

# Evaluating the Impact of the Use of the Internet on Learning Chinese by Students from the Confucius Institute of the University of Zimbabwe<sup>1</sup>

(津巴布韦孔子学院学生在汉语学习当中互联网使用及影响的评价研究)

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**Abstract:** The rise in technology-mediated life activities is now unavoidable throughout the world. The spread of Chinese as a second language and the emergence of the Internet as a source of information and tool for language learning are mutually enforcing trends that need attention from language learners and researchers. The students at the University of Zimbabwe are also not an exception. While the majority of these students are now using the Internet for learning Chinese, there is also need for them to develop some new critical and interpretive skills which will help them to fully utilize the internet for maximum benefit. On the other hand, the teachers of Chinese language and culture need to understand how the Internet is influencing and revolutionizing the learning of Chinese language. This paper therefore evaluates the use of the Internet by University of Zimbabwe students in acquiring Chinese and the need for new frameworks for teaching and learning strategies, which will see students benefiting more from the use of the Internet.

**摘要:** 随着网络技术的飞速发展, 互联网时代已经进入了我们的生活并影响了生活很多方面。二十一世纪是一个信息化的时代, 在这个时代学习一门外语是有必要的。由于中国的国际地位不断提高及中国的经济快速增长, 世界很多地方出现了汉语学习的热潮; 现在很多国家重视汉语教学, 同时互联网也已经渗透到我们生活的各个领域。现在很多师生在教学及学习汉语时也已经开始了使用互联网。通过互联网可以更快的搜到很多汉语学习资料。津巴布韦大学孔子学院的学生也不会例外。虽然大多数学生现在使用互联网进行汉语学习, 但是也需要先为他们制定一些新的网络学习技能, 网络学习方法能帮助他们

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充分利用互联网学习汉语。在另一方面，汉语教师也需要了解互联网对学生汉语学习的影响。因此，本研究试图对津巴布韦大学孔子学院的学生在学习汉语时使用网络的情况进行评价，并提出一些教学策略和新的教学框架，将来可以让学生更有益的使用网络学习汉语。

**Keywords:** Internet, Chinese language learning and teaching, University of Zimbabwe Confucius Institute

**关键词:** 互联网, 汉语学习和教学, 津巴布韦孔子学院

## 1. Introduction

China's rise to prominence on the global stage has made countries all over the world interested in learning Chinese language (Mandarin) and culture. In order to meet this rise in demand for learning the Chinese language, the Chinese government established Confucius Institutes in many countries. Confucius Institutes are non-profit public institutions affiliated with the Chinese Ministry of Education, designed to support the teaching of Chinese language and culture to non-native speakers of Chinese. Interest in learning Chinese as a second language is growing in many developed countries. This trend is also growing even in some third-world countries such as Zimbabwe. The University of Zimbabwe started offering Chinese lessons through the Confucius Institute since 2007; some of its achievements include the training of seven local teachers who are now teaching Chinese in the department of Modern Languages. There has been a remarkable rise in the interest in learning Chinese language and culture at the University of Zimbabwe Confucius Institute. This is supported by the University's participation in the 2013 and 2014 Chinese Bridge competitions, where students from the University of Zimbabwe were amongst the top five winners of this international Chinese competition. Promoted by the Chinese National Hanban (汉办), Chinese Bridge competitions are contests for foreign college students, who compete based on their mastery of the Chinese language. Although we have seen great passion for learning Chinese shown by the University of Zimbabwe students, some Zimbabwean students still consider Chinese a very difficult language to study.

To help students gain access to the Internet, the University of Zimbabwe provides free WIFI to all students and lecturers across faculties, thus enabling the Confucius Institute students to be able to use the Internet in their learning of Chinese. Learners of Chinese at the University of Zimbabwe can therefore download applications from the Internet, which can be used for translation or pronunciation practice. Through the use of social media applications, students are also able to communicate with native speakers of the Chinese language while they are in Zimbabwe. As propounded by Brown and Hanlon (1970), this is an important aspect in the acquisition of a second language because language acquisition is similar to the process children use in mother tongue acquisition, namely, where continuous interaction with native speakers forms the basic source of influence in their acquisition process.

Second language acquisition requires meaningful interaction with native speakers within the target language environment. Through the use of Internet, students at the University of Zimbabwe are now able to learn Chinese language, Chinese history, and culture using available online resources. From a theoretical point of view, the learning of Chinese at the University of Zimbabwe is expected to have improved due to the availability of the Internet; however the results have not changed that significantly and many students still believe that learning Chinese is very difficult. This paper therefore, will discuss and evaluate the extent to which the use of the Internet by Zimbabwean students in learning Chinese is beneficial to acquiring Chinese language and culture. The present study attempts to answer the following questions: is the Internet really benefiting students in learning the Chinese language? To what extent do students know reliable, retrievable and usable Internet resources? As Richards and Rodgers (2008:15) argue, “assumptions about how second language is learned, and preferred teaching techniques, have in common the belief that if language is to be improved, it will come about through changes and improvements in teaching methodology.” Therefore, is there a need for new frameworks for teaching Chinese language in these Internet-mediated contexts?

## 2. Background

The Confucius Institute at the University of Zimbabwe was established in 2007 in the Department of Modern Languages. From its establishment to the present, many developments took place; Chinese classes are not only being offered to the undergraduate students at the University of Zimbabwe but also to private students and to some high school students, primary school students and other college students around the country. The students’ aims for learning Chinese at the University of Zimbabwe differ from one student to another. For instance, some students learn Chinese in order to obtain HSK certificates (a Chinese language proficiency test designed by the HANBAN<sup>2</sup>) so that they can be employed in Chinese firms; some learn Chinese so that they can go and further their studies in Chinese universities; others learn Chinese so that they can be able to communicate with Chinese people and be able to do business with them. As Richards (2008:5) puts it, “the goal of foreign language study is to read its literature or to benefit from the mental discipline and intellectual development that result from language study.” In short, all students at the University of Zimbabwe learn Chinese to be able to use it and benefit from it.

The majority of Zimbabwean students use Shona and Ndebele languages as their mother languages and use English as their formal language. These languages are different from Chinese in terms of their writing systems. Most students at the University of Zimbabwe regard the study of Chinese as a very difficult thing since Chinese is viewed as one of the most difficult languages. This is mainly due to the fact that the Chinese

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<sup>2</sup> HANBAN is the colloquial abbreviation for the Chinese National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language. It is governed by the Office of Chinese Language Council International, a non-government and non-profit organization affiliated with the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. <http://www.ask.com/wiki/Hanban>

language, unlike most other languages, is a tonal language which uses characters; hence there are many similar words with different meanings. This makes learning Chinese difficult as Colton's observed that "a literate Chinese must spend half his life in acquiring a thorough knowledge of Chinese" (in Rosenberg, 1979: 326). The Confucius Institute at the University of Zimbabwe has been sending at least ten students to China to attend an International summer school every year from 2009 up to the present. This development is one of the motivating factors which is attracting more and more students to start learning Chinese. Another motivating factor is the availability of scholarships for short courses in China or Master's Degree programs, which are offered to those who pass HSK level 3 and 4.

Due to the above motivational factors related to the studying of Chinese, the majority of students at the Confucius Institute at the University of Zimbabwe are now using all possible means in order to achieve higher proficiency levels within the shortest possible time; this includes the use of the Internet in learning Chinese. This rise in the use of the Internet in learning Chinese is supported by the availability of free WIFI throughout the University of Zimbabwe campus. Students are now able to download applications which they can use on their computers or smart phones to communicate with native speakers of Chinese. Warschauer and Healey (1998:63) stated that

"...with the advent of the internet, the computer both in society and in the classroom, has been transformed from a tool for information processing and display to a tool for information processing and communication. For the first time, learners of a language can now communicate inexpensively and quickly with other learners of the target language all over the world."

Though students at the University of Zimbabwe are now able to access much information about Chinese language and culture from the Internet, however students still acquire Chinese language slower than expected and some of them still think that the Chinese language is very difficult. This paper is designed to discuss and evaluate how the University of Zimbabwe students are benefiting from the Internet in acquiring Chinese language and culture; are they really using the Internet for the acquisition of Chinese language and culture? What sources or applications are they using to learn and improve their Chinese proficiency, and is the use of Internet really benefiting them? If so, to what extent is it benefiting them to reach their goals of learning the Chinese language? This paper will also attempt to give suggestions on how teachers and students can work together in order to make Chinese learning and teaching easier and interesting through the proper utilization of available Internet resources.

### 3. Literature Review

The present topic is not a pioneer study in the field of assessing the impact of use of the Internet in learning second languages. Literature available also shows that the introduction of new online language learning tools as well as the use of the Internet in

second-language learning is now regarded as one of the most powerful parallel language learning methods. Some of these new online learning tools are introduced by past researchers such as Godwin-Jones (2009), Levy (2009), Meskill & Anthony (2010) and Warschauer (2010). It is now widely accepted that the Internet is now a new source of information and reference in learning, and that most of the information which people might need to use in any subject can be obtained from the Internet. This literature review is mainly focused on the evaluations of the use of the Internet in language learning.

In an attempt to evaluate the use of the Internet as an alternative language learning method, some researchers compared Internet learning methods to face-to-face learning methods. For instance, in one study done by Cheng (2011), an interesting comparison of online and face-to-face learning was done based on the researcher's four-semester online Chinese teaching experience. Cheng (2011) argued that online Chinese instruction may obtain similar learning outcomes if it is carefully designed and well executed, but the efficiency of online learning is not as good as classroom instruction. This evaluation favors face-to-face learning methods. This implies that the use of the Internet as a learning method is a secondary or complementary method which should not be over depended on. Jiang (2014) also evaluated one popular online learning platform called Blackboard Learn™. Jiang's research evaluated the practice and effectiveness of Blackboard Learn™ features' essential to Chinese language online teaching; he mentioned some of the challenges faced when teaching online. This also suggests that while learning through the Internet is growing at a faster rate, the approach has its own limitations.

There are also some other studies which evaluate the choice of language learning applications without comparing them with face-to-face learning methods. For example, Xu (2011) believes that the choice of Internet learning tools should not be random; hence he evaluated the six commonly used web participatory learning tools, which are discussion boards, blogs, Skype-type software, Moodle-based service network, Live Mocha, and Second Life. He emphasized the importance of the selection of the virtual classroom software (VCS) for language teaching and learning based on the concepts of participation and interaction established by Fortin (1997).

Recent research such as that by Chen (2014), recommend a blended learning method, where learners can switch between devices and contexts for a fluid learning experience via learning hubs which are more interactive. Chen's research informs us that despite the rising use of the Internet in learning a second language, depending on a single piece of software, application or single website is therefore a form of underutilization of Internet resources.

There are also a number of studies that criticize the use of the Internet in second language learning. For instance, Kallen (1995) argues that students normally use the Internet mostly for socializing, thus compromising the effectiveness of the use of the Internet in second language learning. Similar criticisms were also articulated in many studies carried out in the 1990s, such as Gary, William, and David (1995), Starr (1990), Hansford & Baker (1990) and many others. On the contrary, some other researchers

support the effectiveness of socializing in second language learning. Thus, they believe that socializing through the Internet is the best method of learning a second language. For example, in a study conducted by the British Council (2007), it was discovered that 69 percent of language learners around the world acquire second language effectively when they are socializing informally. Krashen (1976) also agrees with this notion, thus he argues that those informal environments which promote real language use are more conducive to acquisition. McLuhan (1962) coined the term “global village” in the 1960s when he stated that the Internet would unite the world. The use of the Internet promotes globalization, which in turn promotes socialization between people of different cultures—“a practice which creates an appropriate environment for second language learning.

Given these contradicting views on the use of the Internet in second language acquisition, it is apparent that the evaluation of the use of the Internet in second language learning should be done with particular reference to individual case studies. Therefore, the present research, which borrows various evaluation concepts from previous studies, attempts to evaluate the use of the Internet in learning Chinese in the context of developing countries, with particular reference to Zimbabwe.

Chinese language learning was introduced at the University in 2007, but up to the present not much research has been done to evaluate the strategies and methods used by the University of Zimbabwe students in their acquisition of Chinese language through the Internet, which is now popular. Therefore, the present study is an attempt to fill this gap in order to suggest new ways in which the Internet can be used fully to benefit students in the acquisition of Chinese language and culture.

#### **4. Methodology**

In order to evaluate the use of the Internet in the acquisition of Chinese by the University of Zimbabwe students, the researchers used a qualitative research method. Interviews were carried out among three groups of students at the University of Zimbabwe. These groups include the following: ten students who attended a one-month International Summer School in China (with Chinese language proficiency (HSK) ranging from HSK level 1 to HSK level 3); ten students who have never been to China but have been studying Chinese for 2-3 years with HSK proficiency levels ranging from HSK level 2 to HSK level 3; and, a final group of students who studied Chinese language at the University of Zimbabwe and managed to acquire scholarships to further their studies in China for at least one academic year, with HSK levels ranging from HSK level 3 to HSK level 5.

Skype interviews, face-to-face interviews and desk research were also used to obtain information from the Chinese language teachers at the University of Zimbabwe on how the teachers are helping students in using the Internet in learning Chinese. The research was also done through observations. Since the researchers are also Chinese teachers at the Confucius Institute, observation was the most convenient method to

evaluate the effectiveness of the use of the Internet in learning Chinese. This was achieved by observing students' use of the Internet and evaluating students' progress in the acquisition of the Chinese language.

This research was done in order to find out whether the above mentioned groups have similar behaviors in terms of their use of the Internet in learning Chinese. Considering the fact that these groups have different backgrounds and exposure to the Chinese language environment, this makes them different in terms of learning strategies and materials which they use in learning Chinese.

## **5. Participants of the Research and their Use of the Internet**

During the research, ten students were selected from those students who studied Chinese for a period of one to two years and who have HSK proficiency ranging from level 1 to level 3. The sample was extracted using random sampling from those students who attended the international summer school at Renmin University of China in 2013 and 2014. Amongst these students were three males and seven females. All of them own smart phones and computers which they used to access the Internet. Amongst the group, the male students seemed to have more Chinese friends than the females. These ten students normally use We-chat, a free social application similar to WhatsApp available on smart phones. The application is popular in Asian countries; both native speakers of Chinese and non-native speakers of Chinese who can speak Chinese use this social media platform. These students created a We-chat group, which they used for sharing information regarding the Chinese language.

During interviews, students revealed that they usually use Chinese language for chatting through this platform. Although it is possible to send instant audio messages, they prefer text messages to audio messages. This is mainly because these students are still beginners, thus though they are able to write some Chinese characters, they are not yet able to speak Chinese fluently. Consequently, in order to avoid being misunderstood they rarely send audio messages. In the social group which they called UZCI SUMMERSCHOOL (University of Zimbabwe Confucius Institute Summer School) they encouraged each other to use Chinese to communicate; however in some circumstances they used English to share some important information which they could not write in Chinese. In this group they also encouraged each other to write in Chinese characters but sometimes they used Pinyin, without tones, and the other group members would have to guess the meaning according to the context.

In addition to the We-chat application, this group of students also said all of them had a QQ<sup>3</sup> application, which is similar to the We-chat application. From this group of

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<sup>3</sup> QQ also known as Tencent QQ in China, is an instant messaging software service developed by the Chinese company Tencent Holdings Limited. It has more than 798.2 million active QQ accounts. QQ also offers a variety of services, including online social games, music, shopping, microblogging, and group and voice chat. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tencent\\_QQ](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tencent_QQ)

ten students about six of them said that they used QQ often while four of them said that they rarely used it. The above internet applications are mainly used for interactive practice; there are other these four students who rarely used QQ were still first year students who have studied Chinese for a very short period, but were with the students who went for summer school. This exposure allowed them to be able to use internet social media used by Chinese people. However, although they had QQ accounts on their cell phones they do not use them often because these applications are in Chinese; hence due to the fact that these student's Chinese proficiency is still low they could not use it without assistance. Those who used QQ said they usually used it to socialize with their Chinese friends whom they met during their one-month stay in China. This group of students also said that they could find more Chinese friends on either QQ or We-chat.

Applications such as Pleco are also useful in learning Chinese. Pleco is a language learning application which can be used on mobile phones and can be used as an offline electronic dictionary. With this application students can search the meanings of words in a Chinese to English or English to Chinese dictionary. Searches can be done using Chinese pinyin, drawing Chinese characters on a touch pad, or typing any English word they want to search for in Chinese. These students said that during their one-month stay in China, this application was their main source of lexical reference. The picture below, which was taken from the Pleco application, shows how the Pleco dictionary can be used. When you type a word on the search box, the application gives the meaning of the term and example sentences to help with the usage of the word.

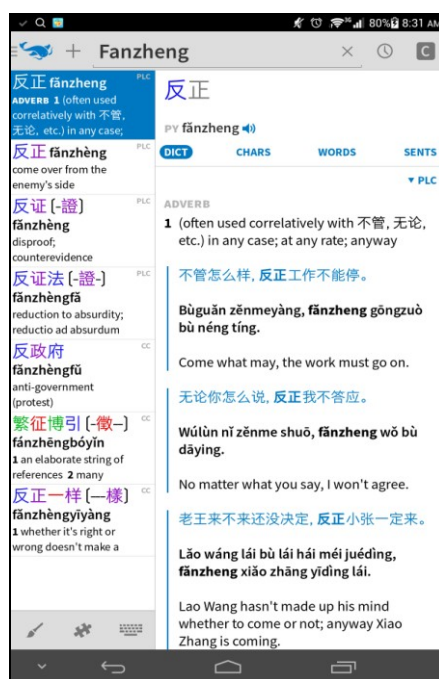


Figure 1: Using the Pleco application

In addition to Pleco, these students also used another common application called Hanping Chinese English dictionary. This application amongst others is very common with the Zimbabwean students because it also includes some HSK vocabulary (from level



one to level six). The application also offers pronunciation practice options as well as translations, hence making it an important Internet learning tool. With these applications students are able to communicate nearly anything in Chinese. During the period these students stayed in China, they depended on these applications and managed to overcome language barriers in an environment where Chinese is primarily the only language used for communication. With these online applications, students could go shopping by themselves since they could search for translations online or on the dictionaries when there was a need. During interviews, it was also found that sometimes these students would use Google translation, a function on Google.com, which is used to translate long phrases and paragraphs that cannot be translated on Pleco and Hanping dictionaries. Although the Pleco and Hanping dictionaries can provide useful examples on the usage of given words, Google translate is more convenient and user friendly since it does not only give the usage of the words but also the meaning of longer sentences. With Hanping Chinese English dictionaries students can read HSK words without the need to copy or write the words down. This is more convenient since a phone is more portable than textbooks. This allows students to study Chinese where ever they are and whenever they feel like studying.

Interviews with students who have never been to China showed that with the provision of free Internet at the University of Zimbabwe Confucius Institute, the majority of students were also able to chat and connect with native speakers of Chinese using online applications. All the interviewed students used the same applications as those who have been to China. However, unlike those who have been to China, they did not have a social group for learning Chinese and they had fewer friends compared to those who have been to China. For the latter group of students to find friends who are native speakers of Chinese, they just had to send friendship requests to any person with a Chinese name or a profile picture for Chinese person. If these recipients accepted the request, then they could become friends. Although it is dangerous to share information with strangers on the Internet, these students thought that it is very interesting to use the little Chinese language they learnt in class with the native speakers of the language.

These students also thought that online applications like QQ and We-chat helped greatly as they forced them to study hard so that they could communicate with their 'new friends.' One interviewee argued that "with each conversation you can learn some new words or some Chinese cultural information and it's interesting since it gives you pressure to study more." This group of students also said that they also used Pleco and Hanping dictionaries for reference when they encountered some difficult vocabulary during their chats with their new friends. This suggests that students at the University of Zimbabwe are now able to communicate in Chinese online through the assistance of online learning applications. The students are very satisfied with this development since they are able to communicate with native speakers of the target language and whenever they meet translation problems they can use Pleco, Google translate, Hanping etc. However, despite the fact that students are satisfied with this development, it was observed that though students use these internet applications for chatting in Chinese, sometimes they also use English for chatting.

The other group which was interviewed in order to obtain information on how the University of Zimbabwe Confucius Institute students were using the Internet in learning Chinese language was those students who passed HSK level three and were awarded one-year scholarships to pursue further studies in Chinese language in various universities around China. These students are now more fluent in Chinese. However, all of them said that the Internet is helping them greatly though they are now in an environment where the language is used every day. Though these students were exposed to the target language environment they still used Internet resources and applications for reference. These students said that the Internet is a good source of information, especially information about culture, because they can get it in English, which makes it easy to understand. In class their teachers gave them reliable Internet websites and downloadable applications where they could access information about Chinese language and culture. This differs from those students in Zimbabwe who got to know of the Internet learning applications by themselves. With these applications, the students felt that their Chinese was improving very fast. Despite the fact that they were in an environment where Chinese is spoken everywhere, they said that online applications were helping them more since they could access anything online and have Internet access all the time. For instance, when they needed directions they used applications like BAIDU DITU, a map which can be downloaded on a mobile device and can help locate directions, taxi charges, and bus routes. With assistance from their Chinese friends, they were able to use the Internet effectively and it benefitted them more than those students studying in Zimbabwe.

Overall, the use of the Internet in learning Chinese is now a common approach for both those students who have been to China before and those who have never gone to China. Students are trying to use the Internet in their Chinese language learning as an alternative learning method to empower themselves. Learning tools like dictionaries or translation applications that can be obtained from the Internet are also helping them when communicating with native speakers of Chinese online. As already observed, from the above results of the interviews, these internet users believe that use of Internet resources and applications is helpful to their acquisition of Chinese. However, is this really happening? If so, to what extent is the use of the Internet useful? Can the Internet substitute for the traditional teacher-student learning approach? Below, these issues and others will be discussed in detail.

## **6. Discussions**

The provision and availability of the Internet has provided easy access to learning materials, as observed from the above sample of students who participated in the interviews. Being exposed to the target language or being in the environment where a second language is spoken is the best way to learn a second language. Krashen (1976) observes that informal environment which promotes real language use is more conducive to acquisition. Krashen (2005) also argued that subconscious language acquisition is more effective. The Internet provides easy access to information updates and provides learning materials for the students at the University of Zimbabwe. This availability of the Internet is helping students to access up-to-date information and more details to what

they would have learnt in class. The Chinese language textbooks being used at the University of Zimbabwe are mainly written specifically for those students studying in China. Some of the information is difficult to understand for students who have never been to China. The provision of the Internet was supposed to help as a secondary learning tool. However, there are some few challenges noted. Although there is a Confucius Institute library at the University, more and more students are now using the Internet to access information related to Chinese language and culture. Thus, they no longer depend on books since the Internet is more convenient and has all the current and necessary information that is required. The Internet has become an important linguistic medium (Wu et al, 2006).

Though the Internet is providing many learning resources for studying Chinese, it seems as though the University of Zimbabwe students are not benefiting much from it. Most of these students are still beginners who have learnt Chinese for one or two years. Their HSK proficiency level ranges between level one and two. In our survey we noted that very few of these students passed HSK level three, which means that these students have not acquired much Chinese vocabulary. Students whose proficiency level is between HSK level one and two mainly depend on pinyin, thus when chatting or searching information on the Internet most of these students cannot use Chinese characters. Rather they would prefer using pinyin since they cannot recognize a number of characters. Most of the students can recognize a certain number of characters, especially the most basic characters, such as 你好 (How are you), 我很好 (I am very well). When they chat with their friends on various social media they only use some basic characters and when the conversation goes beyond greetings or daily conversations they will then continue the conversation using pinyin or English. Another challenge is that when the students try to retrieve information about China, most of the students go to Google, where information is limited, even though much information about China is available on Baidu. Zimbabwean students are not aware of this and very few people outside China know about Baidu. When students search for information about Chinese on Google they get limited information compared to those students who use Baidu.

Most of the students who enroll in Chinese at the Confucius Institute at the University of Zimbabwe are coming from high schools in rural areas where there is no access to the Internet. The majority of these students do not even know how to operate a computer, how to type, or how use the Internet to search for information. It is only when they begin to learn Chinese that they start using computers or phones to access information from the Internet; sometimes they learn this from friends. This is inadequate because they actually do not know how to select useful information and reliable sources. Most of the students who are beginners have not acquired enough Chinese vocabulary; thus they cannot use Chinese characters in searching for Chinese- related learning materials. Therefore, it is difficult for them to access useful Chinese websites with proper online resources. These students require proper training, through workshops or extra information technology courses, which can help them learn how to use or access Chinese websites with relevant and useful materials for learning Chinese.

Use of the Internet in learning a language requires proper guidance for it to be effective. These days anyone can post anything on the Internet, even if it is unprofessional. In this paper our argument is that learning Chinese using Internet resources should receive support and guidance from the teachers. Teachers should therefore assess the reliability of certain Internet resources and recommend those websites and learning applications which are more professional or user friendly. For instance, HANBAN already recognized the importance of the Internet in learning Chinese, thus they introduced an online learning program which can be accessed on <http://liveclass.chinesecio.com/>. This online learning website is more interactive than any other Internet learning tools because the lessons are live classes where teachers and students can interact. However, this learning tool is still unknown to students in Zimbabwe. Also, for students who are still beginners to be able to join such online live classes, a workshop on how to access the lessons is probably required. When the researchers tried to access the HANBAN online live classes it was discovered that the website appears in Chinese as shown on the following picture:



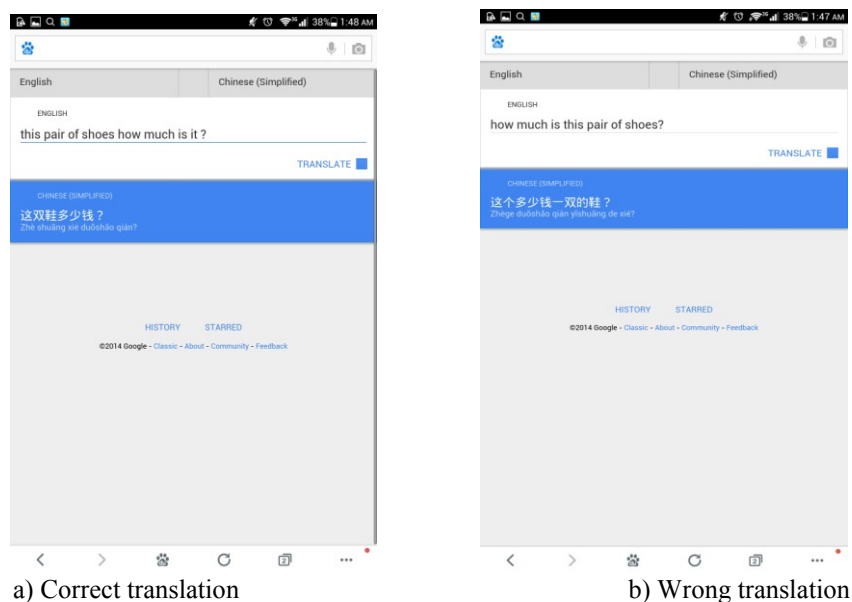
Figure 2: HANBAN online live class

Therefore, Chinese language beginners need guidance on how to change the settings from Chinese to English or how to log in. After that, students should be taught how to join the class, how to adjust the microphone settings as well as how to activate the video settings. The availability of a given resource online does not mean that anybody

can use it. Therefore, it is necessary to continuously carry out workshops with learners of Chinese. During the workshop teachers and students will have to evaluate and examine the effectiveness of various Internet learning applications and websites.

Although some students are now able to interact with native speakers of the target language, it was observed that these students are not taking the opportunity to learn other aspects of the language; rather they use these applications and other internet resources simply to accomplish their assignments or engage in basic social conversations, such as “ni chi fan le ma?” (Have you eaten?), “ni jintian zenme yang?” (How are you today?), “Ni zai gan shenme?” (What are you doing?), etc. From a broader perspective, this does not seem to be beneficial, especially in terms of improving Chinese proficiency as most of the conversations are just repeated daily without much change in vocabulary or grammar. While one can argue that through the frequent use of such simple phrases, students will be able to naturally acquire the target language; however there is no guarantee that these students will be actually able to speak the language. The purpose of learning a language goes beyond texting messages.

On Google Translate, which is a function found on Google and used by many University of Zimbabwe students to translate longer sentences and paragraphs, if the phrases are long then wrong translations are normally given. If students are not guided, they end up being confused or using wrong translations. The purpose of learning Chinese is for learners to be able to use the language free of the Internet. Although the provision of the Internet is helping in providing easy access to Chinese learning materials, it is not actually helping the students to improve their spoken Chinese and other skills, such as listening. Also, since some of the translations they get online are not grammatically correct they end up acquiring wrong grammatical expressions. Below are some pictures captured from some online Google translations showing phrases which are grammatically wrong.



**Figure 3:** Online google translations

The above two pictures shows some translations which were done online through Google translations. The picture in b) with the English sentence “how much is this pair of shoes?” is a common phrase necessary for Chinese language beginners; but the translation given is not grammatically correct. Although native speakers of Chinese can understand the meaning of this phrase, the syntax is wrong, which will end up confusing students or even leading them to the acquisition of wrong grammatical patterns. The picture in a) shows a translation which was done using the same application; the English translation was twisted slightly and not grammatically correct yet it gave the correct Chinese translation. This implies that the over dependency that the University of Zimbabwe students have on the Internet is not likely going to help them improve their Chinese proficiency. There is obviously need for guidance on how students use these online learning applications.

The use of the Internet by University of Zimbabwe students in learning Chinese seems to be leading to internet dependence syndrome. For instance, when these students are given homework, instead of reading reference books given by the teachers where they can grasp the aspects they are studying, they just post the home work to their online friends who will help them do the work. Also, they no longer try to memorize phrases or new words since can easily access these phrases and words on their smartphones whenever they want. Thus, the Internet, which is supposed to be a learning tool and source of information, has become like an “external drive” where students “store” or “save” their information and retrieve it when in need. This kind of dependence syndrome encourages laziness, hence reducing the effectiveness of the use of the Internet as a learning strategy. When students in China go shopping they just use the electronic dictionaries and Internet devices to negotiate whatever they want to buy. Students are no longer worried about internalizing the language, which they feel is time consuming; rather they are worried about getting the best applications which can help them meet their needs within the shortest possible time. For instance, when they want to do assignments they just search the topic on the Internet and they get all the answers.

Overdependence on the Internet seems not to be an effective learning method since it does not offer other metalinguistic aspects of second-language learning, such as writing and acquisition of grammar. The Chinese government introduced the Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK), which requires writing characters especially for Levels 3 to 6. As observed from the present research, the majority of students at the University of Zimbabwe are over dependent on the use of the Internet and they hardly practice writing Chinese characters. When chatting or searching for information on mobile phones and computers, they only type whatever they want or need to know. This makes it difficult when it comes to the HSK examination where they are required to write, identify grammatical errors for given phrases, and construct phrases on their own. Based on this observation, we can argue that the use of the Internet in learning Chinese seems not to be helping students to improve their Chinese proficiency. In other words, the use of the Internet is merely allowing students to temporarily escape the actual challenge they have to face in acquiring Chinese language without totally eradicating the problem. While one may praise the use of the Internet for helping students to achieve the communicative

aspect of language learning, it is however ironic that students' ability to communicate in Chinese is hardly possible without the Internet.

The Internet provides easy access to information and promotes cross-cultural communication. This could have improved the learning and acquisition of Chinese at the University of Zimbabwe Confucius Institute, however the extent to which students have actually benefited from using the Internet is still questionable. This thus calls for researchers to examine the extent to which the use of the Internet benefits students in acquiring the target language in a way which will at last free them from the dependence syndrome discussed above.

## **7. Conclusions and Recommendations**

As observed from the results above, the Internet has become an important learning tool and its impact on the acquisition of Chinese language as a second language cannot be ignored. The Internet, which is full of up-to-date information, can be a useful tool for learning second languages. On the Internet students do not only get dictionaries and links to help them study, but they can get current news, articles, magazines, movies, and music. The Internet is a rich source of information which, if used properly, can become a very powerful and useful tool for second- language learning. With the provision of the Internet, the learning of second languages should be easier and interesting and should encourage students to learn more; their Chinese should also improve from the interactions they have on various social media.

Most of the students, however, are just using Internet without much knowledge on how to effectively use it for the acquisition of Chinese. This is because students never received formal training on using the Internet for learning Chinese. Due to the fact that most of the students at the University of Zimbabwe have not received formal training in the use of computers, learning Chinese through the Internet is therefore benefiting only a few students who acquired basic skills in using computers. Furthermore, the majority of students at the University of Zimbabwe depend on those applications which can be found on English websites. The Internet has all the up-to-date information, newspapers, applications for pronunciation practice, applications for character writing and recognition, etc; however, for students to know about this they require guidance from their teachers.

We suggest that a curriculum review is required at the University of Zimbabwe. Teachers need to see the goals of the students in learning Chinese and adopt appropriate teaching methods so that learners can be able to reach their goals. As has been noted from the above discussions, some students do not know how to use the Internet to access online Chinese resources. We therefore suggest that workshops and training courses should be done to empower the students with IT skills. Learning Chinese should never be detached from IT knowledge. The world is changing, and with the introduction of new learning applications students should be in a position to search and retrieve information from the Internet on their own.

Apart from teaching students on how to use the Internet and how to find resources on the Internet, teachers also need to inform the students about reliable websites as well as trusted online dictionaries that are available. The recently introduced online learning tools, such as the HANBAN online live class, require that students learn how to register for and access the class. All this should be the role of the teachers. We insist that learning Chinese through the Internet should not be left to the students alone; rather teachers should monitor and constantly guide the students. We believe that if students are well guided, they will be able to use the Internet effectively, hence maximizing their time learning Chinese through the Internet.

Most of the students use the Internet as an external drive where they just to keep information. It shows that students understand that they can get the information from the Internet. Teachers and researchers of second languages need to guide these students in the use of the Internet in second-language acquisition as it is apparent that these students seem to lack the ability to effectively use the Internet for language acquisition. According to the New London Group (1996:61),

“The kinds of sophisticated communication skills acquired on the internet in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will seldom develop through practice alone. Students need the opportunity to step back under guidance of the teacher to critically analyze the content, coherence, organization, pragmatics, syntax and lexis of communication”.

The discussion of the results above shows that students are lacking guidance on how to effectively use the Internet for the acquisition of Chinese. With guidance from the Chinese lecturers at the University of Zimbabwe Confucius Institute, students can benefit fully from the use of the Internet and they will be able to acquire Chinese language skills the same way one may acquire second language in the target language’s environment. We recommend that students’ groups on the internet should include somebody who can help and guide them where there is need. This will help students to have systematic and well organized chats which involve language aspects ranging from low to high proficiency levels. According to the New London Group (1996: 61)

“Effective cross-cultural communication and collaboration, including making effective use of information in online networks, necessitates a high degree of critical interpretation, the instructor’s overt role thus should extend beyond narrow language items to also help students learn to critically interpret information and communication in a given social context”.

In conclusion, the research above has shown that the Internet is full of useful tools and information for second language learning and it brings the world together through social media. Students in Zimbabwe can experience Chinese culture through the Internet and can have a clear understanding without necessarily going to China to study. Teachers of second languages and of Chinese language in particular, have greater roles to play so that students can fully benefit from language learning through the Internet. Teachers need



to be up-to-date and also should undertake research to learn new teaching methods being used in developed countries. They also need to understand available new language learning sites so that they can also empower students from these third-world countries to compete with other students around the world. Chinese language teachers also need to evaluate the tools used by students in learning language through the Internet. Guidance should be given to students on how to effectively use the Internet in order to avoid the side effects that arise from over-dependence on the use of the Internet. The Internet is here to stay, so teachers and researchers of Chinese as a second language at the University of Zimbabwe need to develop more new teaching frameworks through providing Internet materials. Teachers should help students to move from overdependence on the Internet to natural acquisition of the target language. These are the aspects of second-language learning which await further research.

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