

Advantages and challenges that Serbian teachers face while teaching English as a foreign language to Chinese students online¹

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Obwohl fast ein Viertel der Weltbevölkerung Chinesisch als Muttersprache spricht (Hua 2002), eine große Zahl von Chinesen lernt Englisch, um die Möglichkeiten der internationalen Kommunikation zu erweitern. Viele Chinesen bemühen sich daher um die Beherrschung der englischen Sprache für ihre Ausbildung oder Arbeit. Diese Aussage wird durch die Existenz von Unternehmen wie z.B.: TutorABC, BedaKid, BiBo, Magic Ears, usw. bestätigt, die Dienstleistungen für den Englischunterricht anbieten. In diesem Beitrag werden wir die Ergebnisse der folgenden Forscher (Lamy & Hampel 2007; Manegre & Sabiri 2022; Mohd Nordin et al. 2022; Tao & Gao 2022, usw.) im Zusammenhang mit dem Online-Fremdsprachenunterricht vorstellen. Wir werden unsere Ergebnisse mit unserer empirischen Forschung, welche sich auf englisch Lehrpersonen aus Serbien fokussiert, in Verbindung bringen. Diese haben alle in einem oder mehreren der bevor genannten Unternehmen gearbeitet. Anhand der Umfrage werden wir die Standpunkte der Lehrer zu den folgenden Aspekten des Online-Unterrichts darstellen: (1) technologische Aspekte - was sind die Vor- und Nachteile der Nutzung von Computern und Online-Plattformen; (2) kulturelle Aspekte - sind die kulturellen Unterschiede im Klassenzimmer problematisch oder vorteilhaft und was sind die Merkmale der Schüler. Anhand dieser Aspekte möchten wir sowohl ein umfassenderes Bild des Online-Unterrichts vermitteln, um Vorteile aufzuzeigen, die möglicherweise übersehen wurden, als auch auf potenzielle Schwierigkeiten verweisen, die bei jeder neuen Unterrichtsform auftreten und vermieden werden sollten.

Stichwörter:

Englisch als Fremdsprache, chinesische Schüler, kultureller Aspekt, digitale Technologie, Online-Unterricht, Serbische Lehrer.

Keywords:

English as a foreign language, Chinese students, cultural aspect, digital technology, online education, Serbian teachers.

1. Introduction

As is widely known, the Chinese language is one of the most commonly spoken languages globally, with nearly a quarter of the world population using it as their

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mother tongue² (Hua 2002). Still, the significance of English as a global lingua franca in spheres of communication and education cannot be understated. Many researchers have noted that people of diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds have sought assistance in polishing their command of English for the purposes of international communication (Wang 2015: 60). To accommodate such a growing need for foreign language education many have turned to online learning via virtual or digital classrooms and other forms of Computer Assisted Language Learning (Li 2016: 265). A plethora of private education brands exist, such as TutorABC, BedaKid, BiBo, Magic Ears, VIP Kid, 51Talk, and DaDaABC amongst others, that are endeavoring to supply the ever-increasing demand for online education, especially at primary school level. As Manegre and Sabiri (2022) note, this sudden and constantly expanding need for online education surfaced because:

Either the parents feel these virtual classrooms are helpful education tools, or they are concerned that, should they not participate, their children would fall behind their classmates academically (Manegre & Sabiri 2022: 2).

Another factor that contributed to the worldwide rise in online learning was the COVID-19 pandemic. Institutions, schools, teachers and students alike had to rapidly adapt to a new mode of teaching. For teachers specifically this was an exceptional challenge as they needed to become acquainted with new technologies, replan their lessons and face problems they had not previously encountered (Jiang et al. 2021: 2; Tao & Gao 2022: 1).

Our study was primarily initiated based on the personal experiences of the authors. In Serbia, securing stable and well-paid employment within one's professional field is often challenging, leading English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers to explore opportunities beyond the domestic job market and to consider international teaching positions. Consequently, a significant number of Serbian educators work for companies offering online English lessons to students in China, with many opting for such employment either as a result of difficulties in finding conventional jobs or a desire to engage with a new culture.

In parallel, the position of freelancers in Serbia has notably deteriorated in recent years, prompting increasingly frequent discussions among educators, both in person and in online forums, regarding the advantages, challenges, and uncertainties surrounding online teaching. This research seeks to approach these experiences from an academic perspective, relying on empirical data and participant insights. By examining the realities of online education for Serbian teachers working with Chinese students, the study aims to contribute to the improvement of working conditions and provide younger colleagues with reliable information when considering similar career paths.

² Coincidentally, it is the third most spoken language in the USA, behind English and Spanish (Yang et al. 2017: 1).

It needs to be acknowledged that a significant amount of research has been undertaken regarding online learning in China. However, most of the research focuses on the transition of traditional schools to online learning and primarily centers on the students' perspectives (e.g., observe the research questions in Li 2016: 266). What sets our research apart is the fact that we focus on companies and corporations (rather than state or private schools) that hire English teachers and tutors from around the world. For ethical reasons we will not explicitly name the companies that our respondents worked for. In addition, many of our respondents worked for multiple companies, which makes it difficult to determine the exact number of companies involved. In our study, we shift our focus to Serbian teachers and scrutinize two distinct aspects that are often specifically associated with teachers engaged in the online teaching of Chinese students: the use of information technology in an online environment and the clash of cultures. Our main goal, using a combination of a literature review and our own empirical research, is to showcase the problems in these areas so that issues become more overtly visible and, hence, adequate solutions may be found. More specifically, our research goals and hypotheses involve the following:

Research objectives:

1. Examine the use of information technology in online English language teaching among Serbian teachers working with Chinese students.
2. Analyze the cultural challenges faced by Serbian teachers in interactions with Chinese students and their parents.
3. Identify differences in the approach of companies that employ teachers in regard to training, support, and technological resources.
4. Determine key issues in order to improve teaching conditions and the quality of online education.
5. Suggest future research directions that include the perspectives of Chinese students and their parents to gain a more comprehensive understanding of online learning.

Research hypotheses:

1. Serbian teachers use information technology flexibly and effectively but face certain technical challenges.
2. Significant cultural differences affect communication and teaching methodology, including parental expectations and student behavior.
3. Companies that hire teachers vary in their training, support, and technological resources, influencing the quality of teachers' work.

4. Teachers are generally satisfied with their training but have concerns regarding salaries, support, and the attitude of companies toward employees.

The structure of this paper is as follows: firstly, we focus on the methodology employed in our research, outlining the data collection process, and presenting our survey and the specifics of our respondents; secondly, we present our findings in combination with theoretical frameworks from other similar research that has been done worldwide; and lastly, we discuss the implications of our results, followed by a general conclusion with suggestions for future research.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 The virtual classroom: characteristics, advantages, and drawbacks

Virtual classrooms are specially designed learning platforms that focus on providing the best learning experience for prospective students (Charles & Babatunde 2014: 68-69). The virtual classroom combines video conferencing with preloaded textbooks and a whiteboard with many drawing and interactive tools (Wang & Chen 2007). Students who wish to study online, or their legal guardians, create an account with their chosen company (in our case this would be Chinese companies that employ Serbian teachers), choose a teacher or have one delegated, and plan their timetable. Using their computer or phone, they enter the classroom where they interact with their teacher via video conferencing and text messaging, using the whiteboard to complete tasks or play educational games. Many companies also have a reward system as an incentive for the younger students to encourage good behavior and participation. Importantly, many of the platforms have a recording option which allows students, teachers, and company employees to rewatch the class for various purposes (Manegre & Sabiri 2022: 3).

The perks of such a system are numerous. As was previously mentioned, learning English is seen as essential in China. In fact, it is "perceived as a necessity to excel in education and business" (Manegre & Sabiri 2022: 4). Virtual classrooms allow Chinese students to connect to native or native-like speakers of English from around the world. These classrooms have lowered the spatial and temporal barriers that traditional classrooms might impose, since students can schedule classes in accordance with their daily obligations (Zhang 2019). For the teachers, this flexibility and availability has brought a unique benefit—it has exposed them to students from different cultural backgrounds. This diversity broadens the teachers' horizons and expands their worldview. In addition, they obtain feedback they can utilize to improve their teaching (Gudea 2008: 145). The virtual platforms themselves have a set of features that are helpful or enticing for certain students. Live video, chat, and text features, and a more relaxed atmosphere can influence the students to engage more (Barry 2019).

Another specific advantage of virtual classrooms is that they have monitoring options. New teachers can obtain guidance from their superiors and support from IT specialists, which minimize the disruption of the class flow (Manegre & Sabiri 2022: 3-4). Furthermore, since most classes are conducted one on one, the students receive the teacher's full attention, which allows for more individualized learning. Chang (2012) highlights that this type of studying may be especially favorable for Chinese students who suffer from the "mute English" syndrome, which happens when students are not confident in speaking English even though they have been learning it for years. Additionally, online learning is known to promote students' independence and encourage them to take responsibility for their learning. Students who have worked in both the traditional and online modes appreciate the ability to use their technological prowess, think about their projects at home before engaging in class, plan their learning, and be more visible to their teachers (Stickler 2022: 69).

2.2 The impact of culture in online classes

The notion of culture is vast and complex, and most certainly extends beyond the scope of this paper. Hence, this section focuses on the influence of cultural factors, such as culture shock, differing habits, and divergent points of view, that may arise between online teachers and their foreign students. In our case we specifically discuss the differences between the Serbian and Chinese cultures.

Rongmei Yu (2019) gives a succinct definition of culture: "Culture is the precipitation of temporal acquired by lots of people in the process of generations by means of individual and group striving" (Yu 2019: 836). As these actions and beliefs are deeply embedded in us, it is no wonder that cultural differences³ will arise when two different cultures interact. Ruihua Chen, among other authors, in their doctoral dissertation (2020) showcases the way different cultural variables manifest. Although the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China strives to develop students' communicative competence in English, students have limited opportunities to utilize their English skills in practice. Hence, their communicative competence may lag behind their other language skills (Chen 2020: 68-69). In addition, language learning in China is to a great extent teacher-centered, and the influence of Confucianism further supports this stance. As a result, learners are expected to respect their teachers and to follow their guidelines and decisions closely, which can also limit the interaction between learners where only the more extroverted students get a chance to express themselves (Chen 2020: 69). Thus, Chinese students are often perceived as passive or reluctant to voice their opinions, something which is highly valued in the West (Zhao & McDougal 2008: 63-64). Another contributing factor to the lackluster development of speaking skills is the weight and importance that China traditionally assigns to exams, thereby making the focus

³ For a more detailed view of what cultural differences entail, see Chen (2014).

of the English classes on grammar, not speaking, since grammar is most often tested (Chen 2020: 71).

On the other hand, Chinese students are more motivated and determined to pursue their long-term goals and will immerse themselves in their studies more earnestly (Zhao & McDougal 2008: 64). Given all of the factors mentioned here, it is no wonder that Chinese students prefer a blended approach to learning over a traditional face-to-face one (Jiang et al. 2021: 9). Online learning, conducted in smaller groups or one on one, allows the more tentative students to progress at their own pace while saving face from possible public humiliation. Working individually with their chosen teacher can help them open up more and feel safe to experiment with the language, giving them ample opportunity to develop their communication skills

3. Research methodology

The success of L2 teaching and learning tends to depend a great deal on the teacher and the support they have during the teaching process. This subject has been studied in the field of developmental psychology and applied linguistics, but when it comes to the subject matter of the challenges that online teachers from the Balkan region (in our case Serbia) face, we note that additional research is welcome.

As a general guideline we followed Dörnyei's (2009) principles regarding the essential components of a questionnaire to ensure its appropriateness for scientific and linguistic studies, as well as its capacity to capture the multifaceted nature of foreign language teaching. We thus devised three sets of questions for our questionnaire: (1) general questions about the respondents; (2) questions regarding the use of information technology in foreign language teaching; and (3) questions concerning the differences in Serbian and Chinese cultures. Our respondents were informed about the purpose, aim and significance that their input would carry. These respondents were English language teachers who live and work in Serbia and who teach students from China online. We specifically focused on the advantages and drawbacks of this mode of teaching from the teachers' perspectives. Since the questionnaire was anonymous, we asked the respondents to supply as many details as possible and to be honest, explaining that their input could influence the quality of online teaching in the future and give greater validity to our current research.

The questionnaire was created via the Google Forms platform and was shared on social media web pages and groups (Facebook and Skype) that had foreign language teachers as their primary members. We set a period of 30 days for potential respondents to complete the questionnaires. The gathering, interpretation, and analysis of the answers was then carried out in the first half of 2023. We gathered 53 valid anonymous responses. The majority of the questions were mandatory (labeled with an *), and the questionnaire was

structured as follows: Of the 22 questions (written in Serbian using Latin script), 20 were labeled as mandatory. A few questions (e.g., *Were the cultural differences an advantage or a hindrance in the classroom? Explain how or in what way.*) required teachers to write additional details aside from answering with just *yes* or *no*. The majority of the questions (17 out of 22) were open-ended because we wanted to give teachers the freedom to openly and independently express their impressions and points of view concerning this mode of education. In order to fully incorporate their perspectives into their responses, we deemed a combination of specific open-ended, clarification, and short-answer questions appropriate. We used sentence-completion items and close-ended questions less frequently, specifically using *yes–no* questions, numerical items, and checklist questions.⁴

4. Survey analysis: results and discussion

In this section, we showcase the main findings of our study. We start by presenting the general data we gathered about our respondents. Following this, we highlight both the advantages and disadvantages our teachers face when teaching English as a foreign language via digital platforms. The final section of our survey analysis focuses on questions about culture, specifically when we asked respondents to share their experiences with teaching learners from a culture that is vastly different from their own.

4.1 Characteristics of the teachers

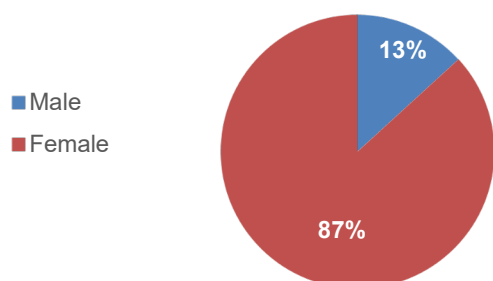
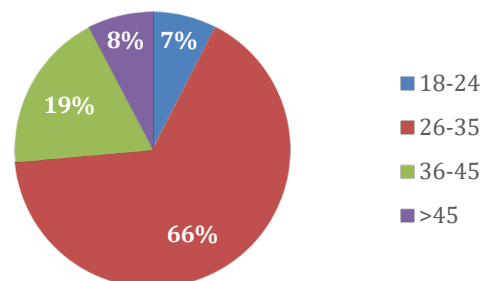
We started our questionnaire with introductory questions concerning the teachers themselves in order to create a picture of "our teacher"—a qualified individual from Serbia who teaches English as a foreign language to Chinese students.

Based on the answers we received we can state that the average teacher in our survey is a person of the female gender (see Graph 1), with an average age between 26 and 35 (Graph 2). Concerning their education and qualifications, we have predominantly *professors⁵ of English language and literature* (23 out of 53 participants). If we add up respondents who characterized themselves as *master's degree professors*, *professors of Serbian and French language* and those who put down *philologist* without any additional explanation, we get a total of 36 respondents who are linguists. The remaining 17 respondents are not fully qualified teachers but they have experience in teaching Chinese students online. They have the following vocations: *student* (3), *medical worker* (2), *marketing manager* (1), *lawyer* (1), *hotelier* (1), *tourismologist* (1), *economist* (1), *tutor* (1), *insurance agent* (1), *professor of physical education* (1), *financial technician* (1), *software engineer* (1), and *pharmaceutical manufacturing*

⁴ Read more about the characteristics of each type of question in Dörnyei 2009: 26-39.

⁵ In Serbian colloquial language there is no clear distinction between the words *professor* and *teacher* and they are often used as synonyms.

technician (1). Since we have a combination of individuals from diverse educational backgrounds, we decided to refer to our respondents as *teachers* in the broadest sense of the term; that is, as individuals who instruct or train others.⁶ In addition, they are marketed as teachers by their companies.⁷

Graph 1: Teachers' gender⁸

Graph 2: Teachers' age

4.2 Challenges that Serbian teachers face in online teaching

In addition to the positive aspects of virtual classrooms and online teaching and learning mentioned in the theoretical framework of this paper, our respondents gave us valuable insights into other features they found exceedingly useful, as well as the difficulties they encountered when using modern technology. To begin with, our respondents identified the following positive aspects of working as a teacher online:

- (1) working from home and the ability to organize one's time;
- (2) ability to work in a stress-free environment;
- (3) opportunity to meet new people from different parts of the world;
- (4) the ability to adjust the teaching materials to the student's age or level of knowledge.

When considering the responses of all participants, we concluded that the primary benefits of teaching in an online environment lie in teachers' ability to organize their own time, schedule, and teaching materials without the added stress associated with working in traditional schools. Another advantage that emerged was the ability to communicate with students from around the world in the comfort of their own homes using the internet and video-conferencing software.

However, with regard to using the same technology for teaching specifically, there were some IT requirements that the teachers had to meet before they

⁶ Definition taken from Cambridge Dictionary Online: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/teacher>

⁷ The issue of differing qualifications and educational backgrounds among individuals hired by companies that provide English lessons should be the subject of a separate study.

⁸ The gender option ""Other"" was given in the survey. None of the respondents chose it.

started teaching. A stable internet connection was an absolute necessity, followed by having a reliable computer or laptop and a headset with a microphone. Only two of our respondents stated that the purchase of the required technology was a strain on their budget. The rest agreed that it presented a difficulty only at the beginning, but noted that the investment was not too high or that they normally invest in IT devices outside of work, so the investment coincided with their general interests. Regarding the software aspect of online teaching, 31 of the respondents were not familiar with the teaching platforms before getting started, but all of them also stated that they did not find it difficult to become acquainted with the platform. The help of their colleagues, organized training, video tutorials, their previous experience in online teaching, and general interest in computers and technology all assisted them in getting to know their new mode of teaching. The remaining 22 respondents were already familiar with various platforms or were introduced to the platforms before they started working.

When asked to consider the best features and characteristics of teaching online, the teachers responded as follows:⁹

(5) The online platform gives the opportunity to overview the whole teacher's book in advance. The video call, ability to highlight parts of the text, draw, insert different audio and video materials and the reward system for students are outstanding.

(6) The creativity, possibility to dedicate oneself to a particular student or work in small groups and to individualize exercises.

(7) It's easy to have all the required props in one place (toys, flashcards, etc.) as well as digital materials that are entertaining for the kids (GIFs, games, drawing materials ...). The children feel more relaxed and comfortable since they are learning from their rooms.

(8) It's a money saver since you don't need to print out anything and you don't need a projector for the children to see the GIFs and videos.

(9) The classes are mostly 1 on 1 thus all of our attention is focused on 1 student which helps us to follow the progress of that student easily. 25 minutes is more than enough time and is especially convenient for younger children. You can, at any point, upload your own materials, use laser pointer options, highlight things... The children can use translation tools and draw. If things get out of hand, you can turn off their pen and touchpad. There is no unnecessary bureaucratic documentation, meetings, planning of tests... You don't have to travel either. You are safe in the comfort of your own home.

To summarize, the respondents asserted that the greatest advantages of online teaching are a high degree of creativity, interactivity, freedom, and independence in creating the classes, the plethora and variety of teaching materials and tools, working one on one, flexibility and the additional time that would be taken up by traveling to and from school. They believe that this time could be better utilized as leisure time or for class preparation. The majority of responses highlight the mixture of creativity and flexibility that virtual classrooms

⁹ Due to the number of answers we received we could not present all of them. Thus, in the paper we are showcasing a few select answers that are either the opinion of the majority or were especially interesting due to their insight into the matter.

provide. The teachers come into classes less stressed and can provide a personal touch by adding videos or games they believe would be helpful to their individual students.

In addition, our respondents mentioned that the support of the company and worker incentives were advantages when it comes to working as teachers for a company rather than a school:

(10) In some companies, the teachers were very valued, so there was less stress and more counseling, while other companies don't care about their teachers since they have a lot of them employed.

(11) The most positive side were the bonuses and seminars that the company organized; good salary in *¹⁰ and professionalism in * and *.

Although participants pointed out that companies support their teaching staff with regular training, counselling, and financial incentives, it would seem that these attitudes vary from company to company. Some companies are better than others in this regard and further research is required into companies' attitudes towards their teachers.

In addition to the rewards provided by the company, several respondents stated that cooperating with learners and building a good rapport with them were motivating factors for teachers:

(12) The most positive aspect is that we get to learn how to recognize the differences [in students] and thus we can approach each individual in the best possible way, and this is helpful in all areas of life.

(13) [T]he children are very dedicated which is very fulfilling to me as a teacher [.]

(14) the majority of the kids are good and want to cooperate.

The survey participants emphasized that the one-on-one nature of the classes enables teachers to really get to know their students. They get to know each student's preferences, strengths, and weaknesses which opens up the possibility for the teachers to individualize their classes in a way that would be more difficult in a traditional setting. This, in turn, makes the students even more motivated to participate in the lessons.

On the other hand, the disadvantages of online learning can be seen as twofold. On the teacher's side, there arises the challenge of adapting to a new style of teaching in a "foreign" environment. The rapidly changing world of information technology can be a lot for some teachers to handle, as they have to restructure their teaching materials and ways of teaching (Stickler 2022: 73) to suit the online mode, which requires a certain level of computer literacy that some teachers do not have (Mohd Nordin et al. 2022: 410). Hence, teachers have to spend more time preparing for or investing in seminars to obtain the proper qualifications and confidence to teach online (Gudea 2008: 48-49; Tao & Gao 2022: 3). And it's not only teachers who are coping with these challenges;

¹⁰ For ethical reasons we used an asterisk to anonymize the names of companies or schools.

students, too, encounter a range of disadvantages in online learning. The most prominent ones include: (1) technical difficulties that hamper learning—unstable internet connections, the teaching materials not loading, general lag, and video issues. These challenges distract students from the subject matter and lead to frustration, and are normally absent in traditional classrooms (Adnan & Anwar 2020: 49); (2) student motivation and engagement (Mohd Nordin et al. 2022: 413; Stickler 2022: 73; Tao & Gao 2022: 3)—in group classes in particular teachers felt that their students would log in and zone out during the class, that the students' attention wavered, or that they were reluctant to speak up if they had questions.¹¹

One major negative impression that our respondents were in agreement on is the negative impact of the presence or direct interference of parents in the teaching process, which is not possible in the traditional classroom. On a related note, our respondents stated that the companies tend to favor parents' opinions and neglect their teachers' well-being:

(15) [T]he school¹² closes some of my time slots without consulting me so that other parents can't book me and so they won't have to pay me a greater sum and on my end, it looked as if I had an empty schedule which made me doubt my teaching skills. In the school where I work now, the parents are practically competing who will book me first. Sometimes it's really not the tutor's fault, but the school's, so be careful for whom you work.

(16) It is always assumed that any problem is the teacher's fault in * and *. There is no "innocent until proven guilty", quite the contrary, you have to prove that sometimes the client was in fact in the wrong.

While the necessity to cooperate or deal with parents is not a new concept in education, having it influence an online teacher's livelihood can be truly demoralizing. According to our participants, companies view parents as clients who book a service, and thus the "customer is always right" philosophy is enforced which many teachers believe is "biased" and "unjust".

Furthermore and contrary to the aforementioned positive effects of the virtual classroom, some respondents declared that certain students lack commitment to their classes and lack responsibility, since online classes do not instill the same feeling of obligation as the traditional classroom:

¹¹ We have only highlighted a few of the problems that are considered major ones. However, there are numerous other problems that online teachers and students face, including the following: traditional schools employ additional staff to handle online classes (Stickler 2022: 72), students turn off their cameras deliberately during class, potentially not focusing on the class (Stickler 2022: 73), the size of the group can negatively influence the quality of the lesson (Gudea 2008: 49), the required technology can be costly (Gudea 2008: 50), online teaching is seen as more of a performance when trying to keep the students' attention (Gudea 2008: 52), the desire to be taught by native speakers exclusively, even if they are not qualified teachers (Wang 2015: 61), etc.

¹² Many teachers use the term "school" when they refer to their workplace, even though they do in fact work for companies that offer English lessons as a service.

(17) grown-up students are mostly not devoted to their lessons, they easily quit or skip classes due to other commitments.

Hence, our respondents postulated that it is easier to teach in person and have face-to-face contact with students, thereby increasing the degree of trust between teachers and students, especially when teaching younger children.

The second major hurdle experienced by the respondents is strictly IT-related. Although every company has IT support, a significant number of respondents were not (entirely) happy with its involvement. Teachers stated that the number of IT assistants is inadequate, and that they are not responsive or interested in helping, and thus many teachers solve such problems themselves, including power and internet outages, video and sound issues, the disappearance of materials from the platform, among others. One of the teachers reported:

(18) I solve these [IT] problems by getting everything double: backup internet connection, headphones, laptop battery... If there is a minor error, I always have a solution. There's no other way—I'm my own IT support.

If technical difficulties occur, it can happen that teachers are not reimbursed for the class or even have to pay a fine. There are, of course, other cases where teachers managed to successfully resolve their IT issues with the help of IT support. One teacher shared his experiences of working with different companies:

(19) In * I had constant problems with Skype, IT support 4 out of 5. * had problems with the platform, IT support 1 out of 5. * had rare problems with the platform, IT support 5 out of 5.

When teachers who had worked in multiple companies summed up their impressions, they repeatedly highlighted the following problems:

(20) They [the students] suddenly cancel classes and I am not compensated.

(21) The salary is delayed without giving any explanation and my time slots are reduced for no reason.

(22) There is a lack of understanding or empathy when you have to take a leave.

(23) Serbian professors are treated as cheap labor by the companies.

In addition to these general problems, Coghlan (2023) mentions one that is closely linked to our research. When it comes to teaching Chinese students, in order to conduct their classes effectively teachers should have insight into the Chinese culture, educational system, and learner characteristics. Furthermore, it should be borne in mind that the aforementioned difficulties¹³ may only be problematic for teachers who are transitioning from traditional to online teaching. These problems may not be so prevalent among teachers who have primarily taught online classes or Chinese students. In the next section, we focus on issues that may arise when dealing with two different cultures.

¹³ Lamy and Hampel (2010) give a useful list of online resources that could alleviate some of these issues.

4.3 Challenges related to cultural differences between China and Serbia

Given the differences in approaches to education between the East and the West in regard to theoretical frameworks, it is not surprising that nearly half of our respondents (22 of them) experienced some form of culture shock when they started interacting with Chinese students. Primarily, they were surprised by the number of obligations Chinese students have in their schools, by their sense of responsibility, and their general obedience and courtesy towards teachers, especially when it comes to preschool children. On the other hand, they also noted that Chinese students could be highly sensitive to negative feedback:

(24) Children from China are so polite and well brought up and kind, but also shy and sensitive.

(25) There is a huge pressure on the children, coming mostly from their parents.

(26) The students can get offended at any negative feedback, no matter how mildly or softly you put it. And its only purpose is to help them to acquire the language better and more efficiently.

These varied perspectives, arising from cultural differences between the Chinese and Serbian cultures, prompted the teachers to reconsider their approaches and adapt their conduct when teaching and giving feedback to their Chinese students. Furthermore, the teachers were struck by the seriousness, sternness, and ambition that parents held for their children. Some parents attended the classes, which some teachers described as a positive influence, while others regarded it as a hindrance for the child:

(27) The parents of my students don't interfere in the teaching process, they just sit next to the children, encourage them to follow the teacher's instructions, which I find exemplary.

(28) Working with Chinese children is different when compared to our kids. Their children are learning far more advanced materials for a 5 or 6-year-old, they [the parents] enforce strong discipline and can be very strict.

(29) I believe they interfere way too much, they are given so much leeway that they want to enforce what should be taught in class and in which way. This puts additional stress [on teachers] because in addition to trying to convey knowledge to the students, you have to watch out and please the parents, otherwise they can give you a bad review which influences your teacher rating.

(30) The parents shout at or even beat their children during class, the kids have classes while being on the toilet or while they are eating. At times, they have classes in the middle of a crowded restaurant or shopping malls.

The positive effects of the parents' presence can be seen in their ability to assist their children in their learning. This is especially evident with preschool children. Parents encourage their children to focus on their lessons, praise them or at times translate words that the teacher is not able to convey using English only. However, the negative effects surface when parents put too much pressure on their children, hampering the learning process because the children become severely stressed or, as some of our respondents pointed out, are punished for not doing exactly as they are told.

The most glaring cases which constantly perplexed our respondents were eating during class or being on the toilet while having the camera turned on, or even undressing and dressing the children while taking the class:

(31) Many of the family members are in the background dressed inappropriately and they make constant noise.

(32) One of the funny things that happen is that the children 'take you' with them to the toilet, put down their iPads on the floor so they wouldn't miss a minute of their class time :). I've also taken part in their family celebrations, they would put me, that is to say, the iPad at the table so that I could see what they were eating and drinking and I'd have a chat with the family as if I were truly there :).

Given the fact that our respondents come from a European culture where things such as nudity or going to the toilet while others are technically present, our teachers were shocked at first to witness such situations. However, they did mention that they were able either to get used to these occurrences or to communicate with the parents to ensure that such situations were not repeated. Nevertheless, given that Chinese people appear to be more relaxed about certain cultural norms, our respondents noted a certain hesitance and reserve among students when it came to expressing their opinions.

Half of the teachers were prepared for such cases since they had taught students from other Asian countries previously or had lived in China and thus did not experience culture shock:

(33) I had no culture shock because I was already acquainted with their culture before I started teaching online since I had lived in China for quite some time.

(34) There was no shock, I taught students from Korea and Japan before and the notion of Asian culture was somewhat familiar to me.

(35) I lived in China for 9 years, so many of the cultural differences didn't phase me.

In addition, some respondents noted that, despite some major differences, there are also similarities between the two cultures:

(36) Some details are completely different from our culture, but you quickly realize that we are very similar to them in terms of how we were brought up, certain habits and family values.

Our respondents who had experience of teaching both Serbian and Chinese children were able to draw our attention to the most notable similarities and differences between the cultures. The most obvious difference lies in the different degrees of discipline, perseverance, and ambition:

(37) Children from foreign countries come to class no matter if they are sick, tired, etc.

(38) The discipline of the Chinese students is on a much higher level and they spend more hours in school or doing their homework. Our students spend more time at home and have fewer extracurricular activities.

(39) Students from Serbia are less focused on the subject matter, chants are too boring or outdated for them, they would rather listen to things more appropriate for adults. They are bored of learning a new language and are mostly there because they have to be. Chinese students enjoy learning. They are much more mature.

(40) A 7-year-old child in our school and a 7-year-old in a Chinese school are not on the same level of thinking or learning. It looks to me as if the Chinese children have more activities to do, they are aware of their responsibilities and show more respect towards their tutors (please take into consideration that this is still a generalization and that there are certainly 7-year-old Chinese students who don't know a word of English).

In their comparisons, participants highlighted that Serbian students are less reserved when it comes to asking for clarification or help. They will openly approach problems and are not hesitant to experiment with the use of the language. However, Serbian students are less motivated than their Chinese counterparts, and are not as driven or focused. Conversely, Chinese students were perceived as more mature and dedicated to their learning, but ultimately very shy and hesitant to express themselves apart from giving rudimentary answers.

The most experienced teachers in our study provided direct insight into negative experiences in Serbian schools, which may have motivated them to switch to online teaching for a different group of students:

(41) Teachers are often victims of mobbing and they are not respected. Parents have high demands and too high standards and the teachers are not paid well enough to put in the extra effort to entertain their misbehaving children. I don't have such problems teaching Chinese students online.

(42) I've worked for traditional schools but then I decided to try out online teaching, because it was more convenient. I've worked for three companies. With Japanese people in *, with Russians in * and with Chinese in *. I had a difficult time with adult Japanese students because they are not sincere and expect the teacher to have all the answers at any given point. During the class, they smile and are polite, but after the class, they give you three out of five stars. With adult Russian students I had an easy time because they were more relaxed, frank and flexible, but I didn't like that they didn't respect my time and they constantly rescheduled or canceled classes. With the Chinese children, I had a phenomenal time—they are diligent, attentive and they crack me up with their jokes.

A vocal majority of our respondents regarded these differences as positive because the children are inherently curious, which can get students interested in talking, while also providing an opportunity for teachers to learn something new. By getting to know the culture and language of their students, teachers develop feelings of attachment and respect from their students and even their families. Beyond these general observations, our study found that in most cases, cultural differences motivated students to be more responsible and show increased enthusiasm for the classes. Our respondents liked the fact that they have an array of topics they can discuss and are able to compare culture and everyday life in Asia, North America, and Europe. Although the students and teachers originate from different sides of the planet, certain teachers found they have many interests in common, including books, comics, and hobbies. Some teachers were indifferent towards the cultural differences; consequently, these were neither a barrier nor a source of inspiration, and these teachers approached all of their students in the same manner. Nevertheless, some teachers found dealing with another culture to be a hurdle, making it difficult for them to connect with their students (the teachers themselves admitted this was

due to their "rigid" nature or their inability to understand the biggest differences). They believe that the crux of the issue is that their students are children who do not have broader or more in-depth knowledge of the world.

5. Conclusion

Many students from China study the English language for the purposes of better employment, international communication, and obtaining a better general education. Language schools and companies recognized an opportunity for profit, and with the growing number of potential students, the number of companies offering English lessons online has increased. This has required hiring a significant number of educators. According to our research carried out since 2023, in Serbia educators in the employ of such companies consist of adequately qualified teachers (36 out of 53 respondents), predominantly of the female gender (46 out of 53 respondents). The aim of this study was to explore the difficulties that this teacher cohort encounters when two seemingly completely different cultures meet in an online environment. Based on the online survey and the responses of 53 participants, we conclude that the teachers are aware of the advantages that the virtual classroom brings, and so fully utilize the flexibility related to teaching materials, time and spatial planning. Conversely, they lamented the lack of direct contact and closer interactions with the students, as these have the potential to enhance the learning experience, especially when teaching children online.

Based on the survey responses, we found that companies employing online teachers differ in regard to their attitudes towards the teachers, the training they provide for teachers who are just starting to teach online, and the degree of IT support they put at their employees' disposal. The teachers stated that they had adequate training and that acquiring the necessary equipment did put a strain on them; however, they were not always satisfied with their salaries, the support they were given, or the attitudes of companies towards employees. A potential solution would be to have a more competitive market and thus companies or schools would be forced to provide higher quality programs and teaching materials, better working conditions for teachers and legally binding rights regarding paid vacation, sick leave, and benefits.

A particularly relevant part of our research was that concerning cultural differences. The majority of teachers noted that cultural differences exist and are typically reflected in the students' level of responsibility, in showing respect to their teachers, as well as in the unrealistic expectations of parents. Generally, the presence of parents during lessons hampers the learning process, and strict attitudes on the part of parents places additional pressure on the students. Moreover, teachers were surprised at certain lax behavior, such as students going to the toilet during class and family members appearing scantily dressed in the background. Based on a great number of similar responses we can conclude that the Chinese students do not see this as inappropriate behavior.

Despite the significant differences, most of our respondents viewed these differences in culture as positive and as an opportunity to learn something new about their students' way of life, their family values, and their immediate environment. The language of communication is predominantly English; only very rarely is it some third intermediary language and almost never the student's mother tongue, which, in the words of our respondents, always elicits priceless and hilarious reactions.

Our research has the limitation of viewing only the teachers' perspectives, and thus, in future studies we would suggest doing similar research from the viewpoint of the students and/or their parents. This would enhance the validity of the results and yield a broader picture of the difficulties that arise in online education.

AI declaration statement: No AI tools were used when writing this paper, aside from Microsoft Word's spellchecker. No AI tools were utilized in the process of collecting, interpreting or presenting the data used in the research.

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