

## **A Study of Chinese Undergraduate Students' Attitudes toward Learning an Online English Course through MOOC at a Private University in Beijing**

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### **Abstract**

This study aimed to investigate the Chinese undergraduate students' attitudes toward learning an online English course through MOOC from affective, behavioral and cognitive dimensions and whether MOOC features and Chinese cultural values influenced their attitudes. The quantitative results, collected from 380 Chinese students at a private university in Beijing selected through stratified random sampling, revealed that they had positive attitudes toward learning the online English course from both three dimensions at a high level and that both MOOC features and Chinese cultural values influenced their positive attitudes at a high level. The qualitative findings, garnered from 18 of them, also supported the quantitative results in that the students preferred studying English on asynchronous and synchronous platforms, providing them with their own learning space, non-face-to-face communication with the lecturer, and a cultural sense of face keeping, concurrently allowing them to learn online English actively and perceptually improve their English skills. Valuable insights for Chinese lecturers of English were provided and replicated studies in different contexts were recommended for future research.

**Keywords:** Attitudes, Online learning, English language learning, Chinese undergraduate students, MOOCs, Chinese cultural values

### **Introduction**

The advent of the COVID 19 pandemic has brought a great change to education throughout the globe. Kindergartens, schools, and universities at the national or municipal level in 172 countries were temporarily closed, affecting approximately 98.5% of the global student population (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020). In order to continue learning, schools, where they could afford virtual learning and teaching, providing students with asynchronous (learning through the recorded lectures and tasks prepared by teachers at any time) and synchronous (learning at a specified time through

a specific medium with teachers at any place) online courses (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020). Such change posed challenges for both students and teachers. On the one hand, students who lacked computer skills were unlikely able to control their study time properly, which in turn made them feel anxious about the quality of their studies (Maqableh & Alia, 2021). On the other hand, teachers must design and plan their online courses carefully and effectively, upload various resources they have created to the selected online platform to provide space for students' independent learning and adhere to instructional requirements that suit their learning needs (Zhang & Chen, 2018).

Take China as an example of the country facing a great impact of the COVID 19 epidemic. In early February 2020, China's Ministry of Education ordered all levels of schools to discontinue face-to-face instruction in the classroom and adopted online learning platforms (Dong et al., 2020). Major platforms for online courses included Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs); all could support synchronous classroom learning and create meeting classrooms of more than one hundred students with documents and screen sharing for real-time environments. Of these platforms, MOOCs have been popular in China since 2014 when the Chinese University MOOC Program was launched (Liu, 2015) to provide free online asynchronous and synchronous courses, teaching services and learning data support for more than 150 Chinese mainland higher education institutions (Wang et al., 2018).

In the case of learning and teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), a compulsory subject for Chinese students to learn from primary school to university in China, they tend to have less enthusiasm and effort to study the language (Yang & Yuen, 2014) due to the teacher-centered ideology, first appearing in Comenius' Great Didactic of Comenius in the 17th century (Polka, 2010) and the primary focus on teaching grammar and reciting vocabulary (Cai, 2012). Influenced as well by Confucian ways of thinking and behaving, the teacher-student relationship tends to awe authorities and respect teachers in Chinese society (Dong et al., 2020). Chinese students feel the need to have a formal relationship with teachers by showing respect to them and regarding them as equal to their parents, believing that they are knowledge providers who can answer all questions (Zhu et al., 2009). Therefore, Chinese students are often afraid to express their ideas when being in the same space as teachers. Culturally speaking, it can imply that the COVID 19 crisis may give a contradictory opportunity to Chinese students to learn the language online more effectively and happily as compared to learning in a face-to-face classroom.

To shed light on the aforementioned implication, it can be significant to examine Chinese students' attitudes toward learning an online English course, for it plays a vital role in language learning and can influence their learning success or failure. Students, who enjoy learning English or have a positive attitude toward it, tend to demonstrate their interest in the language and are eager to learn more (Lai & Aksornjarung, 2018) while possessing a negative attitude often reduces the level of their learning motivation and classroom engagement (Rahimi & Hassani, 2012). Positive attitudes toward educational technology can also have a direct impact on students' learning process as they will feel positive and encouraged to learn the

subject more (Elfaki et al., 2019; Aguilera-Hermida, 2020); if they attend the class with negative attitudes and low motivation, whatever teaching methods effectively used by teachers may be impaired (Lai & Aksornjarung, 2018).

In addition, relevant research studies which focused on Chinese students (e.g., Thompson & Ku, 2005; Zhao & McDougall, 2008) had only explored the influence of Chinese students' culture on their online learning. Three studies into Chinese university students' attitudes toward learning online English courses were found positive findings. Two of them employed quantitative research methods (Hsu & Sheu, 2008; Nan, 2019); another one used mixed methods research (Ku & Lohr, 2003). Other studies found that Chinese university students with negative attitudes were affected by a lack of both computer skills and the ability to study independently (Tang et al., 2015; Li & Lee, 2016). Therefore, it was worth studying Chinese students' attitudes toward learning an online English course through MOOC.

This study aimed to investigate Chinese undergraduate students' attitudes toward learning an online English course through MOOC at a private university in Beijing and whether their attitudes were influenced by MOOC features and the Chinese cultural values. The research findings could be invaluable for Chinese lecturers teaching online through MOOCs.

### **The context of teaching and learning the online English course through MOOC**

The online English course through MOOC in this study adopted asynchronous and synchronous teaching and learning modes, which not only paid attention to the leading role of the lecturer in guiding, inspiring and supervising her teaching process, but also fully embodied the initiative, enthusiasm and creativity of her students as the main body of their learning process (Zhang & Gao, 2021). In the asynchronous learning mode, the lecturer did not have direct communication with her students as the former uploaded courseware videos and language skill tasks on the MOOC platform in advance and for the latter to watch as much as they wanted to within the specified time and then complete the tasks. Thus, the students could control their personal learning progress and make reasonable plans to learn all English skills independently at their own pace, enabling them to learn the language more effectively. In the synchronous teaching and learning mode, the lecturer shared her own screen and real-time explanations for teaching with her students, who could only ask or answer their questions on the discussion board, which allowed them enough time to think before expressing themselves in writing on the board in English. The students could feel at ease with these teaching and learning styles when attending the online English course.

### **Related literature review**

The key concept in this study is attitudes toward learning an online English course, defined as language learners' opinions about online English learning (Ghazvini & Khajepour, 2011), comprising affective, behavioral and cognitive dimensions (Netzer et al., 2018). The affective dimension is their feelings and emotions about online English learning, including likes and dislikes, considered a core dimension of attitude (ibid, 2018, p.13). The behavioral dimension means the intention or tendency they take and act toward online English learning

(Rahimi & Hassani, 2012). The cognitive dimension regards their belief, knowledge and thought about online English learning. Language learners' emotions, behaviors and beliefs are seen to influence one another (Clare & Schnall, 2005) through the learning process and subsequently form their attitudes (Li & Lee, 2016).

Online English learning appears to be a top priority for the students as well as research studies into attitudes toward it due to the COVID-19 foray. The attitudinal research results can be obtained from one's own experience and environmental observation (Asrifan et al., 2020). The existing studies of Chinese university students' attitudes toward learning online English courses showed both positive and negative findings. Positively, they were active in learning both in the virtual classroom and on their own (Ku & Lohr, 2003), willing to study virtually although they encountered technical obstacles (Hsu & Sheu, 2008) as well as willing to seek online consultations with their instructors and join online discussions with their classmates (Nan, 2019). Poor technology skills (Li & Lee, 2016) and a lack of learning autonomy (Tang et al., 2015) in Chinese university students were found to be the negative findings.

In other similar contexts of learning EFL, past studies also revealed both positive and negative outcomes. For example, in Indonesia, Indriani and Widiastuti (2021) reported that Indonesian college students had positive attitudes toward learning an online English course, but the technical problems could negatively affect them. Although Erarslan and Topkaya (2017) studied in a Turkish context and Chomphuchart (2017) in a Thai context, they similarly found that university students' positive attitudes depended on how well they could cope with the difficulty or complexity of the subject and computer technology skills. In Jordan, Mahfouz and Salam (2021) discovered that college students obtained negative attitudes because of the economic situation, that was, they lacked computer facilities for learning online courses.

Although the results of related past studies were dichotomous, this study argued that MOOC features and Chinese cultural values were factors that positively influenced Chinese undergraduate students' attitudes toward learning the online English course. The former offers a clear web page they can clearly see the course schedule and requirements, contents of the course and examination (Zhang & Chen, 2018) and a personal space they can learn whenever they want and wherever it is convenient for them (Chen & Oakley, 2020) on any mobile devices. MOOCs also have an online discussion board for instructors and students to share ideas and discuss relevant topics freely without face-to-face interactions. The latter embedded in their beings guide them on what is good, bad, appropriate or inappropriate (Nakayama & Martin, 2014). Losing face in public is considered bad or inappropriate for Chinese students who are often afraid and ashamed of making errors while speaking in front of other students, so they remain quiet and often refuse to chat (Wang, 2014). Since they usually need time to think and reflect before answering questions and sharing ideas, they prefer to express their ideas on online discussion boards (Thompson & Ku, 2005). The MOOC features that manifested in the asynchronous and synchronous online course could appeal to Chinese students to study the online English course because they were provided with a more independent learning environment, which in turn allowed them to learn at their own pace and express their thoughts in writing in English.

In addition, learning English through MOOCs is more advantageous than other online platforms, for it covers the whole teaching process, including students' online pre-class preparation, in-class learning, in-class assessment and testing. Once they finish all the online learning tasks, they will receive a course completion certificate through the MOOC platform. Students can also anonymously evaluate their peers and act as teachers' evaluators (Wang, 2017). Since competition is common in China's education system, mostly noticed by Chinese students, and it negatively affects their views on peer cooperation (Zhu et al., 2009), mutual evaluation among students through the MOOC platform can provide more objective results, maintain a healthy competitive relationship and promote progress in learning English (Liu et al., 2010). It can be said that MOOC features enable students to learn English better.

Against the above-mentioned backdrop, Chinese undergraduate students who have already taken the online English course in this study would more likely to have positive attitudes toward learning the online English course through the MOOC platform. They would like to learn the English course online (affective dimension), have a tendency to be active in learning the online English course (behavioral dimension), and think they gain knowledge from the online English course (cognitive dimension). MOOC features and the Chinese students' cultural values would be factors that influenced their attitudes toward learning the online English course. Therefore, this article seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) What are the Chinese undergraduate students' attitudes toward learning the online English course through MOOC?
- 2) Do MOOC features influence the Chinese undergraduate students' attitudes toward learning the online English course?
- 3) Do the Chinese cultural values influence the Chinese undergraduate students' attitudes toward learning the online English course?

## **Methodology**

Explanatory sequential mixed method design was adopted because it provided a greater understanding of research problems and complex data that may not be numerically quantifiable (Creswell & Tashakkori, 2007). Quantitative research was mainly used for the overall comparison of large amounts of data while qualitative research was secondarily used for the specific understanding and supplement of the research problem (Li & Lee, 2016). In this study, a questionnaire was used to answer those three research questions, and semi-structured interviews were individual in-depth explorations to crosscheck and supplement the quantitative data.

### **Research instruments, validation and reliability**

The questionnaire and the interview questions were the primary research instruments constructed based on the key concept and the arguments addressed in the related literature review. The former consists of three parts. The first part asked about the participants' gender, age and study major. The second and third parts used the 5-Likert scales to measure the participants' attitudes toward learning the online course through MOOC and factors influencing their attitudes. The second part consisted of 13 items; Items 1-3, 4-7, and 8-13

reflected the affective, behavioral and cognitive attitudes, respectively. The third part had 20 items. While Items 1-11 reflected factors influenced by MOOC features, Items 12-20 were factors influenced by Chinese cultural values. The latter were open-ended questions for semi-structured interviews to allow the students to respond in detail based on their personal experience in learning the online English course. The following were examples:

- 1) How did you feel about the online English course?
- 2) Why did you feel that way?
- 3) How often did you attend the online course?
- 4) Why did you attend the online course with that frequency?
- 5) How did the online English course help you improve your English ability?
- 6) What English ability did you improve through the online English course?

The questionnaire and interview questions were firstly validated by three experts using the item-objective congruence (IOC) method. The index of IOC evaluation results from -1 to +1, and the scores of the questionnaire items and interview questions were 0.79 and 0.55, respectively, all higher than 0.5, which means that they were valid for data collection (Jusoh et al., 2018).

Then 60 students of the target sample were invited to participate in a pilot study to calculate the questionnaire items' reliability using Cronbach's alpha. The value of the Cronbach's alpha in this study was 0.966, higher than 0.70, which means the questionnaire was reliable (Arafat et al., 2016).

### **Population and sample**

There were 950 first-year undergraduate students from 18 majors enrolled in 2020 at a private university in Beijing, China. A stratified random sampling technique was applied to select 380 students for a quantitative sample. Among these students, the gender distribution was average, with 47% male and 53% female; more than 50% were 18 years old, 10% were 17 years old, and 26% were 19 years old. Twelve % of the students majored in 'computer science and technology' and 11% in 'economy and trade' and 'communication engineering'. Other majors ranged between 3% and 6%. The students for qualitative research were selected from the same group of those who completed the questionnaire. With the use of the convenience sampling method, 18 students from 18 majors voluntarily participated in the in-depth interviews, and they turned out to be highly achieving students as all earned grade A

### **Data collection and analysis**

For quantitative data collection, those 380 sample students who were already the WeChat group members were invited to complete the online questionnaire through this link: <https://www.wjx.cn/vm/hPn4Yzi.aspx>. In terms of qualitative data collection, each participant was interviewed online in Chinese for about fifteen minutes. The researcher ensured all the interviewees that their personal information and experiences would be kept confidential.

SPSS 24 version and descriptive statistics including the mean and standard deviation were used for quantitative data analysis. These data were interpreted based on 5-rating scales shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** Interval scale of the options in the questionnaire

5-rating scale	Descriptive Rating
4.21 - 5.00	Strongly agree/ Highest degree of positive attitude
3.41 - 4.20	Agree/ High degree of positive attitude
2.61 - 3.40	Not sure/ Moderate degree of positive attitude
1.81 - 2.60	Disagree/ Low degree of positive attitude
1.00 - 1.80	Strongly disagree/ Lowest degree of positive attitude

The qualitative data were classified and managed through NVIVO 11 version. In doing so, the interviews were translated from Chinese to English, transcribed and saved into 18 different files, which were downloaded to the software program. Then, all the data were encoded with these key codes - online course, ability, English learning and improve - to search for the similarities of the participants' responses in the program. After that, the researcher herself created several new codes for checking the accuracy of those codes created by the program. Finally, the researcher classified similar or identical codes to gain the categories of qualitative data.

## Results

The quantitative data from 380 Chinese undergraduate students were analyzed and mainly reported to answer the three research questions while the qualitative data from 18 of them were analyzed and reported to support and supplement the quantitative data.

### **The Chinese undergraduate students' affective, behavioral and cognitive dimensions of attitudes**

Table 2 displayed the overall mean of the affective dimension of attitudes at a high level ( $\bar{x} = 3.76$ ), meaning the students possessed positive attitudes toward learning the online English course through MOOC at a high level. They did not like learning English in the traditional classroom ( $\bar{x} = 3.75$ ) but liked learning the online English course ( $\bar{x} = 3.76$ ) and preferred to learn the online English course ( $\bar{x} = 3.76$ ). Similar to the interview results, fourteen students mentioned their preference in learning through this online channel, three people preferred traditional English class, and one person had no obvious feeling for both online English learning and traditional English learning. Among those fourteen students with positive feelings, four students particularly stated that they "preferred to learn the online English course" and two participants said that the online course made them feel "comfortable to learn English".

**Table 2** The affective dimension of attitudes

Item	N	Mean	Std.	Meaning
1. I dislike learning English in the traditional classroom.	380	3.75	0.744	High degree of positive attitude
2. I like learning the online English course.	380	3.76	0.805	High degree of positive attitude
3. I prefer to learn the online English course.	380	3.76	0.808	High degree of positive attitude
<b>Overall Mean (Affective dimension)</b>		<b>3.76</b>		<b>High degree of positive attitude</b>

Table 3 revealed the overall mean of the behavioral dimension of attitudes at a high level ( $\bar{x} = 4.13$ ), indicating that the students possessed positive attitudes toward learning the online English course through MOOC at a high level with enthusiasm to learn the online English course ( $\bar{x} = 3.88$ ) and expressing their opinions in the discussion board actively ( $\bar{x} = 3.81$ ). At the highest level ( $\bar{x} > 4.21$ ), they attended all the required lectures every week ( $\bar{x} = 4.54$ ) and finished all other activities assigned by the lecturer ( $\bar{x} = 4.28$ ). In line with the interview results, all the 18 students never missed the online English course as they said they “always attended the online English classes twice a week”, conveying that every week they joined one synchronous class and one asynchronous class. Regular classroom attendance reflected their active learning behaviors or positive attitudes.

**Table 3** The behavioral dimension of attitudes

Item	N	Mean	Std.	Meaning
4. I expressed my opinions in the discussion board actively.	380	3.81	0.738	High degree of positive attitude
<b>5. I attended all the required lectures every week.</b>	<b>380</b>	<b>4.54</b>	<b>0.499</b>	<b>Highest degree of positive attitude</b>
<b>6. I attended and finished all other activities assigned by the lecturer.</b>	<b>380</b>	<b>4.28</b>	<b>0.687</b>	<b>Highest degree of positive attitude</b>
7. I am enthusiastic to learn the online English course	380	3.88	0.76	High degree of positive attitude
<b>Overall Mean (Behavioral dimension)</b>		<b>4.13</b>		<b>High degree of positive attitude</b>

Table 4 demonstrated the overall mean of the cognitive dimension of attitudes at a high level ( $\bar{x} = 4.13$ ), meaning the students possessed positive attitudes toward learning the online English course through MOOC at a high level. They thought that the online course highly improved their English skills in listening ( $\bar{x} = 3.99$ ), reading ( $\bar{x} = 3.84$ ) and writing ( $\bar{x} = 3.86$ )



and that learning the online English course was convenient ( $\bar{x} = 3.91$ ) and suitable for them ( $\bar{x} = 3.82$ ). However, they thought that this online learning mode moderately improved their English-speaking skills ( $\bar{x} = 3.40$ ). Parallel with the interview findings, two students thought that the online course was suitable for them and six students said the online course was more convenient for them to learn English. A number of 17, 14, 9 and 8 students perceived that the online English course improved their English skills in listening, reading, writing and speaking, respectively, because they were able to “get back to learn again and again as much as I wanted to”.

**Table 4** The cognitive dimension of attitudes

Item	N	Mean	Std.	Meaning
8. I think the online course has improved my English listening ability.	380	3.99	0.782	High degree of positive attitude
<b>9. I think the online course has improved my English-speaking ability.</b>	<b>380</b>	<b>3.40</b>	<b>0.771</b>	<b>Moderate degree of positive attitude</b>
10. I think the online course has improved my English reading ability.	380	3.84	0.788	High degree of positive attitude
11. I think the online course has improved my English writing ability.	380	3.86	0.749	High degree of positive attitude
Item	N	Mean	Std.	Meaning
12. I think learning online course is convenient for me.	380	3.91	0.772	High degree of positive attitude
13. I think the online English course is suitable for me.	380	3.82	0.784	High degree of positive attitude
<b>Overall Mean (Cognitive dimension)</b>		<b>3.80</b>		<b>High degree of positive attitude</b>

### MOOC features influencing the students' positive attitudes

Table 5 revealed each mean of MOOC features in Items 1-11 at a high level, meaning the students agreed that features of MOOCs were factors that positively influenced their attitudes toward learning the online English course at a high level. Item 2 ( $\bar{x} = 4.03$ ) and Item 3 ( $\bar{x} = 4.01$ ) scored the highest mean. In line with the interview findings, most students enjoyed the flexibility of the time and space of the online course. Specifically, nine students said that they “liked learning the online course because they could learn it at anytime and anywhere ... save time ... get back to learn again and again”. Such flexibility of time and place of learning the online course encouraged two students to attend all the classes and twelve students to improve their English skills.

**Table 5** MOOC features

Item	N	Mean	Std.	Meaning
I prefer to learn the online English course because				
1. I like the web page design.	380	3.77	0.757	Agree
<b>2. I can learn English at any time convenient for me.</b>	<b>380</b>	<b>4.03</b>	<b>0.760</b>	<b>Agree</b>
<b>3. I can learn English at any place that suits me.</b>	<b>380</b>	<b>4.01</b>	<b>0.734</b>	<b>Agree</b>
4. I can share information online with my classmates and lecturer.	380	3.95	0.776	Agree
5. I can ask any related questions online.	380	3.95	0.725	Agree
6. I can receive answers online from both my lecturer and classmates.	380	3.97	0.735	Agree
7. I can learn English better.	380	3.91	0.746	Agree
8. I can control my own learning progress.	380	3.94	0.813	Agree
9. I can participate in the evaluation process (giving my own score to my classmates' assignments and lecturer's teaching).	380	3.87	0.726	Agree
10. I can show more ideas in my personal learning space.	380	3.94	0.747	Agree
11. I can receive an online certificate for successful completion of the course.	380	3.94	0.749	Agree

### Chinese cultural values influencing the students' positive attitudes

Table 6 revealed each mean of Chinese cultural values in Items 1-9 at a high level, meaning the students agreed that cultural values were factors that influenced their positive attitudes toward learning the online English course at a high level. Item 5 ( $\bar{x} = 4.01$ ) and Item 7 ( $\bar{x} = 4.03$ ) scored the highest mean, indicating that the Chinese students were accustomed to being cautious, and they were willing to accept help from others, which could reduce a probability of making mistakes and thus keep face in public. For the interview findings, one student pointed out that he "didn't have to talk to the teacher face to face", so he became more active to learn the subject.

**Table 6** Chinese cultural values

Item	N	Mean	Std.	Meaning
All in all, I am enthusiastic to learn the online English course because...				
1. I don't need to interact face-to-face with the lecturer.	380	3.83	0.783	Agree
2. I don't need to interact with the lecturer spontaneously.	380	3.87	0.786	Agree
3. I don't lose face in the public when posting my questions and answers in discussion board.	380	3.91	0.748	Agree
4. I don't need to compete with my classmates.	380	3.84	0.814	Agree
<b>5. I have time to think before posting my questions and answers in discussion board.</b>	<b>380</b>	<b>4.01</b>	<b>0.786</b>	<b>Agree</b>
6. I feel more comfortable and confident to post my questions and answers in discussion board.	380	3.87	0.753	Agree
<b>7. I get more help not only from teachers but also from classmates.</b>	<b>380</b>	<b>4.03</b>	<b>0.782</b>	<b>Agree</b>
8. I learn to work as a team rather than competing with others.	380	3.91	0.759	Agree
9. I can learn English on my own.	380	3.95	0.839	Agree

#### **An additional factor: Motivation influencing the students' positive attitudes**

Through the in-depth interviews with 18 students, motivation was an additional factor positively influencing their attitudes. Fourteen of them (Students 12, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 15, 13, 16 and 17) attended all the virtual English classes because they said they wanted to "earn a good final grade" for this online course. Three students (Students 11, 15 and 17) never missed the virtual classes because they wanted to learn the English subject successfully:

"The knowledge points taught by the teacher are consistent, and I will have problems after one class is missed". (Student 11)

"Once I miss one course, it may cause pressure on my later study because the content of the course is continuous. If I don't listen to one class, I may have some things I can't understand in the next class. Also avoid causing my learning pressure". (Student 15)

"The content of each class has its key points. If I miss the class, I will not be able to keep up with it, so I need to spend more time to catch up on my learning progress". (Student 17)

Three other students (Students 6, 8 and 14) also showed their intrinsic motivation because they mentioned that they enjoyed the online learning form, and hardly skipped the class:

“The online course uses different information technology and attract my attention more. At the same time, compared with the traditional class, only one or several students can participate in the activities, but now all students can participate at the same time, which makes me feel more involved in learning.” (Student 6).

“There's a lot of group discussion topics in the course, where I can discuss problems with group members and read online and share ideas and make suggestions, which I think is very convenient and interesting” (Student 8).

“The online English course adopts a novel, modern multimedia format, which can give full play to my enthusiasm for learning.” (Student 14).

## Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative findings were employed to answer the three research questions.

### **RQ1: What are the Chinese undergraduate students' attitudes toward learning the online English course?**

The quantitative results revealed Chinese undergraduate students' positive attitudes toward learning the online English course through MOOC, for they agreed that they preferred learning the online English course to learning in the traditional classroom (affective dimension), they were active learners in this virtual classroom (behavioral dimension) and they thought learning online course was convenient for them and suitable for them and they gained knowledge in English skills in listening, reading and writing (cognitive dimension). These findings reflected the key concept defined based on Ghazvini and Khajepour (2011); Netzer et al. (2018) in this study. The interview results also revealed their positive attitudes since 14 participants showed positive feelings about learning the online English course. All the 18 participants attended all the online English classes and more than half of them considered their English skills in listening, reading and writing improved due to their active learning behaviors in the online English classes - both asynchronous and synchronous.

Similar to Clore and Schnall (2005); Li and Lee (2016), the findings could firstly imply that the affective, behavioral and cognitive dimensions were interrelated. Once the students had the preference to learn the online English course, they were encouraged to be active in their studies and at the same time perceived their English skills to be improved. Secondly, the students had enough computer technology skills and were able to study different English skills on their own or independently, parallel with Tang et al (2015) as well as Li and Lee (2016).

However, the quantitative results showed that Chinese undergraduate students were not sure if learning the online English course improved their English-speaking skills, which was

also verified in the qualitative results, for less than half of the participants thought that they gained knowledge in English skills in speaking. This aspect indicated that they may not be confident to speak in English when they studied the online English course independently, for language skills required practice (Ahmed, 2015). In addition, they may have inadequate opportunities to practice their English-speaking skills on the MOOC platform.

The positive results of this study using explanatory sequential mixed method research were the same as related studies by Ku and Lohr (2003) in that Chinese college students were active in learning English online, Hsu and Sheu (2008) in that 66% of the target Chinese students were willing to online English learning, and Nan (2019) in that Chinese college students had positive attitudes toward learning online English course and they were active in completing the online course activities. The results also indicated that the target group of Chinese students was more likely to accept the change of learning mode.

### **RQ2: Do MOOC features influence Chinese undergraduate students' attitudes toward learning the online English course?**

The quantitative results revealed that MOOC features influenced Chinese undergraduate students' positive attitudes, for the students preferred to learn the online English course because of the web page design of the MOOC platform, in particular the asynchronous and synchronous online learning modes, appealed to them. They were able to share information online with their classmates and lecturer, ask any related questions online, receive answers online from both their lecturer and classmates, learn English better, control their own learning progress, participate in the evaluation process, show more ideas in their personal learning space and receive an online certificate for successful completion of the course. The qualitative findings also revealed that MOOC features positively influenced the students' attitudes, partly similar to the studies by Ku and Lohr (2003) and Lin and Gao (2019), who found that Chinese college students were active in online learning because of the high degree of the ability to learn independently and the flexibility of the online course providing their own learning space.

### **RQ3: Do Chinese cultural values influencing Chinese undergraduate students' attitudes toward learning the online English course?**

The quantitative results revealed that Chinese cultural values affected Chinese undergraduate students' positive attitudes, for the students felt enthusiastic to learn the online English course unlike the traditional classroom where the teacher played an authoritative role and the students copied the teaching materials. In line with Thompson and Ku (2005), their Chinese cultural values embedded in themselves as submissive learners influenced their learning behavior. As a result, Chinese students seldom shared their own thoughts if those were contrary to their lecturers (Zhao & McDougall, 2008), always awed for authority and respect for lecturers (Dong et al., 2020) and were afraid to express their ideas in the same space with lecturers. It could imply that Chinese undergraduate students in this study could keep face in learning the online English course, providing them with more personal learning space and non-face-to-face interaction with their lecturer. The qualitative findings also showed that Chinese

cultural values affected their positive attitudes, consistent with Nan's (2019) study that Chinese university students were willing to discuss with their classmates and ask teachers for help online, rather than face to face in the traditional classes.

### **Students' motivation influencing their attitudes**

Through the in-depth interviews with 18 participants, motivation was an additional factor influencing their attitudes. Fourteen students had extrinsic motivation because they wanted to earn a good final grade and they were able to get an A. They also had intrinsic motivation because six students liked the form of the online English course and wanted to learn the subject successfully. This positive finding was contrary to the study of Hsu and Sheu (2008) which reported that some Chinese students were unwilling to learn English virtually because they were not interested in the online learning mode. It could imply that the students were both extrinsically and intrinsically motivated in learning the online English course. Parallel with Abou El-Seoud et al (2014), motivation is the key factor that can keep language learners learning.

### **Conclusion, implication, limitation and recommendation**

This study used an explanatory sequential mixed method research to investigate attitudes toward learning an online English course through the MOOC platform in Chinese undergraduate students enrolled in the course at a private university in Beijing, China in 2020. The quantitative results from 380 students from 18 majors showed that they had positive attitudes from three dimensions. The qualitative outcomes based on 18 students from 18 majors also supported the quantitative findings, which indicated that they preferred studying English on asynchronous and synchronous platforms, providing them with their own learning space, non-face-to-face communication with the lecturer, and a cultural sense of face keeping, concurrently allowing them to both learn online English actively and perceptually improve their English skills.

The implication of this study could be that the COVID 19 crisis gave a contradictory opportunity to the target group of Chinese students to learn the online English course through MOOC more effectively and happily as compared to learning face to face in the classroom. Extrinsic and intrinsic motivation, a supplemented finding, indicated an extraneous variable that influenced their positive attitudes.

The single final grade result of those 18 students voluntarily participating in the qualitative research may limit the findings, yet this study provided the Chinese lecturers of English with valuable insight into understanding their students' learning nature influenced by Confucian cultural values embedded in their thinking and behaving (Dong et al., 2020) and adopting or integrating asynchronous and synchronous platforms as teaching and learning tools to enhance their students' English skills. The inclusion of different levels of learning achievement and replicated studies in various contexts are recommended for future research.

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