

Foreign Language Teaching during COVID-19: Sri Lankan Students' Perceptions of Learning Chinese Characters through Online Teaching

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on worldwide economies, public health, social well-being, and in particular education. Because of the rapid spread of the virus, educational facilities from the basic to the tertiary level have been closed since the beginning of 2020. As a result, most universities and academic institutions have moved to online Learning Management Systems (LMS). Computer Assisted Learning (CAL) was implemented at the University of Kelaniya to upload instructional materials and conduct online lectures. Because there are more than 200 students enrolled in the degree program, teaching Chinese language characters to beginner-level first-year undergraduates has been a difficult task. When compared to traditional Chinese character teaching methods, the new approach made it more difficult for teachers to teach because there was no face-to-face interaction with the students which hindered the opportunity for real-time group and one-on-one classroom feedback. Teaching Chinese characters in face-to-face sessions involves the four abilities of language learning - listening, speaking, reading, and writing. As a result, CAL-based online Chinese character teaching has run into several stumbling blocks, with students reporting difficulty understanding numerous meanings, pronunciations, and stroke patterns. Therefore, this study aimed to look into Sri Lankan students' opinions of learning Chinese characters online to come up with innovative teaching methods to address the difficulties. The research sample comprised 60 first-year undergraduates enrolled in the University of Kelaniya's Department of Modern Languages Bachelor of Arts (B.A) General Degree program. A questionnaire was used to obtain the information. The findings of the research encountered that identifying the correct usage of stroke patterns was the most difficult task of learning Chinese characters online. Apart from that, some students struggled to accurately pronounce the characters' sounds and distinguish between similar character meanings. Furthermore, the students were demotivated by the repeat of errors made while writing Chinese characters, as the teacher was not given the opportunity to rectify each student's errors individually. Through the research findings, it can be suggested that novel teaching approaches suitable for online teaching of Chinese characters should be integrated into the B. A General Degree first-year course modules to make the learning of Chinese characters an enjoyable and stress-free experience.

Keywords: COVID -19; Chinese characters; Chinese as a foreign language; Online teaching; Students' Perceptions

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on worldwide economies, public health, social well-being, and, in particular, education. Since the beginning of 2020, educational institutes from basic to tertiary levels around the world have been shut down due to the rapid spread of the COVID virus. As a result, most universities and academic institutions have moved to online Learning Management Systems (LMS), such as Blackboard, Moodle, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom. As a part of the government's attempts to slow down the community spread of Covid-19, Sri Lankan universities were temporarily closed and lecture delivering mode was transferred from face to face to online using suitable online learning platforms. The Universities were responsible for enrolling students on to online learning managements systems and keeping record of students attendance and evaluation process. More than half of the country's 15 universities were switched entirely or partially to online delivery of lectures since March 2020. However, for a certain field of study, such as foreign language teaching, where face-to-face interactions are vital, remote distribution has brought additional obstacles. One of the numerous fields affected by the pandemic is teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL). The University of Kelaniya implemented a Computer Assisted Learning system (CAL) to upload the teaching material and conduct online lectures. Using this online system to teach Chinese characters to first-year undergraduates was a challenging task as there are more than 200 students enrolled in the first-year degree program. In a physical classroom all four skills of language learning writing, reading, listening, and speaking are incorporated into the teaching process and monitored closely through direct interactions with the learners. Compared to traditional Chinese teaching methods, online teaching of Chinese characters, prevent the teachers from having face-to-face interaction with learners which hinders the opportunity to give real-time feedback. As a result, CAL-based online Chinese character teaching is confronted with several pitfalls, where the learners have faced difficulties in identifying the multiple meanings, pronunciations, and stroke patterns. Therefore, the aim of this study was to investigate the Sri Lankan students' perceptions of learning Chinese characters online to suggest innovative teaching methodologies to overcome the challenges.

Research Questions:

What are students' perceptions about learning Chinese characters online?

What are the innovative teaching methodologies appropriate for online teaching to make learning Chinese characters more interesting?

Literature Review

In the midst of the Covid-19 outbreak, Xiaoping Gao (2020) analyses Australian students' perspectives on the problems and options for learning and teaching Chinese characters and emergency online teaching. According to the findings it was encountered that the student's perceptions of learning characters in a remote delivery method differed from a face-to-face form of learning. The obstacles to learning characters appear to have been minimized by the implemented teaching methodologies and amended evaluation standards. Students, on the other hand, reported some new challenges in remote learning, such as technological and physical barriers (e.g., internet issues and learning space), as well as demands for self-discipline and time management abilities, which have influenced their mental health and motivation to learn. Her research has important pedagogical implications for Chinese character education, as the proposed teaching methodologies will be extremely advantageous for students. According to the findings, Students' problems in writing and reading characters were not as severe as described in the literature and anecdotal evidence. In emergency online education, the teaching methodologies and changed evaluation standards made it easier to learn characters. Furthermore, technology-assisted teaching and learning methodologies provided new approaches to overcome the difficulties. Typing characters, for example, can relieve students of tedious handwriting assignments, allowing them to concentrate on meaning and communication, as well as other difficult parts of Chinese. Furthermore, a mix of formative and summative assessments will reduce the student's stress levels, and the difficulty grasps a wide range of character writing styles within a limited time range. During the epidemic, Qi Zhang (2020) investigates how to understand Chinese characters. His research studies how the obstacles of teaching and learning Chinese characters online can be solved with the use of suitable teaching and learning methods. Apart from that five CFL

teachers from Ireland and the United Kingdom have also presented their first-hand experience of teaching Chinese characters online. Their research findings suggest that an organized strategy appears to help the teaching of Chinese characters and also online instruction should also include in detail and clear instructions to teach Chinese characters. This research can be considered one of the most recognized contributions to the development and delivery of online Chinese character instructions in a crisis situation. Tao Yang and Man Gao (2020) have explored the learners' impressions on using character-learning tactics used in a web-based course.

The findings imply that the students in web-based courses have encountered visualization of characters, and orthographic and rote learning strategies are the most effective when teaching Chinese characters online. Furthermore, the outcomes of this study shed light on the drawbacks and benefits of a web-based course, as well as the impact that learners' age and gender may have on learning strategy preferences. Suo Yan Ju and Suo Yan Mei (2020) used animated movies to investigate students' attitudes and views of learning mandarin at a basic level. The study revealed that students maintained a good attitude toward learning Mandarin through animated videos. Students said that the animated movies helped them to acquire Mandarin vocabulary and sentence structures in addition to improving their listening and speaking skills. Therefore, it was certain that animated video to teach mandarin vocabulary and sentence structures and has identified that using animated videos make the learners engage in the learning process more interactively.

Hong Zhan and Hsiu–Jen Cheng (2014) have analysed the role of technology in teaching and learning Chinese characters. Chinese language learners who do not have similar characters in their native languages find it challenging to develop Chinese language proficiency due to difficulties to practice the characters. The literature review has identified that linguistic, pedagogical, and political factors as causes for the difficulties of learning Chinese characters. In the Chinese language, tone changes represent different meanings of a word, and compound Chinese characters consist of the phonetic component radicals that do not always sound the same as the phonetic radicals. These linguistic characteristics of the Chinese

language add more challenges for Chinese language learners who learn Chinese as a foreign language. The researchers have presented a technology-enhanced character teaching model consisting of four stages: Radical knowledge awareness, Enforcement of sound–meaning connection, Enforcement sound–meaning–form connection, and Evaluation (REEE). The presented REEE model of teaching Chinese characters save valuable class time for students to practice, thus helping them to build connections between sound, meaning, and form. Jie Lu, Sue Meng, and Vincent Tam (2014) described a project for teaching Chinese as a second language at a bilingual primary school that includes the design and development of a mobile application. To make learning a basic set of 200 Chinese characters easier, an application was created for iPod Touch Apple technology. This paper describes how the project team looked at teachers’ and students’ experiences in a specific setting, gained an understanding of teaching and learning requirements for Chinese language learning, and how those requirements influenced the design of the educational application. The final results of the project will include recommendations for the design and use of Chinese characters learning applications and educational applications in Chinese teaching and other similar contexts. Yi Xu, Lijin, Elizabeth Deifell, and Katie Angus (2021) have discussed Chinese character instruction online and have highlighted the importance of using online tools for remote teaching. Over the past two decades, technically enhanced drafting training has often been promoted but was rarely implemented. Urgent distance learning as a catalyst for online education may make Chinese teachers more willing to use online technologies and resources to teach drawing in the future. In this mixed-methods study, 133 Chinese post-secondary school teachers in the United States were surveyed and follow-up interviews were conducted. They investigated instructors' perceived value of online tools in character education and instructors' confidence in online character education. Additionally, from a technology adoption perspective, they believe that the perceived value, perceived student readiness, and instructor use of online tools in character emergency distance learning will contribute to the future use of online tools for inclusion in character education. In the field of teaching and learning Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL), most studies have examined strategies for learning Chinese characters through pen-and-paper learning in university students. The rise of distance learning, the growing

popularity of smartphones and tablets, and the prevalence of mobile applications for language learning have assisted letter-learning strategies for distance learners. Kan Qian, Nathaniel Owan, and Stephen Bax (2018) attempted to identify changing practices when character learning is supported by mobile technology and analyzed the underlying causes of changes in practice; These issues were explored using online surveys, learner diaries, and email interviews with UK-based distance learners, who just started learning Chinese. The findings imply that there are important new practices and previously unreported strategies such as always testing yourself and using pinyin input to identify new characters. They also uncovered two types of strategies not reported in previous studies on social and emotional aspects. Therefore, their study explored, in terms of course design and learner support, along with the important pedagogical implications of teaching Chinese characters, how Chinese characters entry-level adult distance learners can perform when supported by mobile technology.

Research Methodology

The research sample consisted of 60 first-year undergraduates reading for the Bachelor of Arts (B.A) General Degree program at the Department of Modern Languages, University of Kelaniya. This included 11 males and 49 females, with an average age of 20 (range 20-24). The majority of the participants had little knowledge of Chinese, particularly the absolute beginners who just started learning Chinese. The Data was collected through an online questionnaire. The semi-structured questionnaire consisted of 07 closed-ended and 02 open-ended questions. The questions aimed to collect information on the participants' learning background, for example, age, gender, and learning hours, Participants' perceptions about the difficulties of learning Chinese characters online, and their suggestions to develop new teaching strategies to teach Chinese characters in web-based learning. The participants were required to rate their opinion on a five-point Likert Scale. (01- very important 02- important 03- Moderately important 04- Slightly important 05- Not important)

Research Findings

The data collected from the questionnaire can be analyzed according to the answers given by the learners. The first research question was on the importance of writing Chinese characters stroke by stroke by hand during online teaching sessions. A summary of the learners' answers to this question is presented below:

Do you think it is important that the teacher demonstrates how to write a Chinese character stroke by stroke by hand during the online lectures?

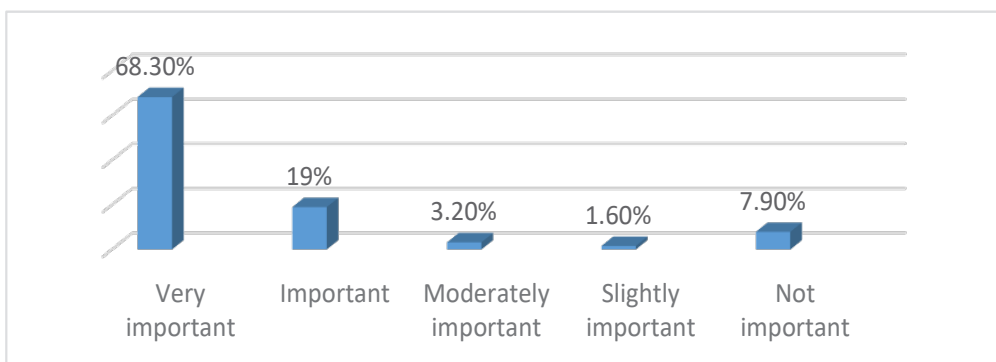


Figure 1

This graph shows that more than 68% think it is essential for the teacher to demonstrate how to write Chinese characters stroke by stroke hand during the online lecture.

The second research question investigated the importance of using online equipment when teaching Chinese characters in virtual spaces.

Do you think the equipment (such as a whiteboard) in the online lecture is effective when the teacher or students demonstrate writing Chinese characters?

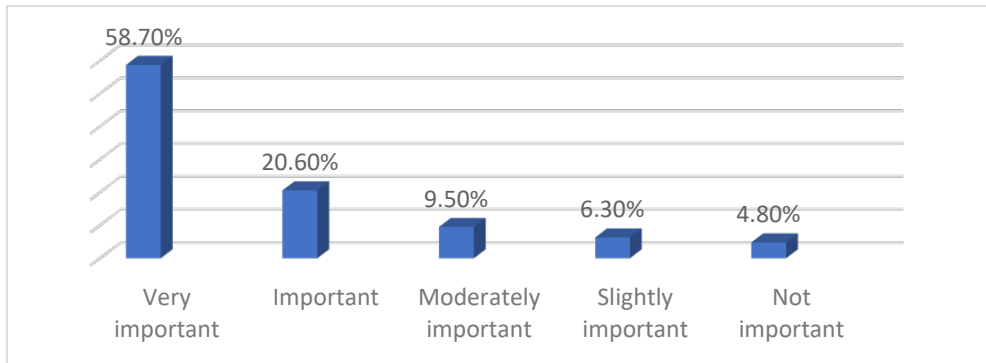


Figure 2

This graph shows that more than 58% think that it is very important and effective to use online equipment such as whiteboards in online lectures.

The third research question was given to identify whether it is important to give students opportunities to write Chinese characters by hand in online teaching.

Do you think it is important that the students are given opportunities to practice writing characters by hand during online lectures on Chinese characters?

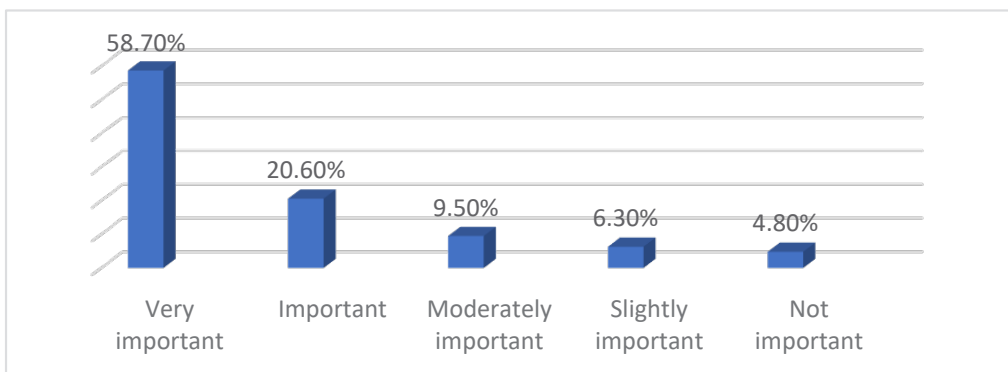


Figure 3

This graph shows that more than 62% think that it is very effective to use a whiteboard in online lectures.

The fourth research question was about how the weekly assignment of the Chinese characters would help the learners to remember the characters.

The weekly assignment of the Chinese character course helps me to remember the characters.

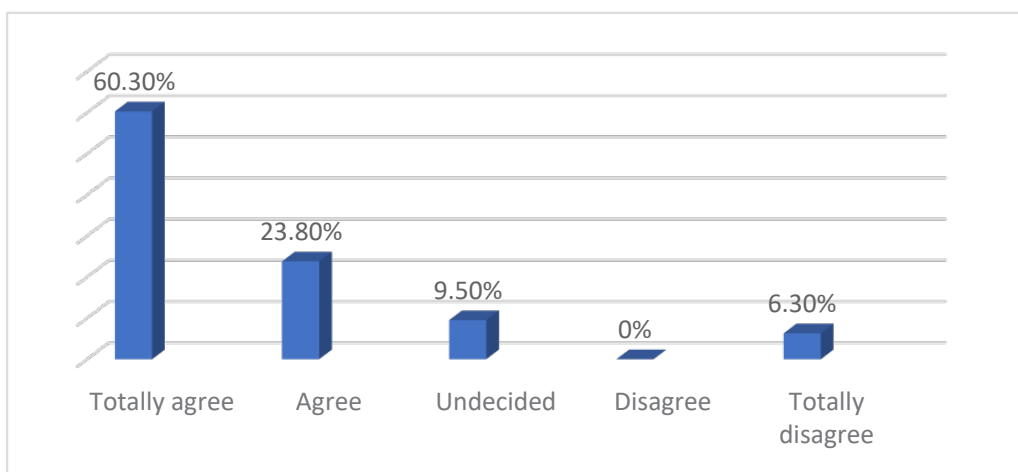


Figure 4

This table shows that more than 60% totally agree that the weekly assignment of the Chinese character course helps them to remember the characters.

The fifth research question was given to identify whether it is important to give students opportunities to write Chinese characters by hand in online teaching.

Using pictures (GIF images) to demonstrate the structure or the development of the Chinese characters during online lectures helps me to remember the characters.

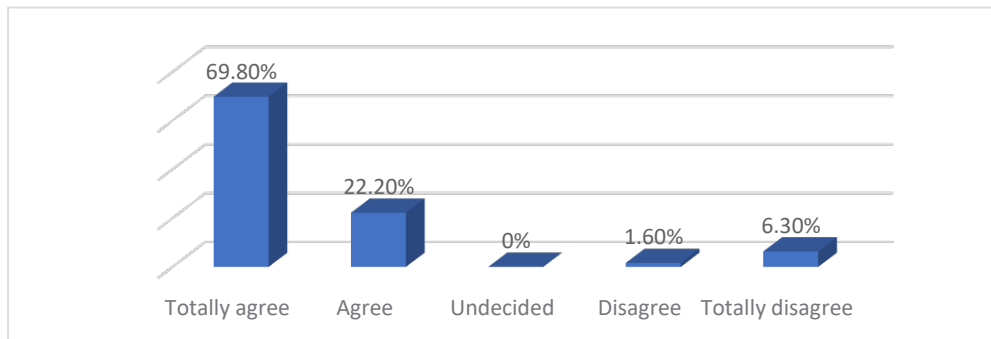


Figure 5

Using videos to demonstrate the structure and the development of Chinese characters during the online lectures helps me to remember the characters by heart.

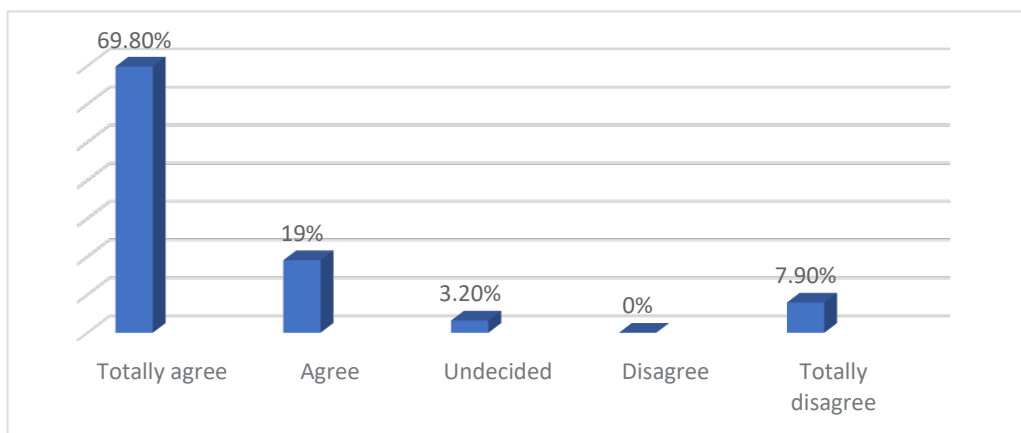


Figure 6

The fifth and sixth research questions were about the use of pictures (GIF images) to demonstrate the structure or the development of the Chinese characters during online lectures to help the students remember the characters with the use of animated gifs and videos. More than 69% have mentioned that the use of animated gifs and videos has helped them to remember the structure of the Chinese characters during online lectures by heart.

The findings of the questionnaire suggest that the most difficult part of learning Chinese characters online is learning the stroke order because they find it difficult to identify the stroke order during online teaching sessions. Apart from that the learners have faced difficulties in recognizing the correct shape of the letters, as the letters written using a mouse on the online whiteboards are not very clear. Some students have responded that the teachers are writing the characters very fast so they don't receive enough time to follow the writing patterns. Almost every student has mentioned that they have signal issues and other technical issues which are due to which they cannot participate in the lectures regularly. Another interesting aspect encountered through the research was that some students struggled to pronounce the characters' sounds accurately and distinguish between similar characters' meanings. Furthermore, the students were demotivated by the repeat of errors made while writing Chinese characters, as the teacher was not allowed to rectify each student's errors individually in the online space.

As a result, the study recommends that the Chinese B. A General Degree's first-year course module should incorporate new teaching approaches suitable for online teaching to make learning Chinese characters an enjoyable and stress-free experience. According to the study, using a writing pad rather than a mouse to write Chinese characters assists teachers to write the letters more neatly. A writing pad can also assist teachers in correcting students' handwriting assignments. Gif animated graphics and movies are highly useful while studying Chinese characters online and doing classroom exercises to practice them on a daily basis is also important. The teachers should also upload a printed page of stroke orders to the CAL page after each teaching session, so that the learners who had issues of identifying the stroke order can revise and practice them after the lectures.

Conclusion

This study examined Sri Lankan Students' perceptions of learning Chinese Characters via online teaching. The findings encountered through this research do not share many similarities with the research findings of previous research related to the online teaching of Chinese characters and the difficulties of learning characters online were not as severe as described in the literature and in anecdotal evidence. In emergency online education, the teaching methodologies and changed

evaluation standards made it easier to learn characters. Furthermore, technology-assisted teaching and learning methodologies provided new approaches to overcome the difficulties. Typing characters, for example, can relieve the students' stress of identifying Chinese characters and stroke patterns and to concentrate on the meaning and pronunciation. Furthermore, a mix of formative and summative assessments would reduce the students' stress levels when learning characters online and reduce the fear of learning a large number of characters in limited teaching sessions.

The technological, physical, and time constraints and their influence on the mental health of the students was another reason for the lack of attention and concentration when learning Chinese characters. Because the stress level of the students was increased as they have to learn the handwriting, stroke patterns and the pronunciation of characters within a limited time range under numerous obstacles. The findings suggest that the quality of educational technology, particularly internet connections and capacity, should be improved and new educational tools suitable to teach Chinese characters, and online apps which can be downloaded in to smart phones easily should be invented to enhance the learning process.

The sample size of this study is relatively modest due to the time constraint. In the future, large-scale investigations will be required to generalize the findings of this study.

The character teaching methodologies used in the study can help researchers come up with new ways to teach and learn characters in CFL. Integrating the character-based concept into curriculum design could make teaching and understanding characters easier. The techniques may motivate CFL teachers to incorporate the most recent research results into their teaching practice in order to address new teaching issues and improve student outcomes. Teachers and educators should pay more attention to effective elements (such as motivation, self-discipline, and anxiety) that may influence the efficiency of instructional practices. Finally, this study could be used as a starting point for future research into how teachers' and students' perspectives of online delivery evolve.

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I am grateful to the 60 first-year undergraduates reading for the Bachelor of Arts (B.A) General Degree program at the Department of Modern Languages, University of Kelaniya, who helped me by filling out the questionnaire. I want to express my heartfelt thanks to all the kind-hearted people who have helped me, and I am grateful to have met you. In the future, I will continue to improve my Chinese language skills and academic writing skills. I will continue cultivating my Chinese language and academic writing skills.

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