4.2.2 Cultural issues
There is an argument that Chinese students are more reluctant to express themselves due to their cultural background. They are more conservative and many are reluctant to communicate. According to P7:
> "Most students are reluctant to express their ideas, and this may be to some extent attributed to cultural reasons. Chinese students tend to be reserved and quiet."

However, there seems to be no issues of cultural differences. This may be because students and teachers are respectful of each other's cultural backgrounds and make great efforts to understand and avoid sensitive topics. P1 stated:

> *"Cultural encounters always exist, but I think the relationship between teacher-student is unique. I think it goes without saying that the interactions between teachers and students should be encouraged, so the problems encountered from a cultural perspective are really a misunderstanding, and nothing more."*

P7 added:

> *"I have to pay attention to the different cultural interactions between the students. It is also important for educators to think long and hard about how to create a sense of community and provide opportunities for socialization between students."*

4.2.3 Communication problems

In terms of communication in an online learning environment, as we have mentioned above, there are many obstacles, such as feeling isolated, difficulty in organizing conversation-based activities, misunderstanding owning to a lack of non-verbal cues, large class sizes, and the unwillingness of students to express themselves.

P7 stated:

> *"I think online learning focuses a lot on independent or individual learning, which hinders the interaction or interpersonal communication. Students may feel isolated from their peers and teachers. Most tasks are text-based; it is more difficult to organize activities that demand too much discussion."*

P5 said:

> *"Sometimes online learning requires a higher command of the communication skills and that sometimes even with the good technology skill, the online instructors may still fail to properly apply all the communications skills."*

It is difficult for teachers to design cooperative activities that will encourage communication in online courses. Untrained teachers and students who are without necessary communication skills may hinder teacher-student communication in an online learning environment. This is just as Mukhtar et al., (2020) mentioned that online learning environment is challenging due to the lack of social interaction and nonverbal cues and that faculties need to fill in the knowledge gaps, acquire new technology, teach with new methods, as well as carry out research with new approaches to keep pace with the innovation of higher education.

When discussing the prospect of online learning, some teachers are optimistic because they see its convenience and popularity. Online learning permits opening channels for synchronous and asynchronous communication and interaction, providing flexible learning experiences, and access to learning resources in various forms (Mukhtar et al., 2020). Online learning enables wider

access to experts and resources around the globe. According to Keengwe et al. (2014), students gained the cross-cultural learning and communication experiences through collaborative assignments and discussion on online platforms. However, others state that online learning may be merely an alternative or supplement for traditional learning and only with the proper equipment and necessary skills can online learning become more widespread. As Palloff and Pratt (2013) highlighted, online learning is by no means a replacement for face-to-face education. In other words, there is no sole online learning format that is suitable for all faculties and students.

5. Conclusion

In summary, this paper aimed to investigate the teachers' perceptions of online learning and, in particular, their communication with students. Based on the findings, the following conclusions are yielded. First, most teachers tend to believe that face-to-face learning is better to build a communication-friendly environment compared with online learning, which in many circumstances lack nonverbal cues, immediate feedback and a sense of commitment. A few teachers suggest that effective communication relies on the subject being taught on the online platform. Second, students experience a feeling of isolation in online learning and interestingly, compared with face-to-face learning, most teachers perceive the students to be more relaxed when speaking online. Third, Chinese students prefer typing to speaking when communicating online and this may be due to their language proficiency, self-efficacy or anxiety. Fourth, most teachers are aware of and can apply the communication skills in online teaching, but they believe there is a deep gap in the knowledge as well as practice of communication skills for the students. Fifth, many challenges are encountered during online learning, be they technical, cultural or communicative. Teachers are encouraged to be prepared to deal with these problems. Finally, whether online learning will become a trend is still in debate. It is popular as a result of its convenience, flexibility and rich resources, but it is by no means a substitute for traditional education.

6. Implications

This paper may shed some light on how teachers can improve their teaching through effective communication with their students. Teachers are encouraged to offer more speaking space or cooperation opportunities for students to foster a closer relationship with each other. Various types of learning activities should be implemented to enhance student engagement and encourage students to speak more rather than just typing when communicating online. Since most students are short of communication skills or strategies, which are essential and effective for communication and interaction, it is worth the effort to provide some training in these aspects. Technology is a common concern when it comes to online learning, therefore, the government and community need to enhance the infrastructure to guarantee a stable internet connection.

7. Limitations and recommendations

This paper bears the following limitations. First, the sample was relatively small. It only involved seven teachers, therefore, the conclusion may not be

comprehensive and there may be other factors or challenges that were not covered in this paper. Second, the paper only focused on language learning courses, thus, how online learning affects the communication between teachers and students in other subjects is not known. Third, the paper only examined the attitudes and perceptions of non-Chinese teachers. Hence, little is known regarding the students' perspectives or Chinese teachers' attitudes. For future studies, it is recommended that more teachers from other majors are recruited as participants. In addition, research can be conducted with students to examine how they feel about their communication with teachers during online learning. Moreover, future studies can also focus on how to improve online communication between students and teachers, and the teaching of communication skills or strategies with a view to achieving optimal attainment in online learning.

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Availability of data and material: Data were collected by the authors. All materials (videos) are available upon request.

Code availability: NA

Ethics approval statement: All participants are volunteers and agreed to participate in this study. There is no question or language that causes discomfort to the participants. The text is written in American English.

Appendix 1. Sample interview questions

1. How long have you been teaching online? Which grades and what subject are you teaching online? What is the major of the students?
2. What do you think of the communication between the teacher and students online? Is it different from face-to-face? (hints: language used, feedback, attitude and etc.) Are the students willing to speak or communicate during online learning?
3. In your perspective, which is more convenient and effective, online or face-to-face communication? Why?
4. Do you think the students are more relaxed or nervous to communicate with each other and with teachers online, compared to face-to-face? Please explain.
5. What do you know about communication skills, like verbal skills, nonverbal skills.
Note: Writing and speaking (clear, confident, correct, appropriate...) Listening and reading (anticipation, concentration, analysis, summary...) Intercultural skills (idioms, communication style, cultural differences...) Are students familiar with these skills?
6. In terms of communication skills for online learning, are you familiar with the netiquette, such as appropriate level of formality, tone of voice and pace, clear and concise, avoid negativity and so on.
7. Which skills do you think are more effective for online learning? How do you use communication skills to achieve your goal or teaching objectives in online courses? Give an example.
8. During online learning, when communicating, do the students prefer speaking or typing the words? Can you describe an example from your class?
9. Were there any challenges encountered during online teaching? Were the problems cultural or technological? Is language the major barrier for communication challenges in online learning? Are there any factors that you think are very significant and affecting communication in online learning? Is there any problems that you think is specific to foreign teachers ?
10. What are some features of online learning that promote communication between teacher and students and among students? How?