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**The impact of Chinese culture in online learning:  
Chinese tertiary students' perceptions**

A thesis  
submitted in partiale fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Education

By  
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## **Abstract**

This thesis looks at Chinese students' understanding of online learning, investigates how culture impact on students online learning attitude, behaviour, and achievement, and seeks their recommendations for eLearning and eTeaching guidelines and/or professional development. This study used a qualitative framework and took place over a year period. The research involved the methods of email surveys and interviews.

The literature identifies many factors including the online learning and teaching pedagogy, aspects of Chinese culture, the implications for online Chinese students' learning, and Chinese students learning in another country. This review helps to identify some research findings of this research.

This finding of this research identified participants' experience and their perceptions of learning online, explored their beliefs about Chinese cultural impact on their online learning, and sought their recommendations to eTeachers and other Chinese students about eTeaching and eLearning.

In the light of literature, this research found that participants had different opinions about the impact of Chinese culture on their online learning. Participants had seen both positive and negative impacts on their online learning. The acknowledgment of individuals' differences and willingness of adapting to a new culture was viewed as a reason why some participants thought the cultural impact varied with individuals and could not be generalized. The invisibility of culture was also explained why some participants disagreed with the cultural impact. Participants' perceptions on the impact of Chinese culture on their online learning would help eTeachers to understand the learning difficulties for Chinese students to study online, and in what ways the Chinese culture influences on their online learning.

The recommendations participants made to eTeachers were related to the effective

eTeaching pedagogy such as to give timely feedback and more encouragements to students, to cater for students' different needs and interests by selecting some course contents or examples relevant to Chinese students' backgrounds. Participants suggested eTeachers to arrange the group meeting beside the course study, and to give more introductions about what online learning was before the online course started. Based on the consideration of the English language difficulties for Chinese students and some negative impacts from Chinese culture, participants made recommendations to other Chinese students such as to be willing to share ideas, to speak out their thoughts and to be active in asking for assistance, and to find more information before they chose online learning. Participants' those recommendations could help eTeachers to make some changes of eTeaching pedagogy and learn about Chinese students' culture in order to cater for Chinese students' interests and needs. Therefore, these recommendations could be helpful for eLearning and eTeaching guidelines and/or professional development on supporting Chinese students learning online both in New Zealand and China.

This study raised some concerns about possible future research such as how to maximise librarian's assistance in online course, and in what ways both Chinese students' written and spoken English language could be improved through learning online.

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# **Chapter 1: Introduction**

## **1.1 Introduction**

This thesis is an investigation into Chinese tertiary students' perceptions of the impact of Chinese culture in online learning.

This chapter begins by giving background to this research (1.2), and explains the research objective (1.3). It concludes with an overview of the thesis structure (1.4).

## **1.2 Background to this research**

This study began for the researcher in 2007 after having completed a paper on research methodology, one fully online paper (eEducation research and development), and a Postgraduate Diploma in Education at the School of Education in the University of Waikato. The knowledge I gained from these two papers and my whole studies in the Postgraduate Diploma in Education inspired me to undertake a piece of my own research. Having five years of primary school teaching experience helped me to be aware of the importance of attending to students' voices and needs. Being a Chinese student undertaking a fully online paper gave me some insight about Chinese students' needs and voices, and actually inspired me into researching Chinese students' perceptions of the cultural impact on online learning. I also realised that this research could make recommendations for eLearning and eTeaching guidelines and/or professional development in supporting Chinese students study online in both New Zealand and China.

## **1.3 Research aims**

This research took place in 2007 and involved eight Chinese students' participation through email surveys. Three of these students also participated in individual interviews.

The aim of this research was to look at Chinese students' understanding of online learning, investigate how they perceived the cultural impact on students' online learning attitude, behaviour, participation and achievements, and seek their recommendations for eLearning and eTeaching guidelines and/or professional development.

The research questions were to ask participants what their understanding of online learning was, what their perceptions of the cultural impact on their online learning attitude, behaviour and achievements were, and what would they recommend to eTeachers and other Chinese students about eTeaching and eLearning. These aims and research questions were further defined into email surveys and interview questions which developed from a review of the relevant literature. This review is the focus of the Chapter 2.

#### **1.4 An overview of this thesis**

This thesis looks at Chinese students' understanding of online learning, and explores their beliefs about cultural impacts on online learning attitude, behaviour and achievements. It identifies the relevant literature about the Chinese cultural influences on students' beliefs and values, and makes recommendations for eLearning and eTeaching guideline and/or professional development.

Chapter 2, the literature review, examines literature in relation to online learning and teaching pedagogy, aspects of Chinese culture, the implications for online Chinese students' learning, and Chinese students learning in another country. Much of this chapter looks at the aspects of Chinese culture to provide readers with a background of Chinese culture.

Chapter 3, the methodology, covers both the theoretical framework of this study and the research methods. It explains the qualitative approach of this study and details the research methods of email surveys and interviews, and data analysis. This chapter also covers ethical considerations.

Chapter 4, the research results, outlines the findings gathered from the email surveys and interviews. This chapter focuses on the participants' perceptions of cultural impacts.

Chapter 5, the discussion section, reconsiders the research findings in the light of the literature.

Chapter 6, the conclusion, contains a summary of the research findings, and outlines research limitations and some possible areas for the future research.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the background information from previous research literature in these areas: online learning and teaching pedagogy, aspects of Chinese culture, the implications for online Chinese students' learning, and Chinese students learning in another country.

### 2.2 Online learning and teaching pedagogy

Not all the online courses are the same, and the learning and teaching pedagogy applied to the design and implementations of different online courses is varied. This section will examine literature around the quality of online learning and effective online teaching pedagogy.

#### 2.2.1 The role of eTeachers

Many studies have been carried out involving the discussion of the role of eTeachers in online teaching pedagogy (Bender, 2003; Ko & Rossen, 2004; Salmon, 2003; Stephenson, 2001; White & Weight, 2000). A famous writer in Computer-Mediated Communication and distance education, Zane Berge focused on Computer-Mediated Communication and the online classroom, particularly in higher education. A number of his publications talked about the features and perspectives of virtual schools, technology and the changing role of students, teachers, curriculum and institutions. In his book *New Roles for Learner and Teachers in Online Higher Education* (2000), he pointed out that the teachers' role "changes from oracle and lecturer to consultant, guide and resource provider, from a solitary teacher to a member of learning team, from total control of the teaching environment to sharing with the students as fellow learner" (p. 6). Berge (2001) stated that the online instructor becomes a co-explorer and co-discoverer rather than a spectator in his or her interaction with the students. Nikolov (2001), a

specialist in distance learning, looked at the role of learners in a global knowledge space and the teachers' role in the learner-centred pedagogy. He discussed some factors mentioned above, that the eTeachers were mostly facilitators, co-learners, persons ensuring the right educational resources at the right time, helping students to access to other relevant resources, analysing the students' problems, and helping them any time when needed. Gilly Salmon is a well-known author in the eEducation field and her books 'e-moderating', both 2000 and 2003 editions, profoundly described the concepts of e-moderating, e-moderating qualities and roles, e-moderating skills, and talked about training e-moderators and e-moderators' experiences. According to Salmon's pedagogy, e-moderating is the key to teaching and learning online, and an eTeacher plays the role of an e-moderator. The e-moderator's main role is to engage the participants so that the knowledge they construct is usable in new and different situations. And the goal of the e-moderator is to enable 'meaning making' rather than content transmission (Salmon, 2003). Salmon also explained that e-moderators could be described as specialist tutors: "they deal with participants but in rather different ways because everyone is working online" (2000, p. 38). As an online education expert, Anita Bischoff's specialties are in student retention expertise, faculty training and development, online curriculum revision, and strategic planning ability. She discussed the elements of effective online teaching, and eTeachers' effectiveness in visibility, feedback, material and retention areas, and also specified the role of eTeachers, as online instructors, who should develop the above four areas of proficiency with fresh perspectives and innovative instructional strategies (2000). According to her explanation of these four areas, instructors need to be visible in the classroom to ensure students could 'see' them; frequent, consistent, and diplomatic online feedback is needed; instructors should provide supplemental material, carefully edited materials, and post materials on set dates; and the retention area of proficiency refers to instructors monitoring students' participation, giving them encouragement, and helping them to solve learning problems. White and Weight (2000) in their book *The Online Teaching Guide: A Handbook of Attitudes, Strategies, and Techniques for the Virtual Classroom* discussed the key

of role of eTeachers as the importance of interaction and feedback, learner control, access to directions and help, consistency and organization, and assessment and record keeping. Apart from discussing some features of online learning such as dialogue between students-teachers and students-students, easy access to and interrogation of high volumes of diverse learning resources, Stephenson (2001) paid particular interest to some eTeaching pedagogy to embrace online learning. He suggested that interactions between learners and learners, learners and teachers would be a major source of information and monitoring of progress. Networking and collaboration between individuals or groups of learners were also discussed as a key learning activity. To provide feedback on task performance and to help to develop personal identity in community of learners was emphasized by Mayes (2001). He argued that eTeachers need to focus on supporting the learner's involvement in collaboration, authentic tasks, reflection and dialogues, and to do so in a way which addresses issues of identity and community. Mayes recommended it was needed to support dialogue both to provide feedback on task performance in practice fields, and to help to develop personal identity in a community of learners. Bender based her research on online learning and teaching pedagogy practice at the Cornell University in the United States. In her book *Discussion-Based Online Teaching to enhance Student Learning* (2003), she talked about the application of learning theories to the online environment; showed how she applied learning theories to online discussion-based courses; and presented suggestions and techniques, illustrated by real examples, for stimulating and managing online discussion effectively and for improving teaching practices. In particular, she paid attention to the importance of the awareness of students' needs and differing abilities. She explained that online instructors needed to be aware of students' different interests, backgrounds and skills. Ko and Rossen (2004) wrote a practical guide for teaching online based on their online teaching experiences at the University of California in Los Angeles. One of their online teaching pedagogies did not emphasize online instructors' technical capabilities, but focused on using technology for the online environment in order to enhance students' learning. They talked about how to use different software platforms to

build an online classroom, and some rules and guidelines to help eTeachers to make use of the Web for students' activities.

As discussed above, the role of eTeachers has been described as facilitator, organizer, counsellor, coach, supervisor, and problem solver over the years (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles & Turoff, 1995). Unlike traditional classroom activity, in which the teacher directs the instruction, leads the lessons, prompts responses, and paces the class, an eTeacher acts more like a facilitator rather than a lecturer. This change may require eTeachers to develop new skills, strategies, and capabilities for effective teaching online. This research sought recommendations for eTeachers, and eLearning and eTeaching professional development from Chinese online students.

### 2.2.2 Learner-centred approach

A learner-centred approach is consistent with an eTeacher's role as facilitator and 'e-moderator'. The main principle in the learner-centred pedagogy is that the learner should not receive knowledge passively, but construct knowledge through the active engagement of online activities and effective interactions (Nikolov, 2001). Bonk and King (1998) explained the learner-centred psychological principles that the learning process is to create meaning and construct knowledge from the information and experience. The successful learner can create and use strategies and reasoning thinking to achieve the learning goal. Learning is influenced by sociocultural factors including culture, technology, and instructional practices, social interaction, interpersonal relations and communication with others. They explained that what and how much is learned are influenced by learners' motivation, and acquisition of complex knowledge and skills requires extended learner effort and guided practice. In particular, they discussed that individual learners can have a different approach, different strategies, and capabilities for learning. They noted that learning is the most effective when differences in learners' linguistic, cultural and social backgrounds are taken into account, and setting appropriate standards and assessing learners are essential parts of the

learning process. Similarly, to cater to the learner was the first strategy in any successful e-learning endeavour identified when Shea-Schultz and Fogarty discussed the learner-centred approach (2002). They explained that ‘cater to’ means to provide anything wished for or needed. In other words, eTeachers must understand why and how learners need the information or knowledge, and why and how they use it, where and when they want to learn it. McCombs and Vakili (2005) discussed the key issues in eLearning to support learner-centred principles as:

Building ways to meet learner needs for interpersonal relationships and connections; finding strategies that acknowledge individual differences and the diversity of learner needs, abilities and interests; tailoring strategies to differing learner needs for personal control and choice; assessing the efficacy of technology to meet diverse and emerging individual learner and learning community needs. (p.1595)

From this point of view, meeting individuals’ needs and acknowledging learners’ differences in their interests, abilities, and choices are stressed in the learner-centred approach.

The discussion of constructivist theory in online courses has also involved some similar principles to the learner-centred approach. From a constructivist’s viewpoint, learners construct their own knowledge, based on their experience and relationship with concepts (Weller, 2002). Constructivism emphasizes a social construction of knowledge, and shifts the focus of attention from teachers to learners. This makes the role of e-educator a more facilitative one, rather than just the transmitter of the knowledge. According to Bonk and King in their discussion of constructivism in online learning (1998), web-based learning tools developed social interaction, and “learned-centred instructional practices are transforming learning from silent, solitary, acts to lively, meaning making rich in discussion and interchange” (p. 35). So, from a constructivist view, the key of a learner-centred approach in online learning is a process of knowledge construction through the interactions between learners and eTeachers, and learners and learners.

Therefore, listening to students’ voices, looking at students’ perspectives, being

aware of and catering to students' needs, interests, and abilities are essential in the success of the learner-centred online teaching and learning environment. As White (2006) pointed out, online teaching is customerised: students are customers, and it is important that their expectations are met to ensure customer satisfaction. This research study was designed to look at Chinese students' needs, interests in online learning, and listen to their voices on the cultural impact on their online learning. Online interaction and support was perceived as an important part of online learning in this research.

### 2.2.3 Online discussion/communication/interaction and online support

Many researchers have discovered that online interaction is central to the success of online teaching and learning among others (Berge, 1999; Flottemesch, 2000; Jin, 2005). The quality of online interaction plays a key role in the students' learning process and outcomes as well as the effectiveness of an online course. Interaction is generally regarded as a two-way communication among two or more people within a learning context. Online interaction can occur between learner and instructor, learner and learner, learner and content (Dennen, Darabi & Smith, 2007). In the web-based learning environment, interaction can refer to an instructor answering emails and providing feedback to students, and students asking questions and receiving feedback. Within the interaction between different learners, information is exchanged, and feedback is also provided by other learners. The interaction between learners and content includes the interaction with the content of the instruction and interpersonal reflection combining new knowledge with that which already existed and within the learner's life experience.

Some literature about students' perceptions of online interaction stressed the link between the online interaction, feedback and students' enthusiasm (Bender, 2003; Donaghy, McGee, Ussher & Yates, 2003). Jin's (2005) research on student-student and student-instructor interaction through multiple communication tools in web-based learning indicated that students learning outcomes were improved through effective online interaction: through online interaction with others,

students shared their experiences, explored multiple perspectives and were motivated to practice skills or apply a process newly learned from another. Students also developed metacognitive and self-evaluative skills rather than an ability to memorize facts from a textbook or through lectures. Therefore, good online interaction between teachers and students, and students and students can increase students' motivation and online participation, and benefit students' learning process and outcomes. Bender (2003) found the significance of feedback in increasing students' learning motivation and in improving learning outcomes. She discussed how frequent feedback is helpful in letting students know how they are doing and maintaining their motivation, and that the feedback must be encouraging so that it stresses the positive of the students' achievements before mentioning suggestions for improvement, as this reinforcement further increases motivation. Donaghy, McGee, Ussher and Yates (2003) studied the way a group of university online students study, learn and organise their time at School of Education in the University of Waikato. An effective online interaction was identified as the key component to the success of their research program, and teachers' feedback was an important aspect of effective teaching and relevant in an online context. According to their research findings, there was a strong link between the lecturer's level of interaction and the students' enthusiasm. Lecturers who regularly participated online and gave feedback tended to produce what students regarded as better interaction through class discussions. In contrast, the lecturers who only posted a question were less likely to produce the same level of discussion because students felt the lecturer was only doing the minimal requirements and therefore they would do the same.

Some literature, in particular, emphasized the importance of prompt and positive feedback in online learning (Bender, 2003; Young 2006). Positive feedback is especially important online, where tone of voice and facial expression are absent. Online critical words can come across sounding more harsh than intended (Bender, 2003). Without positive feedback, some students may feel unsatisfied and disappointed with their contribution and participation. Instructor responsiveness

(answering emails and providing feedback) and message tone or style effect student learning motivation (Gahungu, Dereshiwsy & Moan, 2006; Russo & Campbell, 2004). For example, well-worded suggestions gently pointing out what students need to improve are easily accepted by students and valuable for students' improvement. When the instructor needs to provide critical feedback to students, the feedback should be expressed in a way that maintains the learner's dignity as well as providing an effective analysis of the problem. As a result, students need to be encouraged by a positive feedback about a contribution before presenting a critique. And critiques should be written in an appropriate way that gives students suggestions for their future improvement. Immediacy is also important to feedback. Young (2006) pointed out that timely feedback from instructors is essential to the success of online interaction. Prompt feedback is needed because students expect their contributions to be acknowledged, and they need to know what needs to be improved. Students may feel isolated and unmotivated, sometimes frustrated without prompt feedback. Therefore, the provision of positive and prompt feedback between eTeachers and students, and students and students can increase students learning enthusiasm, and enhance the interaction between teachers and students. This research looked at how Chinese students perceived feedback as one of features of being an effective eTeacher.

Apart from the interaction with eTeachers and other online learning students, librarians also can play an important role in supporting student study online. There is little in the literature on how librarians' major mission is to find ways to ensure that learners have access to information resources, and can acquire information skills, and then become information literate (Sacchanand & Jaroenpuntaruk, 2005). Therefore, effectively involving librarians' assistance in online courses needs to be paid attention in the web-based learning environment so that students can access appropriate support and assistance.

### **2.3 Aspects of Chinese culture**

Culture is abstract, complex, and invisibly influences people's beliefs, values and

behaviour. The Confucian culture has deeply influenced Chinese people's beliefs and values. This section looks at the concept of culture, and then focuses on understanding Confucian culture.

### 2.3.1 The understanding of culture

The concept of culture has been widely discussed (Lustig & Koester, 2003; Samovar & Porter, 2004). Culture is often used to refer to large groups of people. Humans are not born with the genetic imprint of a particular culture; instead, people learn about their culture through the social interaction. Biggs and Moore (1993) defined culture as "the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings which is transmitted from one generation to another" (p. 24). Culture is also a set of shared interpretations that exist in people's minds and not in external or tangible objects or behaviours. According to Geertz's definition (1973), culture is "the fabrics of meaning with which humans being interpret their experience and guide their actions"(p. 42). Culture has three layers: the basic norms and values shared by all human beings; the collective beliefs and values shared by particular groups of people; and an individual's unique experience of people and things (Hofstede, 1980). Similarly, three components of cultural patterns are defined as beliefs, values and norms. These three components provide a way of thinking about the world and orientating oneself to it (Lusting & Koester, 2003). These three layers and components identified that culture has an impact on people's beliefs, values and behaviours. Lustig and Koester (2003) found that, "the shared interpretations that characterize a culture give people guidelines about what things mean, what is important, and what should or should not be done" (p. 30). Therefore, to some extent, culture stabilizes people's interactions or communication patterns and styles. However, most of the time people are not conscious of the cultural impact. Samovar and Porter (2004) pointed out that invisibility is one of the important characteristics of culture. By saying this, most of culture is in the taken-for-granted realm and below the conscious level. In other words, culture influences people from the instant they are born, and people are rarely aware of cultural influences. The understanding of culture helps to

understand why people have different beliefs, values and actions. The following section will examine more specific aspects of Chinese culture: Confucian thought and its impact on Chinese society, education and students' learning.

### 2.3.2 Confucian culture

Confucian culture has tremendous impact on Chinese society. Confucius was born in 551 BC. 'Kong' was his family name and 'Qiu' was his given name. He is thought of as "a great thinker, statesman, educator, and the founder of the Confucian School of Thought in ancient China, as well as one of the supremely great figures in the world's history" (Luo, Guo, Li & Zhang, 1989, p. 2). Confucius's thoughts and sayings have also influenced many other East and Southeast Asian nations such as Japan, Korea, and Singapore. Therefore, the understanding of Confucius is greatly helpful for understanding Chinese culture and some other Asian cultures.

#### 2.3.2.1 Confucius's beliefs in education

Some studies have argued that the Confucian tradition has strongly influenced education in particular (Creel, 1960; Fan, 1999; Liu, 1998). Shen (2001) argued that one of the aspects of the influence from Confucian culture on Chinese society is emphasizing the importance of education and learning. Confucius believed in the importance of education: "everyone is educable, everyone is perfectible forms the basic optimism and dynamism towards education" (Lee, 1996). By saying this, education is perceived as important for personal improvement and societal development. Shen also argued that the Confucius's purpose for education focused more on social development rather than individual development because Confucius illustrated a developmental path for his students to cultivate themselves first, then achieve family harmony, then good order in the state, finally achieve harmony of society (2001).

The Confucius's conceptions of learning are related to some beliefs such as human perfectibility and educability, and emphasis on effort, and will power (Lee, 1996).

Firstly, Confucius perceived that although individuals have differences in intelligence, everyone who wants to learn is educable. Secondly, Confucius emphasized the significance of effort in the learning process.

If another man succeeds by one effort, he will use a hundred efforts. If another man succeeds by ten efforts, he will use a thousand. Let a man proceed in this way, and though dull, he will surely become intelligent; though weak, he will surely become strong. (Wikiquotes, 2001)

By saying this, it does not mean Confucius ignored individuals' differences in intelligence, but he stressed the attitude and effort in learning is far more important than individual intelligence. He also believed that people could increase their intelligence through putting effort into learning. Confucius's follower Menzi explained that self-determination or will power is the driving force of effort (Lee, 1996). As discussed above, these Confucius' beliefs and values have existed in Chinese people's minds and deeply influenced their learning attitudes and actions.

Confucius's beliefs and values influence how students learn and teachers instruct. These main influences on learning and teaching are learning attitude; respect for teachers as authority; memorising information rather than critical thinking; extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivation; communication patterns; and individualism and collectivism.

*Learning attitude: 'face'; hard work, effort and will power*

Firstly, under the Confucian cultural influence, the ultimate purpose of learning is to serve society. Education is viewed as an instrumental entity to cultivate noble persons in order to fulfil social responsibility (Yan, Zheng & Li, 2006). According to the Confucian tradition, a child's academic achievement is associated with family's 'face', so children have been told that learning is not just for themselves, but also for maintaining parents' face. The concept of face is very important in traditional Chinese society as well as the modern China (Ching, 1992). For example, people would be ashamed and lose face if they were criticized publicly. If they do something wrong, they feel they have brought shame on the whole family. Therefore, to some extent, the external pressure for maintaining their

family's face actually drives students learning instead of their internal self-interests.

For Confucianism, education and learning are always associated with effort. Self-determination or will-power is the driving force of effort (Wang, 2006). Tang and Biggs also pointed out, "success comes to those who apply themselves to their allotted tasks unremittingly; with diligence, you can grind an iron bar into a needle, as a Chinese proverb puts it" (1996, p. 159-160). Hue (2007) commented that students were expected to put effort into their learning, as it was regarded as a crucial way through which they could be trained as civilised and cultivated persons. In the view of these teachers, putting in effort meant that students had to engage in the learning tasks they were assigned, endure the boring memorizing, pay attention to what teachers said and demonstrate self-control (p. 33). Therefore, effort, hard work, and self-determination are significantly emphasized by Confucian culture.

#### *Respect teachers as authority*

Chinese have a proverb: teacher for a day, parent for life. This indicates teacher plays a very important role in learning. Instead of questioning teachers, students should listen to teachers. Jiang (2006) explained that in Confucian culture, teachers know more than students, so they are at a higher level in the social hierarchy than students. As Tsui (1996) noted, students are not encouraged to speak out, to question or to criticise, and are unwilling to commit themselves for fear of being wrong and thus losing face. Students also expect a 'correct' answer from the teacher because they believe that the teacher has the sufficient knowledge to give guidance and counsel. Therefore, challenging teachers' ideas or thoughts is not encouraged, and is viewed as disregard for teachers. From this perspective, Chinese learners are used to receiving information from teachers without questioning teachers.

#### *Memorising information rather than critical thinking*

Lee (1996) pointed out that Confucian culture emphasizes memorization, and there is a lack of stress on the significance of reflective thinking in the process of learning. In western countries, it is believed that memorization does not enhance understanding. However, according to Lee (1996), memorising typically precedes understanding, and means becoming familiar with the text in order to achieve a deeper understanding. This argument is also related to the aspect of the students' learning motivation.

#### *Extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivation*

Westerners have seen intrinsic motivation as a way of defining what is interesting, meaningful and worthwhile (Yao, 2005). In comparison to the westerner's intrinsic motivation, Chinese learners tend to be more extrinsically motivated. They are more driven by family responsibilities, achieving power and high social status, or personal ambition such as career development and material reward. In addition, because of the competitive examination system (see below, 2.3.2.2), students are under tremendous pressure from the families, schools and the society so that their learning attitude is passive. Teaching and learning are assumed to be test-orientated.

#### *Communication pattern*

Holmes (2006) discussed some patterns of Chinese communication. Firstly, implicit communication is one of the important features. She explained, "the receiver must correctly interpret the speaker's intent without direct reference to what he or she means; information may also conveyed in the physical context" (p. 21). This implicit communication is listening-centred. The use of indirect language to help to maintain social harmony and face is a communication pattern (Samovar & Porter, 2004). In addition, maintaining silence during a conversation is viewed as respecting teachers and showing willingness to listen. Chinese culture places a value on silence in the classroom. Students' questioning teachers may be viewed as showing off or wasting time in the class. Direct eye contact is discouraged as it suggests impoliteness and disrespect (Holmes, 2005). It should be noted that

implicit communication, the use of indirect language, and maintaining silence is influenced by Confucian tradition and values - protection of face, respect for authority, the power between teacher and students.

### *Individualism and collectivism*

Many studies discussed the value of individualism and collectivism (Erez & Earley, 1993; Kim & Han Guk, 1994). Holmes, Ho and Copper (2004) defined some features of individualism as fostering independence and individual achievement; promoting self-expression, individual thinking and personal choice; being associated with equalitarian relationships and flexibility in roles; and being associated with private property and individual ownership. In contrast, collectivism is valued as encouraging interdependence and group success; promoting adherence to norms, respect for authority/elders and group harmony; being associated with stable, hierarchical roles; and being associated with shared property, group ownership. With regard to their perceptions of family, individualism emphasizes independence, individual autonomy and encourages self-reliance. Conversely, collectivism stresses family harmony, loyalty and responsibility (Samovar & Porter, 2004, p. 119). Hofstede and Bond (1984) found that Chinese culture is characterized as low on individualism and high on collectivism. According to Ho and Chiu (1994), Chinese culture is more collectivist than individualist, especially emphasizing altruism and the maintenance of harmony (p. 154-155).

Confucius influences Chinese thinking not only in how to learn but also in what to learn. Wang (2004) discussed Confucius's thinking as emphasizing learning knowledge, and paying much attention to moral education as well. "Moral education should teach an individual to be an upright person', and of 'learning to be', that is learning from social life" (Wang, 2004, p. 444). Through learning from example, environmental conditions and practice, individuals develop their moral characters. Lu (1997) pointed out that the Confucian tradition holds that teacher should not only teach knowledge but also cultivate in students a strong sense of

moral and righteous conduct. Chinese teachers, consequently, hold a position of moral authority and instruct in the culture's moral rules of conduct (As cited in Samovar & Porter, 2004, p. 236). In other words, according to Confucius's thinking, education is not only about knowledge obtaining, but also a moral training. This belief impacts on the Chinese contemporary education system.

### 2.3.2.2 Chinese examination system

According to the Confucian tradition, education is seen as an important means of gaining wealth, social status, power and success. From the Spring and Autumn Annals, the government made a policy to select government employees by using a competitive examination system, including the 'recommendation' from the referees and the written examinations (Zhu, 1992). Ordinary people were aware that the way to obtain wealth, power and social status is through education. The belief in the possibility of obtaining wealth, power and upward social status through the success in exams drove many ordinary people who desired wealth, power and high social status to study hard in order to succeed in the exams (Lee, 1996). This imperial examination system has left its mark in the contemporary Chinese society. After the imperial examination system was abolished and the empire was overthrown, National College Entrance Examinations (NCEE) have followed the structure and organization of the imperial examination, which continues to influence secondary and elementary education (Feng, 1999). Wang reported:

Even today, in contemporary China, academic success still remains the route to a good job and high social status. Success in public examinations, for instance, the National University Entrance Examination, means that one can expect a better career with security and high income after graduation from university. (2006, pp. 27-30)

Biggs and Watkins pointed out that such a competitive examination system increased pressure on teachers, parents and students (1996). As a result, learning is driven by the exam, and too much attention is paid to learning for the sake of passing the exam. Under the influence of traditional culture, less attention is paid to creative expression, critical thinking, and problem solving in the education

process (Yang, Zheng & Li, 2006). Consequently, teachers become test-focused; parents have more concerns about children's exams' results than the learning process; and the students' goal is to achieve good grades in exams, which is satisfying their family while meeting schools' requirements.

#### 2.3.2.3 Relationship between Chinese students and Chinese teachers

Teacher-student relationship is extremely important. Jiang (2006) pointed out that Confucianism is well known for its advocacy of respect for teachers. First of all, students treat teachers as their parents according to the Confucian tradition. Jiang also explained, in traditional China, teachers were usually male and older than their students, so the relationship between students and teachers was like father and son, and father was the authority in this relationship. This means teachers are superior and students are inferior, students need to listen to what teachers tell them to do. Therefore, the relationship between teachers and students is not equal, teachers are assumed as having higher status than students, and students should show high respect to teachers. Teachers' authority in the classroom is recognized, and being able to take control of the class is viewed as effective teaching (Ho, 2001). The students' role is to listen, obey and follow the teachers' instructions, and not to challenge teachers. Students' speaking loudly or talking to each other is forbidden, and they are only allowed to talk when teachers ask them questions. A common traditional belief is that teachers should keep distance from students in order to keep their high status. In addition, giving authority to teachers also means teachers have responsibility to morally guide students (Ho, 2001). One important principle in Confucian schooling is that teachers, like parents, are responsible for good behaviour in students.

### **2.4 Implications for online Chinese students learning**

As discussed above (2.3.2.1), under the influence of Confucian culture, Chinese students tend to use implicit communication, indirect language, and maintain silence during the communication. This section looks at the implications of these characteristics for online Chinese students learning.

### *Politeness and non-verbal communication*

Argyle (1986) pointed out that non-verbal communication plays a significant role in the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Locke and Daly (2007) found that students meet each other and establish relationships in online discussions, which are typically viewed as lacking other language signals such as body language. Also, Chinese students are perceived as more polite in a non-verbal communication environment. Mao (1994) argued that “face in the Chinese and Japanese context constitutes a publicly negotiated image” (p. 471), and explained that group harmony is privileged instead of individual freedom of action in a Chinese cultural context. Group harmony is achieved by showing politeness and maintaining face, both one’s own and that of others (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). Referring to group work, Carson and Nelson (1996) found that Chinese students showed unwillingness to provide critical feedback, instead preferring to say what the writer might want to hear in order to avoid conflict. Therefore, we can expect Chinese students to be more polite and indirect in asynchronous online discussion.

Online communication is different from face-to-face communication. According to Campbell’s research (2001), online interaction has its own characteristics. For example, online discussion patterns need to be understood by all the members of the group. Communication opportunities to explore ideas are expected and the chance to validate others, a source of pleasure for the recipients. The ability to ‘see’ other participants in an online discussion has broken down many of the barriers associated with working in and relying on a text-based discussion environment. Salmon (2000) also pointed out that it is possible to have more direct communication with tutors and more sharing of experience in online environment than in a face-to-face communication environment. However, there is becoming increased diversity in the student populations learning online, students who come from different cultures may be used to different communication patterns. So Chinese students may need to readjust their communication patterns and styles in

order to adapt to the online learning environment, and eTeachers may need to acknowledge the students' different cultural backgrounds and communication patterns so that they can adjust their teaching as well. When considering the number of Chinese student undertaking online courses in New Zealand, it is important to understand that Chinese students may have different communication patterns from the Confucian cultural influence, and these communication patterns may have implications in their online discussion. So Chinese students' perceptions of online discussion were investigated in this research, including their preferences between online discussion and face-to-face discussion, perceptions of online discussion being marked, and their level of comfort when they post different ideas to lecturers and peers in the online discussion.

### **2.5 Chinese students learning in another country**

International students, and ethnic Chinese students in particular, have an increasingly significant attendance on educational campuses in the western world - the United Kingdom, Ireland, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In 2003, it was estimated that students from China (45%), South Korea (20%) and Japan (17%) together accounted for more than 80% of the international students studying in New Zealand (Education New Zealand, 2003). Butcher (2004) found that the increase in numbers of Chinese students has underwritten growth in numbers at secondary schools and public tertiary institutions over the last five years in New Zealand.

With the number of Chinese students studying in New Zealand, and the increasing paper options available for studying online, it can be expected that there are a number of Chinese students choosing to study online or undertake online courses. Therefore, it is important to look at Chinese students' understanding of online learning, and their perceptions of cultural impact on their online learning as well as listen to their voices about their interests and needs on online learning. Increasingly, researchers are attending to student voice in their research (Motteram & Forrester, 2005; Morrow, 1999; Taylor, 2000; Young, 2006) and promote

awareness of students' needs in their teaching (Bender, 2003; Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Engvig & White, 2006; Laurillard, 2002; Palloff & Pratt, 2001; Palloff & Praff, 2003). However, there is very limited information about cultural impact on students' online learning. Therefore, it is timely and needed for this study to look at the cultural impact on online learning by listening to the voices of online students from another country. In this case, Chinese students studying in New Zealand are the research participants.

#### 2.5.1 Acknowledgement of the cultural differences

As discussed above (2.3.4), under the influence of Confucian culture, Chinese learners are assumed to have some particular learning attitudes and patterns: respect for authority, passive learner, and concerned about losing face. However, some researchers have reported the issue of Chinese students' adapting to the new educational environment. Volet and Renshaw (1996) reported that Chinese students adapt to meet the requirements of new educational environment while at the same time maintaining a high-achievement orientation throughout their academic study. Gu and Schweisfurth reported in his research (2006) of Chinese students who are studying at United Kingdom universities, their motivations for adjusting the new learning environment reflects their desire to succeed in their future and improve future career opportunities. They found that students derive satisfaction from the growth experience of intercultural adaptation itself, and the independence and confidence.

#### 2.5.2 Language difficulties

Apart from the difficulties in adapting to the new culture, Chinese students have encountered language difficulties due to their degree of language proficiency. It can be assumed that students' inadequate language competence may influence students' online learning including online communication, learning behaviour, and further academic achievements. According to Wang and Shan's research (2007), Chinese students have accommodated the language difficulties such as lack of English language proficiency in communication and academic writing when they

studied in Australia's universities. They reported that although Chinese students employed various strategies to improve their English language proficiency, especially in listening and speaking by watching television, listening to news bulletins and making local friends, they still did not have enough confidence in class because of their inadequate English. The language requirements for entering universities could not guarantee these students would participate in class activities effectively or complete assignments up to a certain academic standard. Berry and Williams (2004) also reported that the most noticeable problem for Hong Kong Chinese students to study in the United Kingdom is their inadequate English related to listening and speaking. Holmes (2000) pointed out that Chinese students have a fear that people would make fun of their attempts at communication, and fear they might not be able to understand teachers and classmates. Therefore, because of Chinese students' inadequate English, they experience difficulties in class participation and communication when they study in English-speaking countries. These language difficulties may also influence Chinese students' online participation and communication. This research sought to discover if learning online overcame or enhanced difficulties for students associated with language proficiency.

## **2.6 Chapter summary**

Aspects of the quality of online teaching and learning pedagogy have been discussed in this chapter. The role of eTeachers has been described as a facilitator, e-moderator, organizer, counsellor, coach, supervisor, and problem solver over the years in the literature reviewed. The key role for eTeachers is to engage participants and help them to construct knowledge rather than simply to transmit content. The learner-centred approach was also identified as an important online teaching pedagogy. The main pedagogical principle being that students discover and construct knowledge through their active online participation and their effective online interactions rather than receiving knowledge passively. Catering for students' different interests, abilities, and needs is stressed in the learner-centred approach. Online interaction is central to the success of online

learning and teaching, and students' enthusiasm and the provision of frequent, prompt and positive feedback from eTeachers is linked with success of online interaction. Librarians also play an important role in supporting students to study online.

The concept of culture has been identified as the collective beliefs and values shared by large group of people through social interaction and communication. Beliefs, values and norms are defined as the three basic components of culture. Culture influences people's beliefs, values and actions, but people are rarely aware of the cultural impact due to the invisibility of a culture.

Confucian culture has tremendous impact on Chinese society and is a strong influence on education in particular. The Confucian tradition emphasizes the importance of education for personal improvement and then societal development, and also pays attention to human perfectibility and educability, and moral education. Education is viewed as an important means of achieving wealth, social status, power and success. Confucian culture influences student's learning attitude and style. Students have significant concerns about their academic achievements in order to maintain the family's face, and efforts and will-power are viewed as very important in leading to successful learning outcomes. Students respect teachers as authority. Memorizing information is emphasized rather than critical thinking, and teachers and students focus on the exam results and there is lack of extrinsic motivation due to the competitive examination system. Chinese students are assumed be silent, and to use indirect language in their communication patterns. Teachers are thought of as having higher status than students, and students should respect teaching by listening to the teachers' instruction without questioning. Based on the beliefs in group harmony, and the maintenance of family 'face', Chinese culture supports collectivism more than individualism. In regard to the implications for online Chinese students learning, Chinese students may be expected to be more polite in the non-verbal communication environment. Instead of providing critical feedback, Chinese students may tend to be indirect in online

discussion, to avoid conflict in order to maintain the group harmony.

Chinese students who study in New Zealand encounter myriad difficulties, not only in adapting to the new culture, but also in overcoming the language barrier. Other research shows that Chinese students acknowledged the cultural differences, and tried to adapt to the educational environment when they studied in English-speaking countries. They still experience difficulties in class participation and communication due to their inadequate English language proficiency.

So this research looked at Chinese students' needs and interests in online learning, and listened to their voices on the cultural impact on their online learning in order to seek the recommendations for eTeachers and eEducation professional development. Chinese students' perceptions of the cultural impact on communication pattern in this research may help to understand some of the implications for their online learning. The discussion of Chinese students' learning difficulties in another country may also be helpful in discovering if learning online overcame or enhanced their difficulties.

The research questions were asked participants what their understanding of online learning was, what their perceptions of the cultural impact on their online learning attitude, behaviour, and achievements were, and what would they recommend to eTeachers and other Chinese students about eTeaching and eLearning. This chapter is focused on the relevant literature to the research questions. The next chapter will discuss the research methodology.

## **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

Chapter 3 explains the theoretical approach taken (3.2) and outlines the research methods used within this approach (3.3). Section 3.4 describes the data analysis, and section 3.5 describes research validity and reliability. The next sections are concerned with the research participants, the researcher's role and ethical considerations (3.6, 3.7 and 3.8 respectively).

Briefly, methodology is perspectives on what research is and how research should be conducted (Potter, 1996). "The aim of methodology is to help us to understand, in the broadest terms, not the products of scientific enquiry but the process itself" (Cohen & Manion, 1989, p. 42). Methods refer to techniques and procedures used in the process of data-gathering, and which can be used to service the goals of the methodology.

### **3.2 Theoretical approach of this research**

This research uses a qualitative research framework that examines participants' words and perceptions. Much research literature describes the aim of qualitative research as being toward obtaining an increased understanding of the ideas, feelings, motives, and beliefs behind people's actions, and studying and understanding participants' experience (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stainback & Stainback 1988; Silverman, 1993; Silverman, 1999). Because individuals' experiences are variable, the focus of a qualitative research is people's interpretation of the reality. One of the main aspects of qualitative research is that it is context-specific (Edson, 1988). To put this in another way, ideas, people and events cannot be understood if they are isolated from their contexts. Therefore, qualitative researchers are interested in understanding people's experience in context. In qualitative research, participants are carefully selected for inclusion,

based on the possibility that each participant will expand the variability of the sample (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). In this research, participants were some Chinese students who had/have online learning experience. So, although they have these two aspects in common, they are still different in other ways like gender, age, and their online learning experiences. Therefore, it will explore the ideas of cultural impact on their online learning based on their variable experiences. Flexibility in qualitative research allows data collection times and methods to be varied as a study proceeds (Ohman, 2005; Thomas, 2000). Holloway and Todres (2003) acknowledged the need for flexibility in two ways:

To respect as much as possible the primacy of the topic or phenomenon to be studied and the range of possible research questions by finding a methodological approach and strategy that can serve such inquiry; To acknowledge that a number of qualitative research strategies and skills are generic, such as interviewing, thematizing meanings. (p. 347)

They also pointed out flexibility is possible in certain procedures. For example, the researchers approach the data collection without strong prior assumptions and do not impose their own views on the words and actions of the research participants. In this research, using interviews and some follow-up emails to ask participants some interesting and unclear points from their email survey responses allows the flexibility for gaining in-depth data. Some interview skills the researcher used to conduct interviews also can be viewed as the researcher's flexibility in a qualitative research.

In summary, several characteristics of qualitative research can be defined as a focus on interpretation rather than quantification; an emphasis on subjectivity rather than objectivity; flexibility in the process of conducting research; an orientation towards process rather than outcome; and a concern with context (Cassell & Symon, 1994). In other words, qualitative research is focused on people's interpretation of reality, and used to understand people's ideas, feelings, beliefs and interpretations in specific contexts.

### **3.3 Research methods**

The main data collection methods for this research were the use of email surveys and interviews. These methods are now discussed.

### 3.3.1 Email surveys

A survey is a system for collecting information. The use of the survey is to identify some views about a specific education issue. Most things that surveys are used to measure can be regarded as attitudes (or preferences), beliefs, or facts (Weisberg, Krosnick & Bowen, 1996). The traditional method for administering surveys is through mail questionnaires. However, with low-cost computing and the rapid growth of the Internet, email surveys can now have been created as a new way of conducting survey research (Sue & Ritter, 2007). There is little research that looks at using email surveys, however, with this method the questionnaire is either contained in the body of an email message or included as an attachment. In most cases, the participants can complete the questionnaire by replying to the original emails (Sue & Ritter, 2007). In this email survey, an email message introducing the usage of email surveys with an attachment of the questionnaire was sent to each participant, and participants completed their questionnaires and emailed them back as attachments.

The purpose of this email survey is to examine Chinese students' understanding of online learning; investigate how culture impacts on students' learning attitude, behaviour, strategies, and achievements; and seek their recommendations for eLearning and eTeaching guidelines and/or professional development. This email survey used some dichotomous questions, more multiple choices and rating scale questions for obtaining direct answers from participants, and open-ended question were designed for gathering in-depth data. There were 23 questions, divided into six sections: participants' information and experience; learning online (expectations, benefits, negatives, skills, helpful features); being an effective eTeacher and a successful student; participation in online discussion; cultural impacts; and recommendations.

Although there is little research literature on using email surveys, this method was chosen in this research with consideration of the advantages of email survey such as speed, convenience, and economy. According to Sue and Ritter (2007), the advantages of email surveys are being economical and fast to create, convenient for researchers to send, convenient for participants who can respond at a time that suits them, and no need for special software or technical expertise. The long travelling distance between me and my participants in this research made the inconvenience in getting participants to participate using postal or hand-distributed surveys undesirable. Using email surveys in this research enabled me to overcome a number of practical constraints such as cost, time, and travel distance. Firstly, the research cost was reduced by spending less money on posting letters as well as less time on copying letters and writing envelopes. Secondly, it was a fast way to deliver information through emails, and it was also very convenient and flexible for the researcher to follow up with some more questions about the interesting points or unclear points participants made, to gather more in-depth information or clarify data after receiving the survey responses. Additionally, it allowed participants to consider the questions and frame an appropriate response. Because most participants for this research had a heavy workload or study load, responding to a survey through email was intended to give them more time and less pressure to reflect on their answers.

The weaknesses of using an email survey, such as large file sizes being blocked by email servers, and unsolicited email being recognized as junk emails, were minimized. In regard to this research, after sending email surveys to participants, some of surveys could not be delivered successfully because participants' email boxes were full. Under this circumstance, I tried to send emails to them more than one time during different days to increase the possibility of successful delivery. Meanwhile, I attempted to ask for help from some students who had already responded in passing the invitation letters and my contact information to other Chinese students' other email addresses. Finally participants successfully received my invitation letters and eight Chinese students agreed to participate in this

research.

### 3.3.2 Interviews

The interview is a method in that involves the gathering of data through direct verbal interaction between individuals. The nature of an interview is also defined as human interaction in general and face-to-face interaction in particular: questioning by one person, answering by another, and can be for a variety of purposes (Gillham, 2000; Wengraf, 2001). A qualitative research interview allows for greater depth than is the case with other methods of data collection. In the literature, the 'depth' was defined as to gather more detailed knowledge, and to understand the interviewees' perspectives on their lives, experiences or situations (Wengraf, 2001, Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). The qualitative research interview is defined as a highly flexible method, it can be used almost anywhere and it is capable of gaining great depth (King, 1994). In other words, it can be used with other research methods in order to obtain in-depth data. An interview's flexibility allows the researcher to make some changes to questions according to different interviewees and interview situations in order to further explore interviewees' answers. Using interviews in this research was designed to go deeper into the motivations of respondents and their reasons for responding as they do in the email surveys. Most of the interview questions were designed as open-ended questions (see Appendix C) that allowed me to explore so that I could go into more depth if I wanted or clear up any misunderstandings, and also allowed unexpected or unanticipated answers that may suggest hypotheses. Some of the other questions were designed according to these interviewees' email surveys' responses to clarify some unsure or unclear answers, and to develop some interesting points they made from the online survey responses. Therefore, interviews in this research were designed for gathering in-depth data.

Although the use of qualitative research interviews allowed me to gather in-depth data, it still had its disadvantages and some limitations. Taylor and Bogdan (1998) described these limitations: sometimes researchers cannot assume that what a

person says during an interview is what that person really believes or will say or do in other situations; interviewers misunderstand or misinterpret the interviewees' language including non-verbal language; some interviewees are unwilling to talk during the interview; or interviewers might make incorrect assumptions about what the interviewees said. The bias caused by the difference of sex, race, social class, age, dress, and physical appearance or accent between interviewers and interviewees was discussed as a major disadvantage (Bailey, 1994; King, 1994). Therefore, to minimise bias is the central issue to ensure the interview validity.

To conduct a good interview and minimise bias in the interview, actually involves some skills. Taylor and Bogdan (1998) claimed that the interviewer endeavouring to create an atmosphere in which interviewees feel comfortable to talk is good for interview quality. Ruane (2005) also pointed out that to create a warm and supportive 'talk' environment, an interviewer's active listening and capability to handle respondent silences are needed. In regard to this research, and considering the three interviewees are all Chinese, I chose to interview them in Chinese so that they could feel easy and free to talk in their own language, and they might feel easier in expressing their opinions clearly. I also tried to minimise the noise level of the interview place to ensure interviewees could hear my questions clearly, and I always repeated questions and encouraged them to clarify questions when they did not understand. As a result, using some good interview skills actually helped me to conduct interviews.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

This section reviews the data analysis of the email surveys and interviews, and cultural consideration in this research.

#### **3.4.1 Data analysis of the email surveys and interviews**

The email survey for this research had 23 questions consisting of dichotomous questions, multiple choice, rating scales and open-ended questions. Questions were categorised in six sections: participants' information and experience; learning

online (expectations, benefits, negatives, skills, helpful features); being an effective eTeacher and a successful student; participation in online discussion; cultural impacts; and recommendations. The data from email surveys reflects participants' perspectives of the cultural impact on their online learning. The difference in participants' age, gender and personal experience will allow exploration of a variety of perceptions on the cultural impact on online learning.

The interviews were conducted in Chinese and tape-recorded, and the transcriptions were done by myself. During the data transcribing process, I discovered and accommodated several difficulties. Firstly, translating was quite time consuming; secondly, the level of noise in the tape caused distractions so I had to listen to the same sentence again and again sometimes that made me feel physically exhausted. The third problem was about the language inaccuracy of translating due to interviewers' interpretations of what the interviewees said. In order to minimise the inaccuracy of the interview transcriptions, I reviewed the transcriptions myself and sent them to participants for confirmation.

#### 3.4.2 Cultural and social considerations

There are potential transcribing issues involved in this research. Because the interviews were conducted in Chinese, and I transcribed the interview data, the language of interview transcriptions might have some inaccuracies. However, in order to minimise the language inaccuracy of interview transcriptions, the English transcripts were also returned to participants for their confirmation.

### **3.5 Validity and reliability**

Validity concerns issues of truth and knowledge. Miller (2007) argued that the question of validity is the question of accuracy. As Neuman (2006) indicated, "validity means truthful knowledge. Qualitative researchers are more interested in authenticity than in the idea of a single version of truth (p. 196)." Stainback and Stainback (1988) explained, "In qualitative research, findings can be considered valid if there is a fit between what is intended to be studied and what actually is

studied” (p. 97). Maxwell (1992) argued for five kinds of validity in qualitative research: descriptive validity, interpretive validity, theoretical validity, generalizability, and evaluative validity (as cited in Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2000, p. 107). In this research, some follow-up interviews were used for confirming the accuracy of the words in email surveys, and further exploring some points from the email surveys. So the follow-up interviews can be viewed as a way to address validity in this qualitative research. Additionally, returning interview transcripts to interviewees for their confirmation was also to address validity.

Reliability refers to the consistency and stability of research findings. Kirk and Miller defined reliability as “the degree to which the finding is independent of accidental circumstances of the research” (as cited in Silverman, 1997, p. 203). Bogdan and Biklen (1992) argued that, in qualitative research, reliability can be viewed as a fit between what researchers record as data and what actually occurs in the natural setting that is being researched (as cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p. 119). In regard to this research, the interviews were tape-recorded and interpreted by myself, and the interview transcripts were returned to participants for confirmation. Using a semi-structured interview with the same format and questions for each interviewee and minimizing the bias in interviewing was one method of enhancing reliability in this research. Although this is a small study, readers of this research can assess the reliability of these findings to the degree that the findings are consistent with their own experience, beliefs and research.

### **3.6 Research participants**

There were eight participants in total participating in this research, six females and two males. They all took part in the email survey, and three of them also participated in the interview. Seven participants were in the age group of 25-30 years old, and one was over 30 years old. All the participants were past Chinese students in the postgraduate paper PROF521 eEducation Research and Development and/or PROF522 the Professional Practice of eTeaching at the

school of Education in the University of Waikato. Therefore, they had an experience and interest in eTeaching as a student, and maybe as a teacher.

To recruit participants I followed these steps. Firstly, I wrote an invitation letter informing potential participants of my study and requested them to contact me directly. This letter was distributed to current and past students of PROF521 and PROF522 through School of Education by email. The invitation letter contained background information about myself as the researcher, the purpose of the research project, the ethical basis for the research, an invitation to participate and to make direct contact with myself as researcher, an invitation to participants to participate in the email survey and interview (see Appendices C and D). I sent a consent form to these participants after they consented to be contacted directly. I requested participants to formally consent to participation by signing a consent form before they participated in the research project.

### **3.7 Researcher's background and role**

A course in research methodology at the University of Waikato gave me some theoretical background and understanding of research process and theories. My online learning experience at university and my overseas study experience also drove me into this study. During my postgraduate online course, I had studied with students who come from different cultures especially from China, and I found some Chinese students had been stereotyped in their studies in comparison to domestic students. For example, some local students and lecturers thought Chinese students were conscientious, hard workers, grade-orientated, and quiet in group work during the time they worked or studied with Chinese students. Having been a Chinese student studying online helped me to reflect on the nature of my position as a Chinese student as well as an online learner, and clarify my role as the researcher of this study, as well as to understand Chinese students' thinking, beliefs and language difficulties. With a number of Chinese students studying in New Zealand, and the increasing online paper options available for studying online, it can be expected that there is a number of Chinese students choosing to

study online or undertake online courses. Therefore, as the researcher of this study, I believe that the findings of this research study could contribute to eTeachers' understanding of cultural impact on Chinese students' online learning, and make the recommendations for eLearning and eTeaching guidelines and/or professional development on supporting Chinese students study online.

### **3.8 Ethical considerations**

I followed the ethics procedures and guidelines of the University of Waikato.

#### **3.8.1 Informed consent**

I informed the participants about the research project through the invitation letter. The participants were free to choose to participate, and/or to make further inquiries about the research project, and informed that their participation was voluntary. They also were informed of their right to withdraw up until the time the transcript was confirmed by them. In accordance with the Privacy Act, all the participants' information was kept in the strictest confidence.

#### **3.8.2 Confidentiality**

All information gathered was treated as confidential, as required by the code of ethics of the University of Waikato. I ensured that the identity of my participants will not publicised and eliminated identifying descriptors. Data was coded so participants remain anonymous in discussion of data with the supervisor, and only the researcher and students can see the raw data. No real names were used. For example, the data from participant 1 in the survey was coded as SP1; the data from participant 1 in the interview was coded as IP1. Participants for my research were assured that any data they provided had remained confidential and only been used for academic purposes in this research project including any potential conference presentations and publications. Participation will have no impact on any participant's current study or grades.

#### **3.8.3 Prepublication access**

Any information shared will be only used for the academic purposes of this research and any publication or conference presentations which may arise from this research, and will not be used for my personal gain or for any assessment of the participants' performance.

### **3.9 Chapter summary**

The aim of this research is to look at Chinese students' understanding of online learning, and investigate their perceptions of cultural impact on their online learning. This research used a qualitative research approach, with email surveys and interviews being the main research methods. Email surveys were applied to this research for consideration of issues of convenience, economy, and speed. Interviews were designed and used for obtaining in-depth data.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter describes the results of the data collection and analysis. These results answer research questions about participants' understanding of online learning, their perceptions of Chinese cultural impact on their online learning, and their recommendations for eTeaching guidelines and professional development. The results focus on three sections: participants' experience and their perceptions of learning online (expectations, benefits, negatives, skills, helpful features, the features of being an effective eTeacher and the qualities of being a successful online learning student, and participation in online discussion); their beliefs about Chinese cultural impact on online learning; and recommendations. The analysis in this chapter concerns data obtained through email survey and interviews.

### **4.2 Participants' experience and their perceptions of learning online**

This section will first look at participants' information and online learning experience, including their reasons for choosing to study online or undertake online papers. It will next discuss participants' perceptions of learning online, including their expectations when choosing online learning, the positives and negatives of learning online as a Chinese student, and the skills they developed from online learning. Participants' perceptions of the features of being an effective eTeacher, the qualities of being a successful online learning student, and participating online are also included in this section.

#### **4.2.1 Participants' information and experience**

There were eight participants in total in this research. Eight completed the email survey and three of them were also interviewed. Six participants were females and two are males. Most of them (7/8) are aged between 25 and 30 years old, and one is above 35 years old (Survey questions (SQ) 1 & 2, see Appendix C). Half of

them (4/8) have been in New Zealand for 24 months. The other four have been in New Zealand 12 months, 26 months, 40 months, and 75 months (SQ 3, see Appendix C).

All the participants had experience in online learning at the School of Education of the University of Waikato (SQ 4, see Appendix C). They all had either completed PROF 511 eEducation Research and Development or PROF 522 the Professional Practice of eTeaching; four of them had completed both papers; and one had completed a single level 3 (undergraduate level) online paper.

Participants were asked about their reasons for choosing to study online or undertake an online course (SQ 5, see Appendix C). Most participants (5/8) saw trying a new learning experience as a key reason:

*I wanted to try the new way of learning. (SP7)*

*I was quite interested in online learning because I had never touched it before I came to New Zealand. So I wanted to get to know more about this new learning environment. (SP5)*

Some participants (3/8) thought about the time flexibility of learning online.

*I like the online course because I can look through everyone's discussion anywhere and anytime. (SP6)*

*There is no limitation of learning time and place. (SP3)*

Two explained a reason for them was following others' advice: one participant was following professional academic's advice; the other one was taking a friend's suggestion:

*I have learned from my classmates who have chosen this course, and they told me that this course is very helpful for my future teaching. (SP4)*

This participant (P4) mentioned learning online being helpful for the future teaching. Being good for their career development is also one of the reasons considered by another participant:

*I come from Hebei Radio and TV University, and the distance education is one of the most important components of my university in China. So I think it is necessary for me to have some learning experience and also to learn how to run an online course. (SP2)*

One participant (P3) chose online study because he/she thought it would be easy to achieve high grades in an online course (see quotes below on expectations).

#### 4.2.2 Participants' perceptions of learning online

This section will look at participants' expectations of online learning, their perceptions of benefits and disadvantages for Chinese students to study online, and the skills they developed from online learning. It will also include participants' perceptions of helpful features of online learning, the features of being an effective eTeacher and the qualities of being a successful online learning student, and participation in online discussion.

##### 4.2.2.1 Expectations of learning online

Individuals had different expectations of learning online and these expectations are also associated with their reasons to choose to study online or undertake online courses as discussed in the previous section. In interviews, participants were asked about their expectations when they decided to choose online courses and whether their expectations had been met (interview question (IQ) 2, see Appendix D). Two key expectations were identified in participants' responses: learning about what eEducation and online learning are, and to achieve high grades.

*I expected myself to understand what the online learning and eEducation means. I wanted to know how I could learn very well in online learning, and what kind of learning skills that I needed to learn well. I had understood more about what online learning and the online teaching are after I*

*completed that course. (IP5)*

This participant (P3) expected to achieve higher grades in online course.

*My expectation was to get high scores in online course. I think students should achieve high marks. It is common that Chinese students have significant concerns about high marks. It is cultural impact or family influence I suppose. No matter how Chinese students' marks were before they studied overseas, but in Chinese society, every student has concern about achieving high marks. For example, we won't be able to get into a very good school unless we achieve high score in our exams in China. This is what have we been told since we were a little. We have not changed this kind of thinking even though we studied abroad. So when we study overseas, we still want to get better marks than others. (IP3)*

Participants believed their expectations of understanding eEducation and online learning and the desire to achieve high grades have been met. This participant (P5) explained his/her understanding of eEducation and online learning after finishing an online paper.

*I had understood more about what online learning and what the online teaching are after I completed that course. Online learning is a way of learning which is different from face to face learning. Internet is the tool of online learning. Online learning requires students being more independent in their learning. For teachers, online teaching requires them to have strategies to stimulate students to learn rather than pushing or forcing students to study. (IP5)*

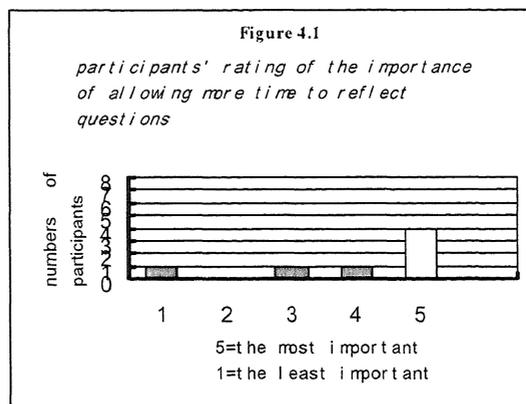
This participant (P3) indicated his/her expectation of achieving high grades was met.

*My marks were as good enough I reckon...My marks could even be better if I had not made some small mistakes. (IP3)*

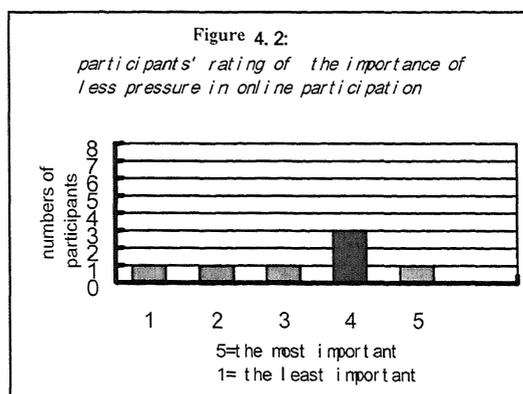
#### 4.2.2.2 Perceptions on the benefits and negatives of learning online as a Chinese student

Participants were asked to rank the benefits and negatives of learning online from Chinese students' perspective (SQ 6 & 7, see Appendix C). Their responses indicated that the level of importance of different benefits and disadvantages varies with individuals. The four choices that participants indicated were the most beneficial for them were less pressure in online participation, time flexibility, more time to reflect on questions, and more support from lecturers and peers. Most participants (7/8) chose 'the less pressure in online participation' and 'time flexibility' as benefits, and many of them (6/8) thought 'allowing more time to reflect on questions' was beneficial to them as Chinese students when studying online.

Some participants (4/7) thought 'allowing more time to reflect on questions' is the most important benefit (see Figure 4.1).



Some participants (3/7) thought 'the less pressure in online participation' was very important (see Figure 4.2).

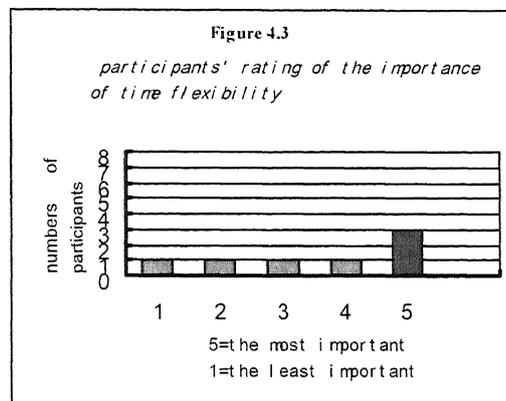


One participant (P3) thought it was the most important and explained:

*It is hard for Chinese students to express their ideas clearly by using appropriate English in a short discussion time when they were in face-to-face class. (IP3)*

This participant indeed indicated that in comparison to face-to-face discussion, online discussion gave him/her more time to think about his/her English expression so it was less stressful.

Clearly participants appreciated the flexibility of time in learning online as a benefit. Some (3/7) rated this aspect as the most important aspect (see Figure 4.3).



Lecturers' and peers' support was indicated as a benefit of learning online for these Chinese students. Most participants chose to ask for help from lecturers (6/7), and other classmates (7/8) (SQ 19, see Appendix C). Some (3/8) chose to ask for help from librarians. Only one participant (P1) chose to consult books. Most of them (5/8) contacted lecturers and peers daily, and some (3/8) contacted lecturers and peers weekly (SQ 20, see Appendix C).

One participant (P5) commented:

*I actually found I got more support in online paper from my lecturers and peers than face-to-face class. (IP5)*

The survey gave participants the opportunity to share their perception of the

benefits to them of online learning. One participant pointed out that being good for career development (eTeaching) is one of the most important benefits.

*Develop my teaching arts: Teaching arts involve the well combination of three parts: whom to teach, what to teach and how to teach. The good knowledge of the three parts can help teacher make the right design. With the knowledge of whom to teach, the teacher can provide a good education that caters for individual needs and helps to develop harmonious teacher-student relationship. It also helps the teacher to decide what to teach. Nobody will learn what he or she does not need or what he or she already knows. The last point “how to teach” is a headache for many teachers since it is not easy to find a suitable teaching method that is both interesting and instructive. Only those who are willing to devote their time and effort to it and those who are enthusiastic to teaching can do so. (SP1)*

P1 also explained another aspect of benefits:

*Teachers and students communicate from mind to mind, and no prejudice can be sensed. (SP1)*

Participants were asked to rank three disadvantages of learning online as a Chinese student: less improvement in spoken English, less culture contact, and more time spend on dealing with written English (SQ 7, see Appendix C). Participants' responses indicated that most of them (7/8) agreed that learning online means less improvement in spoken English.

Five participants chose 'less culture contact'. One participant explained in the interview (IQ 3, see Appendix D):

*Some of my friends think it is like wasting money if we travel to New Zealand but only choose online studies. (IP3)*

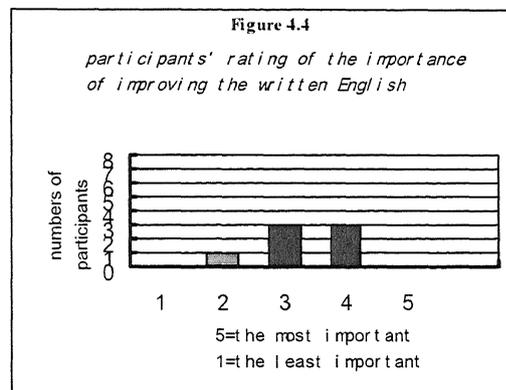
One participant pointed out that lack of information and understanding about learning online is also one of disadvantages.

*The ill preparation before choosing online courses is one of disadvantages.*  
(SP1)

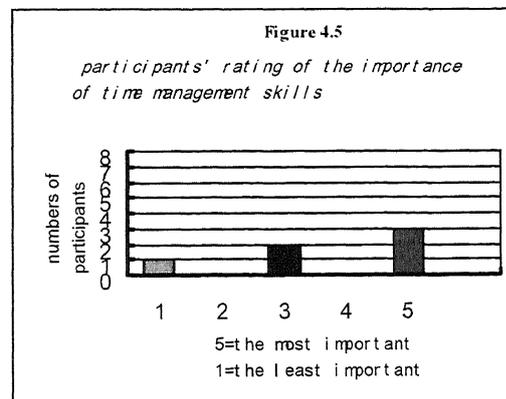
#### 4.2.2.3 Perceptions on the skills participants developed from learning online

Participants were asked to indicate what skills they developed from learning online (SQ 8, see Appendix C). Most participants (7/8) indicated that their written English improved from learning online, and six of the eight participants indicated that they had improved time management skills, technical skills and independent skills.

Most of participants (6/7) indicated 'improve written English' was important or very important (see Figure 4.4).

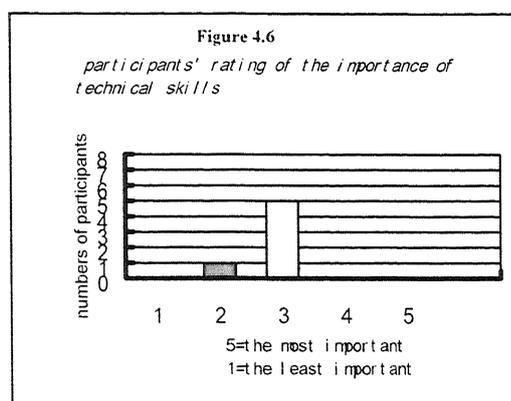


Some (3/6) thought that they improved 'time management skill' the most (see Figure 4.5).

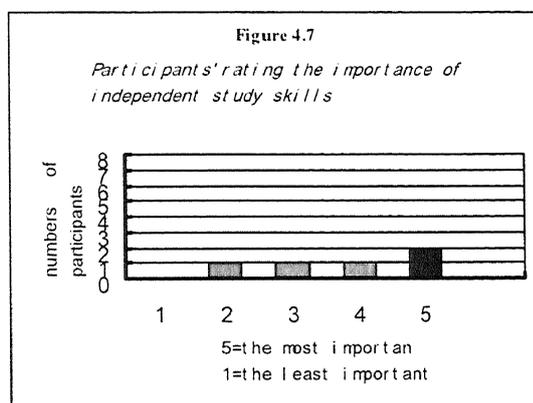


Many participants (5/6) indicated 'technical skills' was the important skill they

improved (see Figure 4.6).



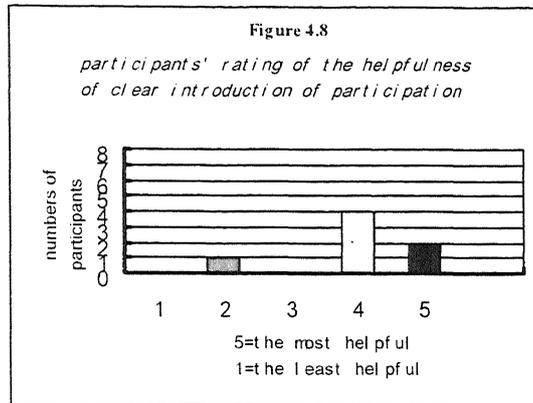
A few (2/5) thought 'independent study skill' was the most important skill they improved (see Figure 4.7).



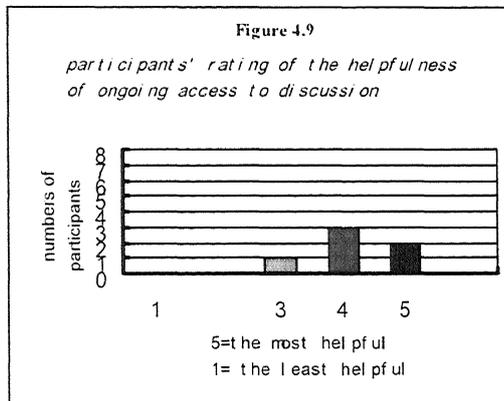
#### 4.2.2.4 Perceptions of the helpfulness of the online learning features

Participants were asked to rank seven features of online learning for the helpfulness (SQ 9, see Appendix C): clear introduction of participation, the ongoing access to read discussion, instant messaging, virtual office, email, librarian's assistance, and instruction online linked to internet material such as course and assignment information. The majority of participants agreed that these seven features were helpful. However, they indicated the level of helpfulness of these features varied.

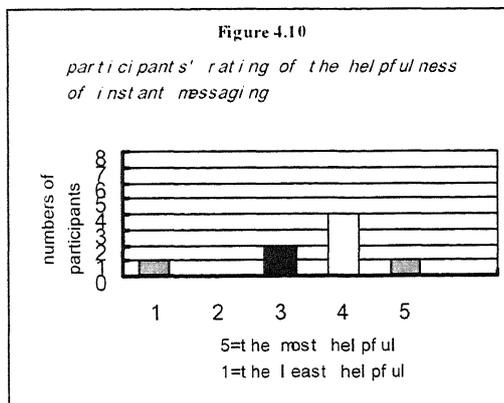
Most participants (6/7) thought clear introduction of participation was helpful or very helpful (see Figure 4.8).



Some participants (5/6) rated 'ongoing access to discussion' from helpful or very helpful (see Figure 4.9).



Some participants (5/8) rated the feature of 'instant messaging' from helpful or very helpful or the most helpful (see Figure 4.10).



One participant commented that instant messaging is a very helpful tool to contact lecturers:

*I normally left message in the Classforum. And the lecturers looked at the Classforum and replied students very frequently. (IP5)*

One participant described the librarian assistance:

*I did not find much access to any person I can consult with. (SP1)*

This might be one of reasons why participants did not consider this feature of online learning as a very helpful feature. Introducing librarian assistance came in the late stages of the online course which some of participants chose; this might be another reason why participants did not acknowledge this feature as being really helpful.

Regarding the feature of email, one participant commented in the interview:

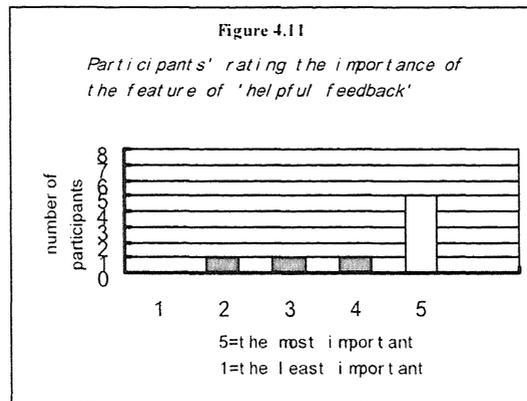
*I normally use email to contact my lecturer, but the lecturer was very busy, so he only responded me only once a week. (IP8)*

From this explanation, delayed responses from lecturers might be the reason why participants did not consider email as a very helpful feature compared to other aspects.

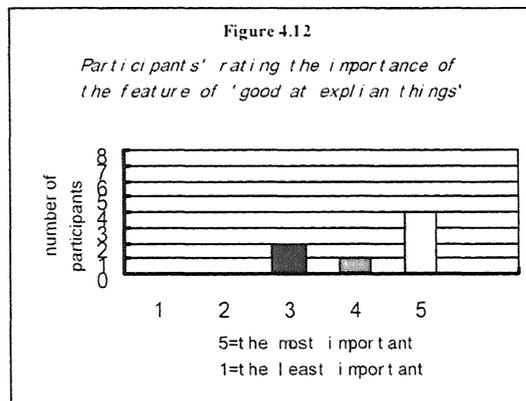
#### 4.2.2.5 Perceptions of the features of being an effective eTeacher and the qualities of being a successful online learning student

Participants were asked to rate the features of being an effective eTeacher. These features are helpful feedback, good at explaining things, encouraging individuals to participate, enthusiasm, clear expectations, being approachable, good technical skills, choose interesting subjects (SQ 10, see Appendix C). The majority of participants agreed with all these features. However, the level of importance of these features also varied.

Helpful feedback is the one of these features all participants agreed was important and most participants (5/8) thought helpful feedback is the most important feature of being an effective eTeacher (see Figure 4.11).



Many participants (4/7) rated 'good at explaining things' as the most important feature.



One participant pointed out other features of being an effective eTeacher:

*Knowledge of subject matter, teaching art, enthusiasm of teaching (rated as 5); respect to other culture and every student (rated as 4); and sharp eyes and logical thinking (rated as 3). (SP1)*

Participants also made some clear points about the qualities of a successful online learning student (SQ 22, see Appendix C). Their perceptions can be categorised as having three main aspects: study attitude, behaviour, and strategies.

#### *Study attitude*

Most participants (5/8) indicated a successful online learning student should be positive and active in online learning: P3 and P6 both said that a successful online

learning student should “pursue knowledge” and P8 advised online learning students to “never give up.”

#### *Study behaviour*

Two participants (P3 & P5) indicated that having “self-control” and being “self-disciplined”, and “having ability to work independently without supervision helps to succeed in online learning”.

#### *Study strategies*

The qualities identified by participants in this study could be applied to any type of learning, but participants also identified these points specifically for online learning: “read and think more” (P2), “make preparation for online discussion” (P6), “willing to share ideas, take notes about useful comments, submit assignments on time” (P3), “frequent participation” (P4), “some computer techniques which can give you an effective way of learning” (P7), and “time management skills, and lecturer’s and classmates’ help” (P8).

These aspects are highly related to the skills they had improved through online learning as were discussed previously (4.2.2.3) such as time management skills, independent study skills, and technical skills. Some of strategies they pointed out such as to read and think more, to make preparation for discussion, and to take notes about useful comments may help Chinese students to overcome the study difficulties caused by participants’ inadequate English language capabilities.

#### 4.2.2.6 Participation in online discussion

Participants were asked about their preference between the online discussion environment and the face-to-face discussion environment (SQ 17, see Appendix C), and their perceptions on whether online discussion should be marked (SQ 16, see Appendix C).

No participants indicated their preference was for a face-to-face discussion

environment. Most participants (6/8) indicated that they preferred an online discussion environment and two gave no indication about their preferences.

One of the main reasons why they preferred the online discussion environment was having more time to reflect on questions. This benefit of online learning has been discussed previously (4.2.2.2).

*I can check other's comments at any time as it is permanent. I have enough time for thinking and writing. I also can read peer's opinion. (SP3)*

*Fewer pressure, flexible time and more time to reflect in online discussion. (SP4)*

*Online discussion provides students more time to reflect on discussion topics and read other people's contributions. It can also keep records of students' contributions for students' further review. (SP5)*

*Got time to figure out ideas. (SP7)*

Again, participant acknowledgment of having more time to reflect on questions in online learning is attributed to their language barrier as a Chinese student.

*For me, I would prefer the face-to-face discussion if I talked to Chinese students. However, if the person who I communicated with was a kiwi, I would prefer online discussion. I had more time in editing my grammar and thinking about how to write my ideas in English properly in the online discussion. (IP3)*

*Firstly, some Chinese students can't really understand the face-to-face discussion due to their language barrier. They may miss some points of discussion when they take notes because of the limited time in a lecture. However, in online discussion, Chinese students have plenty of time to review the discussion in order to fully understand it, and sometimes students*

*may be stimulated and get more ideas and understanding when they review online discussion...In addition, Chinese student will have more time to reflect on the questions. In face-to-face class, Chinese students may not be able to express in English precisely due to their English language capability, but they get more time to think about their English expression in online discussion. (IP5)*

The other two participants who did not indicate their preferences explained:

*Both online discussion and face-to-face discussion environment can be interesting or boring - it depends on how the teacher organises the discussion topic and with whom you discuss about it. (SP1)*

*It depends on the discussion topics and the participants. If the topics are not difficult and do not need a lot of time to prepare, the F2F pattern will be better, otherwise the online one is favourable. (SP2)*

In regard to participants' perceptions on whether online discussion should be marked (SQ 16, see Appendix C), all participants agreed or strongly agreed (see Table 4.1), and no one disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Table 4.1

*Participants' agreement to the statement that online discussion should be marked*

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
3	5	0	0
(P2, P6, P7)	(P1, P3, P4, P5, P8)		

The two participants who strongly agreed explained the marks for participating in the online discussion is "a kind of encouragement" (SP2) and "participation is vital in learning process" (SP7).

Three participants believed that receiving a mark for participating in online discussion reflects whether students meet the course and lecturer's requirements as well as being part of the learning process.

*...I got low grades due to less participation in the beginning of my online paper. Then I knew I must change this situation because I did think I knew better than others and deserved the highest grade. So at the first stage, grades for the online participation forced me to participate more. And later, when I was attracted by the online discussion, grades became a reward and useful information for me to see whether I was doing the right way according to the teachers' requirements. (SP1)*

*Online discussion can indicate a student's learning track and process. I believe online discussion should be marked because whether you participate in the discussion reflects whether students are doing their studies according to the course instruction. (IP3)*

*Online discussion is an important part of online learning. Students can enhance their understanding on topics by regularly and consistently discussing them with peers and lecturers. From the marks given to their online participation, students can see if their participation in online discussion meets the course requirement or not. Students can benefit from the lecturers' comments to improve their participation in the next discussion. Although some students did not want to participate in online discussion, they still push themselves to put time and effort on their participations. Theoretically, students could learn better when they have no pressure. However, in the reality, students are lazy without any pressure. (IP5)*

Based on participants' online learning experience, this section has looked at their perceptions of learning online in these following areas: expectations, positive and negatives of learning online as a Chinese student, skills they developed from online learning, helpful online learning features, the features of being an effective

eTeacher and the qualities of being a successful online learning student, and participating in online discussion. The next section will discuss findings related to beliefs about the impact of culture on online learning.

### 4.3 Participants' beliefs about the impact of culture on online learning

This research sought to identify Chinese students' perception of the impact of their culture on their online learning. This section outlines those perceptions, and particularly looks at their beliefs in some specific aspects such as hard work, success from effort, the importance of high grades, and the level of comfort when they post different opinions to lecturers and peers. This section also identifies participants' perspectives on the relationship between students and lecturers in online papers.

Question 11 (see Appendix C) asked a broad question on participant's general agreement about whether Chinese culture influences their online learning attitude, behaviour and achievements. There was a range of responses. (See Table 4.2)

Table 4.2

*Participants' agreement of the cultural influence on their online learning attitude, behaviour and achievements*

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
2	2	3	1
(P4, P6)	(P1, P7)	(P2, P3, P5)	(P8)

Participants then explained their points of view. Two participants who strongly agreed explained:

*Nearly 20 years living and studying under the Chinese culture and Educational system, I have already been used to think, act in a Chinese way.*  
(P6)

It is interesting that participants understood this survey question differently.

*My Chinese aspects have provided some new information. (SP4)*

One participant who agreed explained a negative cultural influence on his/her online learning:

*The not very open minded way of thinking may influence the speed of learning. (SP7)*

Two participants disagreed and explained:

*From my personal experience, some Chinese students are shy and passive in making their own voices in online discussion as well as face-to-face discussion, but not all of them. I have found some Chinese students are confident in expressing their own ideas. (IP5)*

This participant (P3) thought Chinese students were used to specific instructions and directions from teachers. And the competition in grades between individuals made them unwilling to share ideas.

*Chinese students were used to rely on teachers and do what the teacher told them to do, but eTeacher in New Zealand did not tell you exactly what we needed to do, so some Chinese students got confused when they first start online paper. In Chinese way of learning, some students do not want to let other students know their ideas because sharing ideas with peers may help others to get good grades. This is why some Chinese students are not willing to share their ideas. (IP3)*

The participant (P4) interpreted the influence in a more positive way in comparison to other participants' understanding of this question. This participant thought that to other students not Chinese, the Chinese students' contribution was valued as a different perspective and this is because they provide information in a different context. From participants' explanations, individuals' experience strongly affects their perceptions of the Chinese cultural impact on their online learning. To

investigate some specific aspects that may be cultural, participants were asked about their perceptions of hard work, success from effort, the importance of high grades, and level of comfort when they post different opinions to lecturers and peers, and the relationship between students and lecturers.

Participants were asked about their agreement with the statement: Chinese students generally study harder than other students (SQ 12, see Appendix C). Most (5/8) participants agreed. Only two participants disagreed, and no one strongly disagreed (see Table 4.3).

Table 4.3

*Participants' agreement of this statement: Chinese students generally study harder than other students.*

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	5	2	0
(P5)	(P8, P4, P6, P3, P7)	(P2, P1)	

Participants' comments indicated that to overcome the language barrier is one of the main reasons why Chinese students study hard.

*In order to meet the requirement of course, Chinese students will have to put extra effort to overcome language barriers and to fully understand the course instructions as well as comments from lecturers and peers. (SP5)*

*Chinese students are not as good at English as other native students, so they have to learn more knowledge or do more exercises on English language to make sure they can achieve their goals better. (SP6)*

*We spend more time on reading and reflecting. (SP4)*

According to their explanations, another reason is that Chinese students have a strong desire to achieve high marks which these participants acknowledged as a

cultural influence.

*Another reason why Chinese students study hard is because they desire high marks. Chinese students have significant concerns about marks. (IP5)*

*They used to work hard on study in China. (SP7)*

*Another reason is about our culture. The evaluation by using exams has existed for a long time since the old time. The Qing dynasty started to select government officers by exams. Ordinary people could change their lives by exams. Chinese culture actually tells us that if we cannot achieve good marks in exams, we cannot be successful in our future and lives. (SP3)*

One participant agreed, and explained that there is also a financial burden pushing some students to study hard.

*We paid a great amount of tuition fee here, so we were under lots of financial pressure. That is why lots of Chinese students generally study hard. (IP8)*

One participant who disagreed explained:

*As far as I know, some Chinese students are even worse than others. Every one with a determined heart and a clear goal will work hard no matter what ever culture he/she comes from. Though different students may work hard in different ways. (SP1)*

An indication of hard work might be the time they spend on the course. According to the responses to question 13 (see Appendix C) about the average time they spend on online course per week, many participants (5/8) spent more than 10 hours on the online course per week. This is less than the course requirement which is 20 hours per week (see Table 4.4). Perhaps students interpreted this question to mean only time spent in the course online forum specifically.

Table 4.4

*Participants' average time of spending on online course per week*

5-10 hours	11-15 hours	16-20 hours	20 hours above
3	1	3	1
(P6, P7, P2)	(P1)	(P3, P4, P5)	(P8: 35 hours)

One participant explained:

*Before I found the online course was interesting, I spent less than one hour and seldom participated in online discussions. After I was attracted by it, I visit and read Classforum every day. No other courses attracted me so much. I am not sure how many hours exactly I spent since because the online course was more than two years ago. But I am sure I spent more than 15 hours. (SP1)*

As P1 indicated, some participants had completed their online courses in previous years and their responses may also indicate inaccurate memories over time.

Similar to participants' agreements of Chinese students' working hard, their responses indicated that most of them believe success in online learning comes from students' effort (SQ 21, see Appendix C). Seven participants agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Only one participant disagreed (see Table 4.5).

Table 4.5

*Participants' agreements of this statement: The success in online learning comes from students' effort*

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
2	5	1	0
(P7, P5)	(P8, P2, P4, P6, P3,)	(P1)	

Their additional comments indicated a strong belief in effort as key to success.

*Nothing can take the place of self-effort. (SP7)*

*Students are the most important part of study. (SP4)*

*Students are important in learning. (SP8)*

One participant (P3) specifically mentioned this belief coming from their Chinese culture.

*Success in every course comes from students' efforts: it is true that Chinese people say 'No pain, no gain.' (一份耕耘, 一份收获)(IP3)*

One participant's explanation reflects his/her understanding of the flexibility of the online learning:

*Unlike regular learning, online learning is less supervised and more flexible. It requires students to be self-disciplined and work independently and actively. Therefore, students actually need to put more effort to make sure their success in online learning environment. (SP5)*

The participant who disagreed emphasises the importance of eTeacher in online learning:

*According to my experience, any successful learning is a two-way result. Without a good guidance from the teacher, where can achievement come from? Not every student who is hard working can be successful. Teacher plays a decisive role. Otherwise, students needn't find a teacher to study with. What I mean by a decisive role is teachers should have clear standard, close observation and evaluation. (SP1)*

Some participants believe that Chinese students desire high marks in their learning. According to question 14 (see Appendix C) on their agreement of whether grades are the important part of their achievements for their online course, most participants (5/8) agreed and three disagreed (see Table 4.6).

Table 4.6:

*Participants' agreement that grades are the important part of their achievements for online course*

Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
0	5	3	0
	(P7, P3, P6, P4, P5)	(P1, P2, P8)	

Some participants who agreed explained that grades are a kind of evaluation and represent students' achievements.

*Completing the paper or not depends on the grades students get. Students can understand if they meet the course requirement or not by the grades they have been given. Grades mean whether students have achieved the requirement of online course. It does not mean itself is really important, but the process of getting good marks is a kind of learning process. Students know how much they have achieved and improved from the grades. So grades is kind of evaluation which could stimulate students to study. From this perspective, grades are important. Otherwise students will not pay that much attention to their studies without giving grades. (SP5 & IP5)*

*The grade means how you did your study. (SP4)*

*Grades play an important role in valuing the course. (SP7)*

One participant who disagreed explained the learning process is far more important than the grade itself:

*According to my experience, no education can reveal the true ability of a student by grades...Compared to the development of the students' thinking and the learning experience students got, grade means nothing. (SP1)*

*I think the learning process is far more important than the grades no matter what marks students got. (IP8)*

In the interview, two participants who agreed explained profoundly that having

strong desire for high marks is influenced by Chinese education evaluation system and the social environment.

*This is mainly because of the Chinese education system and social environment. In China, whether you are successful and capable in your studies all depends on your grades. (IP5)*

*In fact, it is inevitable that we influence by the Chinese environment. Since we were a little, we were expected to go to the best kindergarten for the early child education. We started to learn some other skills such as playing piano or painting just for getting extra marks when I took the national exams when we completed high school. We have been sent to the best primary and secondary schools by parents, and told that we need to get the best marks in the class. In order to get a good job, we have been told that we need to get into a good university. Because of the huge population in China, we need to be the best then we can compete with others. Another reason is about culture. Exams have existed for a long time since the old time in China. The Qing dynasty started to select government officials by exams. For examples, people who got the first, second, third or fourth place in the exams were selected to be the government officials. Lots of ordinary people could change their lives by exams. (IP3)*

As an indication of the nature of these students' perceptions of teacher-student and student-student relationships in New Zealand online study, participants were asked about aspects related to how comfortable they felt when they posted different opinions from lecturers and peers (SQ 18, see Appendix C). Seven felt comfortable, and no one felt very uncomfortable (see Table 4.7).

Table 4.7

*Participants' level of comfort when they post different opinions from lecturer and peers*

Very comfortable	Comfortable	Uncomfortable	Very uncomfortable
4	3	1	0
(P3, P6, P4, P2)	(P5, P1, P7)	(P8)	

Most participants looked at the positives of posting different ideas. Three participants explained posting different opinions could challenge others' opinions and stimulate and develop others' thinking.

*I like to challenge others' opinions and like to be challenged. Of course, I try to be polite and not to offend others. (SP2)*

*Those different opinions are my own ideas. Maybe those ideas will widen other students' thinking. So I feel happy with sharing my ideas. (SP6)*

*Different people have different ideas. It is normal to express different opinions to lecturers and other students. I believe thinking from different aspects should be encouraged in online learning because it can stimulate various reflections on discussion topics. From my perspective, I think everybody has different thoughts, and it is acceptable to have different opinions in western education system. According to my experience, everybody has different opinions about the same topic, and lectures will not lower down students' marks if they express different ideas. In fact, they encourage students to do that. Students actually spend more time on finding out evidence to support their own arguments. During this process, students actually develop their thinking. (SP5 & IP5)*

One participant thought posting different opinions could get more attention from others.

*It is very common that different students who come from different culture have different opinions. Lecturer and peers like students' different perspectives. I think if I express different ideas, it actually gets more*

*attention from the lecturer and other classmates as well. We have different thinking to kiwi students because of our cultural background. If someone wants to make their own voices, it will attract kiwi students. (SP3 & IP3)*

Two participants explained posting different opinions is a way of learning, and it has positive influence on online discussion:

*Different opinions make the topic clearer. (SP4)*

*I want to share opinions with others. It is a way of learning. (SP1)*

One participant who felt uncomfortable explained:

*Sometimes I feel uncomfortable when a different opinion comes out and hard to solve it as language and culture. (SP8)*

Perhaps this participant indicated that Chinese students were used to look for one 'right' answer so they felt uncomfortable when they had different points of view to lecturers. The language barrier also caused discomfort for this participant in expressing ideas different from those of lecturers and peers.

In the interview, participants explained that, due to cultural reasons, the relationship between students and teachers in China is different to that in Zealand (IQ 7, see Appendix D).

*In Chinese tradition, teacher is the authority. We have to listen to the teacher. If we disagree with what the teacher said, we are meant not respecting teachers. But in New Zealand, lecturers and students are equal. I think the relationship between students and lecturers in online paper is closer than it is in face-to-face class even if online lecturer never see some students face-to-face. (IP5)*

*In New Zealand, teachers are more like friends to students, and they can talk studies even life experience with students...Respecting teachers and*

*having significant concerns about education is Chinese culture...Chinese people have a saying: "If this person is our teacher, we need to respect him as our father." From this saying, we can see that parents have the strongest influences on children, so people use this saying to describe that teachers play a very important role in children's lives...When I was in China, no matter whether my marks were good or not, I was still scared of talking to teachers. But in New Zealand teachers are more like students' friend, and they do not have bias on whether you have high marks or not. So I feel free and relaxed to communicate with teachers. That is why I always talk to teachers when I have questions. But I would not do this in China if I was still in China. (IP3)*

*What I understood about the relationship is just about academic communication between a teacher and a student, not about personal relationship. Lecturers here are fair to everyone no matter whether you got good marks or not. I appreciate this way. (IP8)*

As they explained, the relationship between students and teachers in China is not equal, and students respect teachers as authority so they normally agree with what teachers said. And some students have fear and unwillingness to communicate with teachers. Participants acknowledged that this kind of unequal relationship between students and teachers is influenced by Chinese culture. In comparison to this kind of teacher-student relationship in China, participants appreciated the more equal teacher-student relationship in New Zealand because teachers were seen as friendly and treating students fairly so that students were more willing to communicate with teachers.

#### **4.4 Participants' recommendations**

Participants were asked to make recommendations to eTeachers and other Chinese students (SQ 23, see Appendix C).

#### 4.4.1 To eTeachers

Most participants (7/8) made specific suggestions to eTeachers for improving the way they cater for Chinese students. Two participants suggested that eTeachers select online questions or provide some topics or examples related to Chinese culture background and context:

*While selecting online questions or provide examples, teachers need to think about students' different culture backgrounds. For example, since having private cars in China is not as common as it in the western countries, Chinese students may not understand the parking problem very well. (SP2)*

*To choose some topics which is relevant to China. (SP6)*

Two participants suggested more activities beside course work such as group meetings in order to make closer relationships between each other or discuss general study problems.

*To organise regular group meeting for Chinese students meet together so that they can discuss the general problems they have in online learning and find the suitable way to solve the problems. (IP5)*

*It would be better if there would be more activities besides course work such as arranging some students to meet together sometimes. It is good for students to communicate in the virtual reality sometimes. (SP1)*

Two participants suggested more on-time feedback and active help are needed:

*Especially when students have problems and questions, it is really necessary for lecturers to give timely feedback. I also suppose that lecturer should give feedback during the online discussion to make sure students are on the right track. When students have personal questions to ask lecturers, lecturers should give feedback as soon as possible especially when students asked questions about the assignments. These feedbacks are good for us to improve our writing when we do the next assignment. (IP3)*

*More active help is needed. Teachers should not wait the students to ask for help. It could be better if they give more active help and feedback. (SP4)*

To give more encouragement to Chinese students is suggested by two participants:

*For example, in some online courses, online discussion is not marked. Under this circumstance, lecturers need to encourage students to participate. Otherwise there will be less students participating in the online discussion. (IP3)*

*It is important to encourage Chinese students to interact and share ideas with lecturers and peers. (SP6)*

Two participants suggested providing relevant materials in a Chinese language version with consideration for the language difficulties for Chinese students, and giving more information about online learning before students start the online course.

*To provide relevant materials in Chinese version in order to help Chinese students to understand what is online learning and what is required in online learning environment such as some useful Webpages and some instructions, particular information about how to interact with lecturers and peers, and how to participate in the online discussion. Providing possible instructions in a Chinese version about how to use specific online learning platform would be a great support. (IP5)*

*Help Chinese students to understand some knowledge what they did not hear about before. (SP6)*

#### 4.4.2 To other Chinese students

Participants also made suggestions to other Chinese students. Some points reflect participants' perceptions of the benefits and disadvantages of learning online for

Chinese students as discussed in section 4.2.2.2.

Two suggested to have positive and active study attitude:

*Be confident, brave and active. (SP2)*

*Do not be shy. (SP3)*

Three participants suggested that Chinese students be willing to share ideas with others:

*Speak out your own ideas; Let other students know you have your own thoughts and they are good, right, fresh and creative. (SP3)*

*Have courage to give different ideas. (SP7)*

*Exchange ideas with other students (SP6)*

Two participants suggested other students do some preparation before choosing or starting online courses.

*Finding out more information about what online learning is before choosing or starting online courses. (IP5)*

*Read more information about online learning. (SP6)*

One participant suggested spending more time on reading due to the inadequate language competence:

*To spend more time on course reading. To spend extra time on improving English. (IP5)*

Two participants suggested asking for help from others when they have questions:

*Please take it easy to ask for help. (SP4)*

*To ask questions and share experience with other Chinese students who have completed or are doing online courses by using email or virtual office. (IP5)*

#### **4.5 Chapter summary**

All the participants had online learning experiences, however, their reasons for choosing online learning were varied. The main reasons were identified as trying a new learning experience, the appreciation of the study-time flexibility of online learning, and the consideration of enhancing their future career development. The desire for achieving high grades was also one of the reasons for some participants to choose online studies as well as one of their expectations before they started online learning. Another expectation was identified as to understand what eEducation and online learning are, which is also associated with their choices in trying a new learning experience.

Participants acknowledged both benefits and disadvantages for Chinese students to choose learning online. The main benefits were less pressure in online participation compared to face-to-face classes, time flexibility, allowing more time to reflect on questions, and more support from lectures and peers. However, participants also identified three negatives as less cultural contact, more time spent on dealing with written English, and lack of information and preparations for online learning. They also believed their written English skills, time management skills, technical skills, and independent study skills had been improved through their online learning.

Instant messaging was identified as a very helpful online feature by the most of participants. Participants also considered other online features (clear introduction of participation, the ongoing access to online/posted discussion, a virtual office, and instruction online linked to internet material such as course and assignment information) had been helpful. However, participants did not recognise librarian assistance as being very helpful during their online courses. Email was identified as a very efficient tool for keeping in contact with their lecturers.

Participants discussed some features of being a successful eTeacher. These features were providing helpful feedback, being good at explaining things, encouraging individuals to participate, enthusiasm, clear expectations, being approachable, having good technical skills, and selecting interesting subjects. Helpful feedback and being good at explaining things were identified as very important features for being a successful eTeacher. Participants also made clear the qualities of being a successful online learning student. Some aspects such as being independent and self-disciplined, and having sufficient technical skills were linked to the skills they improved during their online learning. They also realised that being active and positive in studies, being willing to share ideas in online discussions, and not feeling shamed in asking for help might lead to the success in online learning.

The majority of participants showed their preference for the online discussion environment in comparison to the face-to-face discussion environment. The reason for their preference was because the online learning allowed more time to reflect on questions. This was also perceived as a benefit for Chinese students in choosing online learning because Chinese students need more time to spend on overcoming English language barriers. All the participants thought online discussion should be marked because it reflects whether students meet the course requirements and what progress they had made during the online discussions.

Participants in this study have different opinions about how culture impacts on online learning. Half of them thought Chinese culture influenced their online learning. Participants saw both positive and negative cultural influences on their online learning: the positive impact was that their contribution was valued as a different perspective and providing new information on the Chinese context; some Chinese students being passive and lacking confidence in expressing their own ideas were seen as a negative impact. However, some participants thought that cultural impact cannot be generalised and that the influences varied with

individuals. As for some specific aspects, most agreed that Chinese students generally study harder than other students, and believed that the success in online learning comes from students' efforts, and that grades are important to online courses. They also saw positive sides of sharing ideas in online discussion, and felt comfortable when they posted opinions different from those of lecturers and students. These participants recognised a difference in the nature of the relationship between students and lecturers in China and in New Zealand due to cultural reasons.

In considering the difficulties for Chinese student to study online in New Zealand, participants made some specific suggestions to eTeachers. These were to choose topics or examples related to Chinese students' background, to organise activities such as group meeting beside course work, to give more timely feedback, to give more active help and more encouragement, to provide Chinese language versions of material, and to give more information about online learning before the online course starts. Participants also made suggestions for other Chinese students: to have a positive and active study attitude, to be willing to share ideas, to be well-prepared before choosing online learning, to spend more time on improving their English, and to ask for help when they have questions.

The next chapter will discuss these findings in light of the literature review.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This research provides the opportunity to look at Chinese students' perceptions of the impact of their culture on their online learning. The previous chapter looked at the research results about participants' understanding of online learning, whether participants believed there are cultural influences on their online learning and in what ways these influences may impact, and their recommendations to eTeachers and other Chinese students.

In the light of the literature review, this chapter will firstly discuss participants' perceptions of cultural impacts, particularly about their beliefs in grades, hard work and efforts, and the relationship between teachers and students. It will next discuss the research findings about participants' understanding of online learning. This includes perceptions of choices and expectations, online discussion and support, positives and negatives of online learning for Chinese students, and the features of being an effective eTeacher and qualities of being a successful online learning student. Finally the participants' recommendations to eTeachers and other Chinese students are discussed.

### **5.2 Participants' perceptions of cultural impact on online learning**

The literature suggested that Confucian culture influenced Chinese students' beliefs such as hard work and effort towards learning, learning motivation, and communication patterns (Lee, 1996; Tang & Biggs, 1996; Tsui, 1996; Wang, 2006). Half the participants in this research agreed that Chinese culture influenced their online learning attitude, behaviour and achievements (4.3). It is interesting that those participants who agreed had seen both positive and negative cultural influences on their online learning. On one hand, having a Chinese cultural background and ways of thinking which can bring new information into their online studies, was

viewed as a positive cultural impact. From this point of view, Chinese culture could give Chinese students different perspectives and bring more information to their online discussion, and may even reinforce online interaction with lecturers and peers. By saying this, Chinese culture was beneficial to Chinese students' online participation and had a positive impact on their online learning. On the other hand, some participants explained that Chinese culture and Chinese education system had negative impacts on their learning patterns such as Chinese students being not open in thinking, being used to specific instructions and directions from teachers, lacking in critical thinking, and tending to be silent in a communication.

However, half of the participants disagreed that Chinese culture influenced on their online learning. One participant thought Chinese cultural impacts could not be generalised because not all of Chinese students were passive online learners and some Chinese students were willing to adapt to a new culture and learning environment. In the literature, Xun Lu, a famous writer, philosopher, and spiritual mentor in contemporary China, explained his ideological attitude towards foreign culture as 'comes essence' in his famous essay 'out of', which has strongly influenced on Chinese people's ideas and attitude towards a new culture (Chen, 2001). In other words, Lu's ideology tells Chinese people to take the essence of a new culture, and learn from the other cultures so that they can adapt to the new culture. So perhaps some participants in this study believed that although they had studied in New Zealand only for a short period time, they needed to be willing to learn from New Zealand culture, and try to accept the western ways of learning in order to adapt to the new culture and learning environment. In an online learning context, it may be expected that some Chinese students acknowledged that to be willing to share ideas with peers, to be open in communication, to speak out in their own voices is important and applicable to online learning, so they could probably learn better in New Zealand universities. Therefore, individuals' levels of adaptability and willingness to adjust the new culture may be a reason why some participants disagreed that their Chinese culture influenced their online learning in New Zealand. To some extent, New

Zealand teachers are having to adapt to Chinese students' culture. So both teachers and students are learning about each others' culture. Interaction with another culture may develop both cultures.

Participants' beliefs in grades, hard work, self-effort, and their perceptions of the relationship between teachers and students may be perceived as cultural aspects, and will be discussed in this section.

#### 5.2.1 Beliefs in grades, hard work and effort.

Participants' perceptions of grades in their online learning were investigated in this research. The literature suggests that under the influence of Confucian culture and the competitive examination system in China, Chinese believe it is possible for ordinary people to obtain wealth, power, and social status through success in exams. So teachers, students and parents have paid close attention to grades instead of the learning process, and studies have become result-orientated (Biggs & Watkins, 1996; Feng, 1999; Lee, 1996; Yang, Zheng & Li, 2006). Many participants in this study agreed that grades are important part of their achievement for online course (4.3), to achieve high grades was perceived as one participant's expectation before he/she chose to study online (4.2.2.1). These participants saw grades was a way to value whether students met the online course requirements. However, some participants did not show a strong desire for high grades in their online learning because they thought the learning process, experience, and improvement was far more important than grades. Although these students who focus on the learning process and improvements may be more likely to get high grades, they acknowledged that grades might not truly value a student's ability. Perhaps because these participants were graduate level students, their attitude towards online learning tended to be more mature. They might be more self-motivated, and pay more attention to the learning process, experience, and improvements. It should be noted that some of participants in this research were secondary, high school teachers or online instructors at the universities in China before they studied in New Zealand, so it may be expected that they may have a

deeper understanding about learning. All the participants agreed that online discussion should be marked. Interestingly, their reasons for agreement were not about grades themselves, but acknowledging that grades can reflect whether they met the course requirement as well as showing their improvement. As graduate level students, participants were not only concerned about online learning outcomes, but also sought to pursue knowledge and gain good experiences in their online learning process.

The literature suggests that under the influence of Confucian culture, Chinese people believe that success comes from hard work, self-effort, and willpower. They also think that studying hard determines high grades, and could potentially reward them with power, wealth, social status, a good career, and a good life in the future, and help them to succeed in the competitive Chinese society (Lee, 1996; Tang & Biggs, 1996; Wang, 2006). The majority of participants in this study believed that Chinese students generally study hard (4.3). One participant directly pointed out the reason was a cultural impact and an influence from Chinese examination system. These participants may also mean that Chinese students perhaps spend more time on studies because they accommodated English language difficulties. A financial burden, including a huge amount of tuition fees and living expenses in New Zealand, was also explained as a force for Chinese students to work hard. However, two participants disagreed and explained that this cultural impact could not be generalized because the level of hard working differed between individuals no matter which culture they came from. They also thought the ways of being hard workers could also be interpreted differently. So this finding on participants' perceptions of Chinese students being hard workers is consistent with what the literature suggested, but the individual differences in learning such as learning strategies and approach were acknowledged and explained as the main reason why two participants disagreed.

Literature suggested that Chinese people believe that learning is associated with effort, and self-determination is the driving force of effort (Wang, 2006). The success in study comes to students who are diligent (Tang & Biggs, 1996). Most participants

(7/8) in this research agreed that the success in online learning comes from student effort (4.3). Their comments may suggest that they believe self-effort is a key to the success of any kind of learning and, in particular, to online learning because the online learning environment is less supervised and requires a student's self-discipline and self-determination. One participant pointed out this belief was influenced by Chinese culture. However, one participant thought the learning success is a two-way result, and not every one who is working hard can be successful. This participant might suggest that eTeachers played an important role in online learning although student self-effort was needed, which is consistent with what the literature suggested about the importance of the role of eTeachers in online teaching pedagogy (Bender, 2003; Ko & Rossen, 2004; Salmon, 2003).

#### 5.2.2 Perspectives on the relationship between teachers and students

The relationship between teachers and students was perceived as a cultural impact in this research. As the literature suggested, in the Confucian culture, the relationship between teachers and students is not equal. Teachers are the authority and have higher status than students. Students need to show their respect to teachers by listening and following teachers' instructions without any questioning (Jiang, 2006; Ho, 2001). Participants in this study compared this relationship in China to that in New Zealand (4.3), and agreed that teachers in China are the authority and challenging the teacher is viewed as disrespect to teachers. One participant also directly pointed out that this unequal relationship between teachers and students is influenced by Confucian tradition. This is consistent with what the literature which discusses the influence of Confucian tradition on the relationship between teacher and students (Tsui, 1996). One participant thought teachers' suggestions and opinions are very important because they are more experienced. This may suggest that Chinese culture influenced this participant on his/her attitude towards teachers' opinions. Participants also commented this kind of unequal relationship had made students feel unwilling to communicate with teachers. Some participants in this research found that, in comparison to teachers in China, New Zealand teachers were more friendly to

students, and they did not judge the student by their grades, which made students being more willing to communicate with teachers. In general, participants' comments showed their appreciation of the relationship between themselves and teachers in New Zealand. This relationship in China may be viewed as a cultural impact. To some extent, participants realised this cultural impact and believed that a more equal relationship between students and teachers such as in New Zealand has positive influences on students' online learning.

To sum up, although literature suggested that Chinese culture has influenced students' general learning but was not especially about online learning, this research finding showed that Chinese culture has some impact on students' online learning. Participants perceived grades as being an important part in their online learning achievement, but they had a mature attitude towards their online learning and deep insights about the meaning of grades. They believed Chinese students study hard in their online courses, but also were aware of that the ways of studying hard differs due to individuals' differences of online learning strategies and approach. The unequal relationship between teachers and students in China was thought of as a cultural influence from Confucian tradition. Participants showed their appreciation of the relationship between teachers and students in New Zealand, and considered that a more equal relationship between teachers and students has a positive impact on students' online learning. So it can be assumed that Chinese culture has impacts on students' online learning but these impacts may be not applicable to every Chinese student probably because in a broad context individuals are different to each other even if they come from the same culture. Another reason may be that the level of willingness and ability to adjust a new culture varied. By saying this, to some Chinese students who are more willing and able to adapt to a new culture, may be more influenced by the New Zealand culture and the learning environment than the others who were less willing. In addition, the literature suggests that culture is invisible, and people are rarely aware of cultural influences (Samovar & Porter, 2003). Therefore, some participants might not realize the Chinese cultural impact on them but we

cannot deny Chinese culture influences Chinese students' beliefs about online learning.

### **5.3 Participants' understanding of online learning**

This section will include a discussion of participants' choices and expectations about online learning, their understanding of online discussion, and their perceptions of online support. How they perceived the benefits and disadvantages of online learning for Chinese students, the features of being an effective eTeacher and qualities of being a successful online student will also be investigated.

#### 5.3.1 Choices and expectations

Participants were asked about their reasons for making their decision to choose to study online or undertake online courses (see SQ 5, Appendix C). Apart from an appreciation of obtaining new learning experience and the preferences of the online learning flexibility, participants' responses reflect some Chinese thinking (4.2.1). Some participants in this study believed that this online learning experience would be beneficial for their future career development, and also considered that the success in online studies would reward them with a good career in the future. This is consistent with what the literature suggested, under the influence of Confucian tradition, Chinese believe that the success in education could reward individuals with wealth, career, and social status (Lee, 1996). It should be noted that some of participants were secondary or high school teachers, and online instructors from Heibei province of China before they came to New Zealand. They were sent to the School of Education at the University of Waikato for Master degree studies by the Chinese government. So it could be expected that their purpose of coming to New Zealand was to acquire some advanced knowledge about learning and teaching pedagogies, which they could then apply to their future teaching career as well as enhancing Chinese education professional development on their return to China. Some of them may particularly expect to acquire online learning and teaching knowledge from studying an online course in New Zealand so that they can apply that to their future online teaching.

The Chinese government's needs for developing eLearning and eTeaching may be considered as a reason why some participants chose to undertake online courses in New Zealand. The rapid growth in Internet use and telecommunications is powered in part by China's economic boom. According to the "19th Statistical Survey Report on Internet Development in China", Internet users in China had reached 137 million at the end of year 2006 (Internet World Stats, n.d.). A newly released study from the research firm Pew Internet stated that, the number of Chinese Web surfers will surpass the number of American users some time in 2009, and it will continue to rise sharply afterward (Reimer, 2007). The latest report from Chinese Ministry of Industry and Information showed that the Internet population in China had reached 221 million by the end of February in 2008, which exceeded the figure in the United States to already rank the first in the world, (Xinhua, 2008, para.1). These statistics show that China is the largest telecommunication market, (Internet World Stats, n.d.), and the largest mobile communications market in the world (China mobile market, n.d). From these statistical reports, it can be expected that China could probably become a huge online learning market, and also has great potential in online learning and teaching development, which perhaps will create a strong need for online teachers and professionals. BBC News (2007) reported that the Chinese government encourages people to go online for education or business purposes. According to the report from the China international distance education conference, the online education in China is developing rapidly under the promotion by the government. The scale of online education of ordinary universities and colleges expands continuously and has become the mainstream of adult and continuing education. Many enterprises introduce e-Learning and more and more of them set up their own corporation university. Online professional education increases both its need and its development; IT methodology has been applied in community education and distance education comes directly to the families, and M-learning is breaking ground and showing great expectation (Organizing Committee of China International Distance Education, 2007). In fact, one of the participants in this research was an eTeacher from HeiBei Province

in China, and was sent to New Zealand by the Chinese government for his/her eTeaching training. So it may be expected that he/she would bring the knowledge of online learning and teaching pedagogies back to China after undertaking online courses in New Zealand. This would enhance his/her online teaching in China.

Participants had different levels of expectation about online learning before they chose to undertake online courses (4.2.2.1). One participant had the expectation of achieving high grades in an online course. This participant might think an online course would be easier for Chinese students to get high marks compared to the face-to-face course because an online course can give more time to Chinese students to cope with their English difficulties. Another participant's expectation was to understand what eEducation is and how students can achieve well in online learning. One participant expected to pass this online paper in order to complete his/her degree. Participants' different expectations of online learning may affect their online learning attitude and motivations, and may also potentially have an influence on their learning outcomes. The participant who had an expectation of gaining an understanding of what eEducation is may have an intrinsic motivation towards his/her online learning, and pay more attention to the online learning process and experience rather than grades. The participant who expected to get high grades might achieve good marks in online learning, but this does not necessarily mean he/she had gained a better understanding and more experience of online learning.

### 5.3.2 The understanding of online discussion

The literature suggests that Chinese students accommodate English language difficulties both in spoken and written English when they study in English countries such as New Zealand (Berry & Williams, 2004; Wang & Shan, 2007). Some Chinese students were found lacking in confidence in class communication due to their inadequate English capabilities (Holmes, 2000). Most participants in this research showed their preference for the online discussion environment in comparison to a face-to-face discussion environment (4.2.2.6). They explained online discussion could

record their postings so they could read and check the records any time they liked. And they also could have more time to reflect on a question as well as thinking about the responses, which actually gave them less pressure than the face-to-face discussion. Tracking down the reason for their preference, perhaps these participants' inadequate language capability influenced on their preference. By saying this, Chinese students might mean it was hard for them to understand the question, and express their ideas in English in a short face-to-face discussion time. They might also feel uneasy to react and respond peers' and lecturers' questions in English quickly in a face-to-face discussion. As Holmes (2000) pointed out, Chinese students might have a fear that people would make fun of their English expression, and others may not be able to understand their English. So these participants might mean they had less advantage than other English-speaking students, and also feel uneasy and unable to perform well in a face-to-face discussion due to their insufficient English language competence. In turn, online discussion gave them more time to reflect on questions, read discussion records, prepare responses and reactions, and even check out their English expression such as grammar, which made them feel less stressed. Therefore, they may perform better and have a deeper communication with others in an online discussion environment. However, two participants made no preference between a face-to-face discussion and an online discussion environment. They felt that their preferences depend on how teachers organize the discussion, the attractiveness of discussion topics and participants' learning attitudes. They explained that online discussion would be preferable when the communication was not smooth between Chinese students and domestic students in a group work in the face-to-face discussion. These participants' comments actually reflect their acknowledgement of the differences between online learning and face-to face learning, and their deep insights about the importance of eTeachers' role and the effective eTeaching pedagogies. According to the research from School of Education in the University of Waikato (Donaghy, McGee, Ussher & Yates, 2003), there was a strong link between the lecturer's level of interaction and the students' enthusiasm. Students could have a better interaction through class discussions when lecturers regularly participated online and gave

feedback. In contrast, students seemed being less interested in and tended not to participate in online discussion frequently when lecturers only posted a question without regular engagement. So how the online teachers organize, stimulate and participate in the online discussion influences students' learning enthusiasm. The literature suggests that eTeachers need to be aware of that individuals have different interests and try to meet their needs and interests (Bender, 2003; Shea-Schultz & Fogarty, 2002). One participant in this research commented that the online discussion and the face-to-face discussion both could be preferable, and their preference depends on whether teachers' choose interesting discussion topics. This participant's deeper insights and mature thinking about online discussion may recognise that the quality of learning material eTeachers choose such discussion topics could affect students' levels of interests in online discussion. This is consistent with what Anita Bischoff (2000) found, that online instructors should carefully provide, edit and post material to students.

The literature may suggest that Chinese students might not be comfortable with expressing contrary opinions to peers and teachers in the discussion. For one reason, according to the Confucian culture, questioning teachers is viewed as disrespectful to teachers or showing off so it is not encouraged, and students should keep silence during a conversation (Tsui, 1996). For another reason, Chinese culture places a value on maintaining group harmony which is achieved by showing politeness and maintaining both one's own and others' faces, so students show unwillingness to provide critical feedback and express different ideas in order to avoid conflict (Carson & Nelson, 1996; Gao & Ting, 1998; Mao, 1994). However, most participants (7/8) indicated that they felt comfortable when they posted different opinions to eTeachers and peers in the online discussion (4.2.2.6). They saw challenging lecturers' and peers' ideas is a positive and meaningful thing because different ideas could attract others' attentions and enlighten others' thinking as well. They also realized that it is normal that students who are from different cultural backgrounds have different thinking. Posting different ideas to others in the online discussion was acknowledged

as a positive way of learning, and was thought of as to be encouraged. One participant pointed out the Chinese way of learning is sometimes to seek one right answer and there is a lack of sharing ideas. It is interesting that participants realized the differences between the Chinese ways of learning and western learning styles. Participants' responses showed their willingness to adapt to the new culture and the western learning style. Only one participant felt uncomfortable about posting different ideas to lectures and peers, and this was because of the language difficulties.

### 5.3.3 Perceptions of online support

Some literature suggested that librarians play a role in supporting students to study online (Sacchanand & Jaroenpuntaruk, 2005). However, participants in this research did not fully recognize librarians in this role (4.2.2.2). This maybe because the librarian's role had not been introduced enough to students through eTeachers or schools. Librarians' involvement at a late stage of some participants' online courses might be another reason why students did not clearly acknowledge librarian's support. So, further research introducing librarians' role in an online course and ensuring the effective involvement of librarians from the start of an online course may be needed. Apart from a few participants who asked for help from librarians, most participants in this research chose to contact lecturers and other students for assistance. Most participants (5/8) made daily contact with lecturers and peers, and some of them (3/8) contacted lecturers and peers weekly (4.2.2.2). Participants acknowledged lecturers' and peers' online support, and thought instant messaging was a useful tool for them to keep in contact with lecturers and peers. Perhaps these participants mean that online Classforum which is the online learning management system at the University of Waikato, was very practical and convenient. They might find leaving instant messages in the Classforum was easily seen by lecturers and peers so that they could quickly keep in touch with them when they needed help.

### 5.3.4 Benefits and negatives of online learning for Chinese students

English language difficulties for Chinese students were considered as the main reason

why most participants in this research preferred an online discussion environment to a face-to-face discussion environment. Interestingly, it was also related to participants' perceptions of the benefits and disadvantages of online learning for Chinese students (4.2.2.2). Participants were fully aware of their English language difficulties, and realized that they had less disadvantages in language in online learning compared to studying face-to-face because they could have more time to overcome their language difficulties. Less pressure and more time to reflect on questions in the online discussion were thought of as the main benefits for Chinese students for studying online, which were still associated with Chinese students' English language difficulties. Most participants in this study also found that they had improved their written English from learning online, but had less improvement in spoken English. This can be understood that, because it was unlikely to practice spoken English and there were more written English practice during the online course, choosing online course actually gave Chinese students both advantages and disadvantages in English language learning. One participant in this research commented that no prejudices could be sensed in online discussion. This participant might mean that eTeachers could only value students by their online contributions so the assessment of online courses may be more fair than face-to-face courses because no judgments by appearance can be made. Some participants also felt that having more support from online lecturers and peers was another important benefit for Chinese students, which has been mentioned above (5.3.3).

However, apart from the negative of less improvement in spoken English for Chinese students, some participants also felt less contact with New Zealand culture was another disadvantage for Chinese students learning online. They commented that it seemed like wasting money if they came to New Zealand only for learning online. Perhaps these participants expected to get some knowledge and experiences about New Zealand culture, but it was impossible to truly experience New Zealand culture only through learning online. So participants who made this comment may suggest that online course design could involve increased cultural content. This kind of

change might appeal to more Chinese students to choose online courses in New Zealand in the future. In addition, participants commented on the lack of preparation about online learning was also a negative for Chinese students. This may suggest that the information and basic introduction about online learning is needed before students choose to study online.

### 5.3.5 Features of being an effective eTeacher and the quality of being a successful online student

Literature suggested that to provide feedback is an element of effective online teaching (Bischoff, 2000). Prompt and positive feedback is important in increasing students' learning enthusiasm (Bender, 2003; Young, 2006). Most participants thought helpful feedback was the most important feature, ranking higher than other features such as being good at explaining things, giving clear expectations, having good technical skills, teaching enthusiasm, and being approachable (4.2.2.5). This may suggest that participants acknowledged that effective online teaching pedagogies should come first, and feedback is more important than technical skills, teaching style and the attentiveness of teachers' personalities. It is interesting that one participant also thought that being an effective eTeacher should respect other cultures and every student. Perhaps this participant thought there were students from different cultural backgrounds studying in the same online course, so eTeachers needed to be aware that students' different cultural backgrounds may give them different interests in online courses and different learning strategies towards online studies. This participant's voice may help eTeachers to treat every student fairly and cater to students' different needs so that students can learn better. This is consistent with what the literature suggested that learning is the most effective when differences in learners' linguistic, cultural and social backgrounds are taken into account (Bonk & King, 1998), and to cater to the learner was a strategy for any successful eLearning and eTeaching (Shea-Schultz & Fogarty, 2002).

Chinese student were perceived as being silent and polite in communication in order

to maintain 'face' and group harmony, and show their respect to teachers (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Mao, 1994; Carson & Nelson, 1996). Most participants in this research thought a successful online learning student should be active in online participation and be willing to share ideas in online discussion (4.2.2.5). These participants might realize this cultural impact on Chinese students' online communication pattern, and especially encouraged Chinese students to be open to a new culture and adjust to western ways of learning in order to succeed in the online participation. Some participants commented being self-control, self-disciplined, and being able to study independently were also some qualities of being a successful online learning student. These participants understood that online learning is different from face-to-face learning which has no lecture attendance and less supervision, so students need to be able to be independent in their online learning. So it may be expected that, to some Chinese students who were used to following teachers' instructions and directions, becoming independent might be a challenge when they first start their online courses.

#### **5.4 Participants' voices about recommendations**

The literature suggests that timely feedback is essential to the success of online interaction (Young, 2006). In fact, two participants in this study suggested more on-time feedback is needed (4.4.1). These participants may mean that students expect their online contribution to be acknowledged, and lecturers' on-time feedback could tell them what they have done well, and what they still need to improve in their online participations. It may be expected that students may feel disappointed and frustrated when the lecturer does not give timely feedback.

To acknowledge students differences in interests, ability, cultural and social background, and the diversity of learners' needs, may help eTeachers to cater to students in a learner-centred approach (Bender, 2003; Bonk & King; Shea-Schultz & Fogarty, 2002). Two participants in this research recommended eTeachers should select online questions or provide some topics or examples related to Chinese cultural

background and context (4.4.1). This suggests that these participants had a lack of knowledge about New Zealand culture so they probably had difficulties in understanding some online course contents related to New Zealand context or culture such as New Zealand schooling when they first started their online courses. So, maybe starting with more familiar examples or contexts would be helpful for students to get into the online course. Once students became familiar with New Zealand culture and western education contexts, learning online could possibly become less stressful for them and they might have a better understanding about the online course content. Participants making this recommendation may also mean that using a Chinese context in online learning could bring more information to other students who are not Chinese as well as broadening their minds.

Participants also suggested eTeachers could provide relevant material in a Chinese language version, and give more information about online learning before students start the course (4.4.1). Except for considering Chinese students' English language difficulties, these participants might suggest that having more information about what online learning is could help them make better preparation so that they could have a better start in online learning. It should be noted that a basic instruction regarding the use of specific online learning management system (Classforum) was available when students logged in. However, students were unlikely to be aware of this guidance until after the decision to enrol had been made.

The literature suggests Chinese students were perceived as being quiet without questioning in their communication (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Tsui, 1996). Three participants in this study suggested and encouraged other Chinese students to speak out their own thoughts in discussion, and be willing to share their ideas with others (4.4.1). This might suggest that participants saw being willing to share ideas with others and being active in online discussion were positive online learning strategies, which could help Chinese students to adjust to the new learning environment. 'Do not be afraid of asking for help' was another suggestion from two participants. They may

mean that some Chinese students were shy in asking questions, and worried about losing face if they asked for assistance. This is consistent with what the literature suggested, that 'face' is important for Chinese people in the Confucian tradition (Ching, 1992). Another suggestion from one participant was to spend more time on reading, which may suggest that Chinese students have English language difficulties so that they need to spend extra time on improving their English language capabilities.

### **5.5 Chapter summary**

The literature suggests that Chinese culture influences students' general learning and communication patterns. Chinese students have their cultural beliefs about studies such as hard work and self-effort, the importance of grades, respecting the teacher, and the meaning of 'face' in communication. Participants in this research perceived these culture influences as having implications in students' online learning both in positive and negative ways. However, they thought these cultural impacts cannot be generalized, considering individuals' differences in adjusting a new culture and learning environment. The invisibility of a culture may be another reason why some participants disagreed that there was much Chinese cultural influence.

Participants choosing to study online not only thought about gaining a new learning experience and study flexibility, but also concerned about future career development. The Chinese government's needs for eTeaching development and some participants' circumstances may be associated with their choices.

Having more time to reflect on a question was perceived as the main reason why most participants in this study preferred the online discussion environment as a benefit for Chinese students studying online. This benefit is related to participants' English language difficulties. However, this research found that participants had improved written English but had less improvement in spoken English from learning online. Interestingly most participants in this research felt comfortable with expressing contrary ideas in online discussion, which is different to what the literature suggested

about Chinese cultural impact on students' communication patterns. This finding may suggest that participants were willing to adjust a new culture and a western learning environment. Lecturer and peer support were thought as the main assistance; however, librarian's role was not fully acknowledged by participants.

Participants in this research found that eTeachers' on-time feedback was an important feature of being an effective eTeacher, which is consistent with what the literature suggested about effective eTeaching pedagogies. To provide on-time feedback was a recommendation to eTeachers from participants in this research. Participants also perceived that being active in online participation was very important regarding the quality of being a successful online learning student.

Apart from the recommendation about feedback, to select examples, material or topics related to a Chinese cultural background or context was another suggestion to eTeachers. This suggestion may indicate that participants expected eTeachers could consider students' cultural backgrounds and cater to their needs. Participants' suggestions to other Chinese students are mainly to encourage them to adapt to the new culture and western ways of learning, and to improve their English language capabilities. Therefore, the cultural learning is both ways. New Zealand teachers may need to learn about Chinese culture in order to give relevant examples and context to a Chinese cultural background. Meanwhile Chinese students will learn about New Zealand culture.

The next and final chapter will summarise the findings of this research study and make recommendations for further research.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter summarizes the findings of this research, outlines the research limitations, and concludes with some possible areas for future research.

### 6.2 Conclusions regarding this research

*Research Question 1: What was the participants' understanding of online learning?*

Participants' experience of online learning gave them better understanding of what online learning was, what features online learning had, what skills and knowledge they had developed, and what the benefits and disadvantages were for them in choosing online learning.

Participants made the choice of undertaking online courses based on the appreciation of time flexibility and new learning experiences of online learning. They viewed having online learning experiences as a benefit for individual future career developments.

They acknowledged that they improved their time management skills, written English, technical skills and independent study skills during the online courses. Time flexibility, less pressure in online discussion and more time for reflection on questions are thought of as benefits for Chinese students when studying online. Reduced improvement in spoken English was viewed as a disadvantage for learning online for Chinese students. Participants' understanding of online learning is based on their online learning experience, and these thoughts reflect their significant concerns about English difficulties for Chinese students who study in English-speaking countries. Their limitations in English language capabilities were also associated with the preference of online discussion environment over face-to-face discussion.

Participants were aware of the support from eTeachers and peers, but librarians' assistance has not been fully recognized. They also thought instant messages were the most helpful online features in keeping contact with lecturers and peers.

*Research question 2: What were the participants' perceptions of cultural impacts on their online learning attitude, behaviour and achievements?*

Participants had different opinions about whether Chinese culture influences their online learning attitude, behaviour and achievements. But most participants agreed the Chinese cultural impacts on aspects such as hard work, efforts and grades. The majority of participants believed that hard work and effort lead to success in online learning. They also have strong desires to achieve high grades in their studies. These beliefs can be viewed as having a cultural basis. Participants' attitudes towards the relationship between teacher and students in China were also influenced by Confucian culture. They showed their appreciation of the relationship between teachers and students in New Zealand, and willingness in adjusting to the new learning environment and culture.

Participants having different opinions about cultural impact may be because individuals have different online learning experiences in New Zealand, and the adaptability to the new culture and learning environment differed for individuals. Different English competency can be also viewed as a reason.

*Research question 3: What were the participants' recommendations to eTeachers and other Chinese students about eTeaching and eLearning?*

Chinese students had strong opinions about their needs in this research. They recommended to eTeachers that to add some examples relevant to students' background, and to give some instructions or tools before the online courses start would be useful for students to get into the online study. To give more encouragement and timely feedback are also suggested as being helpful to student learning. Lecturers arranging a group meeting in addition to the course study was suggested as a good

way for Chinese students to communicate with other Chinese students about their problems so that they could help each other.

Participants were fully aware of some negative cultural impacts on students' learning, and encouraged other Chinese students to adjust the new learning environment and culture. These recommendations were to be willing to share ideas, to be willing to speak out their thoughts, and not to be ashamed in asking for help and asking questions, to find some information about online learning before they choose online courses.

### **6.3 Research limitations**

Most of the participants were not on campus, which caused difficulties for the researcher in recruiting participants for interview. Some email surveys could not be successfully delivered to participants during this research, so the number of email responses was limited.

This research is a small study. All eight participants' thoughts may not completely represent Chinese students' perceptions of Chinese cultural impacts on their online learning. In other words, the views of eight Chinese students may not be able to be extrapolated to all online Chinese students in New Zealand.

Participants' responses about cultural impacts may not entirely reflect cultural influences because culture is invisible and participants may not fully aware of its impacts. Their perceptions were also associated with the length they have lived or studied in New Zealand, personal experiences and adaptability to the new culture and learning environment.

This research looked at the English language as an aspect of positives and negatives of online learning for Chinese students; however, it did not ask participants about their English language proficiency.

#### **6.4 Future research**

Participants made recommendations to eTeachers about some pedagogical changes, whether these changes can be made, and how to make changes could be the focus for some future research.

The librarians' role has not been fully acknowledged in this research study's findings. It would be valuable to look at how to maximize librarian assistance in online learning.

This research found that Chinese students improved their written English, but have less improvement in spoken English, so it would be interesting to look at ways both the written and spoken English language of Chinese students could be improved through learning online.

## **Appendices**

Appendix A: An invitation letter to participants in this research project

Appendix B: Consent form

Appendix C: Email survey

Appendix D: Interview questions

## **Appendix A: An invitation letter to participants in the research project**

### **The impact of culture in online learning: Chinese tertiary students' perceptions**

39 York Street, Hamilton East, Hamilton.

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

My name is Yan Cong. I am a Chinese student undertaking a three-paper thesis under the supervision of Kerry Earl in the School of Education at the University of Waikato. I completed PROF 521 07A (Net) eEducation Research and Development last semester.

I wish to invite you to participate in a research project because you are a current or past student of PROF521 eEducation Research and Development and/or PROF522 the Professional Practice of eTeaching.

The project will look at Chinese students' understanding of online learning, and investigate how culture impact on online learning attitude, behaviour and achievements, and seek to make recommendations for eTeachers and professional developers on supporting Chinese students studying online both in China and New Zealand. This research will involve you completing an online survey by email, and taking part in an interview if you are on campus or within a reasonable travelling distance and agree to be interviewed. Any interviews will be carried out in October or November 2007 at a time and place convenient to you. The online survey should take approximately forty five minutes to complete. Interviews will be one hour in duration, and will be audio taped. The transcript will be returned to you for confirmation.

The research will adhere strictly to the University of Waikato Human Research Ethics Regulations (2000). Participation in this research is voluntary. If you agree to participate, you will be able to withdraw from the project until the time the transcript is confirmed by you. Your right to anonymity and privacy will be respected during and after the research process No real names will be used in the report, and all the data gathered will be kept confidential. Any information gathered will be only used for the academic purposes of this research thesis or any resulting journal or conference presentations, unless your permission is obtained for other uses. All information will be coded and the information gathered will not have any negative impact on your current study at the University of Waikato.

Your participation will be greatly appreciated. If you would like to be involved or have further enquires about the project, please **contact me directly** cellphone 02102234075, or email [yc216@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:yc216@waikato.ac.nz). If you have any initial questions about my research, you can contact my Supervisor **Kerry Earl** at ph: (07)8384506 or email: [kearl@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:kearl@waikato.ac.nz) (office TT2.13). If you are confirmed as participants and have any further concerns about how my research is conducted, you need to contact the chairperson of Professional Studies in Education **Russell Yates** (07) 8384466 ext. 4753 or email [ryates@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:ryates@waikato.ac.nz) (Office TT2.05)

If you are willing to participate, please indicate this by signing the consent form below, and return to me through **email** as **attachments**. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours faithfully  
Yan Cong

**Appendix B: Consent form**

**Consent form**

I.....am willing to participant in the research project  
(Please print/type your name) as requested in your invitation letter.

**I have read and understood**

---All the research ethics involved and grant consent for online survey and potential interview.

---The data of this research project will be kept confidential and anonymity will be maximised by the researcher.

--- My participation is voluntary and I may withdraw up until the time the transcript is confirmed by me.

(Please indicate **YES** on the line below if you **agree** to participate)

I am willing to participate the **online survey**\_\_\_\_\_

**Interview**\_\_\_\_\_

Sign:.....Date:.....

(Returning this form with your details filled in will be considered as your informed consent with **or without** an electronic signature!)

**Appendix C: Email survey**



**The impact of culture in online learning:  
Chinese tertiary students' perceptions (online survey)**

I am conducting this survey to seek to provide recommendations for eTeachers and developers. Your perceptions will help to tailor online courses to Chinese students' needs and support.

Please answer **all items**. Information supplied on this survey will be used for the academic purpose only. Your response will be kept confidential. Please submit this survey as an attachment by emailing me [yc216@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:yc216@waikato.ac.nz)

Thank you very much for your participation!

**1. Gender (please tick one only)**

Male       Female

**2. How old are you? (Please tick only one)**

Under 25       25-30       31-35       35 above

**3. How long have you been in New Zealand? \_\_\_\_\_ Months**

**4. What experience have you had learning online?**

What level \_\_\_\_\_

What institution \_\_\_\_\_

What subject \_\_\_\_\_

Duration \_\_\_\_\_

**5. Why do/did you choose to study online or undertake an online course? (For example what is/are your reason/s to choose PROF521 or/and PROF 522)**

6. What do you think are the benefits of learning online to you as a Chinese student? (You can tick more than one choice, then please rate your answers from 1-5. 5: the most important, 1: the least important, you could put the same number more than once.)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Less pressure in online participation	<input type="checkbox"/>	Time flexibility
<input type="checkbox"/>	More attractive as an innovative idea	<input type="checkbox"/>	Learning without distance
<input type="checkbox"/>	More support from lecturers and peers	<input type="checkbox"/>	Learn sufficient knowledge
<input type="checkbox"/>	Improve written English	<input type="checkbox"/>	Connected without being isolated
<input type="checkbox"/>	Allows more time to reflect questions		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (Please explain: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ )		

7. What do you think are the negatives of learning online for you as a Chinese student? (You can tick more than one choice, then please rate your answers from 1-5. 5: the most important, 1: the least important)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Less improvement in spoken English	<input type="checkbox"/>	Less culture contact
<input type="checkbox"/>	More time spend on dealing with written English		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (please explain: _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ )		

8. What skills have you developed from learning online? (Please rate these choices from 1-5, 5: improved the most, 1: improved the least)

	Time management skills		Written English
	Technical skills		Independent study skill
	Other (Please explain: _____ )		

9. Which of these features of online learning help/ helped you? (Please rate it from 1-5, 5: the most helpful, 1: the least helpful)

Clear introductions of participants		Instant messaging	
Ongoing access to read discussion		Virtual office	
Email		Librarian's assists	
Instruction online linked to internet material (e.g.: course and assignment information)			

10. What do you think of the features of being an effective eTeacher? (Please rate your answers from 1-5, 5: the most important 1: the least important.)

Good at explaining things		Helpful feedback	
Encouraging individuals to participate		Enthusiasm	
Clear expectations		Being approachable	
Good technical skills		Choose interesting subjects	

11. Do you agree that your Chinese culture influences on your online learning attitude/ behaviour/ achievement? (Please tick only one)

Strongly agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly disagree

If you strongly agree or agree, in what ways does your Chinese culture influence on your online learning attitude/behaviour/achievements? Please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

12. Please rate your agreement with this statement: Chinese students generally study harder than other students? (Please tick only one)

Strongly agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly disagree

Please comment:

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13. What is/was the average time that you spend on your online course per week?  
\_\_\_\_\_Hours

14. Do you agree that the grades are the important part of your achievements for your online course? (Please tick only one)

Strongly agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly disagree

Please comment: \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

15. Was/is your online participation a part of your course assessment?

Yes    No

16. What is your opinion about participation in online discussion being marked?

Strongly agree    Agree    Disagree    Strongly disagree

Please comment: \_\_\_\_\_

---

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17. Do you prefer online discussion environment or face-to-face course discussion environment? (Please tick only one)

A: Prefer online discussion environment

B: Prefer face-to-face course discussion environment

Please explain your reasons: \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

18. How comfortable are you when you post different opinions from lecturer's and other students'? (Please tick only one)

Very comfortable    Comfortable

Uncomfortable    Very uncomfortable

Please explain why you feel that: \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

19. Who do/did you ask for help when you have questions? (You can tick more than one)

Lecturer     other students     librarians

Other (please explain \_\_\_\_\_)

20. How much contact do you have with your lecturer and other students? (Please tick only one)

Monthly     weekly     daily

21. Do you agree that success in online learning comes from students' effort? (Please tick one)

Strongly agree     Agree     Disagree     Strongly disagree

Please explain your reasons \_\_\_\_\_

---

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22. What does/did make a successful online learning student? Please explain:

23. What recommendations do you have for supporting Chinese students studying online?

**To eTeachers:**

**To other Chinese students:**



## Appendix D: Interview questions

### **The impact of culture in online learning: Chinese tertiary students' perceptions (interview)**

1. Tell me what contributed to your decision to study online? Did you know or have any friends doing online learning before?
2. What were your expectations for learning online? Had you achieved your expectations?
3. What were benefits and negative for Chinese students to choose study online?
4. What characteristics do you think Chinese students have?
5. Tell me your understanding of Chinese culture.
6. Do you think that Chinese culture has influenced on your online learning attitude/behaviour and achievement? Why? If yes, in which ways?
7. Tell me about the relationship between you and your teachers, and between you and other students in China and in New Zealand.
8. Some students suggested that there are strategies could help to get better grades, such as do postings frequently, pay more attention on some important assignments which give more marks, and always clarify the question from the lecturer if you do not understand. What do you think of these strategies? Or any other strategies that you think you used/use for improving grades?
9. Do you have any comments or further recommendations to eTeachers, developers and other Chinese students for supporting Chinese students studying online?

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