

Is On-line Chinese Learning Better Than Face-to-face Chinese Courses? – A Case Study of Graduate Student Majoring in Art

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Abstract As the 21st century unfolds, we are beginning to feel the impact of technology on the way we learn, especially with new developments online. Unlike the traditional learning methods which are usually limited by time and space, the networked learning environment, leveraging online collaborative technology, is providing opportunities to have access to less restrictive education with enabling tools. Online learning emphasizes individual development, subject autonomy and active learning, while face-to face courses focus on teachers' teaching experiences and skills. Hence, the objective of this research is to find out the related factors that may reduce the willingness of subject to acquire Chinese through networked technology facilitating online learning. Based on the variables identified from the literature review of online learning, the researchers consider qualitative research and interviewing as a valuable method for analyzing the factors of obstacles in learning process. By analyzing the data collected from interviewing, several factors impeding the subject's learning process are discovered. Understanding these factors allows the researchers to provide some valuable suggestions to assist the subject with learning better. Additionally, the findings of this research also provide a foundation to develop a model of learning online.

Keywords: *face-to-face Chinese courses, on-line Chinese learning*

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1. Introduction

Due to the rapid advances in technology, a good education is not a luxury reserved only to the elites now [1]. Computing power and its pervasiveness has profoundly altered the learning process for learners. Learners can be proactive and have more power when deciding learning context and tool selected. As Buckup [2] points out, the information technology revolution has arguably made a deeper impact on the daily lives of people than the agricultural as well as industrial revolution, which is significant but much less globally ubiquitous. Gulatee, Combes, & Clayden [3] reported that in a school with a 10-year history of online learning, not all students had positive views of online learning, while staff believed that on-campus teaching produced better outcomes. On the other hand, several studies have concluded that online education outcomes are at least, equal to those of on-campus, face-to-face courses [4,5]. However, the rate of taking on-line learning courses increases substantially with the improvement of networked technology. For better understanding the reasons that may influence the learners' willingness toward on-line learning, the researchers adopt the method of interviewing to explore the possible factors.

2. Literature Review

In 1994, R. Edwards [6] mentioned, advances in technology have profoundly transformed the space-time arrangement formerly existing between learners and instructors. Through on-line learning, learners are able to learn at any time and any place. For better understanding the factors that may reduce learners willing to learn through the networked technology, some related literature are discussed as follows.

2.1. The Theory of Force-field Analysis

In 1967, H.L. Miller started to pay attention to the issue of participation. Based on the theory of A. Maslow's hierarchy of needs and K. Lewin's Field theory, Miller constructed a theory that could explain the relationship between learning participation and social status [7,8]. In Miller's theory of Force-field Analysis, he believed that as long as the positive forces were stronger than the negative forces, learners would be willing to participate in learning. On the contrary, if the negative forces were stronger than the positive forces, learners would choose not to learn. Hence, if the educators are able to weaken the

negative factors of learners, learners will be willing to participate in learning.

2.2. On-line Learning Increases the Knowledge of Target Culture

Culture has been recognized as an integral part of developing language proficiency. Based on the results of a number of researchers investigating learners' language competence, most of instructors have agreed that achievement in language proficiency is significantly affected by their personalities, cultural factors, and background knowledge. For example, English readers are expected to read a paragraph linearly as well as directly; however, in a typical Chinese paragraph, the author likes to adopt an indirect thinking style. Hence, from the English readers' perspective, papers by Chinese-writers lack unity and coherence of message [9]. That's the reason why Chinese written articles are difficult to be understood by foreign learners. In addition, Hung [10] also finds that the writings show relatively limited culture knowledge due to the lack of integration of target culture into the language curriculum, therefore, exposure to the target language environment is considered as the most efficient way to help learners understand Chinese. When learners accumulate enough culture knowledge, it is easier for them to realize or write a grammatical and organized document.

The network provides learners a convenient access to the environment and increases their comprehension of target culture [11]. The network reading materials provide learners numerous opportunities to explore various aspects of Chinese. Then, the cultural differences existing between two groups can be elaborated upon in a written test from the network. Hence, the cross-cultural communication that is inevitable in most internet activities must be taken into account [12]. To sum up, the network of learning provides an opportunity for learners to explore various aspects of Chinese they will otherwise not have a chance to experience.

3. Method

This study adopted the qualitative research to analyze the obstacle of on-line Chinese learning. The in-depth interview was the research tool to gather the related information, and the data was collected and analyzed by the transcripts.

3.1. Research Framework and Methodology

The research tools included digital recorders and notebooks to be directly utilized by the researchers. Because the researchers' job was to gather and to analyze the data, the researchers were considered as the research tool as well. The method of interviewing was considered as the main research tool to explore the hidden factors. A graduate student majoring in art was chosen as the subject to do the case analysis. In addition, the researchers also kept the diary after each interview. The diary could not only help the researchers to reflect on the process of interviewing, but also to assist the researchers in analyzing the collected data as well.

3.2. The Reliability and Validity of Data

In order to increase the reliability and validity of data, the triangulation would be used. Hence, the strategies included the transcripts, the diary of the subject and the documents. Owing to precisely catching up the message from subject, the researchers would carefully examine the transcripts. As long as the researchers were unable to understand the meaning of some phrases, the researchers would ask for an extra interviewing session or e-mail the subject for confirmation. For preventing the misunderstanding or the over-explanation of data, the results of the interviewing would be emailed to the subject. The reason was to make sure the message was examined accurately; if not, the subject would provide a more precise description. Hence, the reliability and validity of data was able to be achieved.

3.3. The Background of Subject

3.3.1. The Background Information of Subject

The subject is a 25-year-old female. She is an American born Chinese and used to study Chinese at language school for 3 years. Basically, her daily Chinese conversation is OK but has difficulty in writing and reading Chinese articles. Now she is a graduate student who majors in Art. In order to improve her Chinese ability, she starts to take online-Chinese-learning courses. So far, she has taken the online courses for three months.

3.3.2. The Reasons for Subject to Learn Chinese

There are two major factors for her to learn Chinese. One is regarding her parents. Her parents were born in Taiwan and immigrated to the States for more than 30 years. They hope their daughter can communicate with them in Chinese and understand the Chinese culture as well. The other reason is that she loves the aboriginal art in Taiwan and eagers to experience the aboriginal culture one day. Because of these two main reasons, the subject took the face-to-face Chinese courses on campus last semester. For learning better, the subject starts to search for the more flexible learning method and decides to choose on-line Chinese learning as her learning tool this summer vacation. Through on-line Chinese learning, she can learn Chinese at any place and any time without limitation. Hence, the subject having the experiences of taking face-to-face Chinese courses as well as on-line Chinese learning is a good candidate to be analyzed in this study.

4. Result and Discussion

Understanding the restraining reasons is a way to increase the rate of participation. By reducing the restraining reasons, the driving factors will have more relative weight. From analyzing the transcription of in-depth interviewing, three reasons are discovered.

4.1. The Coherent Chinese Context is Important

When language is studied in use, context always comes first, directing the process of meaning construction from

the very beginning. Even on-line Chinese learning provides with the flexible learning space and time, the subject mentions that *“the context influences my learning process a lot (6/13, 2017).”* *“In my on-line Chinese learning process, I found that I feel so anxious because of different topics in each class. I have to read new article in each on-line Chinese class. It makes me feel nervous because I don’t have enough background knowledge to realize each topic (6/13,2017).”* However, in my face-to-face Chinese courses, teacher was able to explain the same topic until I fully understood. Furthermore, *“I also find out my learning opportunities have decreased because I will cancel the on-line course if I am not familiar with the context (6/13, 2017).”* From the subject’s viewpoint, the Chinese context lacking coherent will disturb her learning condition or even she will cancel her learning courses. The subject considers although on-line Chinese learning provides her with the flexible learning time, the context is much more important than anything else.

4.2. The Self-discipline is Required

Some studies point out lacking self-discipline may affect the rate of learning participation. In this research, however, the subject considered when she was very tired or got cold, she didn’t have the motivation or willingness to learn. As the subject said *“I feel the healthy problem would influence my learning process... Sometime, when I feel tired or get sick, I find I can’t concentrate on learning (7/22, 2017).”* Moreover, the subject also mentioned *“Instead of participating in on-line learning, I would rather take a nap (7/18, 2017).”* Lacking self-discipline may influence learning process. Otherwise, too many private issues also reduce her willingness to do the on-line Chinese learning. For example, the subject said *“When her friends ask her out or when she has too many assignments, she will choose to cancel the on-line Chinese courses (7/18,2017).”* *“During these 3 months, I has canceled many on-line Chinese courses for dealing with my personal stuff (8/15, 2017).”* Hence, for better on-line Chinese learning, the researchers believe the self-discipline plays an important role during on-line Chinese learning courses.

4.3. A Stable on-line Learning System is Recommended

The subject considered on-line Chinese learning provided her with a better learning channel; however, the subject also mentioned the problem of using computer interrupted her learning. The subject said *“I like learning through network but the problem of computer often interrupts my learning process. ...For example, the monitor of my computer sometimes appears the unknown windows. And, it keeps beeping... I have no idea what to do... and sometimes, my earphones are unable to hear what the lecturer says. Then I have to call the on-line assistant to fix the problem. It disturbs my learning interesting. Hence, I feel very frustrated for using the computer at that time (7/3, 2017).”* Then, the subject also expressed *“Even I have the enough computer literacy, the on-line learning system still require the on-line assistant to deal with these technical problems (7/3, 2017).”*

Although the subject thought the opportunities to get educated had expanded, her learning channel might be disturbed when she encountered the technical problems regarding the on-line system. Hence, providing with the stable on-line systems are required for language learners.

From this study, three factors, the language context, the self-discipline of subject and the stable on-line learning system, will influence subject’s learning achievement. Based on the viewpoints of Miller’s forced-field analysis theory, four positive forces and five negative forces can explain why people participate in activities. The self-discipline of subject and the stable on-line learning tool are the positive motivational factors; however, the language context doesn’t belong to any factors. It is just the difference between two languages which may influence people’s thinking mode. However, as long as the language thinking mode is constructed, the learning achievement of subject will improve as well.

5. Conclusion

In this modern society, a common phenomenon has been identified where learner participate in learning activities, with a trend towards online learning. However, without self-discipline, most learners are easily drop the on-line Chinese courses. With the development of technology, the network learning not only provides them with the newest knowledge and skills for learners but increases the opportunities to excel at learning as well. Therefore, more and more learners are interested in online Chinese learning. However, some factors may still disturb the willingness of learning for learners. For better understanding these factors, the researchers adopt the in-depth interview to investigate the possible negative factors of learning. In this research, three factors, the language context, the self-discipline of subject and the stable on-line learning system may influence language learners. To sum up, online learning should be considered as a new paradigm rather than a substitute for the traditional face-to-face classroom experience.

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