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## **Students' Willingness to Communicate in the Online Synchronous One-on-One Foreign Language Classroom**

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### **Abstract**

The one-on-one session, a typical component of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) courses, transitioned to an online format during the COVID-19 pandemic, utilizing Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (SCMC). Existing literature highlights the advantages of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) instruction over traditional face-to-face methods in augmenting learning outcomes and experiences, with SCMC particularly effective in enhancing oral proficiency. However, scant attention has been paid to whether this relative advantage of SCMC extends to bolstering students' Willingness to Communicate (WTC). This study, therefore, investigates the aforementioned question within the context of the one-on-one session component of college-level CFL courses. Six college students enrolled in an elementary Chinese course in the U.S. participated in this research. Qualitative data were gathered through structured interviews, during which the participants articulated their perceived WTC within both instructional modes, alongside their evaluations of four specific factors: anxiety, sense of control, familiarity, and environment. The results revealed that students had mixed feelings regarding the influence of SCMC on their WTC, shedding light on the convenience associated with the online modality, as well as the efficacy and enriched interpersonal engagement of the in-person alternative. Concerning the four specific factors, participants perceived a higher sense of control during SCMC interactions, while in-person sessions garnered appreciation for their sense of familiarity and conducive environment. Responses pertaining to anxiety displayed a divergence of opinions. The paper concludes by delineating implications for future research and offering pedagogical suggestions suited to the post-pandemic educational landscape.

### **Keywords**

Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL), One-on-one session, Post-COVID-19, Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (SCMC), Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

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## 1. Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak amidst the spring of 2020, a remarkable 84% of post-secondary students in the U.S. experienced the migration of at least some, if not all, of their classes to online instruction (Cameron, 2021), and language education was not an exception. Certain educators have recognized the inherent value of online course delivery, perceiving it as a more potent and engaging approach to language pedagogy, indicative of an inexorable progression towards harnessing technology for education facilitation. Thus, there exists a growing willingness among some educators to embrace it even in the post-pandemic era (Jin et al., 2021). Nevertheless, a substantial number of academics have voiced reservations regarding its less-than-desirable learning outcomes, arguing that in-person interaction remains indispensable (Moser et al., 2021). In a survey that examines the perceptions of 163 undergraduate students toward online language courses, the respondents reported diminished efficacy in class, heightened susceptibility to distractions, and reduced motivation to study, compared with the on-campus, in-person experience they once relished (Armstrong et al., 2022). Concurrent with the trend of resuming face-to-face instruction in the fall of 2021, language courses have progressively restarted being offered in physical classrooms, enabling students to once again derive benefits from face-to-face interaction with teachers and peers for language learning and practice.

That being said, the episode of emergency remote instruction has left a legacy for educators—they have grown more resourceful and proficient in integrating online tools to elevate the overall quality of their teaching in the post-pandemic era. Platforms such as course websites, blogs, online bulletin boards, and online games, while already acknowledged and utilized by certain instructors prior to the pandemic, have assumed an increasingly pivotal role in facilitating and enriching the teaching, management, interaction, and assessment within language courses. This mode of communication is referred to as Asynchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (ACMC), a term defined by Abrams (2003) as the delayed information exchange between two communicating parties who need not be present simultaneously. Moreover, the shift to remote instruction has also significantly propelled the adoption of tools that enable Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (SCMC), which allows instantaneous interaction among participants who are simultaneously present (Abrams, 2003). Typical SCMC tools include video-conferencing platforms like Zoom. These real-time remote teaching techniques were suddenly demystified as emergency instructional measures and have since become familiar terrain for the majority of language educators. Admittedly, as previously mentioned, such methods present challenges in sustaining student engagement, fostering learning communities, and cultivating collective learning experiences (Lomicka, 2020), thereby relinquishing their dominance to in-person communication in language courses during the post-pandemic era. However, with the diverse pedagogical insights accumulated up to the present, it would be prudent to reassess the appropriate role that the SCMC modality might assume in the framework of a language course, rather than hastily discarding it in favor of exclusive adherence to traditional in-person instruction. If demonstrated to be effective to some extent and/or in certain contexts in the post-pandemic era, SCMC could potentially contribute its distinctive value to enhancing students' learning experiences and outcomes.

A typical college-level Chinese course in the U.S. incorporates lectures for introducing new grammar and vocabulary, along with drill sections designed to reinforce the application of acquired language content through focused practice. These two components are now primarily conducted in physical classrooms, along with other content courses, as campuses return to full operation. Additionally, there exists a third component: one-on-one sessions, which typically involve one instructor or tutor collaborating with one student, aiming to foster spontaneous conversations and substantial language output from the student. Given its one-on-one nature, its mode of instruction does not have to address the need for peer interaction, a facet that might be better facilitated in a face-to-face setting. From a logistical perspective, one-on-one sessions generally have shorter durations, entail less preparation, and require fewer sophisticated technological features (e.g., those facilitating group discussions), which also grants

significant flexibility in terms of instructional setup. Furthermore, many existing one-on-one sessions are designed to connect U.S.-based Chinese learners with proficient native-speaking tutors located in the Chinese Mainland or Taiwan, thereby offering students diverse and authentic learning exposure. In scenarios like these, SCMC might even emerge as the only feasible option. Taking all these factors into consideration, it becomes imperative for Chinese educators to deliberate on whether transitioning one-on-one sessions back to in-person settings, akin to the shift observed in lectures or drill sections, is genuinely necessary or advantageous.

Hence, this study aims to investigate the advantages and drawbacks that the SCMC mode may present in the context of one-on-one sessions of a Chinese language course compared to its in-person counterpart. It is observed that students often have relatively limited chances to speak in one-to-many sessions, and one-on-one sessions are specifically designed to compensate for this constraint, providing a platform for students to generate output and even actively lead conversations with their teachers. Therefore, in this current study, we have selected a specific yet meaningful dimension to assess the potential benefits of SCMC in providing one-on-one sessions: Willingness to Communicate (WTC). Originally coined to denote “the probability of engaging in communication when free to choose to do so” among first language speakers (McCroskey & Baer, 1985), this term has been extended to encompass the realms of second and foreign language acquisition, defined as “a readiness to enter a discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons using L2” (MacIntyre et al., 1998). To maximize the benefits of one-on-one sessions, it is meaningful to scrutinize the degree to which students are willing to communicate in different settings, whether in-person or via SCMC, before deciding which approach to adopt.

Therefore, this paper compares the levels of WTC perceived by students enrolled in a college-level Chinese language course in the U.S. while participating in face-to-face one-on-one sessions and SCMC-based one-on-one sessions. It first reviews pertinent literature concerning the employment of SCMC in language learning and the notion of students’ WTC as an educational construct. Subsequently, it outlines the qualitative methodologies used to examine the potentially varying levels of students’ WTC in these two settings. This is followed by the introduction of the results and our corresponding interpretations, as well as the presentation of relevant pedagogical recommendations. The paper concludes by addressing limitations and suggesting potential directions for future research.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (SCMC)**

While initially discussed in non-educational contexts, CMC has progressively found application in language learning settings and has received significant scholarly attention in the field of second language acquisition. According to Chun (2007), CMC stands among the two most prevalent subjects in top Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) journals. With technological advancements, this interest appears to be continuing to grow (Lin, 2015).

Previous research has yielded various affirmative findings that advocate for the integration of CMC into Foreign Language (FL) instruction. However, this research focus has not been evenly distributed across students’ language skills. In Lin’s (2015) meta-analysis of empirical studies on CMC, productive skills (i.e., writing and speaking) have undergone substantially more investigation than receptive skills (i.e., reading and listening). Furthermore, based on their effect sizes, it seems that productive skills have gained more pronounced benefits from the utilization of CMC. Lin (2015) hypothesized that this discrepancy could be attributed to the nature of principal CMC tools (e.g., chatrooms, emails) being oriented towards production.

It is also worth noticing that CMC, as mentioned earlier, is not a simple uniform construct, but rather a broad theme involving various intricacies, such as different forms (synchronous and asynchronous)

and modes (text-based, audio-based, and video-based) (Yu, 2022). This within-group heterogeneity has received increasing attention in more recent studies, with fewer and fewer researchers employing the broad term “CMC” and instead opting for specific terms like “SCMC” or “ACMC.” Existing research and practices generally associate ACMC with the written medium, as it allows more time to think and reflect before output (Zheng & Warschauer, 2017), whereas SCMC, with its real-time interactive features, is predominantly linked to speaking (Ko, 2012). This trend is supported by studies comparing SCMC with ACMC, which highlight the superiority of SCMC in improving students’ oral proficiency (Abrams, 2003; Hirovani, 2009; Rezai & Zafari, 2010) and the strength of ACMC in developing students’ writing skills (Ritchie & Black, 2012).

Focusing on SCMC specifically, its potency is demonstrated in enhancing students’ pragmatic competence (Sykes, 2005). It is also found to establish an accommodating learning environment where students experience a more interactive and democratic medium of communication (Kim, 2000; Abrams, 2003), reduced anxiety (Côté & Gaffney, 2018), and a heightened focus on individual traits and personalities (Sykes, 2005). Some researchers have further subdivided SCMC into two types based on communication medium: text-based and audio/video-based. In a recent study, Namaziandost et al. (2022) discovered that text-based SCMC is more effective in reducing students’ anxiety levels, as it provides more time for students to think and reflect on language output, but both types of SCMC equally enhance students’ oral proficiency. Recognizing the potential of SCMC in enhancing teaching practices, many scholars have suggested increased integration of online platforms in regular language instruction (e.g., Goertler, 2019; Thoms, 2020) as well as language testing (e.g., Du & Zhang, 2022).

Several researchers have voiced concerns about technical issues related to SCMC platforms. For instance, Wang (2004) identified bandwidth and latency as the two critical problems affecting the use of SCMC in educational contexts. Nonetheless, as with other studies on CMC, it is worth noting that all CMC-related technologies continue to evolve rapidly, and concerns raised by researchers years ago may no longer be relevant due to fast technological advancements. In the realm of SCMC, videoconferencing platforms are being continually optimized by developers and are also gaining increased acceptance among the general public, partly due to events like the recent global pandemic. Therefore, despite the weaknesses identified in previous literature, SCMC warrants ongoing scholarly attention.

To summarize, extensive research has underscored the benefits of CMC, predominantly in enhancing productive skills, with speaking being notably associated with and elevated by SCMC. Therefore, it is reasonable to explore one-on-one sessions in foreign language classes, primarily geared towards developing speaking competence, in the context of SCMC. Moreover, according to Lin’s (2015) meta-analysis, smaller groups tend to yield more significant effects, suggesting that one-on-one sessions have the potential to maximize the advantages of SCMC in language learning. All these factors collectively advocate for the selection of one-on-one sessions as the focal point of this study.

## 2.2 Willingness to Communicate (WTC)

The concept of WTC was first introduced in the context of native language (L1) communication by McCroskey and Richmond (1990) and later extended to the field of second language (L2) acquisition (MacIntyre et al., 1998). Its definition has also evolved from being merely an innate trait (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990) to include considerations regarding specific times, interlocutors, and settings (MacIntyre et al., 1998). The latter definition is generally regarded as offering a more comprehensive perspective on the construct (Peng & Woodrow, 2010).

Despite differing definitions, researchers widely agree on its significance in language learning. Vongsila and Reinders (2016) asserted that increased WTC leads to heightened student engagement in communicative activities, resulting in more effective language input, more meaningful negotiations, and greater focus on language forms, ultimately enhancing L2 interactions. MacIntyre et al. (1998) even argued that fostering WTC should be a primary objective in L2 education. Additionally, Mehrgan (2013)

noted that WTC had increasingly been adopted as an assessment measure in numerous English language programs.

However, while there is relative unanimity on WTC's importance, its influencing factors appear more intricate. Earlier studies often examined individual characteristics, such as age and gender (Donovan & MacIntyre, 2004), foreign language anxiety and proficiency (Alemi et al., 2011), as well as personalities (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996). In more recent studies, situational factors have gradually been identified, such as familiarity with the topics and interlocutors (Aubrey, 2011; Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015), teachers and teaching styles (Chen et al., 2022; Wei & Xu, 2022), and group size (Cao & Philp, 2006). MacIntyre et al. (1998) created a heuristic model summarizing situational variables influencing WTC, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of these situational factors (see MacIntyre & Wang, 2021 for a recent application of this model).

Recent research also pointed out that these situational factors include not only the "objective" features of the context but also students' "subjective" perceptions and interpretations of a situation (Li et al., 2022). For instance, students were observed to exhibit higher WTC when interacting with individuals perceived as close (Kang, 2005) or cooperative (Pawlak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2015). Learners also demonstrated elevated WTC when they perceived teachers as supportive (Peng et al., 2017), the environment as relaxing (Zhong, 2013), and learning tasks as engaging (Kang, 2005) and effective (Peng & Woodrow, 2010). Furthermore, students' sense of control was found to predict their WTC (Arkavazi & Nosratinia, 2018). Some researchers even claimed that these subjective perceptions of a situation wield more influence than the objective situation itself (Zhang et al., 2018). Therefore, even in situations where the objective instructional context remains constant, teachers can still implement measures to enhance students' WTC by altering their perceptions. This insight led the current study to go beyond the mere pursuit of identifying "the better situation" through comparison and instead contemplate strategies to optimize students' subjective perceptions of the existing context. In doing so, this paper can potentially offer richer pedagogical suggestions to L2 teachers.

Comparatively, while numerous studies have focused on WTC in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, investigations into WTC within CFL classrooms remain relatively scarce. Liu (2017) examined the WTC of adult CFL learners residing in China and found it influenced by their Chinese-speaking anxiety and length of stay in China. This effect was mediated by their Chinese proficiency and intercultural communication sensitivity level. However, it should be noted that Liu's study considered WTC within the real-life context of China (i.e., the target language environment), rather than CFL classroom settings.

More recently, Zhou (2022) conducted a longitudinal qualitative study tracking six tertiary students' WTC over a year-long CFL course at a Scottish university. The study identified eight individual factors (learner beliefs, personality, motivation, linguistic factors, cognitive factors, affective factors, cultural factors, and physiological factors) and five contextual factors (topic, interlocutor, classroom dynamic, classroom discussion, and class size) that drive or inhibit learners' willingness to speak up in the CFL classroom. These findings lay a comprehensive foundation for future inquiries into the factors influencing WTC within CFL learning environments.

Despite the robust literature on relevant factors (particularly situational ones), there appears to be a gap in research regarding the medium of communication (online vs. in-person) (see Said et al., 2021 and Seyydreazen & Ziafar, 2014 for a couple of exceptions). As students and educators become more acquainted with SCMC technology, it is worth exploring potential differences in students' WTC between online and in-person modalities. As discussed earlier, individual sessions offer flexibility in terms of instructional medium. Therefore, we formulate the following research question for this study: How does students' WTC vary between in-person one-on-one sessions of CFL classes and those conducted through SCMC?

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1 Participants and research context

This study involved six college students who took a year-long beginner-level Chinese language course (from fall 2019 to spring 2020) in the U.S. They were randomly invited to participate in this study upon completing the spring semester (refer to Table 1 for their demographic details). They were provided with a modest monetary reward as a token of appreciation of their time and contribution. Prior to enrolling in the course, all participants had no experience in learning Chinese. In March 2020, they all experienced the transition from in-person to remote teaching for all their courses. Subsequently, all class sessions of the Chinese course, including lectures, drills, and one-on-one sessions, were conducted on the Zoom platform. During these sessions, students generally adhered to the requirement of keeping their cameras on at all times (virtual backgrounds were permitted) and staying in a quiet environment, with only a few exceptions due to conditions like technical constraints. Regarding the one-on-one sessions specifically, despite the dramatic switch in communication methods, most other aspects remained consistent, including the instructors, topics, as well as target language structures and vocabulary. Students voluntarily signed up for one or more 15-min conversation slots on a weekly basis. The majority of sessions involved structured conversations with level-appropriate guiding questions or free discussions on topics that interested specific students. Some sessions were also dedicated to reviewing and clarifying knowledge upon students' requests.

Table 1  
*Demographic Information of the Participants*

No.	Gender	Age	Level	Year	Major
#1	Male	18	Undergraduate	First-Year	Undeclared
#2	Male	19	Undergraduate	First-Year	Undeclared
#3	Female	18	Undergraduate	First-Year	Undeclared
#4	Male	19	Undergraduate	First-Year	Undeclared
#5	Male	18	Undergraduate	First-Year	Undeclared
#6	Male	24	Graduate	Graduate Year 5	Health Policy

#### 3.2 Procedures

A structured interview was conducted to inquire about the students' perceptions of their levels of WTC when attending both face-to-face and online one-on-one sessions respectively. The two interviewers, who were also the authors of this paper, had been their primary instructors in all the three types of teaching sessions mentioned above throughout the entire academic year (2020-2021). Prior to the interview, students were informed that their responses would be used solely for research purposes and would not in any way influence their course grades.

In the first half of the interview, the researchers explained the term WTC and asked for participants' general preference between these two modes of individual conversation. Among all the previously mentioned factors influencing WTC, the research scope was further narrowed down to the four factors most relevant to the current research context: anxiety, sense of control, familiarity, and environment. These four factors were the focus of the second half of the interview, during which the interviewers guided the participants to express their preference between in-person and SCMC teaching, as well as their reasoning. Other factors related to student body (e.g., personalities, language proficiency), teaching content (e.g., topic relevance), and interlocutors (e.g., teacher support) were not considered in this study, as they remained mostly unchanged after the switch in instructional mode. Additionally, factors unrelated to one-on-one sessions, such as cohesiveness among classmates, were excluded.

Following the interview, the authors transcribed the collected data and employed a top-down coding process to analyze the participants' responses. We initially categorized the interviewees' general preferences regarding WTC in general, as well as their preferences for each of the four influencing factors. Subsequently, we provided our own analysis and interpretation of the data, drawing from our understanding of previous literature and teaching experience.

## 4. Results and Discussions

### 4.1 Overall WTC: Mixed

The participants expressed varied feelings and opinions regarding the strength of WTC in online versus offline conversations with the instructor. Each mode was found to possess its own unique advantages.

First, there was unanimous agreement on the naturalness of face-to-face sessions compared to the SCMC mode. Specifically, small talk emerged as a significant aspect, resembling the essential ice-breaking phase in office or classroom meetings. This kind of informal interaction helped participants transition smoothly into the more focused and serious learning process. However, in the online context, students noted that this aspect was often diminished or even skipped due to the perceived awkwardness of initiating casual conversations in a non-real-life setting. This often led conversations to start abruptly.

“In person, it felt like less of a waste of time to talk about friendly topics.” (Participant #5)

“It will take shorter time for you to start feeling more comfortable with expressing thoughts in person.” (Participant #6)

This discrepancy might stem from the fact that students unconsciously perceived SCMC sessions as primarily focused on language instruction, devoid of the socializing function that in-person sessions naturally incorporate. In physical encounters, both the teacher and student could easily draw upon cues from their surroundings (e.g., outfit, weather, campus activities) for small talk, fostering a more personal interaction before delving into formal instruction. In contrast, during online meetings, most of these cues remained outside the camera's view. The occasional use of virtual backgrounds might further discourage both parties from engaging in casual conversations using Chinese based on any readily available prompt. As a result, the experience for both interlocutors could be compromised right from the outset, potentially impacting students' WTC during the session.

In addition, the respondents reported heightened concentration and better engagement when looking at the instructor's face in physical settings. During SCMC sessions, they found themselves more susceptible to distractions from external sources, ranging from irrelevant pop-ups on the screen to people moving around. This was compounded by unforeseen technical issues that occasionally resulted in interaction lag, freezes, and further disruptions to the flow of conversation.

“The flow of conversation was easier to be interrupted virtually. Sometimes I got lost in translation and got a bit frustrated.” (Participant #5)

“There's a minute count on the bottom right of my screen. It's never something I can escape... versus in person, the mostly you can do is looking up at the clock, which I just didn't do as frequently because I was busy looking at the person I was having a conversation with.” (Participant #3)

Under such circumstances, students struggled to maintain a smooth flow of communication, reducing their chances of actively sharing their personal stories or opinions. Consequently, they might gradually view one-on-one sessions as mere routine practice tasks, rather than meaningful exchanges of ideas and feelings. In-person interactions, reminiscent of genuine conversations among acquaintances or friends, appeared to foster greater engagement and encourage open expression.

Moreover, five out of the six participants in this study highlighted the significantly greater effectiveness of in-person sessions. Therefore, they were more inclined to fully utilize these sessions to improve their language proficiency. For instance, many interviewees emphasized the enhanced efficacy of non-verbal communication in face-to-face interactions. Body language and facial expressions are more discernible and promptly responded to. When the teacher noticed the student's struggle to express certain content through non-verbal signs, they could quickly provide corresponding assistance. The student could also promptly correct themselves upon sensing even a slight hint of error from the teacher. Furthermore, the participants argued that face-to-face communication offered additional advantages that contributed to its effectiveness, such as the precision of pointing to specific content in a textbook, the sensitivity to capturing potential pronunciation errors, etc. Collectively, these attributes solidified face-to-face interactions as an ideal way of improving language skills in one-on-one sessions.

“I felt like feedback was a lot easier to be received in person... like when I would make an error with pronunciation or tones, it felt like it was so easy to correct. I think, online, you can sometimes miss tones.” (Participant #2)

“If I were able to be talking to them [the teachers] face to face and which is much more likely to pick up any facial expressions that they have... it's easier too to tell like, oh, I'm saying that incorrectly, let me start off or try again.” (Participant #5)

“I think that in person it is easier to ask specific questions because I could even just point to a spot on the textbook could be like this.” (Participant #4)

However, all the participating students also expressed a positive view of SCMC one-on-one sessions due to their convenience, which made them appealing enough to compete with the in-person version. As revealed during the interviews, the stronger sense of WTC in SCMC conversations was derived from their significantly more casual nature. With the transition to online individual sessions, scheduling and participation became notably easier. A simple mouse click sufficed to bring students together from different locations, minimizing the time spent commuting across campus. Engaging in Chinese practice felt much “lighter” in their daily schedules, reducing the perceived demands of the task. As a result, they displayed increased willingness to attend these sessions more frequently, which, in turn, fostered a heightened comfort level when conversing with the instructor, leading to more conversational and relaxed interactions. Although some argued that students could potentially be less concerned about grammatical accuracy due to the perceived informality of these sessions, a consensus was reached among the participants that they would be more talkative with such conversations occurring more frequently. With the gradual establishment of this practice as a learning habit, the perceived pressure might be likely to considerably diminish.

“(For attending an in-person one-on-one session,) I need to cut this time in a day to go there and do Chinese and sort of have that split off from everything else... Whenever everything is conducted virtually and so then you know your schedule is a bit more cut up into pieces...” (Participant #6)

“It is online, and you don't need to rush, so I think you will feel more comfortable. When you go to the office, you think, oh, I only have like fifteen minutes, so I need to do things very quickly... A longer conversation is probably more likely to happen online. I think it's easier to move on to the next thing.” (Participant #4)

## 4.2 Anxiety: Mixed

The participants' self-evaluations of the variance in their perceived anxiety levels, a potential indicator of WTC, between SCMC and in-person one-on-one sessions yielded varying results. Some participants believed that physical meetings could intensify feelings of unease, which might cause



them to be overly cautious in self-expression and less confident about the accuracy of their linguistic production. In contrast, conversing over SCMC platforms seemed to facilitate a sense of calmness and, more importantly, to encourage them to challenge themselves by using more advanced vocabulary and grammatical structures or initiating discussions about deeper topics. This disparity could be attributed to students feeling less apprehensive about making mistakes and facing embarrassment in remote settings, where social norms pertinent to face-to-face interactions are somewhat lessened (Heidari & Moradian, 2021). As a result, they displayed greater assertiveness in their verbal expression.

“Online, there’s like a bigger distance, so if you make a mistake, it doesn’t feel as like serious or awkward. You’ll feel the pressure directly from the instructor, like, in office.” (Participant #4)

“For one-on-one [sessions] in person, you have to go to office, and then kind of wait. Thus, maybe the nervousness builds up.” (Participant #1)

On the other hand, some respondents felt more at ease when communicating with the instructor in person. In their opinion, being physically present alongside the teacher allowed for a more improvised and spontaneous conversation, and the presence of direct emotional support contributed to this comfort. In a face-to-face social setting, they found themselves more comfortable with their status as language beginners and felt emboldened to generate sentences they were less confident about or to ask about concepts that had not yet grasped. Participants with this perspective might be those who leaned towards the extroverted end of the personality spectrum. They could easily be accustomed to in-person social interactions in their daily lives, and one-on-one sessions might simply extend these interpersonal engagements. Conversely, their more introverted peers might find security in maintaining a physical distance from others.

“I think that by making a mistake in person, it was always something that I could laugh at as the teacher obviously knows how ridiculous that thing I want to say is...” (Participant #5)

“I’m certainly much more willing to kind of go off script and start just like if there is a word that I don’t know [when meeting the instructor in person]. I guess it’s adventurism and trying to say new things, to be vulnerable, to be challenging yourself with new expressions... I’ll say the English word and then ask, what was the word for that?” (Participant #6)

### **4.3 Sense of control: SCMC > In-person**

Another pivotal factor influencing WTC is the speaker’s sense of control, which was consistently reported to be more pronounced during SCMC sessions by all participants. They elaborated that the accessibility of readily available resources within the SCMC environment enhanced the likelihood of better preparation and performance during conversations. Consequently, their WTC demonstrated an increment. For instance, they found it possible to promptly search for new vocabulary or relevant information while engaged in conversation, allowing for more effective self-expression and enabling discussions on new topics on the student’s initiative, rather than being passively guided and focused on the instructor’s prompts. In contrast, when engaging in face-to-face conversations with the instructor, participants expressed feeling more vulnerable, as they had limited access to external sources and the convenience of checking them while the conversation was ongoing.

“Being online, I can say, you can definitely look up things on your phone, if you have it right next to you... when I talk to her [the instructor] sometimes they’ll be words that I don’t know, then I’ll just look at her, um, that’s less convenient.” (Participant #4)

### **4.4 Familiarity/Environment: In-person > SCMC**

Two additional factors that can increase students’ WTC are: 1) being familiar with the conversation routine and the interlocutor, and 2) having an accommodating environment. In relation to these

two factors, the interviewees expressed a clear preference for in-person one-on-one sessions. They reasoned that the increased opportunities to meet the instructor face-to-face, particularly in a more informal setting compared to regular classes, motivated both parties to engage in more personal conversations. For example, students could greet by complimenting the teacher's attire or inquire about the story behind an object on the table. These casual exchanges facilitated the establishment of rapport and the potential development of a friendlier relationship. Moreover, some respondents added that participating in face-to-face meetings enabled them to perceive the teacher as "a whole person" and enjoy more direct cultural contact with the teacher. This is because the teacher's personal habits and preferences, evident in their office décor or even choice of food and drink, might all come to the attention of students and become extended topics of discussion. Such immersive experiences might gradually bring students closer to the target culture and further encourage them to ask questions or leave comments.

"It's easy to build a relationship with the teacher in person, because you get to see them and converse with them all the time." (Participant #5)

"Virtual sessions are more like isolated practices, like responding to questions and wanting to make sure I say it correctly, not building a dialogue, while in-person interaction allows you to build this week's talk upon last week's progress, like talking about summer plan..." (Participant #6)

"If the teacher is drinking tea, I could ask him about it, and like get some cultural contacts and things like that." (Participant #4)

The interviewees also expressed that the conducive environment unique to in-person sessions was a positive aspect. They typically experienced greater excitement and passion for practicing Chinese when visiting the teacher's office or classroom, as they perceived these spaces as the most suitable for purposeful language learning. As a result, they considered conversations held in these environments to be more goal-oriented, leading them to be better mentally prepared for producing output in the target language. This observation might challenge our intuition that one's dorm or home, typically associated with a sense of calmness, should provide an ideal environment for engaging in open conversations with others. Contrary to this assumption, our findings indicated that these comfortable settings could potentially lead to a lack of energy and hinder students from actively using the foreign language. Furthermore, being in the presence of individuals who were not involved in Chinese learning, such as roommates and bystanders, might amplify students' self-consciousness and reluctance to speak Chinese due to the fear of receiving critical or judgmental feedback from those around them.

"The general morale after we went virtual was not that great. I usually started to feel fatigue for a Zoom meeting for more than twenty minutes." (Participant #5)

"It's just bizarre to speak Chinese at home or at dorm... I'd like associate Chinese with a specific space. There is no judgment from others." (Participant #2)

Meanwhile, two participants held the belief that with the gradual establishment of familiarity with the SCMC session environment, students' WTC could eventually attain a comparable level to that of in-person sessions. The constrained WTC experienced by students might be attributed to their lack of preparedness and familiarity with emergency remote instruction. In this regard, the consistent scheduling of individual sessions, regardless of the chosen mode, might be even more crucial than the selection of the mode itself.

## 5. Conclusions

In conclusion, both in-person and SCMC one-on-one interactions offered distinct advantages in boosting students' WTC. The former could facilitate a more natural and amicable experience, thereby enhancing the efficacy of the teaching-learning process, while the latter was usually appreciated for

its convenience and the readily available online resources. Additionally, individual students might react differently to these modes. Although personality was not a targeted factor for interviews due to the absence of personality changes caused by the switch in teaching mode, participants' responses unveiled that students with diverse personalities exhibited varying preferences for the two modes. For example, relatively introverted individuals might be inclined to remain in their comfort zones, such as their dorms or public spaces, while those eager to engage socially would show more enthusiasm when invited to converse with teachers in face-to-face settings. Therefore, in order to optimize students' WTC during one-on-one sessions, it may be wise to allow students to choose the mode that aligns with their comfort level. Such a strategy would require teachers to be trained and equipped to deliver content effectively in both modes. Given the essential role of familiarity in students' success within in-person or remote meetings, educators should dedicate considerable effort to promptly familiarize students with their chosen mode during the initial weeks of a semester (e.g., providing explicit instructions on utilizing online platforms, guiding students to locate necessary resources).

However, if logistical constraints prevent the provision of both modes (e.g., due to the teachers and students being located in different countries), teachers might still need to make a choice between the two. Nevertheless, strategies can still be employed to enhance the experience of each mode by compensating for their respective limitations. In other words, educators could develop online sessions that are more effective and authentic, while also making in-person meetings more accessible. For instance, teachers could opt to remove virtual backgrounds, move the camera around, and offer glimpses of their living spaces to students. They might even extend an invitation for students to reciprocate. Such gestures can help create a "quasi" real-life atmosphere, facilitating the organic introduction of engaging topics relevant to the daily lives of both parties and enabling the fulfillment of the socializing functions even in an online setting. Furthermore, the meeting place for in-person sessions could be moved closer to students' activity areas, making the commitment to practicing Chinese feel more flexible and less stressful for them.

The purpose of one-on-one sessions may also need to be examined before the choice between in-person and SCMC is made. Since the findings of this study showed that remote meetings appeared to be "lighter" in students' schedules, teachers might better conduct casual talks remotely for students who simply want to engage in random conversations and improve their language fluency. Meanwhile, the effectiveness of in-person sessions can position them as ideal opportunities for those who wish to consolidate knowledge and receive intensive and structured language training (e.g., refining tone accuracy).

In the end, it is imperative to acknowledge that this study, owing to its qualitative nature, involved only a limited number of participants and produced restricted data. The interview invitations were sent via email after the conclusion of the spring semester, resulting in students signing up randomly. Given the logistical challenges that undermined the feasibility of conducting a fully controlled study within experimental settings, the distribution of gender and educational level among the participants was not effectively controlled, potentially weakening the validity of the conclusions.

Future researchers can build on the current findings by undertaking quantitative research that collects larger sample sizes and involves more extensive analyses. The existing literature offers a range of measures that can be utilized as tools to quantify WTC (see, for instance, [Khatib & Nourzadeh, 2015](#); [McCroskey & Richmond, 1990](#); [Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2016](#); [Weaver, 2005](#)). Such measures could facilitate the design of methodologies for future quantitative studies. In addition, the sudden emergence of the pandemic prevented us from establishing experimental settings to gather students' voices immediately after experiencing both modes of one-on-one sessions. Therefore, the data collected in this study somewhat relied on participants' recollections of switching from in-person to online instruction, which might undermine the reliability of the results. Similarly, the inability to randomize the order of participants' exposure to the two modes was a result of this constraint. However, our exploratory study and preliminary findings still hold the potential to provide valuable insights for future scholars in terms of research design. Now that campuses are once again fully operational, there is an opportunity to

devise controlled experiments that delve into students' real-time feelings and thoughts after experiencing both modes in a randomized sequence.

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## 线上同步外语“单班课”对学生沟通意愿的影响

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### 摘要

对外汉语课堂的重要组成部分“单班课”在新冠疫情期间开始大量以同步线上沟通的形式展开。过往诸多研究表明,较之面对面交流,线上交流在提升学习成果、优化学习体验等方面具有优势,其中,同步线上沟通尤其有利于提升口语水平。然而,鲜有研究讨论同步线上沟通的优势在强化学习者沟通意愿方面是否依然存在。因此,本文旨在针对大学阶段对外汉语课的“单班课”的环节对这一问题进行研究。被试者为在美国一所高校修读基础汉语课程的六位学生。研究者通过结构化采访收集定性数据,数据内容为被试者在线下沟通和同步线上沟通这两种教学模式中所感知到的沟通意愿的比较,也包括他们对影响沟通意愿的四种因素(焦虑感、掌控感、熟悉感和环境)的比较。结果显示,针对同步线上沟通对沟通意愿的影响,被试者看法不一,他们既指出了同步线上沟通的便利性,又肯定了线下沟通的高效率和较为理想人际互动体验。在四种影响因素中,同步线上沟通时的掌控感更强,但线下沟通时熟悉感更强,环境更佳。同时,不同学生对于两种模式下的焦虑感反馈不一。最后,本文将为未来的相关研究和后疫情时期的对外汉语教育提供建议。

### 关键词

对外汉语; 单班课; 后疫情时代; 同步线上沟通; 沟通意愿

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