

Motivations and experiences of students in online Chinese as a foreign language
learning: Challenges and potential solutions

by

Yusi Xu

M.S., Kansas State University, 2014

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree

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Department of Curriculum and Instruction
College of Education

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Manhattan, Kansas

2026

Abstract

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Adopting a qualitative, quasi-ethnographic case study design, the research examined the experiences of adult CFL learners in an online performance-based course. Data collected through semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and forum analysis provided deep insight into the participants' evolving strategies over eight weeks.

The findings reveal that the online environment is a site of conflict between divergent learner "mental models." A fundamental clash exists between utilitarian learners, who view the community as a "functional help desk" for efficiency, and relational learners, who seek a "supportive home" for identity validation. This dichotomy profoundly influenced how participants perceived peer feedback, defined "noise," and interpreted silence.

Crucially, learners exercised significant agency, employing strategies ranging from avoidance to active community creation to align the flawed digital environment with their needs. Based on these findings, the study proposes a new typology of online learners and challenges monolithic instructional design. The dissertation concludes by advocating for flexible, modular design philosophies to accommodate the diverse motivational profiles of modern digital learners.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	x
List of Figures	xi
Acknowledgements	xii
1 Introduction	1
Statement of Purpose	3
Rationale	4
Research Questions	6
Definition of Terms	8
2 Literature Review	11
Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL)	12
Distance Learning and Language Learning	13
Three Phases of CALL	15
Online Education and Language Learning	18
The Concept of 'Community' in Online Language Learning Environments: A Critical Perspective	22
Motivation Research and CALL	23
Motivation and Language Learning	23
Gender, Age, and Socioeconomic Status	24
Target Language of Study	27
Motivation and CALL	27

Synthesis	32
3 Methodology	34
Introduction	34
Quasi-Ethnographic Case Study	35
Online Chinese Language Program Setting	38
Methods of Data Collection	40
Data Analysis	42
Ethical Considerations	43
Limitations and Delimitations	44
Limitations	44
Delimitations	45
Researcher’s Perspective	46
Summary	47
4 Findings	48
Introduction	48
Theme 1: The Clash of Expectations: The Online Community as Help Desk, Library, or Home	50
The Utilitarian Models: The Forum as a “Functional Help Desk” and “Orderly Library”	51
The Relational Model: The Forum as a “Supportive Family” and “Cultural Home” .	53
A Collision of Purpose: The “Introduce Yourself” Thread as a Microcosm of Conflict	55
Theme 2: The Motivational Switch: The Debate Between the “What” and the “How” of Feedback	57
Motivation through Data: The Value of “Actionable, Specific, and Technical” Correction	58
Motivation through Safety: The Primacy of “Gentle, Kind, and Encouraging” Tone	59

The Failure of the Loop: Silence as Rejection and a “Wasted Opportunity for Collective Intelligence”	61
Theme 3: The Dual Filters of Culture and Technology: From Defining “Noise” to “Hacking” the System	63
The Subjectivity of “Noise”: Distraction, Inefficiency, or Disconnection?	64
The Evolution of User Strategies: From Passive Victim to Active Agent	66
Avoidance and Insulation: The “Absolute Minimalism” Strategy	66
Observation and Analysis: The “Lurker” as Researcher	68
Exploitation and Social Engineering: The Pragmatist’s Pivot	70
Creation and Cultivation: The Relationalist’s Community Building	71
Theme 4: The Final Calculus: The Obstacle of “Negative Motivation” vs. The Triumph of Belonging	73
The Platform as Hindrance: Frustration, Resentment, and “Negative Motivation” . .	74
The Emergence of Higher-Order Value: Finding a Reason to Stay	75
The Victory of Mastery: Intellectual Belonging and Control	76
The Victory of Connection: Emotional Belonging and Identity Validation .	77
Chapter Summary	79
5 Discussion	81
Introduction	81
The Spectrum of Motivation: A Dialogue with the L2 Motivational Self System	82
The Fallacy of the Monolithic “Community”: A Typology of Learners and Implications for Design	85
Chapter Summary	88
6 Conclusion	90
Summary of the Study and Key Findings	90
Contributions, Implications, and Future Research	91

Theoretical Contributions	92
Practical Implications	92
Directions for Future Research	93
Limitations and Concluding Remarks	93
Bibliography	95
A IRB Approval	105
B Recruitment and Screening Materials	111
C Semi-Structured Interview Protocol	114
D Screenshots of the Online Learning Environment	118

List of Tables

3.1	Participant Profiles and Background Information	37
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List of Figures

D.1	Screenshot of the online lab class interface	118
D.2	Layout of the online discussion forum	119

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This study seeks to explore the motivations and experiences of students engaged in online Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) learning. The intention is to explore the reasons behind students opting for online Chinese learning and their experiences within these instructional settings. This understanding is crucial as it directly informs the design of online courses and strategies to enhance learner motivation. More profoundly, this study explores learner agency, investigating how students actively navigate, negotiate, and even reshape these digital environments to sustain their motivation amidst inherent challenges. This focus on agency moves beyond passive experience to understand the proactive strategies learners employ in their online educational journeys.

Universities globally have expanded their online curriculum in recent decades, seeking to attract a diverse student base. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 necessitated school and university closures across the U.S., prompting a swift transition towards online learning platforms ([Smalley, 2021](#)). Consequently, the Spring 2020 term encountered unprecedented challenges, as more than 1,300 higher education institutions across the country either suspended face-to-face instruction or shifted to remote teaching ([Smalley, 2021](#)). Institutions promptly developed methodologies combining online and face-to-face learning, respecting social distancing protocols, with varying degrees of success ([Smalley, 2021](#)). According to the College Crisis Initiative, 44% of institutions predominantly implemented online instruction, 21% adopted a blended learning approach, and 27% remained primarily face-to-face ([College Crisis Initiative, 2021](#)). This

scenario has contributed to the recognition and development of e-learning as a valid alternative to conventional educational practices.

Online learning is also growing rapidly, in addition to the environment created by the pandemic. According to recent data, “while overall postsecondary enrollment declined by nearly 90,000 students, or nearly half a percentage point, from fall 2016 to fall 2017, the number of all students taking at least some of their courses online grew by more than 350,000, a healthy 5.7 percent” (Ginder et al., 2019). The proportion of students enrolled exclusively online increased to 15.4%, and those taking a mix of online and in-person courses grew from 16.4% in 2016 to 17.6% in 2017 (Ginder et al., 2019). According to a study by Jaggars (2014), 10% of students preferred taking all classes online, while 90% favored a mix of online and face-to-face classes, indicating that most students desire the option of online courses.

Mandarin, on the other hand, has become a highly sought-after foreign language in recent years, with more and more people seeking to improve their language skills for a variety of reasons. China’s growing economic power has driven demand for Chinese speakers in global trade and business (Xu and Peng, 2017). In addition to these practical benefits, learning Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) has many academic and psychological benefits. For example, the ability to communicate in another language can give students a leg up in the job market, especially in professions such as journalism, translation, and international relations (Liu et al., 2018). Learning Mandarin also enriches personal development and cultural competency, fostering a deeper understanding of and appreciation for Chinese culture, literature, and history. Online learning technology’s accessibility has led students to increasingly choose online environments to learn Mandarin. An estimated 25 million people are enrolled or studying Mandarin as a foreign language in online programs introduced into the curricula of over 4,000 colleges worldwide (George, 2021). In recent years, despite China’s economic slowdown and the economic “decoupling” with the West, the demand for learning the Chinese language continues to be significant, underpinned by a variety of compelling factors. This sustained interest is largely attributed to the dynamic motivations of learners, the pivotal role of the Chinese language in global communication, and the tangible benefits associated with Chinese language proficiency. Research indicates that educational and sociocultural experiences, such as industrial training in China, can significantly enhance learners’ motivation to pursue

Chinese language studies ([Avenida et al., 2023](#)). Moreover, international students acknowledge the economic, social, cultural, and educational advantages of studying Mandarin Chinese, including improved employment prospects and opportunities for future trade dealings ([Singh, 2022](#)).

Despite having easy access to the Internet and other technologies, students learning Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) confront distinctive challenges such as limited interaction, the necessity of self-regulated learning, and issues related to feedback ([Khan et al., 2020](#)). Furthermore, outside the classroom, CFL students might encounter a lack of opportunities to engage with the language and its associated culture. These challenges may be amplified in online learning environments, where direct face-to-face interaction with peers and instructors is unavailable, and opportunities for authentic language use and cultural immersion might be limited ([Ezra et al., 2021](#)). Nevertheless, despite these obstacles, a significant number of students persist in enrolling in online Chinese language courses. This paradoxical behavior—choosing online learning in the face of these challenges—has sparked substantial interest among researchers. However, previous explorations have often focused on static motivations and reported experiences. This study posits that the resolution to this paradox lies not merely in what students feel, but in what they do. Therefore, it moves beyond a simple inquiry into motivations and experiences to investigate the crucial role of learner agency: the capacity of students to actively deploy strategies, to filter, adapt, and even subvert the learning environment to align it with their personal goals ([Biesta and Tedder, 2007](#)). Understanding this dynamic negotiation is key to explaining their persistence and success in online CFL learning.

Statement of Purpose

The aim of this study is to identify the two sides of using online Chinese language learning, specifically students' motivation and their experiences within this digital learning landscape. This study seeks to discern why learners opt for online Chinese courses, how they perceive their learning environment, and the efficacy of these platforms. A crucial part of this investigation involved examining factors that propel or hinder students' motivation, encompassing elements like the perceived relevance of course content and the degree of encouragement from peers and instructors.

Through in-depth understanding of these motivational aspects and experiences, the researcher anticipates that this study will inform the creation of more efficacious online Chinese language courses and fortify learner motivation within digital learning ecosystems.

Rationale

Across the academic landscape, online learning strategies have garnered significant attention, with a plethora of research dedicated to exploring their implementation in fields as varied as science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM), arts, and social sciences. As we have seen a surge in online courses offered by various educational institutions worldwide, the sphere of online learning has expanded exponentially. However, despite this overarching trend, a conspicuous gap exists in research dedicated to online language learning, particularly in the field of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL). Historically, the CFL field was met with limited public interest, resulting in a scarcity of CFL programs. This lack of availability and interest subsequently led to a dearth of motivational research in this area, as compared to languages such as English, French, and Spanish (Cai and Zhu, 2012). However, with the advent of the digital age and, more specifically, the unprecedented acceleration of online learning programs due to recent global events, this situation has begun to transform dramatically.

Learning institutions are beginning to acknowledge the immense prowess of the online learning platforms and have incorporated multiple CFL courses within the curriculum. Leading to an enrollment of online students in CFL to show swift growth, up to 47.5% reported for the past decade (Looney and Lusin, 2020). Consequently, it has become one of the highest ranking languages (the third) in the growth percentage after Arabic and Korean. The alarming and vertiginous growth pattern emphasizes the vitality of defining the factors that attract learners in this field that is reputed to be growing so quickly.

It is widely recognized that technology has the potential to stimulate student motivation (Chapelle and Jamieson, 1986; Kinzie et al., 1988; Warschauer, 1996). As educators and researchers alike have begun to appreciate the unique advantages offered by the digital medium, the way people approach language learning has been fundamentally altered. However, while the integration of

technology into the curriculum has been widely recognized, the motivational effects of technology in CFL classrooms remain largely unexplored. Only a few studies, like that of [Jiang and Ramsay \(2005\)](#), have begun to explore this issue, and there is much left to uncover. Therefore, there is a pressing need for more comprehensive study to fully understand how and why particular technologies either motivate or demotivate learners in a CFL classroom context.

Furthermore, while meta-analyses of online learning on a more extensive level have been successful in suggesting the merit of online learning (e.g., [Bernard et al., 2009](#)), such a process overlooks the online learner as a diverse collective. But this study proves otherwise. It operates from the idea that learners are not merely passive recipients of technology. Still, they are actively interpreting agents who enter the online classroom with their own pre-determined 'mental models' ([Kurniawan, 2004](#); [Norman, 1983](#)) that regulate what they expect - based on their previous experience with technology, culture and motivation - and what they do during the learning experience. Therefore, the study claims that an online tool's motivational affordance is not an intrinsic quality of the tool itself; instead, it is dependent on whether there is a fit (or misfit) between the tool's design and these types of learners. Thus, by exploring these mental models, this study attempts to justify a more appropriate differentiation of online language learners as opposed to a universal inquiry.

This research is timely because these CFL findings occur during a stressful experience of CFL learning. Compared to other language learning and alphabet systems, characters, tones, and conditional constructions require tailored feedback that asynchronous online teaching does not feasibly provide since many of these issues can only be answered at the time. Such findings can risk discouraging CFL learners in these online environments who lack the technology and course construction to make such issues less problematic, for online learning also teaches self-regulated learning without the intercultural understanding at present.

Cultural factors also play a role in language learning motivation. In traditional classroom settings, learners of Mandarin benefit from immersive experiences and interactions with native speakers, which are essential for cultural integration. In contrast, online environments may limit these opportunities, leaving students to navigate cultural learning independently. For international learners, this lack of cultural immersion can create a disconnect between the language and its

context, potentially diminishing their motivation and hindering language acquisition (Dörnyei, 2001). Thus, examining how students overcome these cultural gaps in an online learning context is vital to designing courses that bridge the divide between language learning and cultural engagement.

Given these developments, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the motivational dynamics within online CFL learning environments. By employing qualitative methods, including case studies, the research explored the impact of online language programs on students' motivation and experiences. This includes investigating how specific technological tools, such as video conferencing, peer-to-peer interaction, and digital feedback systems, influence students' engagement with the course material and with each other. The study also aims to uncover how students perceive the effectiveness of these tools in fostering language learning and how they navigate the cultural challenges inherent in an online learning setting.

Additionally, this research builds on the work of Bernard et al. (2009), who conducted a meta-analysis comparing distance education with traditional classroom instruction. Like their work, this study examined different aspects of online learning, such as paragraph writing, reading comprehension, and student interaction, but within the specific context of CFL. By doing so, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how online CFL courses can be designed to better support student motivation and success.

Ultimately, this study addressed the critical question of whether technology can enhance, rather than simply maintain, student motivation in online CFL learning environments. As the use of digital platforms in education continues to expand, understanding how to optimize these platforms for language learning is increasingly important. The findings of this study informed the development of more effective online Mandarin courses that engage learners and support both linguistic and cultural proficiency, helping to bridge the current research gap in this field.

Research Questions

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the impact of an online learning program on the motivation of CFL students. The program to be observed in this study is an online Chinese (II) course, created and developed by a university in China. It is offered online as an

instructional course, accessible to all foreign students registered at the university. These students, who do not reside in China, participate in the course remotely via the internet. They come from various academic backgrounds and can earn credits through their participation in this program. The course integrates classroom instruction with an immersive online learning community project. Central to this program is the incorporation of an innovative online learning community, where students engage with peers in a CFL environment. Detailed explanations of the program are provided in Chapter 3.

The study is grounded in the L2 motivational self-system, a novel theoretical approach proposed by (Dörnyei, 2001, 2009). It focuses on the three components of motivation that this approach presents, namely, ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience. It aims to pinpoint the specific facets of the online project that either foster or diminish student motivation. Additionally, it seeks to unearth potential connections between individual cultural and technological backgrounds and their experiences within the online program. With a deep dive into student experiences and perspectives, this qualitative design aims to offer valuable insights that could shape the implementation of similar projects in CFL and other educational realms.

Based on this theory, the study focuses on the following research questions:

Research Question 1: How do participants perceive their experience with the online program, and which features do they find motivating or demotivating?

- How does a specific feature of the program, such as online classes, self-learning online resources, or online communities, impact participants' motivation to engage with the online learning platform for Chinese?
- What emotions do participants associate with their experience in the online program, and how do these emotions affect their motivation to learn Chinese online?

Research Question 2: How do participants from diverse cultural backgrounds interpret their online learning motivation and experiences?

- How do participants from varying cultural backgrounds perceive the role of cultural representation in the online learning platform, and how does this perception influence their motivation to learn Chinese?

- How do the personal values and beliefs of the participants influence their motivation within the context of the online environment and Chinese language learning?

Research Question 3: How do participants from diverse technological backgrounds interpret their online learning motivation and experiences?

- How do participants with different levels of technological proficiency adapt to the online learning platform, and how does their technological background affect their motivation to learn Chinese?
- How do participants' previous experiences with technology influence their expectations and satisfaction with the online learning platform's features and usability for Chinese language learning?

These research questions are designed to yield a comprehensive understanding of CFL learners' motivations and experiences with the online program. The first research question aims to gain qualitative data describing participants' interactions with the online program, and specifically, what aspects they find either motivating or demotivating. The second question digs deeper into the experiences of participants from diverse cultural and technological backgrounds, focusing on how they perceive and understand their online learning motivations and experiences. To answer these questions, the study employed a qualitative research design, including case studies. The approaches allowed participants to provide rich and diverse perspectives on the online CFL experience and motivation, as well as highlight how their cultural and technological background influenced their motivation and learning experiences.

Definition of Terms

This section clarifies key constructs and terminology employed in the study:

Online Learning. Online learning is defined as electronically supported learning and teaching, including e-learning, blended learning, and web-based learning (Allen and Seaman, 2013). For the purposes of this study, online learning is limited to classrooms in which students

and instructors are independent of time and place but connected by technology such as a computer and the Internet. Consistent with [Allen and Seaman \(2013\)](#), online learning is characterized as “a course in which most or all of the content is delivered online, typically has no face-to-face meetings”.

Language Learning. According to [Mitchell and Myles \(2004, p. 22\)](#), language learning is the process of acquiring the ability to speak and understand a target language and is defined as “the learning of any language, at any level, provided that the learning of the ... language takes place some time after the acquisition of the first language”. For the purposes of this study, language learning is limited to an adult learner’s ability to acquire a new language other than their native language.

Motivation. [Lantolf and Thorne \(2006\)](#) conducted a meta-analysis of several studies on motivation and language learning and concluded that the term “motivation” has significant meaning. According to [Lantolf and Thorne \(2006, p. 245\)](#), “these studies suggest that motivation is not an atomistic element possessed by a learner; rather, it is constructed in relation to prior and ongoing activity and is responsive to changing social-material circumstances”.

Case Study. According to [Yin \(2018, p. 45\)](#), a case study is “a type of research methodology used to thoroughly examine a contemporary phenomenon in its actual setting”. When the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not immediately apparent, this strategy is particularly helpful. As a comprehensive form of inquiry, case study research has its own design logic, methods of data collection, and methods of data analysis. The dual definition of case study research shows that it is not limited to a single data collection strategy or even a single design element ([Yin, 2018](#)). Rather, it is an empirical approach that involves the in-depth study and contextualization of a particular case.

Learner Agency. For the purposes of this study, learner agency is defined as the capacity of individuals to act purposefully and autonomously to direct their own learning paths, particularly within the constraints and affordances of a digital environment. It extends beyond simple self-regulation to encompass a range of proactive and often strategic behaviors, including navigating systemic flaws, negotiating social dynamics, filtering information, and actively shaping or creating personalized learning spaces to better meet one’s motivational and educational needs (as adapted

from [Bandura \(2001\)](#); [Biesta and Tedder \(2007\)](#)). This study examines agency as a critical mediating factor between the learning environment and a student's sustained motivation.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand and explain the learning experiences and motivational factors of students learning Chinese as a foreign language in an online environment. This review provides a comprehensive exploration of various topics, areas, and theoretical frameworks pertinent to online language learning. It focuses particularly on Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Online Education in the context of Language Learning. Furthermore, it delves into the aspects of learner motivation within the CALL environment, providing a thorough understanding of this domain.

It begins by examining the evolution and significance of CALL, highlighting the use of multimedia and interactive computer capabilities to enhance language acquisition in various contexts such as English as a Second Language (ESL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and Chinese as a foreign or second language. The development of CALL is traced historically, showing its emergence and growth in different educational settings. This part of the review also addresses the broader context of distance learning and online education, emphasizing the transition from traditional classroom instruction to technologically mediated learning environments. This portion of the review directly relates to the first research question regarding participants' perceptions of their experiences with online programs. By examining the evolution and effectiveness of CALL, the review sheds light on how interactive and multimedia capabilities of computers can impact the learners' motivation and engagement, thereby influencing their perception of online language

learning environments. The discussion on the historical development of CALL and its application in different language contexts, including ESL, EFL, and Chinese as a foreign or second language, provides a backdrop for understanding the factors that students might find motivating or demotivating. This is crucial for analyzing participants' experiences and identifying specific aspects of the online program that influence their motivation.

Additionally, the review's focus on the broader context of distance learning and online education ties into the second and third research questions. It explores how the shift from traditional classrooms to technologically mediated learning environments can affect students from diverse cultural and technological backgrounds. The exploration of how different online tools and platforms are used in language education, and their effectiveness, speaks to how participants with varied technological backgrounds might interpret their motivation and experiences in online learning. Furthermore, the discussion on learner motivation within the CALL environment, and the consideration of factors such as gender, age, and socioeconomic status, aligns with understanding the diverse cultural backgrounds of participants. This aspect of the review is particularly relevant in examining how these demographic factors influence motivational orientations and attitudes toward language learning. Understanding these nuances is vital for answering how participants from diverse cultural and technological backgrounds interpret their online learning motivation and experiences.

Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL)

Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is a theory that uses the multimedia and interactive capabilities of computers to enhance second and foreign language acquisition. This approach has been applied to both English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. Over the past decade, CALL has become an integral part of language learning.

The development time of online Chinese learning as a foreign/second language (CSL/CFL) learning has been found to be relatively short. This has been noted since the 4th International Conference on Chinese as a Foreign/Second Language Teaching in 2004, where the publication of

the paper collection Digital Chinese Language Teaching and Research Methods was presented. As a result, the past decades have seen a significant development of "digital Chinese as a foreign/second language learning" (Liu, 2020). In recent years, with the emergence of the Internet and big data analysis technology, online learning has made remarkable progress. There has been a growing interest in integrating online learning into the teaching of CSL/CFL. This has led to the establishment of a basic framework for integrating online learning into the learning of CSL/CFL (Angelova and Zhao, 2016).

Distance Learning and Language Learning

Ghosh et al. (2012) predicts that distance learning, which includes online learning, is becoming an integral part of future education and training systems, and is likely to have a significant impact on education in the coming years. Formal distance learning, which refers to all forms of learning and teaching in which those who learn and those who teach are in different locations for all or most of the time, has a long history. The origins of distance education can be traced back more than 170 years to the offering of correspondence courses in Great Britain, where the instructor sent lessons and received completed assignments from students by mail (Bates, 2005). Despite the historical use of distance learning, there is still a perception that online learning is inferior to face-to-face learning. However, previous studies have shown that distance learning technologies are not significantly different from regular classroom learning in terms of effectiveness and can serve as an appropriate alternative (Corry, 2012). The development of new technologies has enabled the development of distance education in the online learning environment, and it is now a dominant topic among policy makers, administrators, faculty, and students across the educational spectrum (Corry, 2012).

The application of electronic technology in education also has a long history, with the first electronic learning device invented by Professor Sidney Pressey at Ohio State University in 1924. Over time, e-learning has evolved, and by 2010, more than half of educational institutions in the United States had developed online instruction (Tafazoli and Golshan, 2014). However, the application of e-learning to language learning is a relatively new development for language learners,

teachers, and scholars ([Tafazoli and Golshan, 2014](#)). While computer-assisted instruction was first used for purposes other than language instruction in the 1950s, the use of computers for foreign language instruction did not occur until the 1960s ([Chapelle, 2001](#)). In North America, the Stanford University School of Social Sciences Mathematics had the most famous early Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) program, led by Richard Atkinson and Patrick Suppes ([Chapelle, 2001](#)). Similarly, PLATO, initiated at the University of Illinois in 1960, was the first generalized computer-assisted instruction system ([Smith and Sherwood, 1976](#)). Although early e-learning for language learning emerged first in North America and Europe, it focused primarily on teaching native languages such as French and English. For foreign language learning, the earliest e-learning emerged in the Russian language for political reasons ([Beatty, 2013](#)). Subsequently, language e-learning emerged in other languages such as Chinese and Japanese, and has developed rapidly due to the existing foundation in English and the rapid development of computer and network technology.

The emergence of online technologies and the widespread availability of the Internet have led to a transformation in e-learning and distance education. Online education refers to the delivery of at least 80% of course content via computers and the Internet ([Allen and Seaman, 2007](#)). Initially, computer-based training was used for new employees in the corporate sector in the 1980s ([Rudestam and Schoenholtz-Read, 2002](#)). The University of Phoenix was one of the first institutions to offer online educational programs in 1989 using CompuServe, after the advent of the World Wide Web in 1991, the University of Phoenix became one of the pioneers in offering online education via the Internet ([Kentnor, 2015](#)). Today, online learning is widely used by both educators and learners and continues to evolve with new technologies. As the Internet has become ubiquitous, online learning has become increasingly powerful and influential in education. According to Allen and Seaman ([Allen and Seaman, 2013](#)), 65% of institutions considered online learning critical to their long-term plans in 2011. This number increased to 77% by 2021, while 44% of institutions have adopted entirely or primarily online programs, demonstrating that it is no longer a fad, but a growing trend ([College Crisis Initiative, 2021](#)).

Three Phases of CALL

While changes in language teaching are typically viewed as a shift from structural to communicative, recent history reveals a complex overlap of three theoretical movements. The invention of PLATO in 1959 marked the beginning of the use of computers in language teaching and learning. Over the course of more than half a century, CALL has evolved through three distinct phases: structuralist, communicative, and integrative CALL ([Warschauer, 1996](#)). The first phase, which dominated the 1960s and 1970s, was rooted in the behaviorist educational psychology that underpinned structuralist CALL. According to behaviorists, language learning is a process of habit formation in which learners internalize prescriptive grammar through exposure to numerous stimuli with corrective feedback. Language instruction in this phase prioritized language structure, emphasizing language accuracy and product. Computers served as tutors ([Warschauer, 1996](#); [Warschauer and Kern, 2000](#)), providing repeated exposure to learning materials and exercises with immediate corrective feedback.

Structuralist CALL began to decline in the late 1970s and early 1980s due to theoretical and pedagogical paradigm shifts and the advent of microcomputers, which offered greater potential educational benefits. Behaviorism was criticized for being overly mechanical and for failing to prepare students for authentic communication. As [Chomsky \(2014\)](#) argued, the focus of language learning shifted from the memorization of accurate language structure to the mental construction of the target language system. Encouraging learners to produce original utterances rather than imitate sentence structure facilitated language development as an active process of generating knowledge in the target language. These theoretical and pedagogical changes, coupled with the advent of powerful personal computers, led to the emergence of communicative CALL ([Warschauer, 1996](#); [Warschauer and Healey, 1998](#); [Warschauer and Kern, 2000](#)). This new phase of CALL emphasized the use of forms rather than teaching the forms themselves. Instead of teaching grammar explicitly as in the previous phase, communicative CALL taught grammar implicitly and did not evaluate or judge its accuracy. The computer was seen as either a stimulus ([Taylor and Perez, 1989](#)) or a tool ([Brierley and Kemble, 1991](#)), in the former case providing a stimulus for discussion or writing, and in the latter case enabling learners to process and understand the target language through the use

of word processors, spell checkers, and Concordancers , a software tool used in language studies, particularly in corpus linguistics. It allows users to search for and analyze specific words or phrases within a large body of text (corpus) to see how they are used in context ([Myles and Mitchell, 2004](#)).

In this theoretical model, learners construct new knowledge by exploring the micro pieces of content they have learned through instruction, which provides opportunities for problem solving and hypothesis testing, allowing learners to apply their prior knowledge to develop new understandings ([Godwin-Jones, 2005](#)). This is a creative process in which learners construct new "buildings" using "bricks" of foundational knowledge. For example, in language learning, sentence structure practice is a useful application for learners to learn how to express themselves using familiar words. In the traditional classroom, this process relies on the teacher because computers cannot provide immediate feedback. The M.I.T. Media Laboratory turned the earlier computer-as-tutor metaphor on its head, viewing computers as objects to be controlled by learners rather than controlling them. While the computer provides tools and resources, it's ultimately up to the learner to engage with these in a simulated environment ([Godwin-Jones, 2005](#)).

The cognitive approach and communicative CALL represented a significant improvement over behaviorist and structuralist CALL. However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a theoretical and pedagogical shift occurred due to criticism that language learning was not just an individual process of acquiring knowledge in the target language, but a socially constructed one ([Hymes, 2011](#); [Meyer et al., 1987](#); [Paulston, 1974](#); [Urban, 1981](#)). As a result, language educators moved toward a social-cognitive perspective that focused on communicative competence and the social appropriateness of language use ([Hymes, 2011](#)), emphasizing the development of language skills through authentic social interactions and the assimilation of target language discourse communities. Proponents of this approach used task- or project-based methods that integrated language skills into authentic tasks. Some educators also used content-based learning, which allowed students to learn language and content simultaneously ([Snow et al., 1989](#)). This shift in pedagogy led to a critique of communicative CALL, which educators felt did not contribute significantly to the central components of language learning. As a result, integrative CALL emerged, which aimed to fully integrate technology and various language skills into the language learning process ([Warschauer, 1996](#); [Warschauer and Healey, 1998](#)). Multimedia technology and the Internet were two major

technological developments that formed the basis of integrative CALL. Multimedia technology allowed learners to access different types of media in one machine and required the simultaneous use of different language skills. The integration of multimedia materials and activities facilitated personalized learning paths, allowing users to navigate resources based on their interests and preferences, mimicking the real-world learning environment (Warschauer, 1996).

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) and the Internet have provided an opportunity to integrate meaningful and authentic interactions into language learning that were previously unattainable with multimedia CALL or intelligent CALL (Warschauer and Healey, 1998). Through e-mail, instant messengers, chat rooms, and other CMC applications, learners can communicate directly with teachers, peers, or native speakers from around the world, both synchronously and asynchronously, allowing for many-to-many communication, text-based interaction, and exchange independent of time and place (Warschauer and Healey, 1998). Such interactions are consistent with social cognitive theory, which posits that language development is facilitated by interaction (Vygotsky and Cole, 1978). In addition, CMC fosters collaborative learning by allowing learners to communicate, share files, and provide peer support, which promotes learners' progress within their zone of proximal development (Warschauer, 1996).

Research has shown that CMC has many benefits for language learning. For instance, Warschauer's (1996) quantitative survey study of ESL and EFL students revealed that using computers for writing and communication significantly reduced learner anxiety and provided extensive target language practice. Similarly, Blake (2000) conducted a mixed-methods study analyzing synchronous CMC discourse. The results demonstrated that frequent lexical negotiations in online chats effectively improved students' language forms by prompting them to notice linguistic gaps. Furthermore, qualitative case studies on telecollaboration, such as Belz's (2003) discourse analysis of a German-American e-mail partnership, indicated that sustained online interactions help learners develop intercultural awareness and the ability to critically evaluate foreign attitudes (supported by Müller-Hartmann, 2000; Warschauer and Healey, 1998).

The notion of intercultural competence, defined as the ability to critically evaluate and reproduce foreign attitudes, beliefs, values, and practices, has also been used as a framework for CMC research (Byram et al., 2002; Kramsch, 2014; Levine, 2008). Monocultural interactions are

generally considered insufficient for the development of intercultural competence ([Belz and Thorne, 2006](#)) (Belz & Thorne, 2006; Thorne, 2003). While early efforts to promote intercultural competence through technology lacked learner reflection on their own culture, more recent qualitative research explicitly guides learners to reflect on relevant evidence. For example, Furstenberg and Levet's (2001) qualitative report on the Cultura project demonstrated that web-based, cross-cultural exchanges foster a dialogic learning process, leading to deeper intercultural learning as students co-construct meaning with their foreign partners. Other studies have demonstrated the development of intercultural pragmatics in online language learning. Notably, O'Dowd (2003) conducted a qualitative ethnographic study utilizing e-mail data, questionnaires, and interviews from a Spanish-English exchange. His findings highlighted the social dimensions of language learning, showing that specific characteristics of e-mail interactions—such as exploring cultural identity and understanding differing worldviews—helped learners successfully develop intercultural communicative competence.

The World Wide Web, along with CMC, provides students with access to a vast array of authentic resources from different parts of the world, such as newspapers, online radio stations, and music. According to [Warschauer and Kern \(2000, p. 11\)](#), “Computer networking enhances the function of the computer as a tool by providing connections to information and data as well as to other people”. Students can not only explore information on the Internet, but also create their own Web sites. With appropriate technology training and language support, students can publish their work in the target language and communicate with their audience. These activities involve indirect interaction and writing for a public audience ([Warschauer, 2004](#)). Web authoring can facilitate students' learning and practice of different genres, multimodal writing, and online identity construction ([Lam, 2000](#)).

Online Education and Language Learning

Numerous studies have been conducted on the general success of online communication in a variety of classroom settings ([Ajayi, 2010](#); [Cochrane, 2014](#); [Johnson, 2006](#); [Vonderwell et al., 2007](#)). The body of research discussed here deals directly with language learning in an online environment.

Previous research has examined differences in online learning in language learning environments and found minimal differences in delivery methods (Abrams, 2003; Nguyen, 2011). However, as technology continues to grow, interest in the effectiveness of online learning has increased. Regardless of the similarity in outcomes, online learning provides a different environment for students to interact, and the effects of these interactions appear to be varied.

Tabatabaei and Gui (2011) discussed the role of technology in Chinese language learning. The researchers observed an increase in online course offerings and the incorporation of interactive technologies such as Second Life to support younger language learners (Tabatabaei and Gui, 2011). In addition to advanced online tools such as Second Life, the technology used in online classes included learning management systems such as Blackboard, as well as online games to encourage interaction with the language in a fun and novel way. Second Life is a virtual world that allows users to create avatars and interact with other users in a simulated environment. It has been used in language learning to provide students with a more immersive and interactive experience. Some of the benefits of using Second Life in language learning include the ability to practice speaking and listening skills in a safe and supportive environment, the opportunity to interact with native speakers of the language, and the ability to explore and experience the culture of the language being learned (Tabatabaei and Gui, 2011). Tabatabaei and Gui (2011, p. 516) conclude by stating that regardless of the methods used, it is important for teachers to remember that people learn through experience and that "students should be given opportunities to practice and experience the language".

In online language learning classrooms, a variety of tactics are often used to increase the knowledge of the target language. Writing is one of these tactics that has been found to be effective in increasing the knowledge of the vocabulary of the target language. For example, Mompean (2010) studied the use of blogs in online language learning. The interactions on the blogs allowed students to create authentic productions of the language. Sasaki and Takeuchi (2010) also used writing as a key component of their research. Instead of using blogs, they encouraged students to write emails back and forth between native and non-native speakers of the language. Effective language learning involves students in a variety of activities where they not only learn vocabulary, but also use the language in other contexts.

Thorne and Smith (2011) studied the relationship between technology and second language

acquisition. They found that the two have a complex and dialectical relationship. They discussed how new theories of language learning emerge with the advent of new technologies. One such theory is the interaction approach, which suggests a link between interaction and motivation. However, they did not offer suggestions on how to incorporate technology, but rather suggested that further research is needed to understand the relationship between theory and practice.

[Yanguas \(2012\)](#) conducted a study comparing face-to-face classrooms with online classrooms in terms of vocabulary acquisition when learning a second language. The study examined audio and video modes as a means of facilitating student-to-student learning in the online classroom and compared them to traditional face-to-face interactions. The results showed no statistical differences between the face-to-face group and the two CMC groups. Students enjoyed interacting with other learners through video programs more than they enjoyed normal classroom interaction. Yanguas encouraged the use of more audio and video conferencing in the classroom to promote second language learning experience and motivation.

[Wang and Vásquez \(2012\)](#) conducted a review of the literature on Web 2.0 and language learning from 2006 to 2010. They found that the majority of studies focused on English language learning (58%), followed by Spanish (21%). A few studies were conducted on German, French, Italian, Chinese, or multiple languages. Many of the studies focused on L2 writing skills or attitudes and perceptions about learning. Only one study focused on grammar, one on motivation, and one on L2 reading. There were three studies that compared technologies, but only one that compared instructional methods. The consensus was that the use of online learning technologies increased students' interest and motivation in language learning.

A literature review of empirical research articles from 16 prominent language learning journals was conducted by [Vorobel and Kim \(2012\)](#). They focused on language learning that took place in distance education classrooms between 2005 and 2010. They found 24 articles that met the criteria for their review and would help answer the key questions on which the review focused. The review aimed to answer questions about the contexts, languages, types of learners, technologies, and methodologies used in each study, as well as what areas of research were still lacking. The review identified significant gaps in the literature related to teacher-student interaction, student motivation and engagement, and second language instruction at a distance.

The use of CMC and the Internet for instructional purposes has enabled real-time discussion among whole classes or small groups (Warschauer, 1996, 2004), which is understood to increase student motivation in language learning (Jiang and Ramsay, 2005; Warschauer, 1996). However, the influence of technology use on learner motivation in language learning remains underexplored. According to Brown (1994), there are two types of motivational effects related to technology use in language learning: situational motivation, which measures comfort, anxiety, and risk-taking in specific language learning contexts; and task motivation, which reflects the perceived relevance and excitement generated by specific language learning activities.

In terms of situated motivation, previous studies have shown that both language anxiety (Beauvois, 1994; Jiang and Ramsay, 2005; Warschauer, 1996) and technology anxiety (Greenfield, 2003; Warschauer, 1996) were reduced when students used CMC. In addition, CMC not only facilitated classroom participation, but also resulted in more balanced student participation in the non-CMC environment (Warschauer and Kern, 2000). In terms of task motivation, several studies have shown that students were integratively and instrumentally motivated when using specific online tools such as e-mail (Shang, 2007; Warschauer, 2004), computer-assisted conversation or blogs (Warschauer, 2004).

While there have been numerous studies exploring the effectiveness of online communication in language learning, this review underscores that there are gaps in understanding the nuances of student-teacher interaction, student motivation and engagement, and second language instruction at a distance. It's evident that online tools such as Blackboard, online games, and Second Life are critical to language learning. The literature highlights a symbiotic relationship between technology and second language acquisition and emphasizes the significance of writing and blogging in online language learning. Moreover, it asserts that the use of online learning technologies can positively impact student motivation and engagement.

The Concept of 'Community' in Online Language Learning Environments: A Critical Perspective

A significant body of research within CALL and online education highlights the pedagogical benefits of fostering an "online learning community." Such communities are often associated with increased student interaction, collaborative learning, and enhanced engagement ([Ajayi, 2010](#); [Vonderwell et al., 2007](#)). The underlying premise is that a sense of community can mitigate the isolation often experienced in distance learning and provide the social context necessary for meaningful language practice, a concept rooted in sociocultural theories of learning ([Lantolf and Thorne, 2006](#)).

However, a critical review of the literature reveals that the term "community" is often treated as a uniform and unambiguously positive construct. Much of the early research focused on the technological affordances for creating community—such as discussion boards, wikis, or synchronous chat—often operating under a "techno-centric" assumption that the provision of a tool would naturally lead to the formation of a cohesive group ([Warschauer, 2004](#)). This perspective tends to conceptualize "community" as a monolithic entity, a singular feature to be designed and implemented for a generic "learner."

Consequently, there is a significant gap in understanding the diversity within these purported communities. Little attention has been paid to how learners with vastly different motivations, cultural norms, and technological backgrounds might perceive and experience the same digital space in profoundly different ways. The prevailing monolithic model often fails to account for the potential for friction and misalignment when a single platform design is imposed on a heterogeneous user base. It implicitly assumes a "one-size-fits-all" community that may, in reality, be a "one-size-fits-none." This study, therefore, moves beyond the question of whether an online community is beneficial, to ask a more fundamental question: A community for whom, and for what purpose? It seeks to deconstruct the monolithic view by exploring the competing needs and 'mental models' that co-exist and often clash within a single online CFL environment.

Motivation Research and CALL

Learner motivation is one of the most important individual differences that affect language learning outcomes. Achieving advanced proficiency in a second language requires considerable time and effort. Learners who are highly motivated are much more likely to succeed. For this reason, motivation has been a central issue in language learning research.

Motivation and Language Learning

The socio-educational model proposed by [Gardner \(1985\)](#) is the most influential theory in the field of language learning motivation. This model emphasizes the impact of attitudes toward the second language (L2) community on students' motivation and achievement. According to this model, motivation consists of three components: effort, desire, and affect. The model also identifies two types of motivational orientations: integrative and instrumental. Integrative orientation refers to a sincere and personal interest in the people and culture represented by the other language group ([Gardner and Lambert, 1973](#)), while instrumental orientation refers to potential pragmatic gains associated with L2 proficiency, such as getting a better job or passing a required exam.

A meta-analysis conducted by [Masgoret and Gardner \(2003\)](#) examined 75 independent studies involving 10,489 individuals and found a positive relationship between both types of orientation and performance. Both integrative and instrumental orientations had an indirect effect on achievement through motivation.

While many studies have shown the effects of integrative and instrumental orientations on students' achievement through motivation, less attention has been paid to the effects of learners' demographic and linguistic backgrounds on motivational orientation. For example, according to Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model, the social milieu, as reflected in the home environment, plays an important role in motivation and thus affects learner achievement. Other studies have found that learner variables such as language of study and gender have a significant impact on motivational orientation ([Dörnyei, 2001](#)). Most previous studies have examined motivational models for specific languages, such as English or French. It is not clear whether these models are applicable to learning other languages or to people from different backgrounds.

Gender, Age, and Socioeconomic Status

Several studies have shown that there are gender differences in motivational orientations toward second language learning. Specifically, females tend to have higher integrative orientations and more positive attitudes toward second language learning than males. For example, [Yang \(2003\)](#) found that female East Asian language learners in the United States had a higher integrative motivational orientation than male students. Similarly, [Mori and Gobel \(2006\)](#) found that female Japanese English learners had higher integrative motivation and a stronger desire to learn a foreign language than males. [Dörnyei and Clément \(2001\)](#) also found that females scored significantly higher on integrativeness using a scale developed by [Dörnyei \(1998\)](#). However, [Shaaban and Ghaith \(2000\)](#) study of Lebanese undergraduate English learners found no gender difference in integrative motivation.

Research on gender differences in instrumental motivation for second language learning is inconclusive. Some studies have found higher instrumental motivation among females (e.g., [Bacon and Finnemann \(2006\)](#)), while others have found no gender differences (e.g., [Shaaban and Ghaith \(2000\)](#)). [Dörnyei and Clément \(2001\)](#) found that females had higher instrumental motivation to learn some languages but not others. In contrast to the numerous studies reporting gender differences in integrative orientation, there is no consensus on gender differences in instrumental orientation.

Few studies have examined the relationship between age and motivational orientations toward second language learning. [Williams et al. \(2002\)](#) found that seventh grade students initially expressed high enthusiasm for language learning, but their enthusiasm gradually decreased after two years. These students reported a higher integrative orientation in seventh grade than in ninth grade. Similar findings were reported in other studies conducted in England ([Chambers, 1999](#); [Filmer-Sankey and Phillips, 1993](#)). [Williams et al. \(2002\)](#) suggested that this declining trend may also occur in other school subjects and may be due in part to a general disengagement from school-based learning. [Masgoret and Gardner \(2003\)](#) found that both integrative and instrumental orientations declined with age among elementary, secondary, and university students. However, [Kormos and Csizér \(2008\)](#) found no age-related difference in integrative motivation to learn English as a

foreign language among secondary school students, university students, and adult learners. While research on age-related differences in language learning motivation among students at different levels provides some insights, little is known about the motivation of adult learners who study languages voluntarily. [Kormos and Csizér \(2008\)](#) study, which found no age-related difference in integrative motivation to learn English as a foreign language among secondary school students, university students, and adult learners in Hungary, may not be relevant outside its specific context.

Socioeconomic status (SES) is considered an important factor in language learning because it affects people's access to symbolic and material resources ([Bourdieu, 2006](#)), which can increase their opportunities to interact with people from different linguistic backgrounds through international travel or careers. However, little research has been done on the effect of SES on language learning motivation, effort, or outcomes. [Burstall \(1975\)](#) found a positive relationship between SES and student achievement in French as a foreign language in England. Students from higher SES families had significantly higher scores than those from lower SES families. The effect of SES was more pronounced in secondary school than in primary school. The study also found that students attending different types of secondary schools in Britain's stratified education system had different attitudes toward learning French. Students in schools for more able students had more positive attitudes than those in schools for less able students. This difference was due not only to a general difference in attitudes towards education, but also to a specific belief among low SES students that they were unlikely to ever speak French beyond school. These findings support [Bourdieu \(2006\)](#) emphasis on the importance of cultural capital in education.

The effect of SES on adult motivation for language learning remains unclear. To address this gap, the current study proposes two hypotheses. First, individuals with higher levels of education are hypothesized to have a stronger instrumental orientation toward language learning than those with lower levels of education, due to heightened awareness of the importance of language learning. Second, individuals with higher income are hypothesized to have a stronger integrative orientation toward language learning than those with lower income, as they are less likely to study for career opportunities or educational requirements and more likely to do so out of personal interest and a desire to communicate with L2 communities. Gardner's socio-educational model emphasizes the importance of the social environment for language learning, which can be assessed through

two factors: the perceived importance and usefulness of learning the language ([Gardner et al., 1983](#)). These factors may vary across social groups, and previous research suggests that the social environment is related to language learners' goals, attitudes, and motivation ([Gardner, 1985](#); [Gardner et al., 1983](#)).

According to Gardner's socio-educational model, the social environment influences language learning. The social environment can be assessed by two factors: how important it is to learn the language and how useful it is ([Gardner et al., 1983](#)). These factors can vary for different groups of people within a society. Gardner and his colleagues ([Gardner, 1985](#); [Gardner et al., 1983](#)) have found evidence that the social environment is related to the goals, attitudes and motivation of language learners. The socio-educational model has been tested mainly among students of French or English in Canada, and some researchers have pointed out that these contexts of second language learning in Canada may not be similar to other contexts of foreign language learning in Canada or elsewhere ([Oxford and Shearin, 1994](#)). For example, some suggest that second language learners tend to have more integrative goals, whereas foreign language learners may have more instrumental goals ([Dörnyei, 1998](#)). However, a meta-analysis by [Masgoret and Gardner \(2003\)](#) does not support the idea that the context of language learning has a strong influence on motivation. This may be because the studies of motivation in Canadian communities did not include much variation in the contexts of language learning.

There is limited research comparing the influence of the social environment on language learning across different countries. However, [Kouritzin et al. \(2009\)](#) conducted a study that examined the impact of context on foreign language learning in Japan, France, and Canada. The study found that university students of English in France and Canada had primarily integrative and instrumental motivations, respectively. Conversely, university students of English in Japan demonstrated what the authors referred to as social capital motivation, in which they perceived the ability to communicate in a foreign language as a valuable asset that afforded them status and power.

Target Language of Study

Motivational orientation may also depend on the language being learned, among other factors such as gender, age, SES, and context. [Yang \(2003\)](#) investigated the relationship between the differences in learning styles and the motivational orientations of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean language learners from university students in the United States. He found that Chinese language learners had much higher motivation than Japanese and Korean language learners. This makes sense given China's increasing influence in the global economy.

The interaction between gender and language of study has been observed in several studies. For example, [Williams et al. \(2002\)](#) found that secondary school students studying foreign languages in England perceived French as a feminine language of love and German as a masculine language more associated with military history. As a result, boys were more motivated to learn German, whereas girls were more motivated to learn French. Similarly, [Kissau \(2006\)](#) found that boys felt less competent than girls in French, in part because they were less interested in learning about French culture, which boys tended to view as girly. Even boys who were good at French and liked it often gave up studying the language because of concerns about social perceptions. [Dörnyei and Clément \(2001\)](#) study of Hungarian adolescents' motivation also showed a gender preference in the choice of target language, with French and Italian preferred by females, German and Russian by males, and English considered gender neutral.

Motivation and CALL

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between student motivation and the use of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). In order to do so, it is important to examine the potential links between motivation research and CALL research. Based on a review of key research and findings, it is apparent that most motivation studies have been conducted in traditional educational contexts without technology integration ([Ushida, 2004](#)). However, this contradicts current trends in language classrooms over the past two decades, where technology integration has become increasingly prevalent. Given the claim that technology integration has the potential to increase student motivation ([Ushida, 2004](#); [Warschauer, 1996](#)), it is surprising that few empirical

studies have systematically examined motivation in the CALL context.

Several studies have treated motivation either as a subcategory of affective factors or as a by-product of technology applications, resulting in insufficient attention to this critical aspect (Jiang and Ramsay, 2005). However, Ushida (2004) and Warschauer (1996) are two exceptions that have explicitly and extensively focused on motivation in CALL contexts. In addition to these exceptional studies, a few other existing studies have included the discussion of motivation in CALL contexts. It is important to note that the theoretical approaches or key terms used in these studies are mainly derived from earlier approaches to motivation research. The studies are reviewed chronologically in order to examine the history and development of motivation research in CALL contexts over the past two decades.

Warschauer (1996) conducted a survey study to investigate the effects of CALL on student motivation. The study included 167 university students from 12 ESL and EFL writing classes in the United States, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. The questionnaire used in the study was designed by the researcher. The classes all had CALL components in which students used computers for writing and communication. In the introduction, Warschauer briefly outlined various lines of research in L2 motivation and pointed out the major shortcomings of the social-psychological approach. Although he did not explicitly state which approach he was following, his three research questions focused on situation-specific aspects of motivation, similar to the framework proposed by Dörnyei (1998). The first research question explored the effect of context-specific factors, specifically the use of computers for writing and communication, on motivation. The second research question focused on the influence of student-specific factors, such as their background, on motivation. The third research question investigated the impact of class-specific, teacher-specific, and SL vs. FL-specific factors on motivation.

According to Warschauer (1996) study, students generally had positive attitudes toward the context of computer-assisted writing and communication. The study found that students' prior knowledge and experience with computers and e-mail were positively correlated with motivation in the CALL context. Specifically, students who had more computer knowledge and previous experience with e-mail tended to be more motivated to use these technologies for learning. In addition, classroom- and teacher-specific factors, such as how teachers integrated computer-based

projects into the overall course structure, were shown to influence motivation. The study also found that FL students were more motivated in the CALL context than SL students, although Warschauer suggested that this difference may be due to different activities used in the SL and FL classes, indicating class-specific differences rather than general SL vs. FL context differences. The questionnaire items were subjected to factor analysis, which identified three underlying themes that were thought to contribute to motivation in the CALL context. The first theme, communication, motivated students to interact with other speakers of the language in different parts of the world. The second theme, empowerment, indicated that students perceived the CALL context as a means of increasing their personal power and reducing the perceived threat associated with writing in the target language. The third theme, learning, suggested that students believed that the use of computers facilitated faster and more creative learning experiences (Warschauer, 1996).

According to Warschauer's (1996) findings, the three motivational themes that emerged from the factor analysis of the questionnaire items - communication, empowerment, and learning - are distinct from the traditional social psychological framework of integrative and instrumental motivation. Instead, they are related to the specific learning context.

After Warschauer's seminal work on motivation in the CALL context, other researchers began to explore the topic. Gruber-Miller and Benton (2001) studied the implementation of a MOO (Multi-user Object-Oriented) project in a Latin course, collecting data from students' daily journals and course evaluations. In their open-ended comments, students noted that MOO was motivating, with three themes emerging: (a) it provided a different learning resource from the textbook, (b) the visual and spatial aspects helped them learn about Roman culture from a new perspective, and (c) it was fun to learn with MOO (Gruber-Miller and Benton, 2001). However, the study lacked explicit reference to theoretical frameworks or previous research on motivation. Nevertheless, the three motivational themes identified can be related to Schumann's Stimulus Evaluation Theory, as the first two themes can be related to novelty and the third theme to pleasantness.

Stepp-Greany (2012) conducted a large-scale survey study of students' perceptions of technology components in the context of first and second semester Spanish language classes. The study drew data from 358 students in 20 sections with technology applications such as Internet activities, CD-ROM, electronic pen pals, and threaded discussions. While the study did not ex-

plicitly state which theoretical framework was used, the researcher suggested that factors such as language proficiency level, type of class activity, and curriculum structure could influence student motivation. The study followed the situated approach to L2 motivation research and referred to [Warschauer \(1996\)](#) findings to support the discussion. The main findings of the study indicated that a lack of relevance between technology components and the overall coursework may not increase motivation, and limited proficiency levels may decrease motivation for CALL tasks.

[Weasenforth et al. \(2015\)](#) examined the impact of integrating electronic discussion into a constructivist curriculum on affective factors, including motivation, in six advanced university-level ESL reading and writing classes. Participants were required to participate in an online discussion board by initiating a new topic or responding to a topic initiated by a peer or teacher. The study collected data from 52 students' posts on the discussion board and their responses to an end-of-semester survey. The researchers used an eclectic framework to analyze the data, including intrinsic motivation, technology novelty, students' perceptions of the technology's relevance to their future work, and group-specific motivation. Results indicated that the novelty and perceived relevance of the technology component to future professional work motivated students to learn. However, students also perceived electronic discussion assignments as an additional burden because they repeated traditional assignments. In addition, group dynamics were identified as a factor that may have influenced student motivation in certain groups.

A study on the role of CALL in promoting learner-teacher rapport and its impact on motivation was conducted by [Jiang and Ramsay \(2005\)](#). The study involved 28 students who used sound files and e-mails as CALL components. Data collected from their sound file responses, reflections, email messages, and responses to an email interview were analyzed qualitatively, although the researchers did not specify the method used. The study was consistent with [Dörnyei \(1994\)](#) situated approach to motivation research, in which learner-teacher rapport building is a significant motivational factor at the teacher-specific level. The results showed that the use of CALL applications helped to foster learner-teacher rapport building, which in turn motivated students to learn beyond the regular classroom.

Research on Chinese language learning motivation has mainly focused on topics such as the construct of Chinese as a second language (CSL) or CFL learning motivation ([Comanaru and Noels,](#)

2009; Wen, 1997, 2011), the influencing factors of CSL/CFL learning motivation (Cai and Zhu, 2012; Chua et al., 2009; Gong et al., 2020; Lu and Li, 2008), and the comparison between Chinese-as-a-heritage-language (CHL) and non-CHL learners' motivation in North America (Comanaru and Noels, 2009; Wen, 2011). A limited number of studies have examined the relationship between motivation and Chinese language proficiency, but with inconsistent results. For example, Wen (1997) found that intrinsic motivation was a significant predictor of Chinese course performance among CFL learners in the U.S., and Lu and Li (2008) reported a similar finding regarding integrative motivation and test scores. However, research on CFL learners in less developed countries has yielded different results from American CFL learners. For example, Ter et al. (2020) reported a negative relationship between integrative motivation and self-rated Chinese proficiency and a positive relationship between instrumental motivation and self-rated Chinese proficiency among 205 undergraduate CFL learners in Malaysia.

Overall, the studies reviewed in this chapter used various concepts from motivation research to inform their investigations in the CALL context. However, many studies did not explicitly mention a theoretical framework for analyzing student motivation, and those that did often mixed concepts from different approaches without delineating the underlying theories. Ushioda's (2004) study stood out for its use of two complementary theoretical frameworks: the social-psychological approach and the situated model. The former was used to examine the relationship between motivation, attitude, and second language learning performance, while the latter identified the effect of the immediate environment on motivation. This approach inspired the present researcher to seek a more comprehensive framework to capture the many aspects of motivation, and Dörnyei's (2005; 2009) L2 Motivation Self System seems promising in this regard. This framework is the most recent and comprehensive model for L2 motivation research, as reviewed earlier in this chapter.

Furthermore, an issue mentioned by both Warschauer (1996) and Ushida (2004) is that students' familiarity with the specific technologies used in the CALL components and/or the specific technology environment might have an important impact on their motivation. That is, if students are not familiar with the specific technologies or the specific CALL environment, they may be very apprehensive about the new technological environment and may be less motivated to learn in such an environment. However, more study is needed to understand the interaction between

students' technology experience and their motivation. This issue is addressed in the proposed study by interviewing individual students to obtain in-depth information about their perceptions and experiences in the CALL environment, which is discussed in Chapter Three.

Synthesis

This chapter reviewed several key areas—Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), online education, and learner motivation in digital language environments. Although each area has its own focus, they overlap and connect in meaningful ways, forming a complex framework for understanding how language learning happens online. Together, these interconnected themes provide a comprehensive perspective on online language learning.

CALL, centered on interactivity and multimedia use, forms the technological foundation of today's language learning systems. Its development—from early structuralist models to communicative and integrative approaches—reflects a broader educational move toward flexible, learner-focused methods. This shift helps explain how technology has reshaped traditional learning practices and, in turn, affected students' engagement and motivation. Examining distance and online learning further extends this perspective by placing CALL within the wider field of educational technology. The move from in-person classrooms to online formats carries important consequences for learners with varied cultural and technological backgrounds, directly linking to the study's second and third research questions.

When the interactive nature of CALL is considered alongside the ideas that guide distance learning, a clearer picture emerges of how technology actually shapes language study. Motivation research within CALL adds another layer to this picture by turning attention to what happens inside the learner—their effort, persistence, and personal differences. Looking at these elements together helps answer the study's main questions. The discussion that connects CALL, online learning, and motivation does more than link theories; it shows how learners respond to and are changed by the design of online language programs. In the end, it is the mix of technical systems, teaching approaches, and motivational forces that explains online language learning more fully than any single perspective can.

To conclude, this chapter brings together several related areas to form a solid base for the study. It points out how complex online language learning can be and sets the stage for a closer look at how different influences shape learners' motivation and experience in digital settings. Understanding these relationships is vital for improving learning design and ensuring that online instruction works well for people with varied backgrounds.

While earlier studies have shed light on motivational factors in online language learning, notable gaps still exist—especially in understanding how a learner's background affects motivation and how CALL-based settings shape that process in Chinese language learning. The present study addresses these issues by examining motivation in online Chinese learning through the lens of learners' experiences, personal and cultural contexts, and their interaction with CALL technologies.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Introduction

To examine the environment of an online Chinese language course, this study integrated the concentrated analysis of a case study (Yin, 2018) with a quasi-ethnographic viewpoint. Rather than following students individually, the aim was to understand how a shared culture forms within the learning community. This involved observing the common norms, the tensions between values such as efficiency and interpersonal connection, and the collective processes through which participants construct meaning in their everyday interactions.

The methods outlined in this chapter were intended to capture these complex dynamics. The study evaluated how effective online Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) instruction was and identified the factors that influenced learner engagement, either positively or negatively. Because student motivation and interaction in online spaces are multifaceted, a purely quantitative method would not have sufficed. A qualitative, quasi-ethnographic case study design was therefore chosen for its ability to look beyond surface-level outcomes and reveal the deeper dimensions of the online learning experience (Creswell and Poth, 2016).

Using a quasi-ethnographic lens, this study explored the virtual cultures and communities that emerge within online CFL courses, tracing how learners interacted, adapted, and made sense of their learning experiences. By combining ethnographic attention to context with the focused struc-

ture of a case study, this approach is well suited to uncovering detailed, context-rich insights that reflect learners' own perspectives on online CFL learning (Yin, 2018). It allows for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon by examining how lived experience, cultural background, and social interaction both influence and are influenced by the dynamics of the online learning environment (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Quasi-Ethnographic Case Study

The quasi-ethnographic case study is a methodological innovation in qualitative research that merges traditional ethnography with the detailed inquiry typical of case studies. This approach draws on ethnography's profound engagement with cultural and social contexts, effectively capturing the lived experiences and complex realities of participants within specific environments (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). Concurrently, it emphasizes the in-depth examination of specific instances or phenomena, a hallmark of case study research (Yin, 2015). Quasi-ethnography adapts traditional ethnographic methods for use in settings where prolonged immersion is not feasible, such as digital or non-traditional environments. This adaptation is critical in contemporary research scenarios where direct, physical presence in the field may be impractical or impossible (Hine, 2017). The method is particularly suited for studies in online learning environments, where it allows researchers to understand the nuanced dynamics of virtual communities and digital cultures (Kozinets, 2015). Through this lens, the quasi-ethnographic case study facilitates a rich exploration of online Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) learning, offering insights into the motivations, experiences, and interactions of learners within digital contexts.

Quantitative tools such as surveys are not well suited to the goals of this study. Because they rely on fixed, closed-ended items, they restrict how participants can describe their experiences or express subtle differences in perception (Creswell and Poth, 2016). A survey might capture how motivated learners feel, yet it would miss the reasons behind that motivation or the emotions that accompany it. Quantitative designs also tend to favor general patterns over context, emphasizing what is typical rather than how meaning is produced in a specific situation (Tisdell et al., 2025). The questions guiding this research ask how particular design features of an online course shape learners'

motivation. To explore that process, qualitative methods—such as interviews and observation—are needed to gather contextual detail about what drives or discourages engagement.

Finally, this study considers how cultural background and technological familiarity affect how participants interpret their online learning experience. Such influences are difficult to capture through statistical instruments alone (Patton, 2014). Surveys might show levels of engagement, but they rarely reveal the cultural or technological factors that give those numbers meaning.

Additionally, qualitative approaches provide flexibility to adapt research methods based on emerging insights and allow for in-depth exploration of complex interactions and processes over time (Yin, 2018). This flexibility is essential for understanding the dynamic nature of motivations and experiences in online learning environments, whereas quantitative surveys often follow a predefined structure that may limit exploration of new avenues of inquiry or evolving research questions. Qualitative methods enable detailed analysis through thematic analysis and rich description, offering a depth of understanding that quantitative methods may not achieve (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

The research, designed as an instrumental case study, was intended to explore the broader implications of online learning environments on student motivation for learning Chinese as a foreign language. Following the guidelines of (Stake, 1995), this approach uses specific cases—here, individual students—to enrich our understanding of broader educational theories and practices. The study involved six adult students, all selected from a college setting, ensuring that the participants share a similar educational context, enhancing the relevance and applicability of the findings.

The criteria for selecting these participants, specifically their heritage background and prior technology experience, are informed by a comprehensive review of motivation studies in Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and language learning, discussed in Chapter 2 of the study. Influential research by Rueda and Chen (2005), Ushida (2004), Warschauer (1996), and Beatty (2013) has demonstrated the significant impact of a student's background and technology experience on their motivation, particularly highlighting the importance of familiarity with the technologies used in CALL settings. To ensure participants met the study criteria and represented diverse backgrounds, a preliminary screening survey was distributed to all students in the course (see Appendix B for the list of screening questions). Based on the responses, the study carefully selected six adult participants, ensuring a mix of heritage backgrounds and varying levels of technology

experience. Table 3.1 provides a detailed summary of each participant’s profile, including their motivation and technology habits.

Table 3.1: *Participant Profiles and Background Information*

Pseudonym	Age / Background	Heritage	Motivation	Technology Profile
David	35, German, Engineer	Non-Herit.	Instrumental (Business); values structure	Digital Immigrant (Low); functional use only
Liam	20, US, Int. Relations	Non-Herit.	Instrumental & Intellectual; geopolitics	Digital Native (High); efficiency (Reddit style)
Priya	25, Indian, Comp. Sci.	Non-Herit.	Pragmatic; career competitiveness	Analytical User (High); critical of design
Kenji	21, Japanese, Economics	Non-Herit.	Cultural; East Asian ties & economy	Niche User (High); observer/lurker behavior
Sofia	22, Brazilian, Art History	Non-Herit.	Integrative (Emotional); pop culture	Social User (Moderate); seeks "warmth"
Chloe	19, Canadian, Sociology	Heritage	Identity; seeking roots & belonging	Social Media Savvy (High); identity constr.

Qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews, analysis of online posts, and weekly reflective journals. These methods were selected to examine the complex dynamics between student motivation and their interactions with online learning tools. Detailed documentation and analysis concentrated on how each student’s engagement with the online learning project reflects broader educational practices and theoretical frameworks. This methodological approach is aligned with the characteristics of instrumental case studies, which employ specific instances as a lens to understand and theorize about larger educational phenomena [Stake \(1995\)](#). The findings of this study provide actionable insights that could guide future enhancements in online educational settings, particularly for foreign language instruction.

Online Chinese Language Program Setting

The Chinese II language course, designed with an online performance-based approach, emphasized the enhancement of listening and speaking skills, facilitated by two instructors. The curriculum included interactive activities, such as role-plays, to reinforce language use in practical contexts. A unique feature was the lab class, which encouraged self-study through multimedia resources. Additionally, the program integrated an online learning community project to foster student motivation and interaction. This project aimed at improving pronunciation and offered a platform for sharing experiences and receiving feedback, thus creating a supportive learning environment.

The program, which was part of a performance-based foreign language instruction approach, had primary goals to reinforce fundamental listening and speaking skills acquired in the previous semester and to expand students' language repertoire in telling time and describing events and consequences. The program included online classroom instruction, a lab class, and an online learning community project. The target audience for this program was students who have completed Chinese I and are looking to continue their language studies in Chinese II. The program was designed to provide students with opportunities to practice the language through performance, such as role-plays and short conversations in school and business settings. Additionally, the online learning community project aimed to motivate students, help them set realistic learning goals, and envision the practical use of Chinese in their future careers.

In the Chinese II program, instruction was delivered by a team of two instructors, with classes meeting for one hour every day from Monday to Thursday. The lead instructor, a native Chinese speaker fluent in English, designed the overall curriculum and provided biweekly schedules to the team. The teaching approach was performance-based, focusing on role-plays and short conversations in school and business settings. The major objectives were to reinforce listening and speaking skills and to expand learners' language repertoire for telling time and describing events. Students were expected to spend one and a half to two hours on self-study and preparation before each class. Additionally, there was a one-credit hour lab class that supplemented the regular class, in which students studied materials via online videos and completed assignments (see Appendix

D, Figure D.1 for a screenshot of the online instructional interface). Teaching methodologies in the program were centered on performance-based foreign language instruction. This approach emphasized active participation and practice through role-plays and short conversations. The program aimed to engage students in using the language in realistic scenarios to enhance their speaking and listening skills. One unique aspect of the program was the integration of an online learning community project into the lab assignments. This project allowed students to interact with other Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) learners, share experiences, seek and provide feedback on pronunciation, and reflect on their online learning experience. The online component was designed to motivate students, help them set realistic learning goals, and envision the practical use of Chinese in their future careers.

For the online learning community project, the program uses an online platform called www.chinese-forums.com (see Appendix D, Figure D.2 for the layout of the discussion forum). This online community consists of 28 forums covering various aspects of Chinese study, culture, and life in China. It has a large number of registered members who participate actively in discussions. The project tasks include navigating and exploring the online community, learning about other members' experiences, posting pronunciation samples for feedback, and writing weekly reflective journals. Sound Recorder and Audacity are recommended for recording pronunciation samples, and technical assistance is provided for students who need help with recording. Specifically, students are required to navigate and explore the online community, learn about other members' experiences, post samples of their pronunciation for feedback, and write weekly reflective journals. The project lasts for four weeks, with specific tasks assigned for each week, such as registering for the online community, exploring recommended forums, posting pronunciation samples, and preparing for an imaginary summer trip to China.

Overall, the Chinese II language course was an online performance-based program that emphasized enhancing listening and speaking skills through interactive activities such as role-plays. It was designed for students who had completed Chinese I and aimed to expand their language repertoire for telling time and describing events. The program included online classroom instruction, a lab class for self-study with multimedia resources, and an online learning community project to foster student motivation and interaction. Instruction was delivered by a team of two instructors, with

a lead instructor designing the curriculum and focusing on performance-based teaching methodologies. The online learning community project, which used the platform www.chinese-forums.com, was a key feature that allowed students to interact with other learners, share experiences, and receive feedback on pronunciation. This project aimed to motivate students, help them set realistic learning goals, and envision the practical use of Chinese in their future careers.

Methods of Data Collection

In this study, data were collected through three key methods: analysis of online posts, analysis of reflective journals, and interviews. Each method was carefully chosen to suit the research context, which focused on understanding student motivation and experiences in an online learning environment for Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL). These methods were selected to complement each other and provide a comprehensive perspective on students' experiences by addressing different aspects of the learning process.

The analysis of online posts was used to capture real-time, spontaneous feedback on student interactions within the digital learning platform. This method provided a contemporary extension of traditional documentary analysis, allowing researchers to observe authentic student engagement as it naturally unfolded ([Baxter and Jack, 2008](#)). Online posts offered a unique perspective on the social dynamics and peer interactions that occurred in an online learning environment, enriching the understanding of the processes behind student motivation and engagement.

Reflective journals, meanwhile, were employed to gather self-reported data on students' learning journeys over time. These journals provided a longitudinal view of each student's reflections, challenges, and achievements, offering a deeper understanding of individual learning trajectories and the strategies students used to navigate the online environment ([Tisdell et al., 2025](#)). By documenting experiences across the course, reflective journals helped capture the evolution of student motivation and engagement in a way that single-point data collection methods, such as interviews, cannot.

The integration of these three data collection methods—interviews, online posts, and reflective journals—ensured a comprehensive approach to understanding student experiences. Through

triangulation, the study strengthened the reliability and validity of its findings by cross-verifying information from multiple sources (Creswell and Poth, 2016). This was particularly valuable in online educational research, where traditional observational methods may be less feasible. For example, while interviews provided detailed, personal accounts, they may have lacked the immediacy and spontaneity captured by online posts. Likewise, reflective journals tracked motivation over time, offering insights that are difficult to glean from one-time interviews or static observations of online interactions.

All interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or Google Meet, allowing for face-to-face interaction despite geographical distances. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes. Interviews were conducted primarily in English, as it was the shared language of instruction for the course and the common language among all participants. Participants were informed that they were welcome to use Chinese words or phrases if it helped them better express specific concepts, which were then discussed and clarified during the interview. Interviews were conducted to obtain a comprehensive understanding of students' personal experiences, motivations, and emotional responses to online learning (see Appendix C for the interview protocol). This qualitative method facilitated a deeper investigation into the cognitive and affective processes that shape student engagement and motivation in an online environment (Yin, 2018). However, it is important to acknowledge that interviews can present certain limitations, such as recall bias and potential interviewer influence, which may impact the reliability of the data. To mitigate these concerns, the interviews were carefully designed to capture the unique experiences and perspectives of six participants selected for their diverse backgrounds and varying levels of technological proficiency. The primary focus of these interviews was to explore how their participation in the online project influenced their motivation to learn Chinese as a foreign language, providing nuanced insights into the factors that drive or hinder student engagement in an online setting.

Individualized questions were constructed based on each participant's online posts and weekly journals. For instance, if a participant mentioned that their first language was English and their second language was Cantonese, the researcher appended a question about their proficiency in Cantonese and their experiences using both languages in their daily lives. New questions might emerge during the interviews based on participants' responses or information from their reflective

journals and online posts.

By triangulating these diverse data sources, the study not only reduced potential biases but also enhanced the richness and depth of its analysis. Cross-verifying emerging themes—such as the influence of self-regulation on student motivation—across interviews, reflective journals, and online posts increased the credibility of the findings (Baxter and Jack, 2008). Ultimately, this combination of methods resulted in a more nuanced and contextually rich understanding of student motivation and experiences in online CFL learning environments. Additionally, the inherent weaknesses of one data source were balanced by the strengths of another, ensuring a holistic and credible analysis (Tisdell et al., 2025). For instance, reflective journals revealed longitudinal trends in motivation, while online posts provided immediate insights into student engagement with peers.

This comprehensive approach to data collection aligned with best practices in qualitative research, where triangulation is crucial for constructing a strong foundation for interpreting and generalizing findings (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). By employing these complementary methods, the study was able to provide a thorough, multi-dimensional exploration of student motivation and experiences in online learning.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected from semi-structured interviews, weekly reflective journals, and online forum posts were analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis approach. This method allowed for the identification of patterns and themes that emerged directly from the data, rather than being imposed by a pre-existing theoretical framework (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The analysis was conducted in a systematic, iterative process designed to capture the richness and complexity of the participants' experiences. While the final discussion chapter places these emergent themes in dialogue with Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System, the initial coding and theme development process remained intentionally inductive to ensure the findings were firmly grounded in the participants' own voices and experiences.

The process involved several key phases:

1. Familiarization: The researcher began by repeatedly reading and immersing in the entire

dataset to gain a holistic understanding of the participants' narratives.

2. Initial Coding: The data were be systematically coded line-by-line. This initial phase used open coding to generate a comprehensive list of codes that closely reflect the participants' own words and concepts.
3. Theme Development: The codes were then collated, sorted, and grouped into potential themes. This phase involved a process of constant comparison, where the researcher will analyzed the relationships between codes and began to construct broader patterns of meaning.
4. Reviewing and Refining Themes: The potential themes were reviewed and refined by checking them against the coded extracts and the entire dataset. The goal was to ensure that the themes are coherent, distinct, and accurately represent the data. This iterative process aimed to identify the core tensions and overarching narratives that explain the participants' motivational journeys.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Once finalized, each theme was clearly defined and given a concise, descriptive name. This phase involved articulating the "story" that each theme tells.

Through this inductive approach, the analysis sought to construct a robust, data-grounded framework that illuminated the central dynamics of motivation and agency within the online CFL learning environment. The use of triangulated data sources further enhanced the credibility of the emergent themes by allowing for cross-validation of findings across interviews, journals, and forum activities.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to the commencement of data collection. All research activities were conducted in strict adherence to the ethical standards for research involving human subjects.

Prior to participation, all students were provided with a detailed informed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and their rights as participants,

including the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained from all six participants (see Appendix A for the IRB approval letter and a sample consent form).

To protect participant confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from the data. Pseudonyms (e.g., David, Liam, Chloe) were assigned to each participant and were used exclusively in all transcripts, data analysis, and the final reporting of findings. A master list linking pseudonyms to real identities was stored separately from the data in a password-protected file, accessible only to the researcher. All digital data, including audio recordings of interviews and copies of reflective journals, were stored on a secure, encrypted drive and will be destroyed in accordance with IRB guidelines after the required retention period.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

Research limitations are defined as potential weaknesses generally outside the researcher's control ([Theofanidis and Fountouki, 2018](#)). These constraints, which may affect the study's credibility, precision, and generalizability, often encompass factors such as sample size, data collection techniques, measurement tools, or extrinsic variables.

In the early stages of designing this research, I had originally planned to use a qualitative case study approach. However, during the planning process, I identified several limitations associated with this method.

One limitation of this study was the relatively small number of participants in the qualitative case study, particularly when compared to large-scale quantitative studies. Due to various factors, including the impact of the pandemic and the necessity of conducting interviews via virtual platforms, only six participants were included in the case study. The sample consisted of approximately half of the students enrolled in the Chinese II section during the semester in which the data were collected, as enrollment in the course at the research site was relatively low. Despite the sample size, the study's in-depth focus on the unique characteristics of the online project and how indi-

vidual backgrounds influenced student experiences helped to mitigate this limitation. Additionally, conducting interviews through virtual meetings allowed for greater flexibility in data collection.

Another limitation concerned the length of the online project. In naturalistic settings, the duration of an intervention involves a trade-off: if too long, external factors may obscure the results; if too short, motivational changes may not manifest. I selected an eight-week period based on practical considerations and the findings of [Darhower \(2007\)](#), who suggested that social bonds and collaboration can be established in as little as four weeks. I anticipated that this duration, combined with the specially designed activities, would provide sufficient time for participants to build relationships and for observable changes in motivation to occur.

While case study research is valuable for examining complex phenomena in context, it is not without limitations. A primary challenge is generalizability, as case studies typically focus on a small number of cases that may not represent broader populations. Additionally, researcher bias can influence data interpretation. To address these constraints, I prioritized rigor through careful design and implementation. Specifically, I utilized multiple data sources to triangulate findings, thereby mitigating subjectivity and enhancing the credibility of the research.

Delimitations

A delimitation is defined as the “limitations the researcher places on themselves” ([Theofanidis and Fountouki, 2018](#), p. 50). These boundaries are established to narrow the study’s focus, ensuring the project remains relevant, manageable, and feasible. By setting these restrictions, researchers explicitly define what is included in and excluded from the scope of inquiry.

The following delimitations were established for this case study:

- The study focused exclusively on participants who were not located in China. This boundary was set to address practical constraints regarding accessibility and cultural familiarity.
- The sample size was intentionally limited to 6 participants. While this restricted the generalizability of the results, it allowed for a more in-depth and detailed analysis of individual cases.

- The study covered a limited time frame (one semester). Consequently, the findings did not capture the potential long-term effects of online language learning beyond this period.
- Participation was restricted to individuals with access to the necessary technology and reliable Internet connection, thereby excluding those without such resources.
- The study included only participants who had reached a specific level of Chinese proficiency (Chinese II). This focuses the findings on this specific level and excluded insights from participants at other proficiency stages.

Researcher's Perspective

In conducting this research, my personal interest in the field of online language learning, particularly in the context of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL), has been a driving force. My own experiences with language learning, both in traditional classroom settings and through online platforms, have shaped my understanding of the challenges and opportunities that come with acquiring a new language.

As a researcher, I was particularly intrigued by the motivations behind students' choices to pursue CFL online. While the convenience, flexibility, and accessibility of online learning are undeniable, I sought to understand the deeper, perhaps more personal reasons that lead learners to this mode of study. This curiosity guided my approach to designing the study, framing the research questions, and selecting the methodology. Throughout the research process, I remained mindful of my own biases and assumptions. I recognized that my perspective as a researcher, influenced by my background and experiences, had the potential to impact the interpretation of the data. To mitigate this, I employed rigorous qualitative methods, ensuring that the findings were grounded in the participants' experiences rather than my own preconceptions. The challenges faced by online CFL learners, such as diminished teacher roles, increased responsibility, and feelings of isolation, resonate with me. These are issues that I have encountered in my own online learning experiences. This personal connection has fueled my passion for exploring potential solutions and strategies to enhance learner motivation and success in online environments.

In summary, my perspective as a researcher is shaped by a blend of personal interest, academic curiosity, and a commitment to addressing the challenges of online language learning. This study is not only an academic endeavor but also a reflection of my desire to contribute to the field and improve the experiences of future online CFL learners.

Summary

This chapter outlines the methodology employed in this qualitative study, which aimed to explore the experiences, motivations, and performance of students undertaking Chinese language learning in online environments. The chapter begins with an introduction to the qualitative research approach, emphasizing its role in understanding the meanings individuals or groups associate with social or human challenges. The study adopted a constructivist worldview, highlighting the importance of understanding participants' subjective meanings of their experiences. The research design included a case study component, which focused on the individual level. A sample of six students was selected based on their background and previous exposure to technology. Qualitative data were collected through interviews, online posts, and weekly reflective journals to explore the influence of the online project on each student's motivation. The case study aimed to investigate how individual factors such as heritage background and prior technology experience might have shaped students' experiences with the online project and their motivation. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations and delimitations of the study. Limitations included the small number of participants in the case study and the potential influence of other factors beyond the online project on student motivation. The chapter provides a detailed overview of the methodology employed in the study, setting the stage for a comprehensive analysis of online Chinese language learning.

Chapter 4

Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the qualitative case study conducted to gain a greater understanding of the CFL online learning experience. The previous chapters justify this study through relevant context and theoretical foundations that explain the CFL online learning experience as paradoxical and undertheorized based on discrepancies between learner identities and complicated yet sometimes alienating digital environments and an insufficient investigation into CFL online learner identities according to the sub-components of motivation highlighted by Dörnyei's (2001) L2 Motivational Self System. Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System served as the theoretical lens through which this guided inquiry was established for a guided inquiry connected to the most appropriate levels of motivations associated with the Ideal L2 Self, the Ought-to L2 Self, and the L2 Learning Experience.

To best assess this guided inquiry, a quasi-ethnographic case study was completed with a triangulated data collection instrument of semi-structured interviews, weekly reflective journals, and assessments of online forum posts. A quasi-ethnographic case study provided a researched yet naturally immersive snapshot into the specific class in focus for this responsive CFL online learning experience. The study investigated central questions that got to the heart of the CFL online learning experience:

1. How do participants perceive their experience with the online program, and which features do they find motivating or demotivating?
2. How do participants from diverse cultural backgrounds interpret their online learning motivation and experiences?
3. How do participants from diverse technological backgrounds interpret their online learning motivation and experiences?

Ultimately, results revealed a complex and often paradoxical existence where various components of each learner's background and identity motivation personalized the CFL online learning experience, and are presented in this chapter thematically through four significant findings instead of presenting each part individually due to more thematic coherence. The following themes explored in this chapter are central problems and progressions often associated with any CFL online learner, as established through an online community with these study participants.

The first theme, "The Clash of Expectations: The Online Community as Help Desk, Library, or Home," explores the fundamentally different mental models participants brought to the forum, which dictated their initial hopes and subsequent frustrations. The second theme, "The Motivational Switch: The Debate Between the 'What' and the 'How' of Feedback," delves into the critical role of peer feedback, revealing how its perceived value was contingent on both its content and its tone. The third theme, "The Dual Filters of Culture and Technology: From Defining 'Noise' to 'Hacking' the System," examines how participants' cultural and technical backgrounds shaped their perception of the environment and led to the development of sophisticated coping strategies. Finally, the fourth theme, "The Final Calculus: The Obstacle of 'Negative Motivation' vs. The Triumph of Intellectual and Emotional Belonging," synthesizes the participants' ultimate assessments of the experience, weighing the platform's systemic flaws against the profound sense of value—be it intellectual, emotional, or strategic—that they ultimately managed to create for themselves.

Theme 1: The Clash of Expectations: The Online Community as Help Desk, Library, or Home

The initial engagement of participants with the chinese-forums.com project was not a tabula rasa experience. Each learner entered the digital space carrying a pre-existing set of expectations, or a “mental model,” of what an effective online community should be and do. This model, shaped by their primary motivations for learning Chinese as well as their prior experiences with other online platforms, functioned as a critical lens through which they evaluated every feature, task, and interaction. The data revealed that these mental models were not only diverse but often fundamentally in conflict with one another, leading to a significant “clash of expectations” that became a primary determinant of their subsequent motivation and experience.

Analysis of the interviews and reflective journals revealed that these expectations coalesced around two distinct and polarized archetypes. The first, which can be termed the utilitarian model, was held by participants driven by professional or efficiency-oriented goals. They envisioned the forum as a functional tool “help desk” for rapid problem-solving or an “orderly library” for the systematic acquisition of knowledge. For these learners, the value of the community was directly proportional to its ability to provide accurate information with minimal friction.

In stark contrast, the second archetype, the relational model, was held by participants whose motivations were rooted in personal connection and identity. They imagined the community as a social ecosystem “supportive family” for mutual encouragement or a “cultural home” for finding belonging and validation. For these learners, the value of the platform was measured by its capacity to foster warmth, authentic human connection, and a shared sense of identity.

This section explores these conflicting models in detail. It first examines the core tenets of the utilitarian “help desk” and “library” paradigms, drawing on data from participants like David, Liam, Kenji, and Priya. It then contrasts this with the relational “family” and “home” paradigms, as articulated by Sofia and Chloe. Finally, it uses the “Introduce Yourself” assignment as a specific case study microcosm that vividly illustrates how a single, mandatory task could be simultaneously perceived as an unstructured “data dump” by one group and a failed attempt at building community

by the other, thereby laying the groundwork for the divergent motivational trajectories that followed.

The Utilitarian Models: The Forum as a “Functional Help Desk” and “Orderly Library”

For a significant portion of the participants, particularly those with professional, pragmatic, or systems-oriented motivations, the online forum was conceptualized not as a social space, but as a functional instrument. Their ideal version of the platform was stripped of extraneous social elements and optimized for the efficient retrieval and exchange of accurate information. This utilitarian perspective manifested in two closely related mental models: the forum as a “functional help desk” and as an “orderly library.”

The “help desk” model was most purely articulated by David, the project engineer whose motivation was exclusively professional. His goal was not to connect or explore, but to solve specific problems that impeded his primary objective of achieving professional working proficiency. He explicitly rejected the notion of “community,” stating in his interview, “I was not looking for an online ‘community.’ I was looking for a functional ‘help desk.’” This expectation framed his entire interaction with the platform. When the forum succeeded in this narrow function, it earned a rare moment of approval. He described one such instance:

I posted a very direct question: “What is the correct measure word for ‘engineer,’ ‘report,’ and ‘component’? Thank you.” ... They provided the correct answers... and then, most importantly, they provided a link to a website that was a searchable database of measure words. This was extremely valuable. The answer solved my immediate problem, and the link provided a tool that I could use for future problems. This was a moment of perfect efficiency. The system, in this one instance, worked. It functioned as a help desk.

David’s Week 1 journal entry reinforces this view, critiquing the forum precisely because it failed this functional test: “I am not interested in unstructured social interaction. I expect the platform to be used as a formal question-and-answer repository, where we can address specific

problems related to the course material.” For David, any feature or interaction that did not contribute to this direct, transactional exchange of verifiable information was, by definition, a “waste of time.”

Closely related to the help desk was the model of the forum as a library or database—a structured repository of collective knowledge. This view was shared by participants with strong technical or analytical backgrounds, such as Kenji, Liam, and Priya, who saw immense potential in the forum’s archival function. Kenji, influenced by his experience with highly specialized hobby forums, hoped for “a reliable and orderly repository of knowledge.” His satisfaction came not from interaction, but from the quiet, efficient absorption of information. In his Week 2 journal, he celebrated this aspect:

The most significant linguistic learning moment this week... did not come from an assignment I completed, but from one I observed. I located an old, extensive thread discussing the various functions of the particle 就 (jiù)... This single thread provided a much deeper and more nuanced understanding of the topic than the textbook... This experience confirmed my initial hypothesis that the forum’s greatest value lies in its archives.

Priya, the computer science student, took this model a step further, viewing the forum through the lens of a “distributed knowledge base” like Stack Overflow. Her ideal was a system where information was not only stored but also “community-vetted,” structured, and searchable. Her primary frustration stemmed from the platform’s failure to live up to this standard, which she described as having a “low signal-to-noise ratio.” However, when she did find a high-quality “signal” in the archives, the value was immense. She recounted finding a thread with visual aids for directional complements:

It was a goldmine... It transformed an abstract grammatical rule into a simple, visual, perspective-based concept... The textbook gives you the algorithm; the forum gives you a working implementation and a visualization. As a computer scientist, I deeply appreciate that.

Liam, whose mental model was shaped by Reddit, shared this hope for a “dynamic, user-driven knowledge base.” His Week 1 journal expressed “cautious optimism” based on this potential,

noting his discovery of old threads with a level of detail “you’d never get in a beginner-level class.” For him, the forum’s potential utility lay in its ability to serve as a “high-quality, crowdsourced knowledge base, similar to a niche subreddit.”

In essence, for all these participants, the forum’s primary purpose was instrumental. Whether viewed as a help desk for immediate answers or a library for deep research, the core expectation was the same: the platform should be a tool for efficient, logical, and data-driven learning. Social interaction was, at best, a secondary concern and, at worst, a distraction—a form of “noise” that cluttered the system and impeded access to the valuable “signal” of knowledge. This utilitarian framework stood in stark opposition to the relational expectations of their peers, setting the stage for a fundamental clash in how the community’s purpose and value were perceived.

The Relational Model: The Forum as a “Supportive Family” and “Cultural Home”

In direct opposition to the utilitarian models, a second group of participants approached the online forum with primarily relational goals. For them, the platform’s value was not measured by its efficiency as a tool, but by its capacity to foster human connection, provide emotional support, and validate personal identity. Driven by intrinsic and affective motivations, these learners envisioned the community not as a database to be queried, but as a social ecosystem to be inhabited—a “supportive family” or a “cultural home.”

This perspective was powerfully articulated by Sofia, whose motivation to learn Chinese stemmed from a deep love for the culture and a desire to connect on an emotional level. Having been compelled to choose the online format for logistical reasons, she entered the experience with significant apprehension, fearing it would be “very cold and impersonal.” Her hope for the forum was therefore explicitly social and affective. As she stated in her interview, she imagined it would be a space for connection beyond academics:

My hope was that it would be a warm and welcoming place. I imagined us all being like a big, supportive family. We could share our struggles, celebrate our small victories... I wanted it to be the “heart” of the class, the place where we connect on a human level

outside of just grammar and vocabulary.

Her Week 1 journal entry echoes this sentiment, framing her expectations in terms of belonging rather than learning outcomes: “My main expectation is not just to learn the language, but to feel a sense of belonging with the people I am learning with. I hope this forum can be the place where that happens.” For Sofia, the forum’s primary function was to mitigate the inherent isolation of online learning and create a sense of shared human experience.

This desire for a relational space was even more pronounced for Chloe, a heritage learner whose journey was deeply intertwined with her personal identity. For her, learning Mandarin was an act of “bridging the gap” to her family and heritage. Consequently, she saw the online community as a potential space to find others who understood her unique “in-between” experience. Her mental model, shaped by supportive, identity-focused communities on platforms like Instagram and Discord, was that of a cultural sanctuary. She explained her hopes in her interview:

My first thought was, “Ooh, maybe I can find other people like me!” I was really hopeful that it would be a space where I could connect with other heritage learners. I imagined finding threads where people were talking about the weird experience of understanding a language you can’t speak... I was looking for that cultural connection, that shared identity space, more than anything else.

In her first journal entry, she described her feelings of vulnerability and hope, framing the experience as searching for a social home: “My biggest feeling right now is a deep, powerful hope that I found other people here who understand this complicated ‘in-between’ feeling. I feel like I’m standing at the door of a party, and I’m not sure if I’m dressed right or if I’ll know anyone inside.” This powerful metaphor highlights that for Chloe, acceptance and social recognition were prerequisites for meaningful engagement. The forum’s success or failure would hinge on its ability to be a place where her authentic, complex identity was not only accepted but understood and validated.

For both Sofia and Chloe, the forum’s technical features and information architecture were secondary to its “vibe” or atmosphere. Their core need was not for efficient answers but for empathy,

shared experience, and belonging. They were not looking for a “help desk” to fix a problem, but for a “home” where they could be seen, heard, and understood as whole people. This fundamental difference in purpose put them on a direct collision course with the platform’s actual design and the expectations of their more utilitarian-minded peers.

A Collision of Purpose: The “Introduce Yourself” Thread as a Microcosm of Conflict

Nowhere was the collision between the utilitarian and relational models more evident than in the participants’ reactions to the first mandatory assignment: posting in the “Introduce Yourself” thread. This single task, intended as a standard icebreaker, functioned as a litmus test for their expectations. The resulting perceptions were so profoundly divergent that they reveal a fundamental schism in how the very purpose of the community was understood. For one group, the thread was a frustrating example of inefficiency and poor data management; for the other, it was a failed but hopeful attempt at human connection.

Participants adhering to the utilitarian model viewed the assignment with uniform disdain, critiquing it as an illogical and inefficient use of time. David, seeking a “functional help desk,” saw the single, chronological thread as a design failure. In his Week 1 journal, he dismissed it as “an unstructured data dump” and argued that it was “not a functional method for building a professional directory.” His critique was rooted in a logic of data architecture and utility:

I do not feel any sense of “community” from this; rather, I feel a sense of disorganization. My motivation for this course is high... However, this motivation is currently being tested by inefficient tools and processes.

Liam, hoping for a Reddit-like knowledge base, similarly perceived the task as purely performative and inefficient. He described the experience in his interview as shouting into a void: “I scrolled through the thread. And it was just a wall of text. Hundreds of posts, all formatted almost identically. It was a digital graveyard of introductions... No connection whatsoever. It felt utterly pointless.” For him, the lack of interaction and tangible outcome confirmed his suspicion

that the task was mere busywork, a “compliance exercise rather than a social one,” as he noted in his journal. Priya, the systems analyst, offered the most technical critique, labeling the thread a “classic example of poor data management” that creates a “massive thread with low-signal entries that quickly becomes unmanageable and functionally useless.” For all these participants, the assignment failed because it did not produce structured, searchable, or useful data; it only created “noise.”

In stark contrast, participants with relational models saw the exact same thread not as a data management problem, but as a social opportunity—albeit a flawed one. Chloe, the heritage learner searching for her “people,” approached the task with immense care and vulnerability. She was not submitting data; she was sharing her story. She recounted in her Week 1 journal:

I spent so much time on my post. I didn't just want to say “Hi, I'm Chloe.” I really wanted to share my story... about my hope that learning Mandarin will help me connect with my family and my heritage. I even put a little dim sum emoji in my profile signature, hoping to find other people who would get it.

Her disappointment was not with the thread's inefficiency, but with its social sterility and the silence that followed her heartfelt post. The lack of replies made her feel vulnerable, as if she had “shared too much.” Similarly, Sofia saw the thread as her first chance to build the “supportive family” she craved. She, too, invested emotional energy, sharing her “passion for C-dramas and my dream of one day visiting the historical sites.” Her anxiety, documented in her journal, was purely social:

Posting my introduction was honestly a little scary. I poured my heart into it, and then it was just... out there, in this quiet, text-filled space. I felt very vulnerable. I keep checking it to see if anyone has replied, but so far it's mostly just been silent. This silence is what makes me most anxious.

Thus, the “Introduce Yourself” thread serves as a perfect microcosm of the conflicting expectations at play. What one group saw as a chaotic database, the other saw as a quiet, lonely party. The very same digital artifact was simultaneously a source of frustration over procedural

inefficiency and a source of anxiety over social disconnection. This fundamental divergence in perception, established in the very first week, set the participants on starkly different motivational paths, shaping their subsequent strategies for engagement, withdrawal, and survival within the online community.

Theme 2: The Motivational Switch: The Debate Between the “What” and the “How” of Feedback

Beyond the initial clash of expectations, the most potent force shaping participants’ ongoing motivation was the experience of giving and receiving feedback, particularly within the context of the mandatory pronunciation assignments. This act of public performance and critique served as a powerful “motivational switch,” capable of either validating a learner’s efforts and spurring them toward further engagement, or confirming their anxieties and pushing them toward withdrawal. However, the data revealed a crucial and complex distinction in what made feedback effective. For some participants, the value of feedback was determined by what was said—its technical precision, accuracy, and actionability. For others, the value was almost entirely dependent on how it was said—its tone, kindness, and ability to create a sense of emotional safety. This debate between the “what” and the “how” of feedback became a central dynamic in defining the quality of the L2 learning experience, demonstrating that even a technically perfect correction could be demotivating if delivered without the appropriate relational context, and conversely, that a simple expression of kindness could be more motivationally powerful than any linguistic advice. This section explores this dichotomy, first examining the profound impact of data-driven, actionable feedback on utilitarian learners, then contrasting it with the primacy of a safe, encouraging tone for relational learners, and finally, analyzing the universally demotivating effect of the ultimate feedback failure: silence.

Motivation through Data: The Value of “Actionable, Specific, and Technical” Correction

For participants with utilitarian, pragmatic, and analytical orientations, the pronunciation task was a source of significant initial friction due to its flawed technical workflow. However, the experience was often redeemed, and motivation powerfully switched on, at the moment they received high-quality, data-driven feedback. For these learners, effective feedback was defined by its content: it had to be specific, technically accurate, and immediately applicable. This type of feedback transformed a subjective, anxiety-provoking performance into an objective, solvable problem, aligning perfectly with their core learning motivations.

Liam, the strategic International Relations major, provided the clearest example of this motivational transformation. He initially described the act of posting a recording as emotionally fraught, an act of creating “a piece of data that proves your incompetence.” However, his entire perspective shifted when he received feedback that was not a vague encouragement but a precise, technical diagnosis. He recounted the experience in his interview:

He wrote, “Your pronunciation of the vowels is very clear, but your third tone is consistently rising at the end, almost like a second tone... Try to think of it as a low, dipping sound that doesn’t have to rise back up.” And then he attached a 5-second audio clip of himself saying the same words... It was a complete switch in my mindset. It went from being an emotional issue about my ego... to being a technical problem about sound waves. The feedback wasn’t “You’re bad,” it was “Here is a specific, actionable piece of data you can use to fix a bug.”

This “eureka” moment, as he called it in his Week 2 journal, was powerful precisely because it was depersonalized and data-driven. The motivation, he explained, “came from seeing a clear, tangible path to improvement. It was no longer about me; it was about fixing the sound.”

Priya, the computer science student, echoed this sentiment, framing the entire experience as a “trade-off” between a poor user interface and high-quality data output. The asynchronous nature of the forum, she argued, allowed for a “much higher resolution of feedback” than a live class.

Her motivation was directly tied to the quality of the “data” she received, which enabled her to approach her own speech analytically. In her interview, she described this process as “debugging my pronunciation.” The value was not in the social interaction, but in the efficient identification of errors:

The motivation came from the quality of the data I was receiving. It was clear, specific, and directly applicable. It was a very efficient way to identify and correct errors.

In her Week 2 journal, Priya described this as a “successful data transaction,” clarifying that her satisfaction was “not of a social or emotional nature.” The high quality of the feedback validated the community’s potential as a knowledge source, motivating her to tolerate the platform’s technical flaws in exchange for access to this valuable, actionable data.

Even David, the highly critical engineer, conceded the value of a technically precise correction. While he found the process “absurdly complicated,” he noted in his Week 2 journal that the feedback he received did contain “one useful correction regarding the sh sound.” Though for him the high “cost” in time and frustration ultimately outweighed this benefit, the acknowledgement itself is significant. For learners whose primary goal is the systematic improvement of a skill, feedback that is specific, technical, and provides a clear, logical path to correction serves as a powerful motivational catalyst. It reassures them that despite systemic inefficiencies or emotional discomfort, the environment can still provide what they value most: measurable progress.

Motivation through Safety: The Primacy of “Gentle, Kind, and Encouraging” Tone

While utilitarian learners found motivation in the technical data of feedback, relational learners experienced the motivational switch through an entirely different mechanism. For participants like Sofia and Chloe, whose primary goal was connection and whose primary fear was social judgment, the tone of the feedback was paramount, often outweighing the content itself. A gentle, kind, and encouraging “how” was a prerequisite for them to even begin to process the “what.” For them, the forum’s ability to function as a learning space was contingent on its ability to first

establish itself as an emotionally safe space.

Sofia, who entered the project fearing a “cold and faceless” environment, described the pronunciation task as “terrifying” and “vulnerable.” Her entire experience was transformed not by a technical correction, but by a simple act of human kindness. In her Week 2 journal, she recounted the moment a classmate’s comment changed everything:

She didn’t just give me a correction. She started by writing, “You have a really lovely speaking voice! It’s so brave to post this.” That one sentence changed everything. It felt like a warm hug. It wasn’t about my tones or my grammar; it was a human-to-human compliment. It made me feel seen and safe. Her kindness completely washed away all the anxiety I had felt.

In her interview, Sofia emphasized that this emotional validation was more important than the linguistic advice that followed. When asked about the tone, she stated, “More important, for me. If someone had been very blunt or critical, I think I would have been too scared to ever post again. But because they were gentle, it made me feel safe.” This feeling of safety gave her the courage to re-engage, demonstrating that for her, the motivation to participate was directly tied to the perceived kindness of the community. The simple compliment was not social pleasantries; it was the essential act that made learning possible.

This need for a safe, non-judgmental space was even more acute for Chloe, the heritage learner grappling with a profound sense of linguistic insecurity. For her, the pronunciation assignment combined her “biggest anxieties: the fear of my spoken Chinese being judged, and the pressure of being a heritage learner who ‘should’ sound better.” The act of posting her voice was, in her words, an act of “exposing my linguistic insecurity so publicly,” which filled her with a feeling of “dread” and “shame.” While she received polite and helpful feedback, she noted in her interview that it “didn’t change the feeling of dread I had every time I had to do it.” The feedback’s helpfulness was overshadowed by the fundamental discomfort of the task itself.

However, the experience of Kenji, the structurally-minded learner from Japan, provides a crucial nuance. While he did not seek social connection, his deep-seated cultural desire to avoid “shame” (耻 , haji) made the tone of feedback critically important for him as well. He needed

a guarantee of predictable, respectful interaction to feel safe enough to participate. He described the polite feedback he received not as motivating, but as a source of “relief” that made the task “manageable.” In his interview, he stated:

It showed me that the community, at least in this area, followed an unwritten rule of polite and encouraging interaction. This was very important. A harsh or rude comment would have made it very difficult for me to continue participating... It created a sense of safety, if not comfort.

For both relational learners and those with high cultural anxiety, the data shows that the community must first prove itself to be a safe environment before it can be an effective learning environment. The content of feedback, no matter how technically brilliant, is motivationally inert if the learner feels judged, exposed, or unsafe. The “how” of feedback functions as a gatekeeper; only when the tone is perceived as kind, gentle, and respectful does the gate open for the “what” to be received as a gift for growth rather than a judgment of worth.

The Failure of the Loop: Silence as Rejection and a “Wasted Opportunity for Collective Intelligence”

If actionable data and kind words represented the two primary paths to positive motivation, their absence—in the form of silence—was a universally demotivating experience. The failure of the feedback loop, where a user’s contribution was met with no response, was perceived by all participants as a significant problem. However, the interpretation of that silence differed based on their underlying mental models. For relational learners, silence was felt as a deeply personal and emotional rejection. For utilitarian learners, it was analyzed as a critical system failure and a waste of collective potential. In both cases, silence actively discouraged future participation.

For participants seeking connection and validation, silence was the materialization of their deepest fears. Sofia described the experience of posting in the weekly reflection journals and receiving no replies as an “awful” and “isolating feeling.” The silence transformed the space from a potential community into a collection of disconnected individuals, confirming her initial

anxieties. In her interview, she articulated the pain of this “quiet rejection”:

It's a quiet rejection, which is almost worse. It makes you question yourself. Was my post boring? Did I say something wrong?... It's not like the feeling of just doing an assignment badly; it's a social pain. It made me feel like I wasn't interesting enough... And when that happens, the motivation to connect just... withers.

Chloe experienced a similar “huge mismatch” when her attempts to be vulnerable in her journal posts were met with silence. This lack of response taught her a painful lesson, as she noted in her interview: “I learned that my authentic, vulnerable self wasn’t welcome or understood here, so I put on a ‘good student’ mask.” For both Chloe and Sofia, silence was not a neutral absence of data; it was a potent social signal that their contributions were unwanted, leading to emotional withdrawal and a retreat into performative, low-risk participation.

For the utilitarian and pragmatic learners, silence was interpreted less as an emotional slight and more as a fundamental system failure. When Liam invested “real intellectual and emotional energy” into a well-formulated grammar question and was met with “complete silence for days,” he felt it as a rejection not just of his question, but of himself “as a contributor.” The long-term effect, he explained, was a behavioral shift toward passivity:

It makes me gun-shy. The next time I have a question, I'll hesitate... It pushes me back into being a passive consumer... The platform, in that moment, teaches you that contributing is risky and often unrewarded.

Priya, the systems analyst, provided the most technical diagnosis of this failure. She viewed the silent reception of the reflective journals as a design flaw that created a “write-only operation.” She saw the collection of unread personal reflections not as a series of personal rejections, but as a systemic failure to capitalize on a valuable dataset. In her interview, she described it in terms of engineering and missed potential:

The feedback loop was broken. It was like pushing code to a repository that had no code review process. The potential for peer-to-peer learning and problem-solving from

these journals was completely untapped. It was a wasted opportunity for collective intelligence.

Her Week 3 journal entry reinforces this view, framing the issue as a “classic design failure” that results in an “enormous waste of potential collective intelligence.”

Whether interpreted as social pain or a systemic flaw, the effect of silence was the same: it was a powerful demotivator. It broke the implicit contract of a community forum, which assumes that a good-faith contribution that met with some form of acknowledgement. The failure of this feedback loop taught participants that engagement was a “gamble” (David) or “risky” (Liam), eroding trust in the platform’s value and actively discouraging the very participation the course sought to foster.

Theme 3: The Dual Filters of Culture and Technology: From Defining “Noise” to “Hacking” the System

The participants’ experiences within the online forum were not passive. Faced with a platform that frequently failed to meet their expectations, they actively interpreted and navigated its complexities through a set of “dual filters”: their personal cultural background and their specific technological fluency. These filters profoundly shaped their experience in two critical ways. First, they determined each participant’s subjective definition of “noise”—the undesirable, demotivating, or inefficient elements of the platform that interfered with their learning goals. What one learner perceived as valuable social interaction, another filtered out as distracting noise. Second, these filters informed the sophisticated and often divergent coping strategies that participants developed to mitigate the platform’s shortcomings. Over time, they moved from being passive victims of a flawed system to becoming active agents who learned to “hack,” manage, or cultivate the environment to better suit their needs. This section explores this dynamic process, first by analyzing how the dual filters of culture and technology created highly individualized definitions of “noise,” and then by detailing the evolution of four distinct user strategies—Avoidance, Observation, Exploitation, and Creation—that participants employed to survive and, in some cases, thrive within the chaotic

digital space.

The Subjectivity of “Noise”: Distraction, Inefficiency, or Disconnection?

While the forum’s flaws were universally acknowledged, the participants’ dual filters of culture and technology led them to identify and prioritize different problems. A recurring concept that emerged across multiple interviews was the idea of “noise”—the unwanted elements that cluttered the learning experience and diminished motivation. However, the very definition of “noise” proved to be highly subjective, directly reflecting each learner’s core motivations and background. What constituted disruptive noise for one participant was the very “signal” of community another was desperately seeking.

For the utilitarian and structurally-minded participants, “noise” was primarily defined as distraction and inefficiency. David, the engineer from Germany, provided the most unequivocal definition. His cultural and professional background trained him to value order and measurable outcomes, leading him to categorize all non-academic social interaction as a distraction from his objective. He explained in his interview:

People discussing television shows, sharing recipes, or talking about their holidays... from my perspective, it is noise. It is a distraction... It does not lead to a measurable learning outcome. It is an inefficient use of a finite resource, which is my time.

Kenji, influenced by his Japanese cultural background and experience with highly-regulated hobby forums, shared a similar view. For him, “noise” was not only inefficient but also socially inappropriate. The “Introduce Yourself” thread, he argued in his Week 1 journal, “seems to create more ‘noise’ than ‘signal.’” He further identified overly emotional posts as a form of noise that created social awkwardness, stating in his interview that they felt “inappropriate for a space that I viewed as being for academic learning.” For both David and Kenji, noise was a disruption of order and purpose.

For participants with a high degree of technological fluency, “noise” was often defined as procedural friction. Liam and Priya, both accustomed to modern, intuitive platforms, identified

the clunky user interface and convoluted workflows as major sources of noise. Liam described the multi-step audio upload process as a “motivation killer” and a “complete flow-breaker” that shattered his focus. Priya, using a more technical lexicon, saw the platform’s poor design as creating systemic noise. The constant redundancy of basic questions, she argued, was a result of a flawed system that “is constantly reinventing the wheel,” a form of “massive inefficiency.” For these “digital natives,” noise was any element that created unnecessary cognitive load and wasted energy that could have been spent on learning.

In stark contrast, for the relational learners, “noise” was not the presence of social chatter, but its absence. For them, the biggest source of disruption was the feeling of disconnection and emotional sterility. Chloe, a “social media native” accustomed to the rich, visual, and personal nature of Instagram and TikTok, perceived the text-only, asynchronous format of the forum as emotionally “flat.” The technological limitations created a form of emotional noise by filtering out personality. As she put it:

The whole thing is just walls of text... It feels slow, clumsy, and emotionally flat... It filters out all the personality.

Most profoundly, for both Chloe and Sofia, the ultimate form of noise was silence. The lack of replies and human warmth was not a welcome lack of distraction, but an anxiety-inducing signal of isolation. Sofia articulated this in her Week 1 journal: “This silence is what makes me most anxious. It makes the space feel lonely.” Chloe felt this so acutely that she described the platform’s asynchronous nature as being “designed for isolation, not for real-time connection.” For them, a forum devoid of the “messy... beautiful energy of a real human gathering” (Sofia) was the noisiest environment of all, because it amplified the feelings of loneliness and disconnection that directly undermined their reason for being there. This subjective and often contradictory definition of “noise” is fundamental to understanding why each participant developed a unique strategy to manage, filter, or even generate the very signals they needed to sustain their motivation.

The Evolution of User Strategies: From Passive Victim to Active Agent

Faced with an environment rife with their own subjective forms of “noise,” participants did not remain passive. The data from the reflective journals, in particular, reveal a clear and fascinating evolution over the four-week period, as learners transitioned from being frustrated victims of a flawed system to becoming active agents who developed distinct strategies to manage their experience. Dissatisfied with the platform as designed, they effectively redesigned their interaction with it, creating personal “user flows” to either minimize demotivating elements or maximize motivating ones. This proactive adaptation was a crucial mechanism for protecting their motivation and asserting control over their learning environment. Analysis of their journals and interview narratives reveals the emergence of four primary strategic archetypes: Avoidance and Insulation, Observation and Analysis, Exploitation and Social Engineering, and Creation and Cultivation. The first of these, a strategy of radical disengagement, was born out of profound misalignment between the user’s goals and the platform’s affordances.

Avoidance and Insulation: The “Absolute Minimalism” Strategy

The most extreme coping strategy that emerged was one of systematic avoidance and emotional insulation. This approach, which can be termed “absolute minimalism,” was most thoroughly developed and articulated by David. Faced with a platform he deemed “fundamentally inefficient and poorly designed,” and which was filled with what he defined as “noise”—social chatter, emotional content, and unreliable information—David’s strategy was not to fix or engage with the system, but to reduce his interaction with it to the barest functional minimum. His goal was to insulate his primary, professionally driven motivation from the “negative motivation” generated by the platform itself.

David’s reflective journals provide a clear, week-by-week log of the development of this strategy. In Week 1, after his initial negative assessment, he signaled his intention for limited engagement, stating, “My engagement with the forum will be strictly limited to what is necessary to achieve my learning objectives.” By Week 3, after a failed experiment to use the forum as a help desk yielded what he called “useless responses,” his position hardened into a formal policy:

My strategy moving forward will be one of absolute minimalism. I will complete only the assignments that are explicitly tied to a grade. I will not waste any more time attempting to use the forum for voluntary learning. I will treat the forum as a mandatory administrative hurdle, not as a learning resource.

By Week 4, David reported that his strategy was a complete success. By disengaging from all non-essential and social aspects, he had effectively neutralized the platform as a source of frustration. He had transformed it in his mind from a chaotic “marketplace” into a simple transactional tool. His journal entry from that week reads like a report on a successful operational optimization:

By treating the forum as nothing more than a simple file submission portal, I successfully eliminated all the previous sources of frustration... My motivation... has remained high and stable because I have insulated it from the negative influence of the poorly designed platform. I feel a sense of control over my learning process. I am no longer fighting the system; I am simply routing around its deficiencies.

This strategic disengagement is further evidenced through a triangulation with his actual posts on the Chinese-Forums.com platform. An analysis of David’s contributions confirms his “minimalist” approach. His post in the “Introduce Yourself” thread was a terse, three-sentence paragraph stating only his professional role and learning objective. His weekly reflective journal entries were similarly factual and devoid of personal feeling, such as his Week 3 entry: “This week’s academic content focused on directional complements... The main forum assignment was to submit this reflective journal. I stated clearly that I do not see the pedagogical value in this task.” Furthermore, beyond the mandatory assignments, David made only one other post during the observation period—the single, direct question about measure words mentioned in his interview. He made no replies to other students’ posts, offered no social pleasantries, and did not participate in any non-academic threads.

Through this disciplined and systematic strategy of avoidance, David effectively insulated himself from the aspects of the community he found demotivating. He successfully transformed the

platform into a “neutral and transactional” tool, an “administrative task on my weekly checklist.” While this approach meant forgoing any potential benefits of social or collaborative learning, it was, for him, the most logical and efficient method to protect his core motivation and achieve his highly specific, professional goals.

Observation and Analysis: The “Lurker” as Researcher

A second, more nuanced strategy involved a highly analytical and observational approach to the forum. Participants employing this strategy did not disengage entirely but instead adopted the role of a “lurker”—a user who primarily reads and observes rather than posts. However, their lurking was not passive consumption; it was an active, strategic process of research and analysis. This “lurker as researcher” approach was best exemplified by Kenji and Priya, who leveraged their analytical skills to filter the “noise,” identify high-value content and contributors, and extract knowledge efficiently, all while minimizing the risks of direct participation.

Kenji, influenced by his cultural preference to “observe-first” and avoid “shame” (haji), articulated this strategy from the very beginning. In his Week 1 journal, he explicitly stated his intention:

My preferred method of learning in a new online environment is to lurk—to read, observe, and understand the unwritten rules and identify the key contributors before making any posts of my own.

For him, lurking was a form of due diligence and a sign of respect for the community. His goal was to achieve a high “signal-to-noise ratio” in his own eventual participation. The success of this strategy was confirmed in Week 2, when his observational approach led him to a highly valuable thread on the particle “就 (jiù)”:

This experience confirmed my initial hypothesis that the forum’s greatest value lies in its archives, and it motivated me to continue my “lurking” strategy, as it is clearly a high-yield activity.

Over time, his lurking became more sophisticated. By Week 3, he had moved from simple observation to active analysis, documenting in his journal that he had begun to “categorize the user base into distinct types: the ‘newcomers,’ the ‘socializers,’ and the ‘experts.’” This act of user-profiling allowed him to navigate the “flawed system” with a sense of “quiet confidence,” feeling not isolated, but like a “researcher, observing a complex social ecosystem from a detached and advantageous position.”

Priya, with her systems analyst mindset, adopted a similar strategy, though framed in more technical language. From the outset, she saw the forum as a system to be evaluated and “hacked.” In her Week 1 journal, she described her initial approach as one of systematic exploration, “reverse-engineering the user flow, mapping out the forum’s structure, navigation paths, and core functionalities.” Her goal was to treat the forum as a “passive database rather than an active community space” and to develop an “optimal strategy for querying this database.” Like Kenji, she found immense value in the archives, describing a thread with visual aids as a “goldmine” that demonstrated the forum’s potential as a valuable, if messy, database. Her motivation, she explained in her interview, was to become a better “information extractor.” Her journal entries track her progress in refining this skill, from identifying “expert users” in Week 3 to actively running an “A/B test” on question formulation in Week 4 to maximize the quality of responses.

Their forum activity provides strong evidence for this “lurker as researcher” strategy. Both Kenji’s and Priya’s post counts were extremely low, especially in the initial weeks. Beyond mandatory assignments, their public contributions were minimal. Kenji made only one voluntary post in the first four weeks, which he described in his journal as a carefully planned “experiment in minimally viable, strategic participation.” Similarly, Priya’s posts were infrequent and highly structured, framed as precise queries to the “database.” Their primary activity was invisible—the hours spent reading, analyzing, and building their own private, curated knowledge bases from the community’s raw data. This strategy allowed them to bypass the social and procedural “noise” they found demotivating while systematically extracting the intellectual “signal” that aligned with their learning objectives, thus maintaining their motivation through quiet, intellectual satisfaction and a growing sense of mastery over the chaotic environment.

Exploitation and Social Engineering: The Pragmatist's Pivot

A third strategy, representing a significant evolution from passive observation to active manipulation of the environment, can be described as “exploitation and social engineering.” This approach was uniquely embodied by Liam, the pragmatic and efficiency-driven student. Starting with a similar utilitarian mindset to Priya and Kenji, Liam’s strategy underwent a dramatic pivot. After discovering the limitations of treating the forum as a purely transactional database, he correctly diagnosed it as a “social network” and began to strategically engage with its “human algorithm” to maximize his return on investment.

Liam’s initial approach mirrored that of the other researchers. In his Week 3 journal, he described a feeling of “empowerment” as he transitioned from a “victim of a bad system” to an “operator who is learning how to exploit that system for maximum gain.” His primary tactic at this stage was the “search-first” strategy, which he saw as a way to “hack the learning process” by finding superior, pre-existing resources within the forum’s archives. This reinforced his belief that the forum’s true value lay in its function as a “deep, searchable archive of collective knowledge.”

The critical pivot occurred in Week 4. In his Week 3 journal, Liam had formulated a new hypothesis: there seemed to be an “unspoken social economy at play.” He decided to run an experiment in what he termed “strategic social engagement.” His goal was not to make friends, but to “build a small amount of ‘social capital’” to see if it would increase the quality and speed of responses to his own questions. His Week 4 journal documents the execution and stunning success of this experiment:

The main learning this week was not about Chinese grammar, but about the social dynamics of the online community itself. I learned that even minimal, helpful participation significantly changes how one is perceived... I posted a fairly complex question... The response was dramatically different from my first, un-established query weeks ago. Not only did I receive a reply within an hour, but it was from one of the “power users” I had identified. They gave an incredibly detailed answer and even said, “Hey Liam, saw your helpful answer on the measure words thread yesterday, nice explanation.”

This moment was, in his words, a “breakthrough.” His forum posts from this week provide

concrete evidence of this strategic shift. While his posts in earlier weeks were either mandatory assignments or direct, impersonal questions, his activity in Week 4 shows a clear change. He posted three helpful, concise replies in the “Beginner Questions” thread, clarifying simple grammar points for new users, and also left a constructive comment on another student’s pronunciation recording. It was only after this “investment” that he posted his own complex question about the grammar of “比 (bǐ),” which, as his journal confirms, received a rapid, high-quality response.

This experience fundamentally reshaped his understanding of the platform and his strategy for using it. He concluded in his Week 4 journal that his initial belief that he could treat the forum as a “pure, impersonal database was naive.” He had discovered that the most efficient way to get value from the system was to engage with it socially, but in a highly strategic, transactional manner. He redefined social interaction not as a waste of time, but as a “necessary lubricant for efficient learning... It is part of the optimization process.” Liam’s journey represents a pivot from a simple user to a sophisticated social engineer, who learned to “optimize the human algorithm of the community itself” to serve his pragmatic and efficiency-oriented goals.

Creation and Cultivation: The Relationalist’s Community Building

The fourth and most transformative strategy was one of active creation and cultivation. This approach was adopted by the relational learners, Sofia and Chloe, who, after initial periods of anxiety and disappointment, pivoted from being passive seekers of community to becoming its primary architects. Faced with an environment they perceived as “cold,” “sterile,” or silent, they did not retreat or simply analyze. Instead, they took the risk of being vulnerable and actively injected the warmth, personality, and identity-focused content they found lacking, thereby cultivating the very spaces they needed to thrive.

Sofia’s journey from a nervous observer to an “active community builder” is a clear example of this evolution. Her initial experience was marked by loneliness and the fear that the forum was just “a place for assignments, not for people” (Week 2 Journal). The turning point was receiving a single, kind comment on her pronunciation post, which she described as a “human-to-human compliment” that “made me feel seen and safe.” This small act of kindness did not just relieve

her anxiety; it inspired her to become a progenitor of that same warmth. She wrote in her Week 2 journal:

I now realize that the warmth and connection I'm looking for might not come from the platform's design... but from the small, individual acts of kindness between students. My hope for the future is to find more of these moments. I expect that I need to be the change I want to see.

She immediately put this into practice. In Week 3, inspired by a desire to connect learning to her passion for art history, she wrote a long, personal post about the Mogao Caves. The overwhelmingly positive response transformed her perspective. She no longer saw herself as a passive student but as someone with agency. Her Week 3 journal entry radiates this newfound empowerment: “It made me realize that community doesn’t just happen; you have to build it... I no longer see myself as a passive student just completing assignments. I now see myself as an active community builder.”

Chloe’s trajectory followed a remarkably similar path, though rooted more in identity than general social connection. Her initial feelings of being an outsider, “not ‘Chinese enough,’” were profoundly isolating. Her turning point, like Sofia’s, came from a small, specific interaction—a conversation about White Rabbit candy—which she described in her Week 2 journal as a “secret signal” and a “moment of pure cultural recognition.” This experience emboldened her to take a significant risk. In Week 3, she wrote a reflective journal post directly addressing the “in-between” experience of heritage learners. The response was a flood of validation. She wrote:

It was like I opened a door, and suddenly all these other people who had been feeling the same way walked through it... For the first time, this forum didn't feel like a classroom at all; it felt like a support group. It felt like our space.

This feeling of empowerment led her to become a leader in community creation. Triangulation with the forum data confirms this active role. In Week 4, Chloe started a new thread in the “General Chat” section titled “C-Drama & Movie Club!”—a space entirely dedicated to the kind of cultural, passion-based sharing she had found missing. The thread, as her journal notes,

“exploded with recommendations.” Similarly, Sofia’s forum posts show her initiating a thread about “The Story of Minglan” and actively leaving supportive, encouraging comments on other students’ pronunciation posts.

For both Sofia and Chloe, this strategy of creation was profoundly motivating. It not only eliminated their feelings of loneliness but replaced them with a sense of “belonging and purpose” (Sofia, Week 4 Journal). Chloe’s Week 4 journal perfectly captures the outcome of this strategy: “All the initial feelings of being an outsider... have been replaced by a strong sense of belonging... The forum is no longer a source of anxiety; it is a source of inspiration. It feels like home.” By refusing to accept the platform’s sterile, transactional nature, and by bravely creating and cultivating their own “islands of warmth” and “neighborhoods,” the relational learners didn’t just find a community; they built one.

Theme 4: The Final Calculus: The Obstacle of “Negative Motivation” vs. The Triumph of Belonging

After weeks of navigating the online forum’s chaotic environment, clashing with its design, and developing sophisticated personal strategies, what was the participants’ final assessment? When weighing moments of profound connection and intellectual discovery against persistent frustrations with technical flaws and social disconnects, was the online community ultimately a net benefit or a net drawback for their learning journey? The data reveal a final calculus that was complex, deeply personal, and far from unanimous. For every participant, the platform functioned as a significant obstacle, generating friction, anxiety, and, in some cases, a powerful “negative motivation” that actively worked against their learning goals. However, for most, this hindrance was not the final word. Through their own agency and strategic efforts, they were able to unlock or create a form of “higher-order value” that transcended the platform’s limitations. This ultimate triumph—whether it manifested as a victory of intellectual mastery and control or a victory of emotional connection and identity validation—provided a compelling reason to persist despite the costs. This final section examines this dualistic experience, first by detailing the universal perception of the platform as

a hindrance and then by exploring the two distinct forms of triumph that ultimately defined the experience for the majority of the learners.

The Platform as Hindrance: Frustration, Resentment, and “Negative Motivation”

Regardless of their initial motivation or the strategies they developed, a consistent finding across all participants was that the online platform itself functioned as a significant hindrance. The technology, design, and organization were rarely described as transparent facilitators of learning; instead, they were frequently experienced as obstacles to be fought, navigated, or circumvented. This systemic friction generated a spectrum of negative affect, ranging from mild annoyance and anxiety to deep frustration and, in the most severe case, a powerful “negative motivation” marked by resentment.

For David, the engineer, this was the dominant and defining aspect of his experience. His assessment was unequivocal: the forum was not a support system, but an “obstacle to be overcome.” In his Week 2 journal, he described the flawed workflow for the pronunciation assignment as creating a strong “negative motivation.” He wrote:

It created a feeling of resentment towards the course’s technical infrastructure... The frustration from battling the tool overshadowed any potential benefit from the learning task itself... It feels like being asked to build a precision machine with broken tools.

In his interview, he expanded on this, stating that the system “actively works against my learning objectives.” His completion of assignments was an act of discipline, done “despite” the platform, not because of it. This is corroborated by his forum activity, which was the absolute minimum required for compliance, reflecting his judgment that any voluntary engagement was a poor use of his time.

Liam shared this frustration, describing the clunky user interface as a “motivation killer” and a “complete flow-breaker.” He noted that the friction of the platform “raises the activation energy required to contribute,” making him less likely to engage spontaneously. Priya, too, described the

technical implementation as “abysmal” and “a significant demotivator.” For these learners, the platform’s poor design was a constant tax on their time and cognitive energy.

Even for the relational learners, Sofia and Chloe, the platform was a source of hindrance, though their frustration was more social and emotional. Chloe described the text-only, asynchronous format as a “huge barrier” that “filters out all the personality” and was “designed for isolation.” Sofia found the platform itself “mechanical” and felt that the technology acted like “a wall sometimes, not a bridge.” For them, the platform hindered the very human connection they sought.

Priya provided the most incisive summary of this collective experience in her interview: “It shifts a significant amount of the cognitive load... from the system onto the end user.” Every participant felt the weight of this load. Whether it was the time spent troubleshooting audio uploads, filtering through “noisy” threads, or overcoming the anxiety of posting in a “cold” space, the platform required a significant investment of effort just to be used. For David, this cost was too high, resulting in a net negative assessment. For others, it was a barrier they had to actively and strategically surmount to find value on the other side.

The Emergence of Higher-Order Value: Finding a Reason to Stay

Despite the universal experience of the platform as a hindrance, the final calculus for all participants except David was ultimately positive. The data reveal that while the course-mandated tasks and the platform’s surface-level design were often demotivating, learners who persisted and actively implemented their personal strategies were able to unlock or create a form of “higher-order value.” This value was not easily accessible; it was, as Kenji described, “hidden within a chaotic structure.” Yet, its discovery or creation was so potent that it not only compensated for the platform’s deficiencies but became the primary driver for their continued engagement. This emergent value was not monolithic; it manifested in two distinct but equally powerful forms of triumph, aligning with the participants’ core motivations. For the analytical and pragmatic learners, it was a victory of mastery over the content and the environment itself. For the relational and identity-driven learners, it was a victory of connection and a profound sense of belonging.

The Victory of Mastery: Intellectual Belonging and Control

For the participants who approached the forum as a system to be analyzed, navigated, or exploited, the ultimate reward was a profound sense of mastery. This victory was twofold: mastery over the complex content of the Chinese language, achieved through access to the community's collective intelligence, and mastery over the chaotic environment itself. The motivation they found was not one of social warmth, but of intellectual satisfaction, control, and a unique form of “intellectual belonging” earned through competence.

Priya, the systems analyst, perfectly captured this trajectory. After weeks of treating the forum as a system to be “hacked,” she successfully developed a repeatable process for extracting high-value data. The success of her “A/B test” on question formulation was a turning point, transforming the forum from a “gamble” into a predictable system. Her Week 4 journal entry radiates a sense of intellectual triumph:

My motivation is now at its highest, because I have a proven, repeatable process for extracting high-value knowledge from this environment... I felt a sense of mastery over the environment, not by socializing, but by understanding and leveraging its underlying system logic—even if that logic is human rather than computational.

This feeling of mastery gave her a compelling reason to stay. She had successfully built her own efficient learning system on top of the platform's flawed foundation, a challenge she found “intellectually stimulating” from the start.

Liam's journey culminated in a similar victory. His pivot to “social engineering” was not about making friends but about optimizing a system. The breakthrough moment—receiving a high-quality answer after building “social capital”—was, in his words, “incredibly efficient.” It affirmed the success of his strategy and gave him a sense of control. He described this feeling in his Week 4 journal:

I felt a sense of mastery, not just over the language content, but over the learning environment itself. The frustration I once felt with the platform's chaos has been almost entirely replaced by a feeling of being able to navigate it effectively.

Kenji, the quiet observer, found his own version of this triumph. His painstakingly cautious strategy paid off when his first voluntary contribution—a cross-linguistic analysis—was positively received by an “expert” user. This validation was not emotional, but logical. It was, as he wrote in his Week 4 journal, a “logical confirmation that my analysis of the community’s unwritten rules was correct.” This success replaced his initial anxiety with a sense of competence and a unique form of belonging, earned not through social pleasantries, but through intellectual merit:

The feeling is not one of social belonging... It is a feeling of intellectual belonging—that my analytical contributions are seen as valuable by the members of the community I most respect. This is a much more meaningful and motivating form of validation for me.

This is supported by the forum data, which shows his single, well-researched post nestled within a high-level discussion, receiving a “thank you” from the original poster. For these learners, the ultimate “reason to stay” was the deep satisfaction that came from cracking the code. They had tamed the chaos. Whether by building a personal database (Priya), optimizing the “human algorithm” (Liam), or earning a place in the intellectual inner circle (Kenji), they had achieved a victory of control, competence, and a hard-won sense of intellectual belonging that made the struggle worthwhile.

The Victory of Connection: Emotional Belonging and Identity Validation

For the relational and identity-driven learners, the ultimate triumph was not one of control, but of connection. After initial experiences of profound loneliness and anxiety, they succeeded in finding or creating the very “home” they were searching for. This victory manifested as a powerful sense of emotional belonging, shared identity, and personal validation. The motivation they found was not the quiet satisfaction of solving a puzzle, but the joyful, vibrant feeling of having finally found their “people.” This sense of community became such a powerful motivator that it not only eclipsed the platform’s flaws but fundamentally transformed their relationship with the language itself.

Chloe's journey as a heritage learner provides the most poignant example of this transformation. She began the course feeling like an outsider, burdened by the anxiety of not being "Chinese enough." Her turning point was a series of small, identity-affirming interactions, culminating in a reflective journal post where she shared her "in-between" experience. The outpouring of support she received was, in her words, "profoundly motivating." She felt "seen, validated, and incredibly empowered." This experience catalyzed her shift into an active community builder, culminating in her creation of the "C-Drama & Movie Club!" thread. This thread, confirmed by forum data to be one of the most active and engaged non-academic spaces, became the heart of her experience. In her final journal entry, she described the complete reversal of her initial feelings:

All the initial feelings of being an outsider, of not being "Chinese enough," have been replaced by a strong sense of belonging... My learning goals are no longer abstract; they are directly connected to my desire to participate more fully in this community... The forum is no longer a source of anxiety; it is a source of inspiration. It feels like home.

This feeling of "home" was the ultimate victory. It validated her identity, provided the safe space she craved, and, crucially, recontextualized her language learning. Mandarin was no longer just a bridge to a lost heritage; it was the language of her newfound community.

Sofia's path was remarkably similar. She entered the forum fearing a "cold wall" of technology but found that she could, through her own efforts, create an "island of warmth." After taking the risk to share a personal, passion-driven post about the Mogao Caves, she was met with a chorus of engaged and enthusiastic replies, including from Chloe. This moment, as she noted in her Week 3 journal, was the "most powerful motivator I've experienced yet." It proved that "community doesn't just happen; you have to build it." From that point on, she fully embraced her role as a "community builder." Her forum activity shows her initiating new, culturally rich threads and proactively leaving kind, supportive comments on others' posts. This agency completely dissolved her initial loneliness. Her Week 4 journal entry radiates this triumph:

The feeling of loneliness is completely gone, replaced by a sense of belonging and

purpose... I've realized the “vibe” of a community isn't in the website's code; it's in the actions and intentions of the people within it.

For both Chloe and Sofia, the final calculus was overwhelmingly positive because they achieved their primary goal: they found connection. This victory was not an intellectual exercise; it was a deeply emotional and social one. They triumphed not by “hacking” the system, but by infusing it with their own humanity. The sense of belonging they built became a powerful, self-sustaining motivational engine that made all the technical frustrations and initial anxieties feel distant and insignificant. They found their reason to stay by building the very home they had been searching for.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented the findings from a qualitative inquiry into the motivations and experiences of learners in an online CFL community. Through the analysis of interviews, reflective journals, and forum posts, four major themes emerged that capture the complex, dynamic, and often contradictory nature of the participants' journeys.

The first theme, *The Clash of Expectations*, revealed that learners approached the online forum with fundamentally divergent mental models, viewing it either as a utilitarian “help desk” or “library” for efficient knowledge acquisition, or as a relational “family” or “home” for emotional support and identity validation. This initial conflict in purpose shaped their subsequent perceptions and frustrations.

The second theme, *The Motivational Switch*, focused on the critical role of feedback. It demonstrated that motivation was powerfully influenced by two different mechanisms: for some, the value lay in the content of feedback—its technical specificity and actionability—while for others, the tone—its kindness and ability to create emotional safety—was paramount. The universal failure of the feedback loop, silence, was shown to be a potent demotivator for all participants, interpreted either as social rejection or systemic failure.

The third theme, *The Dual Filters of Culture and Technology*, detailed how participants'

backgrounds informed their subjective definitions of “noise” and led to the evolution of sophisticated user strategies. Learners transitioned from passive recipients to active agents, employing distinct approaches of Avoidance, Observation, Exploitation, and Creation to manage the flawed environment and protect their motivation.

Finally, the fourth theme, *The Final Calculus*, synthesized the participants’ ultimate assessments. While the platform was universally perceived as a hindrance that generated significant frustration and even “negative motivation,” most learners were able to find a compelling “reason to stay.” They achieved this by creating or discovering a higher-order value, which manifested as either a victory of mastery—characterized by intellectual control and belonging—or a victory of connection—defined by emotional belonging and identity validation.

Collectively, these findings paint a rich and nuanced picture of online language learning, highlighting that a learner’s motivation and success are not determined by the platform alone, but by a complex interplay between their personal goals, their background, and their own agency in navigating and reshaping their digital learning environment. The following chapter discusses these findings in greater detail, placing them in dialogue with the existing literature and theoretical frameworks.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Introduction

The previous chapter presented a detailed narrative of the multifaceted and often contradictory experiences of learners within the online CFL community. It revealed that while all participants engaged with the same platform, their subjective realities were profoundly different. The findings demonstrated a significant divergence in how learners perceived the platform's value, defined its flaws, and navigated its challenges. This chapter moves from presentation to interpretation, aiming to synthesize these findings and explore their broader implications for theory and practice. The central argument emerging from the data is that the vast spectrum of student experience is not random, but is systematically shaped by a fundamental conflict between the platform's monolithic design and the learners' diverse motivations, cultural expectations, and technological fluencies.

This discussion unfolds in two main sections. First, it revisits the study's theoretical framework, Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System, to argue that the online learning environment introduces new complexities and tensions to the model. Specifically, it analyzes how the core components of the L2 Learning Experience—functional efficiency versus relational connection—are often in direct conflict, and how learner agency in developing coping strategies becomes a critical factor in sustaining motivation.

Second, this chapter addresses the practical and pedagogical implications of these findings

by deconstructing the “fallacy of the monolithic community.” Drawing on the rich data, it proposes a typology of online language learners—such as “The Utilitarian,” “The Relationalist,” and “The Heritage Learner”—to illustrate why a one-size-fits-all approach to community design is destined to fail. By placing these findings in dialogue with existing literature on computer-assisted language learning (CALL), this section advocates for a more flexible, modular, and user-centric approach to instructional design that acknowledges and accommodates this diversity of needs. Ultimately, this chapter explains not only what the participants experienced, but why their journeys diverged so dramatically, and what lessons can be learned for the future of online language education.

The Spectrum of Motivation: A Dialogue with the L2 Motivational Self System

The findings of this study, when viewed through the lens of Dörnyei’s (2005; 2009) L2 Motivational Self System, do not merely affirm the framework’s relevance but also extend and complicate it within the unique context of an online learning community. The framework’s three core components—the Ideal L2 Self, the Ought-to L2 Self, and the L2 Learning Experience—provide a powerful explanatory tool for understanding the divergent motivational trajectories observed. However, the data also suggests that the online environment introduces new dimensions and tensions to each of these components, highlighting the critical and previously under-examined role of learner agency.

This study reveals a vast spectrum of Ideal and Ought-to L2 Selves, arguably more diverse and specific than those typically found in traditional classroom settings. The self-selecting nature of an online course attracts learners with highly particularized goals. At one end of this spectrum lies the purely instrumental motivation embodied by David, whose Ought-to L2 Self was that of an efficient engineer for whom Mandarin was simply a “tool for my job,” necessary to secure a promotion and reduce communication errors. This was echoed by Liam, whose Ought-to L2 Self was a competitive job candidate using Mandarin as a “powerful signal” to differentiate himself, and by Priya, whose future self was a computer scientist needing direct access to Chinese technical

papers. These learners' motivations were extrinsic, precise, and deeply pragmatic.

At the other end of the spectrum, the motivations were profoundly intrinsic and tied to the Ideal L2 Self. Sofia's ideal self was a person who could deeply connect with Chinese culture on an emotional level, to "feel the emotion in their real voices" without the filter of subtitles. For Chloe, the heritage learner, the Ideal L2 Self was even more fundamental: it was a vision of a whole, integrated person who had successfully bridged the "cultural gap" to her family and identity. For her, learning Mandarin was not about acquiring a skill but about "searching for a cultural home." This diversity is critical because, as the findings show, these deeply held future self-guides acted as the primary filter through which each learner evaluated their entire online experience.

The most significant contribution of this study to the framework is its illumination of a core, structural tension within the L2 Learning Experience in an online community: the conflict between functional efficiency and relational connection. The Chinese-Forums.com platform, with its text-based, asynchronous, and functionally limited design, implicitly prioritized one form of interaction over the other, creating a constant source of friction.

For learners like David, Liam, and Priya, whose future selves were defined by professional competence and efficiency, the ideal L2 Learning Experience was one that maximized return on time invested. They judged the platform on its ability to function as a "help desk" or a "database." Consequently, the platform's "clunky" interface, inefficient workflows, and unstructured "social chatter" were perceived as direct impediments to their learning, generating frustration and "negative motivation." Their positive motivational moments were "successful data transactions" (Priya) and "moments of perfect efficiency" (David).

Conversely, for learners like Sofia and Chloe, whose ideal selves were defined by connection and belonging, the ideal L2 Learning Experience was one that fostered warmth, empathy, and shared identity. For them, the platform's "transactional" nature, its "sterility," and the "silence" that often met their emotional outreach were the primary sources of demotivation. The platform's failure to be a "supportive family" or "cultural home" was not a minor flaw but a fundamental failure. Their peak motivational moments were not efficient transactions, but sparks of human connection—a shared love for art history or a conversation about White Rabbit candy. This inherent tension demonstrates that a single platform design cannot simultaneously optimize for both efficiency and

connection, inevitably creating a suboptimal experience for a large portion of its users.

This study's findings strongly suggest that in a flawed and impersonal online environment, learner agency emerges as a critical mediating variable between the L2 Learning Experience and the learner's motivational perseverance. The participants did not passively endure a suboptimal experience; they actively sought to reshape it. This agency manifested in the sophisticated strategies they developed—Avoidance, Observation, Exploitation, and Creation.

David insulated his motivation by “routing around” the system's flaws. Kenji and Priya became “researchers,” developing protocols to extract “signal” from “noise.” Liam pivoted to become a “social engineer,” learning to manipulate the community's “human algorithm” for pragmatic ends. Most transformatively, Sofia and Chloe became “community builders,” actively creating the warm, relational spaces the platform failed to provide.

This demonstrates that motivation is not a static consequence of the learning environment. Rather, it is a dynamic process of negotiation. When the provided L2 Learning Experience failed to align with their Ideal or Ought-to L2 Self, these learners took control, “hacking” the environment to construct a personalized experience that could sustain them. The triumph of mastery or connection described in the previous chapter was, in fact, a triumph of agency. This suggests that for online learning, a key component of a learner's motivation is their perceived ability to control and customize their own learning path, especially when the default path is flawed.

This study's findings confirm the robustness of Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System as an explanatory framework, yet they also reveal that its core components manifest with new complexities and tensions within an online learning community. The framework's three pillars are not merely replicated but are fundamentally reshaped by the digital context.

First, the Ideal/Ought-to L2 Selves are exceptionally diversified. The online environment attracts a wide spectrum of learners with highly specific, self-defined goals, ranging from the pragmatic Ought-to L2 Self of the “efficient engineer” seeking a concrete career tool, to the deeply intrinsic Ideal L2 Self of the “cultural home-seeker” on a personal quest for identity and belonging.

Second, this diversity of “selves” creates a central, irreconcilable tension within the L2 Learning Experience: a direct conflict between functional efficiency and relational connection. A platform design and community culture that caters to the utilitarian need for a transactional

“help desk” inherently frustrates the relational need for a supportive “home,” and vice versa. This structural conflict ensures that for many learners, the default learning experience is suboptimal and demotivating.

Finally, in response to this flawed environment, learner agency emerges as the critical mediating variable. The study demonstrates that sustained motivation is not a passive outcome of the learning experience, but an active achievement. Learners employ sophisticated strategies—from insulation and observation to social engineering and community creation—to “hack” the provided environment. It is this exercise of agency that allows them to bridge the gap between a dissonant L2 Learning Experience and their deeply held Ideal or Ought-to L2 Self, ultimately making continued engagement possible.

The Fallacy of the Monolithic “Community”: A Typology of Learners and Implications for Design

The findings of this study compellingly challenge the notion of a singular, one-size-fits-all “online community” in language education. The starkly divergent experiences of the participants reveal the central fallacy of designing for a monolithic user base. The data demonstrates that there is no single “best” design for an online learning community; there are only designs that align with or conflict with the deeply rooted motivations, cultural norms, and technological expectations of specific learner types. To move toward more effective and equitable online pedagogy, instructional designers must abandon the monolithic model and instead embrace the diversity of their learners. This section proposes a new typology of online language learners derived from the study’s findings, places this typology in dialogue with existing literature, and outlines concrete implications for future design.

This research suggests the existence of at least five distinct learner archetypes coexisting, and often clashing, within the same digital space. These are not rigid categories, but rather fluid prototypes that highlight dominant motivational drivers:

1. **The Utilitarian** (e.g., David): Views the community as a “functional help desk.” Motivated

by external, professional objectives, they seek transactional efficiency and see any non-instrumental social interaction as “noise.”

2. **The Structurist** (e.g., Kenji): Views the community as an “orderly library.” Motivated by intellectual clarity and a desire to avoid “shame,” they value structure, order, and high-quality, curated information, preferring to learn through careful observation.
3. **The Pragmatist** (e.g., Liam, Priya): Views the community as a “system to be optimized.” Initially driven by utilitarian goals, they are distinguished by their high technological fluency and their ability to “hack” or “socially engineer” the environment to maximize their return on investment.
4. **The Relationalist** (e.g., Sofia): Views the community as a “supportive family.” Motivated by intrinsic affect and a desire for connection, they seek warmth, empathy, and emotional safety, seeing these as prerequisites for effective learning.
5. **The Identity Seeker** (e.g., Chloe): Views the community as a potential “cultural home.” A unique and vulnerable archetype, this heritage learner is motivated by a profound need for identity validation and a sense of belonging among peers who understand their specific “in-between” experience.

This typology makes clear that what constitutes a motivating feature for one type can be a significant demotivator for another. The “messy, chaotic, beautiful energy” (Sofia) that the Relationalist craves is the very “disorganization” (David) that the Utilitarian seeks to avoid. The “quiet, intellectual satisfaction” (Kenji) found in the archives is insufficient for the Identity Seeker who needs active validation.

This typology helps to complicate and extend earlier foundational research in Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). Seminal work by researchers like Warschauer (1996) on motivation in CALL contexts identified key themes such as communication, empowerment, and learning. While these themes remain relevant, the findings of this study, conducted in an era of ubiquitous and highly specialized social media, suggest they are no longer sufficient. The participants in this study are not a homogenous group of “students using computers”; they are

sophisticated digital actors whose expectations have been shaped by a diverse media landscape, from Reddit (Liam) and Stack Overflow (Priya) to Instagram and Discord (Chloe, Sofia).

Consequently, a single concept like “communication” fragments into multiple, conflicting forms: is it the efficient, transactional communication of a “help desk,” or the warm, relational communication of a “virtual café”? The notion of “empowerment” also diversifies: is it the empowerment that comes from intellectual mastery and control over a system (Priya), or the empowerment that comes from feeling seen and validated by a community (Chloe)? This study argues that in the modern digital era, the learner’s pre-existing “mental model” of an online community, filtered through their cultural and technological background, is a more powerful predictor of their experience than the technological features of the platform alone. Furthermore, the acute “plight and power” of the heritage learner—grappling with unique anxieties while also possessing the potential to be a powerful community builder—represents a critical dimension largely absent from earlier, non-identity-focused CALL research.

The central implication of this research is a call to move away from monolithic design and toward a more flexible, user-centric, and modular approach to creating online learning environments. If a single platform must serve the Utilitarian, the Relationalist, and the Identity Seeker simultaneously, it must do so by offering choice and functional separation. The following design principles emerge directly from the findings:

1. **Modular design and functional zoning:** Instead of a single, chaotic feed, platforms should be structured with clearly demarcated “zones” for different types of interaction. A “Grammar Lab” or “Q&A Zone” with strict moderation and features like upvoting and “best answer” marking would serve the Utilitarian and the Structurist. A separate, less formal “Community Lounge” or “Media Club,” optimized for visual sharing and informal chat, would provide a home for the Relationalist. This functional zoning allows different learner types to engage in their preferred mode without generating “noise” for others.
2. **Provide user choice and control:** Learners should be given greater control over their own experience. This could include the ability to customize their notification settings to filter out certain types of content, to choose an anonymous or personalized profile, and to opt in

or opt out of certain social assignments. Giving a learner like David the ability to “turn off” the social lounge would neutralize his frustration, while providing a dedicated, optional sub-forum for heritage learners could create the “safe space” Chloe was seeking.

3. **Design for agency, not just consumption:** The most motivated learners in this study were those who felt a sense of agency—the ability to control, shape, or create their own experience. Future designs should intentionally foster this. This means moving beyond “performative” tasks and designing assignments that empower learners to become co-creators of the community’s value. Examples include tasks that require students to curate a “best of” resource list (for the Structurist), to answer a beginner’s question with a link to an expert thread (for the Pragmatist), or to interview a family member and share a cultural story (for the Identity Seeker).

By acknowledging the fallacy of the monolithic community and embracing a typology of diverse learners, instructional designers can create more equitable, effective, and ultimately more motivating online learning environments. The goal is not to build one perfect community, but to provide the tools and spaces for many different kinds of success to flourish.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has moved from the presentation of findings to a deeper interpretation of their significance. It has argued that the diverse and often conflicting experiences of online language learners can be understood through a dynamic interplay between their motivational “selves,” the inherent tensions of the digital learning environment, and the crucial role of learner agency. By placing the study’s findings in dialogue with Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self System, this discussion has highlighted a core conflict within the online L2 Learning Experience: the structural tension between functional efficiency and relational connection.

Furthermore, this chapter addressed the central fallacy of designing for a monolithic “community” by proposing a new typology of online learners. This framework, which includes archetypes such as The Utilitarian, The Relationalist, and The Identity Seeker, makes clear that a

one-size-fits-all approach to platform design is insufficient and often counterproductive. In situating these findings within the broader CALL literature, this chapter contended that the hyper-specialized nature of modern digital life requires a more nuanced understanding of learner expectations and needs. Finally, a series of concrete design implications were proposed, advocating a shift toward modularity, functional zoning, and user choice. This learner-centered design philosophy, which empowers users to construct their own optimal experience, emerges as the most viable solution to the complex motivational challenges identified. The following and final chapter summarizes the study's contributions, acknowledge its limitations, and offer concluding thoughts on the future of online language education.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to explore the complex landscape of student motivation and experience within an online Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) community. Moving beyond a simple evaluation of the platform's features, the study sought to understand the deeply personal and divergent journeys of learners as they navigated a digital environment often at odds with their goals. The research was driven by a central question: In a space where technological design, pedagogical intent, and human need collide, what truly sustains or diminishes a learner's motivation? This final chapter begins by summarizing the study's core findings, which coalesce around a central argument: that a learner's experience is not determined by the platform alone, but by the critical interplay between their individual motivational drives, their cultural and technological backgrounds, and their own agency in confronting the inevitable misalignments that arise.

Summary of the Study and Key Findings

To this end, a quasi-ethnographic case study was conducted, employing semi-structured interviews and the analysis of weekly reflective journals to capture the rich, longitudinal experiences of a diverse group of learners.

The central and most significant finding of this research is that the effectiveness of an online learning community is not a property of the technology itself, but a function of the alignment or

misalignment between the platform’s design and the learner’s individual motivational profile. The study revealed that a single, monolithic platform design inevitably fails to serve all learners equally because their core needs are fundamentally different and often in direct conflict. This core tension was most evident in the clash between two opposing paradigms: the need for functional efficiency and the need for relational connection. Learners driven by pragmatic, instrumental goals (their Ought-to L2 Self) perceived the platform’s social features and disorganized structure as “noise” and a hindrance to efficient learning. In stark contrast, learners driven by affective, identity-based goals (their Ideal L2 Self) experienced the platform’s transactional nature and lack of human warmth as a profound source of isolation and demotivation.

Furthermore, this study found that in the face of this systemic misalignment, learner agency emerged as the critical variable for motivational survival. Participants did not passively accept the flawed environment. Instead, they actively developed sophisticated strategies—ranging from systematic avoidance and observational analysis to social engineering and community creation—to “hack” the platform. They worked to reshape their personal experience, either by insulating themselves from demotivating elements or by cultivating the very interactions that fueled their desire to learn. Ultimately, this research demonstrates that a learner’s journey in an online community is a dynamic process of negotiation, where success is often determined not by the quality of the tool provided, but by the learner’s own ability to adapt, filter, and create the specific experience they need to sustain their motivation.

Contributions, Implications, and Future Research

The findings of this study offer significant contributions to both the theoretical understanding of online learner motivation and the practical design of digital learning environments. By revealing the deep fissures in learner needs and the critical role of individual agency, this research provides a clear path forward for educators, designers, and scholars seeking to create more effective and equitable online spaces.

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes a notable contribution to Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System by complicating its application in a digital context. It empirically demonstrates that the L2 Learning Experience is not a monolithic construct, but is instead fractured by a core, structural tension between functional efficiency and relational connection. The research argues that in many online platforms, these two needs are in a zero-sum relationship, and the platform's inherent design bias toward one inevitably creates a demotivating experience for learners who prioritize the other. Furthermore, the study elevates the role of Learner Agency to that of a primary mediating variable within the model. It shows that in suboptimal online environments, motivation is not merely a consequence of the learning experience, but is actively preserved through strategic actions that allow learners to align a flawed reality with their motivational "selves."

Practical Implications

The most critical practical implication of this research is a call to abandon the fallacy of the monolithic "community" in instructional design. The proposed typology of online learners—The Utilitarian, The Relationalist, The Structurist, and The Identity Seeker, among others—makes it clear that a "one-size-fits-all" platform is a "one-size-fits-none." Therefore, this study strongly advocates for a learner-centered, modular design philosophy. This approach would prioritize:

- **Functional Zoning:** Creating distinct digital "zones" for different activities—such as a highly structured, moderated "Q&A Lab" for utilitarian learners, and a separate, informal "Community Lounge" for relational learners—to allow different needs to be met without creating "noise" for others.
- **User Choice and Control:** Empowering learners to customize their own experience by allowing them to opt-in or opt-out of certain social features, filter content, and choose the interaction style that best suits their goals.

Directions for Future Research

This qualitative study opens several promising avenues for future inquiry. First, a large-scale quantitative study could be designed to validate the proposed learner typology and assess the prevalence of these archetypes across different populations and learning contexts. Second, comparative cross-platform research is needed to investigate how different architectural designs (e.g., a dynamic Discord server vs. a traditional asynchronous forum) impact the experiences of these different learner types. Finally, the unique and powerful story of the heritage learner deserves further attention. Longitudinal studies that follow identity-seekers like Chloe over time could provide invaluable insights into the role of online communities in language learning, identity formation, and cultural connection in a globalized world.

Limitations and Concluding Remarks

In closing, it is important to acknowledge the limitations inherent in this study's design. As a qualitative case study with a small, context-specific sample, its findings are not intended to be generalizable in a statistical sense. The deep, nuanced portraits of the learners presented here are illustrative, not representative of all online language learners. Furthermore, the inquiry was confined to the ecosystem of a single, traditionally designed online forum. The dynamics of motivation and experience might manifest differently on more modern, feature-rich platforms. These limitations, however, do not diminish the study's central contribution, which is to provide a rich, theoretical framework for understanding the diversity of learner needs in any online environment.

The stories of Liam, Sofia, Kenji, Priya, Chloe, and David ultimately converge on a single, powerful truth: technology is never a neutral container for pedagogy. It is an active force that shapes experience, enables certain interactions while disabling others, and either aligns with or clashes against the deeply human reasons why people choose to learn. This research began with a question about motivation in an online Chinese course, but it ends with a broader conclusion about the nature of educational technology itself. The ultimate lesson is not that one platform is better than another, or that one type of learner is more successful. The core message is that technology

itself is not the answer. The answer lies in recognizing, respecting, and designing for the complex, diverse, and agentic human being on the other side of the screen. The future of effective online language education will not be found in a single, perfectly engineered platform, but in the creation of flexible, empowering ecosystems that provide the tools for learners to become the architects of their own success. The most successful learning environment is not one that has all the answers, but one that honors all the different questions.

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edition.

Appendix A

IRB Approval

A.1 IRB Approval Letter

The following is the official approval letter from the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for research protocol IRB-12962.

TO: Deepak Subramony
Curriculum and Instruction
Manhattan, KS 66506

Proposal Number: IRB-12962

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 06/18/2025

RE: Proposal Entitled, "Motivations and Experiences of Students in Online Chinese as a Foreign Language Learning: Challenges and Potential Solutions."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects / Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Kansas State University has reviewed the proposal identified above and has determined that it is EXEMPT from further IRB review. This exemption applies only to the proposal - as written - and currently on file with the IRB. Any change potentially affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation and may disqualify the proposal from exemption.

Based upon information provided to the IRB, this activity is exempt under the criteria set forth in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, **45 CFR §104(d)**, category: **Exempt Category 1**.

Certain research is exempt from the requirements of HHS/OHRP regulations. A determination that research is exempt does not imply that investigators have no ethical responsibilities to subjects in such research; it means only that the regulatory requirements related to IRB review, informed consent, and assurance of compliance do not apply to the research.

Any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, the University Research Compliance Office, and if the subjects are KSU students, to the Director of the Student Health Center.

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 06/19/2025 1:00 AM ET

A.2 Informed Consent Form

The following is the blank informed consent form provided to the participants of this study prior to their participation in interviews and data collection.

PROJECT TITLE:

Motivations and Experiences of Students in Online Chinese as a Foreign Language Learning: Challenges and Potential Solutions

**PROJECT APPROVAL
DATE:**

**PROJECT EXPIRATION
DATE:**

**LENGTH OF
STUDY:**

8 weeks

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:

Deepak Subramony, Professor
Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Kansas State University
785-532-5550, deepak7@k-state.edu

CO-INVESTIGATOR:

Yusi Xu, PhD Candidate
Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Kansas State University

**CONTACT DETAILS FOR
PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:**

Yusi Xu: (707) 883-0917, yxu@ksu.edu

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION:

Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects,
203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506,
(785) 532-3224, rubin@ksu.edu.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

You are invited to participate in a research study. This study aims to help us understand why adult students like you choose to learn the Chinese language online and what your learning experiences are like. We want to find out what helps you stay motivated and what challenges you face when learning Chinese online. The goal is to use this information to help create better online Chinese courses for future students.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things over approximately 8 weeks while you are taking your online Chinese (II) course:

1. **Online Learning Community Project Participation (Course Assignment):** Your Chinese (II) course includes a 4-week online learning community project. This involves activities like visiting a specific online forum for Chinese learners, sharing your experiences, posting short audio recordings of your pronunciation for feedback from other learners, and interacting with posts from other students in the project. These activities are part of your course requirements. The researcher will analyze your project-related posts and pronunciation samples for this research study
2. **Weekly Reflective Journals (Course Assignment):** Your Chinese (II) course also requires you to write reflective journals (typically 8 in total). For this research, you are being asked to voluntarily submit copies of at least four (4) of these course-required journals directly to the researcher (Yusi Xu) via email. Your course instructor will not know whether you submit journals for this research or how many you submit. Allowing your journals to be used for this research is voluntary.
3. **Research Interview:** Towards the end of the 8-week period, you will be asked to participate in one interview with the student researcher (Yusi Xu). This interview will last about 30-60 minutes and will be conducted online using a virtual meeting platform (like Zoom or Teams). The interview will be about your experiences, motivations, and thoughts on learning Chinese online. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded. Participation in this interview is voluntary.
4. **There is no payment for participating in this study.** Your decision whether or not to participate in the research components (allowing analysis of your forum posts, submitting journal copies for research, and the research interview) will not affect your grade or standing in the Chinese (II) course.

BIOLOGICAL SAMPLES COLLECTED (Describe procedure, storage, etc.):

Not applicable. This is not a treatment study; your participation is focused on sharing your experiences in your existing online course.

ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES OR TREATMENTS, IF ANY, THAT MIGHT BE ADVANTAGEOUS TO SUBJECT:

Not applicable. This is not a treatment study; your participation is focused on sharing your experiences in your existing online course.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED:

We believe the risks of participating in this study are minimal, meaning they are not greater than what you would encounter in everyday life or normal educational activities. However, some possible risks or discomforts could include:

- **Use of Confidential Records and Invasion of Privacy:** This study involves collecting personal information from you, such as your thoughts and feelings in reflective journals, your responses during interviews, and your interactions in the online learning community project. This information will be treated as confidential research records. There is a small risk that if these records were improperly accessed or disclosed, it could be an invasion of your privacy.
- **Social or Economic Risk:** If your confidential information were to be breached and linked back to you, there is a small risk of social discomfort, such as embarrassment among peers if personal reflections or learning challenges became known. Direct economic risk is not anticipated.
- **Other Discomforts:**
 - Feeling a little uncomfortable or anxious when sharing your language pronunciation online for others to hear, or when interacting with peers in the online community project.
 - Spending time on study activities (submitting journals for research, the interview) might take away from your other personal or study time.
 - You might feel a little uncomfortable reflecting on or discussing your personal learning experiences, challenges, or emotions in your journals or during the interview.

We will take careful steps to protect your information and minimize these risks (see "Extent of Confidentiality" below). You do not have to answer any question in the journal (submitted for research) or interview that makes you uncomfortable, and you can stop participating in the research at any time.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:

You may not receive any direct personal benefit from participating in this study. However, by sharing your experiences, you might find it helpful to reflect on your own learning. The main benefits will be for future online Chinese language learners and educators. What we learn from this study will help:

- Improve how online Chinese courses are designed and taught.
- Create better ways to support and motivate students learning Chinese online.
- Add to the knowledge about online language learning.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:

We will do our best to keep your personal information confidential.

- Your real name will not be used in any reports or publications that come from this study. We will use a pseudonym (a false name) instead.
- All electronic data (audio recordings, interview transcripts, journals, notes from online posts) will be stored on password-protected computers and/or encrypted files accessible only to the researcher oversight.
- Audio recordings of interviews will be transcribed, and then the recordings may be deleted after transcription is checked for accuracy, or kept securely until the end of the data retention period.
- For the online learning community project posts, the researcher will focus on your project-related posts. While the forum itself is public, your connection to this research study through your journals and interviews will be kept confidential.
- All information will be reported in a way that no single person can be identified from the results.

Absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed because research records might be inspected by the Kansas State University IRB or other officials as part of their duties.

The information or biospecimens collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

IS COMPENSATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS? ☐ Yes ☒ No

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

PARTICIPANT NAME:		
PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE:		DATE:
WITNESS TO SIGNATURE: (PROJECT STAFF)		DATE:

Appendix B

Recruitment and Screening Materials

Screening Questions for Potential Research Participants

Thank you for your interest in the research study on “Motivations and Experiences of Students in Online Chinese as a Foreign Language Learning.” To ensure we select participants who meet the study criteria, please answer the following questions. Your responses will be kept confidential.

1. Course Enrollment:

- Are you currently enrolled in the online Chinese (II) course offered by Hunan Normal University for the Summer 2025 term? (Yes/No)
- Are you officially registered as a student at Hunan Normal University for this course? (Yes/No)

2. Age:

- Are you 18 years of age or older? (Yes/No)

3. Current Location:

- Are you participating in this online Chinese (II) course remotely? (Yes/No)

4. Language Proficiency for Course & Research:

- The Chinese (II) course you are enrolled in uses both Mandarin Chinese and English for instruction. For the purposes of this research study, communications, the consent form, and the interview will be conducted in English. Are you comfortable understanding and communicating in English for these research-related activities? (Yes/No)

5. Prerequisite Chinese Level:

- Have you successfully completed a “Chinese I” level course or do you have equivalent foundational knowledge of Mandarin Chinese that makes you eligible for the Chinese (II) course? (Yes/No)

6. Technology Access:

- Do you have regular access to a computer and a stable internet connection suitable for participating in all aspects of the online course, submitting electronic documents (like journal copies), and participating in a virtual online interview (using platforms like Zoom or Teams)? (Yes/No)

7. Heritage Background (for diverse sampling):

- To help us understand a variety of learning experiences, could you briefly describe your heritage background in relation to the Chinese language? (e.g., “I am a non-heritage learner, with no prior family background in Chinese.” or “I am a heritage learner; Chinese was spoken in my home growing up outside of China.”) [*Open-ended response*]

8. Technology Experience (for diverse sampling):

- How would you describe your general comfort and experience level with using on-line learning platforms, discussion forums, and virtual meeting software? (e.g., Very experienced, Moderately experienced, Somewhat experienced, Novice)
- Have you taken fully online courses before this one? (Yes/No)

9. Preliminary Willingness for Research Activities:

- This research study involves allowing the researcher to analyze your project-related posts (including text and audio pronunciation samples) on www.chinese-forums.com (your forum account name would be shared with the researcher for this purpose only). It also involves voluntarily submitting copies of at least four of your course-required reflective journals to the researcher via email, and participating in one audio-recorded online interview lasting approximately 30-60 minutes. Are you, in principle, willing to consider participating in these research-specific activities if you are selected for the study? (Yes/No)

10. Non-Involvement in the Study's Conduct:

- Are you in any way involved in the design, administration, or analysis of this specific research study being conducted by Yusi Xu of Kansas State University? (Yes/No)

Thank you for answering these questions. We will review your responses and contact you regarding the next steps if you meet the initial eligibility criteria for potential selection.

Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Introduction Script

“Hi [Participant’s Name], thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me today. My name is Yusi Xu, and as you know, I’m conducting research to better understand students’ experiences and motivations in the online Chinese course you just completed. This interview is semi-structured, which means I have some guiding questions, but it’s really more of a conversation. There are no right or wrong answers; I’m genuinely interested in your unique perspective and honest reflections. Our conversation will be confidential, and all data will be anonymized in the final dissertation.

To make sure I capture everything accurately, I’d like to record the audio of our conversation. Is that okay with you? The interview should last about 30 to 40 minutes, but you can choose to stop at any time or skip any question you’re not comfortable with.

Before we begin, do you have any questions for me?”

Part 1: Foundational Motivations and Background (≈ 10 mins)

1. To start, could you tell me a bit about your personal journey with the Chinese language?
What initially sparked your interest?
2. Thinking about the future, what does “success” in learning Chinese look like for you? If you became very proficient, what would you be doing with the language?
 - *Probe: Is it about connecting with family, advancing your career, enjoying media, etc.?*
 - **[Theoretical Link: Probes for Ideal L2 Self]**
3. Were there any external pressures or practical needs that made you feel you *should* learn Chinese?
 - **[Theoretical Link: Probes for Ought-to L2 Self]**
4. How would you describe your relationship with Chinese culture? How did you anticipate this playing a role in the course?
5. And what about your background with technology? Would you describe yourself as tech-savvy?

Part 2: The Lived Online Experience (≈ 10 mins)

1. Let’s go back to the beginning of the course. Before you logged on for the first time, what were you expecting from the online community forum? What was your “mental model” (or image in your head) of it?
2. Now, let’s talk about your actual experience. Can you walk me through your first couple of weeks?
 - *Probe: What were your first impressions? What stood out to you?*
3. I’d like to talk about a specific activity: giving and receiving pronunciation feedback. Can you describe a memorable moment related to that?

- *Probe: What made it memorable? How did you feel?*

4. Thinking about that feedback, what was more important for your motivation: the *content* of the feedback (what was said) or the *tone* (how it was said)?

- **[Theoretical Link: Probes for L2 Learning Experience (Functional vs. Relational)]**

5. Can you recall another moment or activity where you felt particularly engaged and motivated? What was happening?
6. On the flip side, can you describe a time when you faced a significant challenge or felt your motivation drop?

- *Probe: What was the obstacle? How did you try to overcome it?*

- **[Theoretical Link: Probes for Learner Agency]**

Part 3: Final Reflections and Impact (≈ 10 mins)

1. Looking back at the whole experience, how did your involvement in the online project affect your overall motivation to learn Chinese? Did it change over time?
2. Has this experience influenced your plans to continue learning Chinese in the future? If so, how?
3. Overall, if you had to weigh the helpful aspects against the challenging ones, what was the final verdict for you? What is the one thing you will take away from this experience?

Potential Probing Questions (to be used throughout)

- “Could you give me a specific example of that?”
- “What was going through your mind when that happened?”
- “How did that make you feel?”

- “How did that moment affect what you did next?”

Closing Script

“We’ve covered all my main questions. Is there anything else you’d like to add that we haven’t talked about, or any questions you have for me?”

Thank you again for your time and for sharing your experiences so openly. Your insights are incredibly valuable to this research. I’ll be transcribing our conversation, and I’ll be sure to remove any identifying information. I really appreciate your contribution.”

Appendix D

Screenshots of the Online Learning Environment

D.1 Online Instructional Interface

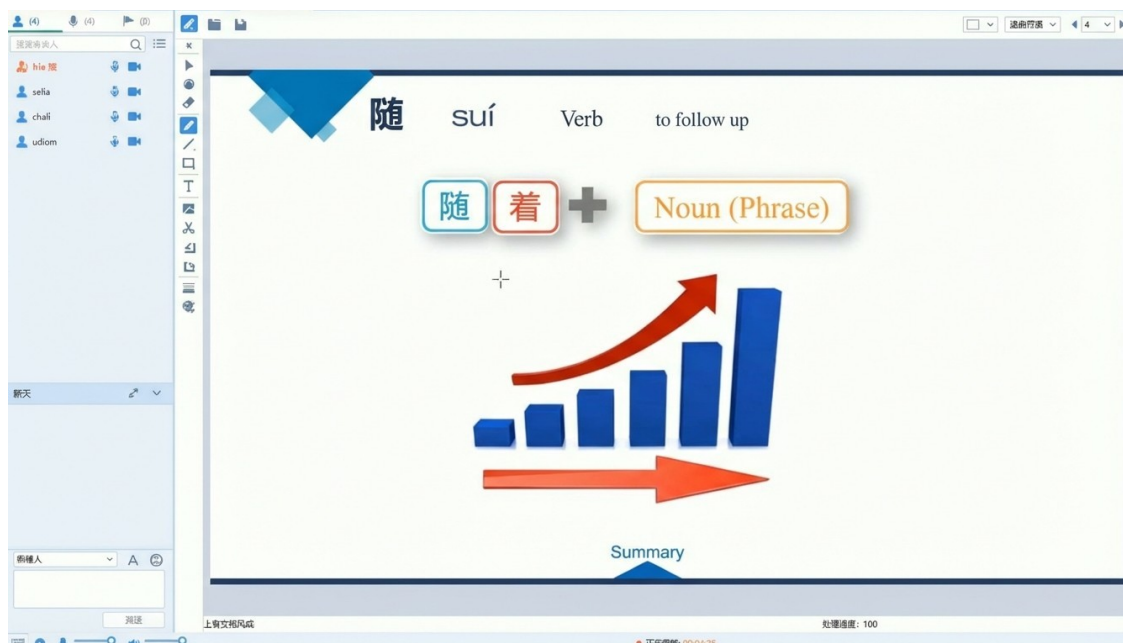


Figure D.1: Screenshot of the online lab class interface

D.2 Discussion Forum Layout

Chinese-Forums

Existing user? [Sign In](#) [Sign Up](#)

[Home](#) [Forums](#) [Blogs](#) [All Activity](#)

[Home](#) > [Forums](#) > [Learning Chinese](#) > [Resources for Studying Chinese](#) [All Activity](#)

Resources for Studying Chinese

[Followers](#) 4

Subforums

-  **The HSK Exam, and others**
Primarily the HSK exam, but also covering any other exam of interest to Chinese learners. **6.4k** posts  **HSK 3.0 ... new, new HSK?**
By becky82, February 14, 2026 at 06:31 PM
-  **Textbooks for learning Chinese** **3.8k** posts  **What's better than Chinese...**
By Mulan_tongzhi, February 17, 2026 at 12:42 PM

[Start new topic](#)

1 2 3 4 5 6 NEXT » Page 1 of 115 [SORT BY](#)

 A Short List of Resources for Studying Chinese 1 2 3 4 11» By 艾墨本, July 11, 2016 at 11:35 PM	216 replies 95.9k views	 ajithberlin February 15, 2026 at 10:03 PM
 Pinyinput - Type Pinyin with Tone Marks 1 2 3 4 22» By imron, September 25, 2006 at 03:15 AM	430 replies 297.7k views	 tempire February 10, 2025 at 02:16 PM
 The Grand Gaming Project 1 2 3 4 8» By Gleaves, April 17, 2011 at 10:30 PM	141 replies 87.8k views	 matteo November 4, 2024 at 07:39 PM
Sharing my Anki Add-On that lets you review multiple words at once by generating sentences, "BeyondVocab" By amm_real, March 12, 2025 at 03:30 PM	4 replies 2k views	 amm_real February 16, 2026 at 08:47 AM
YouTube Channels with Soft Subtitles (Chinese) 1 2 By markhavemann, August 5, 2021 at 08:19 AM	24 replies 10.7k views	 richardpohl February 15, 2026 at 11:19 PM
Looking for Help with Content for a Chinese Site By qubitspace, February 1, 2026 at 11:09 PM	8 replies 790 views	 SuShuang February 12, 2026 at 01:10 AM
Chinese Readers! By chongshipei, January 20, 2026 at 12:58 PM	3 replies 492 views	 chongshipei January 24, 2026 at 05:11 AM

Figure D.2: *Layout of the online discussion forum*