

Teaching in the Time of COVID-19: Sri Lankan Students' Perceptions on Learning Chinese Characters via Online Teaching

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The COVID-19 pandemic has made a significant impact on global economics, public health, social wellbeing, and especially the education sector. Since the inception of 2020, educational institutes across the globe from elementary to tertiary level have collapsed due to frequent lockdowns and the rapid growth of Coronavirus. Therefore, the majority of universities and academic institutions have shifted to online Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as Blackboard, Moodle, Microsoft teams, and Zoom, etc. Similarly, the University of Kelaniya implemented a Computer Assisted Learning system (CAL) to upload teaching material and to conduct online lectures. Using this online system to teach Chinese characters for beginners' level, first-year undergraduates was a challenging task as the batch comprised more than 200 students. In comparison to the traditional physical class room where all four skills of language learning - writing, reading, listening and speaking - are incorporated in the teaching process and monitored closely while directly interacting with the learners, online teaching of Chinese

characters prevents teachers from maintaining face-to-face interaction with learners, which thereby hinders the opportunity to provide real time feedback. As a result, CAL-based online teaching of Chinese characters showcases several pitfalls including the difficulties faced by learners in identifying multiple meanings, pronunciations, and stroke patterns. Therefore, this study aims to investigate Sri Lankan students' perceptions on learning Chinese characters through online lectures and to suggest innovative teaching methodologies to overcome the challenges. The data were collected through a questionnaire administered among a sample of 60 first-year undergraduates reading for the Bachelor of Arts (B.A) general degree programme at the Department of Modern Languages, University of Kelaniya. The findings revealed that the main difficulty of learning Chinese characters online was identifying the correct use of stroke patterns. Apart from that, some learners were unable to pronounce the sounds of the characters correctly and could not differentiate the meaning of similar characters. Furthermore, the learners were demotivated by the repetitive errors that occurred while writing Chinese characters as the teacher was unable to correct the mistakes of students virtually. The research findings further revealed that the use of a writing pad instead of a mouse to write Chinese characters allowed teachers to write the letters neatly and that the use of GIF and animated images enabled the learners to easily identify Chinese characters and writing patterns. Accordingly, the study suggests that the first-year course delivery of the Chinese B.A.

General Degree should be revised with innovative teaching methodologies appropriate for online teaching to make the learning of Chinese characters an interesting and stress-free experience.

Keywords: *COVID-19, students' perceptions, Chinese characters, Chinese as a foreign language, online teaching*