

## Engaging Students in the Online Classroom: A Case Study on Teachers of Chinese as a Foreign Language (促進學生在線課堂的參與：一項基於對外漢語教師的案例研究)

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**Abstract:** Compared to traditional face-to-face classrooms, engaging students in online Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) classroom poses unique challenges. In light of the importance of fostering student engagement for academic achievement, this case study collected data through interviews and observations with three CFL teachers to investigate their challenges and strategies in terms of enhancing student engagement in the online classroom. The results suggest that while the teachers encountered challenges in enhancing students' emotional engagement in online CFL classrooms, they valued the direct and indirect impacts of emotional engagement on language learning. Consequently, they employed various strategies, such as using multilingual resources to scaffold understanding, providing technology-enhanced constructive feedback, and increasing "personal touch", to promote online student engagement. Drawing on these insights into teachers' experiences of online student engagement, this study provides recommendations for training and professional development initiatives aimed at preparing CFL teachers for the online classroom.

**摘要：**提高學生的課堂參與度對其學業成就至關重要。與傳統的面對面課堂相比，促進學生對外漢語在綫課堂的參與面臨著特殊的挑戰。鑒於此，本案例研究結合半結構化訪談和課堂觀察，探究三位對外漢語教師促進學生參與在綫課堂時面臨的挑戰及其採取的相應策略。研究結果表明，儘管提高學生在綫課堂中的情感參與存在挑戰，但是教師重視情感參與對語言學習的直接和間接影響。同時，他們也採用各種策略促進學生參與在綫課堂，例如使用多語資源協助學生理解、提供技術強化的建設性反饋、增加“個人接觸”等。基於以上研究發現，本研究提出促進學生參與在綫課堂的相關建議，以期為對外漢語教師進行在綫教學做好準備，並為未來的教師培訓和專業發展活動提供參考。

**Keywords:** Student engagement, online classroom, challenges, strategies,

Chinese as a foreign language (CFL)

**關鍵詞：** 學生參與、在綫課堂、挑戰、策略、對外漢語教學

## 1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, there has been a growing demand for Chinese language teaching and learning all over the world (Gong et al., 2020; Gong et al., 2018). As of 2021, the Chinese language is taught in more than 180 countries and regions globally, with over 20 million learners of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) worldwide (Center for Language Education and Cooperation, 2021). Due to the unique characteristics of the Chinese language, CFL learners can encounter various challenges in learning Chinese. For instance, they need to master the different tones associated with Chinese character recognition, memorize a large number of Chinese characters, and understand the syntactic relationships in modern written and spoken Chinese (Ma et al., 2017). To address these challenges, a high degree of student engagement is necessary in the CFL learning process to enhance their learning outcome and performance (Lee & Kalyuga, 2011). Student engagement has long been topic of interest in educational research, with numerous studies conducted in traditional face-to-face classrooms (Bao et al., 2021). However, compared to offline teaching, language teachers have reported that online teaching often suffers from limited student engagement (Tarrayo et al., 2023; Vurdien, 2019).

Regardless of the instructional environments, student engagement is considered a crucial factor for students' learning and academic achievement (Fredricks et al., 2016; Rasheed et al., 2020). Specifically, engaged students are intrinsically motivated to learn, attend classes, and participate in classroom activities, making them more likely to achieve good learning performance (Bakker et al., 2015). Meanwhile, language learning emphasizes active behavior and encourages students to engage in authentic communication in the target language context (Lightbown et al., 1993; Savignon, 2018). Thus, student engagement is of great importance in online CFL classrooms.

Previous studies have suggested strategies that teachers use to engage students in the context of traditional classrooms (e.g., Bond et al., 2012; Hawtrey, 2007), while only a few have specifically addressed strategies to promote student engagement in online classrooms (e.g., Abou-Khalil et al., 2021). Indeed, engaging students in online classrooms is often more challenging for teachers compared to traditional face-to-face classrooms due to constraints such as time, internet connections, and the lack of physical contact (Bao et al., 2021; Gillett-Swan, 2017; Hew, 2016). Therefore, further research is needed to explore how language teachers can effectively engage students online, especially in the context of CFL classrooms. This case study presents the experiences of three teachers in promoting student engagement in online CFL classrooms. By investigating the challenges and strategies related to engaging students in online CFL classrooms from the participants, this study aims to provide insights for CFL teachers facing similar dilemmas and offer practical implications for online CFL teaching and learning.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Challenges and strategies regarding online CFL teaching

Even though technological enhancement has benefited language teaching, there are a variety of challenges that teachers face when teaching CFL online (Zhang, 2020). These include common challenges in other disciplines, such as limited online interaction (Alsheikhidris, 2020; Stickler & Shi, 2013), little experience in online teaching (Lin & Zheng, 2015), lack of support and training in the use of technology (Gong, Fan, & Wang, 2021; Wang, 2023), but also the difficulties of teaching CFL online in general (Xu et al., 2021; Zhang, 2020; Zhang, 2017).

In a review of empirical research on teaching foreign languages online, Zhang (2014) reported the impact of the tonal features of Mandarin Chinese itself on online CFL teaching and pointed out that teaching Chinese online was inherently more challenging than teaching a phonetic, non-tonal language. Stickler and Shi (2013) also found that CFL teachers might not be able to recognize students' comprehension difficulties in a timely manner due to the lack of facial expressions in online classrooms, and the similarity between the second tone in Putonghua and the questioning tone in English could lead to errors easily when students spoke Chinese. Such a situation affected the communication between teachers and students as well as further interaction, making it difficult for CFL teachers to give proper language modeling and instruction through online conversations to further develop students' Chinese speaking skills (Alsheikhidris, 2020). In addition, as noted by Zhang (2020), online CFL classrooms also hinder teachers from observing students' handwriting and demonstrating the strokes of Chinese characters to students through handwriting, which makes it challenging for teachers to know and guide students' Chinese character development. Given the above difficulties of teaching CFL online, teachers need to make efforts to enhance online interactions and develop students' language skills in Chinese.

To overcome these challenges and enhance teaching effectiveness, a range of strategies for online CFL teaching have been proposed. For example, breaking down language tasks and providing additional digital scaffolding materials (e.g., meanings of difficult words, and multimedia resources) are considered useful in enhancing online interactions and students' understanding (Chen, 2021). Similarly, Stickler and Shi (2013) suggested that CFL teachers could increase the proportion of using English appropriately in online classrooms to promote students' understanding of the teacher's discourse, especially when teaching difficult grammar rules. In terms of enhancing students' Chinese speaking skills, verbal repetition and feedback were found to be effective in improving the accuracy of their L2 production (Yang & Lin, 2020). It may ensure that students can get enough information in case of an unstable network and help them to correct their pronunciation. CFL teachers are also encouraged to adopt technology-enhanced pedagogical tools in online CFL teaching, such as the Chinese characters teaching model relying on multimedia and mobile applications (Zhan & Cheng, 2014), and online grammar modules designed following multimedia design principles (Zhang, 2017). Overall, faced with the challenges posed by the online context for CFL teaching, teachers tend to employ

different strategies to address the challenges and achieve their teaching goals. Yet, students are more likely to disengage rather than find new learning strategies when facing the difficulties of learning Chinese online, as they have more freedom to withdraw in an online classroom (Bao et al., 2021; Tseng, Lin, & Chen, 2018).

In the context of online CFL teaching, previous studies have focused on some factors related to student engagement, such as teachers' self-efficacy (Bao et al., 2021), students' learning performance (Fan & Tian, 2022), and students' motivation (Jiang & Xie, 2022). However, little research has been conducted to date on how to promote student engagement in online CFL classrooms. Given the importance of student engagement to successful language learning, this issue needs more attention from educational stakeholders.

## 2.2 Enhancing student engagement in language education

In the field of language education, Hiver et al. (2020) defined student engagement as the extent to which students actively participate in language learning tasks and goal-directed psychological and physiological activities. Student engagement is generally understood to encompass three dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). Previous studies have shown that this three-dimension conceptualization of learner engagement has been widely used in studies on second language acquisition (SLA) (e.g., Ellis, 2010; Sulis, 2022; Zhang, 2022). Therefore, the present study adopted these three dimensions to guide the data analysis related to engaging students in online CFL classrooms.

Behavioral engagement is often described as visible or measurable behaviors that engage students in teaching (Fredricks et al., 2004). Examples of behavioral engagement in SLA include learners' voluntary speech, initiating interactions, time spent on the task, the amount of semantic content produced in the task, and persistence in the task without assistance or guidance (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). Regarding emotional engagement, language education researchers often focus on students' emotional responses when engaging in language activities or tasks in the target language (Hiver et al., 2021). Cognitive engagement mainly refers to learners' mental effort and mental activity in the learning process (Hiver et al., 2021), emphasizing that students have their own learning goals and can understand the importance of education. In language classrooms, both verbal interactions (e.g., exchanging ideas or providing feedback) and nonverbal communication (e.g., body language) are recognized as critical indicators of cognitive engagement (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012; Hiver et al., 2021). Notably, emotional engagement is the most important driver of student engagement because students' subjective attitudes or perceptions in the classroom or in language-related tasks directly or indirectly affect other dimensions of engagement (Dao, 2021; Henry & Thorsen, 2020).

After the COVID-19 leads to a shift to online teaching and learning, research focusing on online language teaching has explored the role of teachers in fostering student engagement in the online language classroom. For instance, teacher support is found to be able to promote student engagement in the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) online (Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2022). Similarly, Luan et al. (2020) revealed a positive relationship between teacher support and behavioral engagement in online EFL

classrooms. Moreover, Mihai et al. (2022) pointed out that teacher-student interaction was also an important factor in supporting the engagement of EFL learners in online classrooms, which means that more online interactive tasks should be designed by EFL teachers. Previous studies emphasize that language teachers can engage students in the online language classroom by providing support and enhancing interactions. In line with this, some studies have further suggested strategies for language teachers who teach online, looking at aspects such as feedback and communication (e.g., Tanis, 2020; Moore, 2018).

To engage students in online language classrooms, teachers are encouraged to provide students with feedback on their learning performance, since feedback is usually considered one of the effective means to create interaction in the online context (Gaytan, 2005). Specifically, Tanis (2020) found that providing students with constructive written or audio feedback was essential to keep them engaged in the online language classroom. At the same time, constructive feedback should be timely and clear, encouraging students and containing appropriate suggestions for improvement (Hamid & Mahmood, 2010). In addition to feedback, timely communication by teachers also helps engage students and bridge the distance between online teaching and learning (Moore, 2018). There are several technology-assisted approaches that can be adopted to enhance teacher-student communication or encourage cross-cultural communication when teaching foreign languages online (Hiver et al., 2021), such as email and video calls (Tanis, 2020), and authentic social media (Henry & Thorsen, 2020). Although these technologies are generally used outside of the classroom, Mercer (2019) pointed out that these could promote students' meaningful use of the target language and increase student engagement in language learning. Notably, due to geographic isolation, online communication between teachers and students may be one of the most important ways for teachers to know about their students. Thus, it may also allow teachers to identify disengaged learners so that targeted interventions can be made to motivate students in online language learning (Hiver et al., 2021).

The above studies emphasize the important role of teachers in fostering student engagement in online language classrooms, and they also provide some pedagogical implications for engaging students. However, most of them have been conducted in the context of EFL teaching and few studies have focused on the setting of online CFL classrooms. Thus, these experiences and approaches may not be applicable to CFL teachers in promoting student engagement in online classrooms. With this in mind, the present research aims to address the following two questions:

- RQ1: What challenges did CFL teachers encounter in engaging students in online classrooms?
- RQ2: How did CFL teachers address these challenges in online classrooms?

### 3. Methodology

A case study approach is adopted in the present study since it is grounded in real-life situations, offers an insightful and comprehensive account of teachers' personal experiences and teaching practices, and is commonly suitable in educational research

(Merriam, 1998).

### 3.1 Participants

To identify participants who exemplify the characteristics of interest in this study, snowball sampling was adopted for participant recruitment (Merriam, 1998). The participants were required to be CFL teachers and have experience in teaching CFL online. Three teachers - Ms. Yu, Mr. Zhao, and Ms. Wang, who taught Chinese as a foreign language were recruited to participate in this study. The researchers first approached Ms. Wang, an experienced CFL teacher, who then recommended Ms. Yu and Mr. Zhao as potential participants. The participants were affiliated with Confucius Institutes, which are language and culture promotion projects initiated by the Chinese government (Zhao & Huang, 2010). All participants were native speakers of Chinese and possessed experience with online CFL teaching, with variations in their CFL teaching experience. In addition, as shown in Table 1, the participants exhibited diverse demographic characteristics, including gender, language background, and prior experience, thereby contributing to the study's richness by offering multiple perspectives.

**Table 1 Participants' profiles**

Name	Gender	Language background	CFL teaching experience	Work experience	Employment status
Ms. Yu	Female	Putonghua, English	6 years	Chinese language teacher at a Chinese university's international college	Volunteer teacher at a university's Confucius Institute
Ms. Wang	Female	Putonghua, English	5 years	No	Volunteer teacher at a university's Confucius Institute
Mr. Zhao	Male	Putonghua, English, Portuguese	3 years	No	Online teacher at a university's Confucius Institute

Note: All names are pseudonyms.

### 3.2 Data collection

This study was conducted to explore the challenges and strategies of CFL teachers to engage students in online classrooms. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data as interviews have the advantage of being focused, authentic, and in-depth, allowing researchers to delve into specific topics without being susceptible to respondent fatigue (Bryman, 2016). The researcher prepared a list of questions to guide the interviews, and participants were encouraged to comment on the topic by expressing any opinions, observations, associations, or examples related to the dominant theme of the conversation.

To introduce the topic, the three participants were asked about the level of student engagement in their online CFL classrooms and their perceptions and expectations of student engagement. They were also asked to share their perceptions of online teaching by comparing offline and online teaching, which may be related to the strategies they chose to engage students online. A further line of inquiry focused on the participants' perceptions of possible ways to enhance student engagement in online CFL classrooms. They were asked about specific techniques or strategies they use in this regard. A final question addressed their' overall feelings/opinions about facilitating student engagement in online CFL classrooms, reflecting the challenges they encountered in this process.

The interview questions were first reviewed and assessed by an expert and a teacher of Chinese as a foreign language. These questions, topics, and interview techniques were then pilot-tested with two CFL teachers, and the interview designs were modified accordingly. Before the interview started, each participant was informed about the process and possible risks of the study and signed the informed consent form with their electronic signature. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted online. In addition, three semi-structured interviews were conducted in Putonghua, the participant's first language, to minimize language barriers. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

In addition, by observing some online classes of the participants with their permission, field notes were also taken to provide a comprehensive and contextualized account of how teachers enhance student engagement in online classes (Wolfinger, 2002). The field notes were descriptive, providing more detailed accounts of student engagement in online classes and enriching the interpretation of the research questions, given that some of the strategies chosen and used may not be fully reflected in the interviews.

### 3.3 Data analysis

According to Gibbs (2007), qualitative data analysis includes data processing and data interpretation. In the process of data processing and interpretation, this study adopted the six strategies suggested by Creswell (2003) for qualitative research data analysis, which are: 1) organizing and preparing the data for analysis; 2) reading all the data through; 3) starting detailed analysis with a coding process; 4) using coding to generate a small number of themes or categories; 5) advancing how the description and themes will be represented in the qualitative narrative; and 6) making an interpretation of the data.

Interviews and classroom videos for this study were conducted during the fall and winter of 2022. The second author first transcribed the qualitative material collected through interviews and observations into texts and collated, categorized, and screened the material. Then, the three authors reviewed all the interview transcripts and field notes three times to identify the sections of text relevant to the research questions and coded them using the original terms. The coding was conducted according to the three dimensions of student engagement: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Within each dimension, the authors compiled the corresponding excerpts from all interviews and then coded and recorded the excerpts under each theme to produce descriptive codes. Similar codes were grouped together to create analytic categories. The initial coding of the analytic

categories was then compared between the participants to find overlapping ideas and evidence and to cross-validate the resulting categories. Finally, this study used a narrative passage to convey the findings of the analysis. Responses were cited, described, compared, interpreted, and analyzed to answer this study's research questions systematically.

Throughout the data analysis process, annotations and memos were used to record immediate comments and reflections on the data and assist in coding and categorizing the data (Maxwell, 2012). In addition, to ensure the accuracy of the data and the credibility of the subsequent analysis, the researcher conducted the member-checking procedure (Birt et al., 2016) by presenting the raw data to the participants and sharing a summary of the findings. One participant made minor annotations, and the other two made no comments.

## **4. Findings**

After analyzing all the data collected from the three participants, the findings revealed various challenges they encountered in terms of enhancing student engagement in online CFL classrooms. To address the challenges, the participants adopted different strategies before, during, or after class to engage students in the online classroom. The strategies derived from the participants' intention to "test the waters", as was indicated in the interview accounts. These step-by-step strategies proved useful in effectively engaging students in online CFL classrooms.

### **4.1 Using multilingual resources to scaffold students' understanding**

All participants reported that the first thing they became aware of during online teaching was the communication barrier with students. In traditional face-to-face classrooms, they would predominantly use Chinese as the medium of instruction, immersing students in a sole Chinese-speaking environment. When observing students becoming confused, they could use body language or facial expressions to assist, and peer-to-peer communication also proved effective in helping them understand the teacher's instructional words. The participants stated that using the target language for instruction is a common practice in CFL teaching, which can increase students' Chinese vocabulary and effectively promote their listening comprehension. However, the same pedagogical approaches seemed to have more drawbacks when applied in the online environment.

In online CFL classrooms, teacher-student interactions primarily rely on digital audio. For instance, Ms. Yu mentioned that without some non-verbal expressions and gestures, communication looked like a "listening test". Because Chinese is a tonal language, foreign students often find it challenging to differentiate and comprehend Chinese characters based on tones (Zhang, 2014), let alone pronounce the words accurately (Stickler & Shi, 2013). Meanwhile, objective contextual factors, such as internet lag and environmental noise, also affected the fluency and accuracy of online class audio. In this situation, mutual understanding between teachers and students was relatively hindered, influencing the progress of teaching. For instance, when Ms. Wang asked questions in the online classroom, students always requested her to repeat the questions one or two times for needing more time and prompts to think about. Although Ms. Wang could slow down



the teaching pace, she was concerned that such situations might affect the opportunities and confidence of students to engage in online language learning. Similarly, in one online class delivered by Ms. Yu, a student's misinterpretation of instructional words affected their performance in answering questions:

[1] Ms. Yu asked the students, “Do you like raising animals? (literally in Chinese: 你喜歡養動物嗎? )” One student volunteered to answer, but he heard “raise (literally in Chinese: 養yang3)” as “sheep (literally in Chinese: 羊 yang2)” and replied, “I don't like sheep; I like dogs. (literally in Chinese: 我不喜歡羊, 我喜歡狗。)” (Field note)

Even though this student provided the correct answer after Ms. Yu repeated and explained the question, he subsequently “became noticeably silent” for the rest of the class. The student's silence could be related to a lack of success after misinterpreting Ms. Yu's instructional questions. In the same vein, Ms. Wang, an experienced CFL teacher, also mentioned that the students mostly reduced their online class engagement because of no “sense of success”, while they actively participated in learning originally.

In response to this situation, the participants emphasized the importance of teacher support. They believed that students in online CFL classes were “isolated” (Mr. Zhao), and thus it was necessary for teachers to provide scaffolding for their online learning, ensuring that students could understand the class content and have equal opportunities to participate in online classes. A common strategy was to introduce multilingual resources during online teaching. Specifically, the participants adapted and supplemented teaching slides in online CFL teaching, increasing the proportion of English explanations in the class to help students understand the content. Ms. Wang described how she did this:

[2] I added Hanyu Pinyin (Chinese romanization system) next to Chinese characters, and some difficult words even have English explanations. In addition, to ensure that students understand the requirements of classroom activities and homework, I often explain to them in English. (Ms. Wang)

The participants usually used English in online CFL classes to enhance students' understanding, because the students came from different countries and had a certain level of English proficiency (Gong, Gao, Li, & Xue, 2021; Yang & Gong, 2023). However, in addition to English, they may also need to choose other appropriate linguistic resources for classroom interactions according to the student's language background, as some of them may not know English. For example, Mr. Zhao scaffolded his Brazil students in Portuguese in his online classes:

[3] When teaching online, I often use their native language for instruction, and gradually increase the use of Chinese. After students reach the advanced level, the use of Chinese and Portuguese in one class is about 50% each. I usually also open a Word document during class and write down important content in both Chinese and Portuguese. (Mr. Zhao)

According to participants' experiences, such support was very helpful for students with a lower level of Chinese proficiency, since it could facilitate them to reduce their anxiety in learning Chinese. Previous research has already demonstrated that teacher support is often considered to enhance student behavioral engagement in online language classes (Luan et al., 2020). Providing digital scaffolding materials has also been found to enhance interaction online and facilitate students' understanding (Chen, 2021). Therefore, this strategy can help students understand course content, keep up with the class, and have more opportunities to participate in online language learning tasks, thereby improving their behavioral engagement in online CFL classes. Additionally, the participants believed that this could facilitate students to successfully complete online language learning tasks. The strategy could finally create a positive learning experience for students and enhance their emotional engagement (Hiver et al., 2021).

#### **4.2 Providing technology-enhanced constructive feedback to engage students emotionally and cognitively**

Similar to the above situation, all three participants were concerned that students might experience reluctance and subsequently disengage from online CFL learning. Therefore, they chose to provide more positive feedback in online classes at the beginning. Ms. Yu believed that encouraging students to practice language skills through speaking in class was beneficial. As language learners, students need to build their confidence in the target language for effective communication. Positive feedback from teachers can increase their confidence and make the learning experience more enjoyable, further effectively promoting their emotional engagement (Hiver et al., 2021). Ms. Wang mentioned the positive role of encouraging students, and she always praised students' achievements in her online classes:

[4] When I teach, I try to encourage my students, no matter how they are doing, specifically by telling them it's great or excellent! This makes the students feel good, and they are more willing to respond to me in the online classroom or participate more actively in other activities. (Ms. Wang)

While positive feedback can motivate students to learn, the participants emphasize that corrective feedback should not be overlooked in online classes. Corrective feedback was considered an important way to improve students' Chinese language skills. Providing solely positive feedback may lead students to feel "overconfident" and they may think that not much effort to learn is needed. At the same time, students usually have more freedom to disengage from learning in virtual classrooms themselves (Bao et al., 2021). For example, Mr. Zhao found that while "abundant" praise increased his students' willingness to attend online classes, it also led to slow progress. Because students in such situations often fail to realize the importance of certain learning tasks and only participate on a surface level.

To address this issue, all participants reported to have developed a feedback template, which includes two components: positive comments, and corrective feedback on areas for improvement, such as pronunciation and grammar. Previous research has shown that feedback provided by teachers can effectively enhance student engagement in online language classes, especially when the feedback is constructive (Gaytan, 2005; Tanis, 2020).

Following the definition proposed by Hamid & Mahmood (2010), the feedback template that participants used to engage students in the online classroom is constructive feedback. Specifically, Ms. Yu provided constructive feedback to students like this:

[5] A student used the idiom “人山人海 (literally in Chinese: a sea of people)” when describing a tourist attraction she visited, and Ms. Yu said, “Fantastic! You used the new idiom we just learned to describe a large crowd, and you placed it correctly. If you could pronounce the tone of ‘海 (sea)’ more accurately, it would be perfect! This is a third tone. Could you try to say it again?” (Field note about Ms. Yu)

In addition to the verbal feedback, the participants in online CFL teaching also utilized digital technologies to provide constructive feedback to students. During online teaching, teachers might not have enough time to converse with each student, and using digital technologies to provide feedback both in and outside the classroom was a critical approach. For example, Ms. Wang provided audio feedback for her students’ recording assignments:

[6] I will play back their recordings on the computer, then pause at different points and provide verbal feedback. I record the whole process with my phone and then send the audio feedback to each student. Generally, I will praise the good parts of what they said, and then specifically point out where the vocabulary or pronunciation is not quite accurate, and how to improve. (Interview with Ms. Wang)

Compared to directly telling students, this digital feedback allowed students to replay and study repeatedly, which was particularly beneficial for students to imitate correct Chinese discourse. Similarly, Ms. Yu also sent written encouragement and guidance to his students in Zoom breakout rooms for their discussion activities. This pedagogical approach she used could assist students in a timely manner without interrupting their discussions. Overall, providing technology-enhanced constructive feedback not only boosted students’ confidence in learning Chinese and promoted their emotional engagement, but also stimulated their thinking and cognitive engagement in online CFL classrooms (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012).

### **4.3 Increasing “personal touch” to engage students emotionally and culturally**

Regarding engaging students in online CFL classrooms, all participants identified another major challenge: a lack of emotional connection. They believed that if teachers and students had established a strong emotional bond from the previous face-to-face classes, students would be happier and more willing to participate in online classes, showing a high level of emotional engagement. However, in most cases, students and teachers in online language courses did not have the opportunity to meet in person, making it difficult to form the emotional connection. At the same time, considering “foreigner privacy” and students’ feelings, the participants did not require students to turn on their webcams during online classes. Therefore, it was more challenging for teachers and students to know each other in

the online CFL classroom. As Ms. Yu observed, online classrooms tended to be teacher-centered, with the teacher talking most and students speaking with little initiative. In addition, Ms. Wang described how the lack of an emotional connection affected the atmosphere in her online classes:

[7] There was a class that I used to teach offline, and then I switched to an online class. I was quite familiar with the class and had a good emotional build-up, so the class had a good online learning atmosphere. For a class that was taught online from the beginning, we were not familiar with each other, and sometimes there would be awkward moments, like when I asked a question, and nobody answered. (Interview with Ms. Wang)

In such a situation, the atmosphere in the class was more subdued, and students might become more silent and distant from the teacher. In traditional face-to-face classrooms, the participants often have the opportunity to chat with students before and after class, or even during breaks, to bridge the gap between them and students. However, all speech in online classrooms is public and recorded, making it unsuitable for casual conversations unrelated to the course content. In this regard, participants emphasized the need to increase “personal touch” before and after class. For example, Mr. Zhao often interacted with students on social media platforms during his free time:

[8] When I have time, I often chat with them privately, asking them how their recent learning was going, whether they could keep up with my teaching pace, or if they had any questions about their studies. They can feel that the teacher cares about them, and they will be more active in class. (Interview with Mr. Zhao)

He believed that this way allowed students to feel cared for and valued, thereby promoting their emotional engagement in online classrooms. Using authentic social media to enhance teacher-student communication could bring online teaching and learning closer together (Moore, 1997; Henry & Thorsen, 2020). Additionally, teacher-student communication allowed teachers to better understand students’ learning situations and adjust their teaching. Ms. Wang found that when teachers “met the learning needs of students”, students might become more aware of the importance of tasks, increasing their cognitive engagement in online classrooms (Hiver et al., 2021).

Another benefit of increasing “personal touch” is that it brings students closer to the Chinese language, facilitating cross-cultural communication (Hiver et al., 2021). Participants believed that CFL teachers represented not only teachers but also Chinese people and Chinese culture for students. Ms. Yu stated that getting in touch with students helped motivate them to learn Chinese:

[9] If they had a good relationship with the Chinese teacher, they would try harder to learn Chinese in order to communicate further with the teacher. Moreover, in the process of communicating with the teacher, students might have become interested in certain aspects of Chinese culture, making them more proactive in learning Chinese. (Interview with Ms. Yu)

This might also serve as a way to compensate for experiences that are harder to replicate online. All participants mentioned that they often organized Chinese cultural experience activities during face-to-face teaching, such as calligraphy or paper cutting, which were challenging to do online. Therefore, in online classrooms, CFL teachers had to strengthen contact with students, bridging the gap between students and teachers, as well as between students and the Chinese language. This could help students set their own learning goals and continue to engage in learning Chinese, enhancing their cognitive engagement (Hiver et al., 2021). Additionally, contact and communication with students also helped teachers identify disengaged learners and employ targeted strategies to engage them in online CFL classrooms.

## 5. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate challenges and strategies for promoting student engagement in online CFL classrooms by examining the experiences of three CFL teachers through semi-structured interviews and observed field notes. Consistent with existing research (Bao et al., 2021; Gillett-Swan, 2017; Hew, 2016), this study found that teachers faced greater challenges engaging students in online courses than traditional ones. The participants generally expressed low expectations for student engagement in online classes due to the non-obligatory nature of the classes and the lack of engaging elements that could entice students to remain actively involved. One major challenge identified by the participants was the absence of emotional connection, which significantly influenced the learning atmosphere in online CFL classrooms. As a result, the participants observed a noticeable decline in students' motivation to participate in speaking activities during online classes. Since language learning emphasizes active behaviors that encourage students to engage in authentic communication within the target language context (Lightbown et al., 1993; Savignon, 2018), this situation undoubtedly hampers students' learning in online language classrooms.

To address the challenges, the participants shared strategies that extended beyond lesson preparation and classroom sessions, and could also be implemented outside of the classroom. These strategies included offering more multilingual resources, providing technology-enhanced constructive feedback, and increasing "personal touch" to enhance students' engagement in the online CFL classroom. These strategies are consistent with the suggestions from previous studies (e.g., Luan et al., 2020; Sadoughi & Hejazi, 2022; Mihai et al. 2022) that emphasize the importance of enhancing interactions and providing various forms of support. Most importantly, regardless of student differences, the participants emphasized the need for online CFL classes to offer increased support and encouragement, enhance students' emotional experience of online learning, and recognize the direct and indirect impacts of emotional engagement on language learning (Dao, 2021; Henry & Thorsen, 2020).

The findings regarding the challenges faced by CFL teachers in online teaching can help educational institutions better understand and address the difficulties encountered in online CFL instruction. On one hand, CFL teachers recognized that the difficulties in learning Chinese might be more pronounced for CFL learners in the online context and that

teachers needed to provide comprehensive support for online Chinese language learning. Therefore, schools and institutes should increase opportunities for CFL teachers to interact with students during online teaching (e.g., organize online workshops; and create class groups on social media), fostering closer connections between CFL teachers and students and enhancing their understanding of students' needs. On the other hand, the lower requirements and expectations for student engagement in online CFL classrooms may lead to students not taking online learning seriously and being more inclined to disengage from the online classroom. Thus, CFL teachers should establish clear rules for the online classroom to facilitate students' engagement in the learning process (e.g., ask students to turn on their cameras; no eating or drinking during class). Meanwhile, there is no standardized benchmark for the acceptable degree of decline in student online engagement, as it depends on the individual CFL teacher's assessment, making it challenging to ensure the effectiveness of online teaching. Considering that online education will continue to evolve, schools and institutes can conduct surveys and scientific evaluations based on the issues raised by the teachers, carefully considering how to make online language teaching meaningful and effective, and establishing clear and consistent standards for intended teaching objectives.

In terms of strategies to engage students in online classrooms, CFL teachers emphasized the importance of a gradual and adaptive approach. Instructions marked by the gradual increase of Chinese language input, as well as tasks catering to students' multilingual backgrounds and emotional needs, proved effective in enhancing student engagement in online classrooms. However, these strategies alone may not fully address the challenges they encountered. Therefore, CFL teachers should reflect on how to actively engage students in online CFL classrooms, while educational institutions should provide appropriate training and support (e.g., offering videos or lectures showcasing successful online CFL classes). CFL teachers can benefit from more training on information and communication technologies (ICT) that provides effective strategies for integrating digital tools into online language teaching, fostering interactive and engaging learning environments. Promoting excellent online teaching experiences is also vital to CFL teachers' professional development, rather than simply training them to use online teaching platforms (Gong, Fan, & Wang, 2021).

## 6. Conclusion

This study investigated three CFL teachers and the challenges and strategies in terms of engaging students in online classrooms. Analysis of the interviews and observation notes from the online classroom revealed some challenges in engaging students in online CFL classrooms, one of them was the lack of emotional connection. In terms of the strategies, the participants felt that using multilingual resources, providing technology-enhanced constructive feedback, and increasing "personal touch" were crucial and helpful to increase student engagement in the online context. Notably, while CFL teachers were committed to students' behavioral use of the target language, they were equally aware of the dominant role of emotional engagement, focusing on engaging students emotionally to support their initiative and continuity in learning Chinese online.

There are some limitations in this study. First, at the time of the survey, most of the participants in this study had resumed offline teaching or adopted a mixed mode of online and offline instruction due to different local policies in and after COVID-19. The change may have resulted in their lack of clear recollection of online teaching and their inability to accurately reflect on the situation at that time. Another important limitation of this study is that only semi-structured interviews with teachers and classroom observations were used to collect data, which may not be sufficient to provide a holistic picture of student engagement. Thus, the participants' opinions and classroom observations cannot guarantee the effectiveness of their strategies. In this regard, future studies on student engagement should include both students and teachers to explore their challenges and strategies for learning or teaching CFL online and to identify the differences in their perceptions and practices. In addition, this study only investigated the situation of CFL teachers, and any generalization of the findings to other language teachers should be undertaken with caution. Given that the teaching and learning of each language has their own characteristics, other language education researchers should conduct research about promoting student engagement in the context of the classrooms of a particular language, which should be a field of their interest and has not yet been well investigated.

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