



## **Chinese Students' Identity Construction and Negotiation during Emergency Remote Teaching: A Case Study from Wuhan**

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### **Introduction**

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, higher education institutions have been forced to significantly alter how they deliver content (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021a). To continue with teaching and learning but minimize person-to-person contact, many have adopted emergency remote teaching (ERT) (Hodges et al., 2020) and created flexible learning environments (e.g., HyFlex) to facilitate language learning (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2021). The Chinese Ministry of Education implemented a policy known as 'Suspending Classes Without Stopping Learning' to 'provide rich, diverse, selectable, high-quality online resources for all students across the country' (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China [MoE], 2020a). In April 2020, ERT was implemented at 1,454 higher education institutions in mainland China, affecting 1.18 million students (MoE, 2020b). It comprised video conferencing software, recorded teaching presentations, online discussion forums and social media (Yan et al., 2021). This new learning format inevitably disrupted teaching and learning (Sequeira & Dacey, 2020) because teachers and students constantly had to negotiate their identities in the unfamiliar educational environment. Students' identities in classroom contexts are highly complex, dynamic and diverse (Moya, 2006). Furthermore, they develop through interactions that are affected by their backgrounds and culture (Cobb & Hodge, 2010). Therefore, exploring the identity negotiation of second-language (L2) students participating in ERT is vital.

This qualitative preliminary case study aims to contribute to the existing literature about COVID-19 ERT instruction by shedding light on the different identities' students experienced during the suspension of face-to-face teaching and learning. It explores the experiences of undergraduate students in an ERT literature course at a university in Wuhan, China. It addresses a broad research question: How did these university students construct and negotiate their identities during ERT?



## Literature Review

### Identity Construction and Identity Negotiation

Building identity is a fluid and flexible process (Tomlinson, 2010) shaped by a range of experiences, including being a university student. For this study, identity is defined as ‘how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how the relationship is constructed across time and space’ (Norton, 2000, p. 5) and how one is ‘recognized as a certain “kind of person” in a given context’ (Gee, 2001, p. 99). In the L2 classroom, teachers and students constantly negotiate their identities as they interact. In this sense, identity can be considered ‘an internalized set of role expectations’ (Simon, 2004, p. 23) that plays a significant role in self-improvement and development (Layder, 2004; Oyserman, 2004) and influences how individuals respond to situations. While attending university, L2 learners learn how to relate to themselves, their peers and their teachers not once but repeatedly. This is related to identity development and has been linked to academic performance (Berzonsky & Adams, 1999).

Language classrooms do not exist in a vacuum and are not neutral; instead, they are places of struggle in which micro-identities are constantly negotiated through interactions (Pennycook, 2000). In the classroom, social relations and power are established (Luke & Freebody, 1997), and learners learn to be particular kinds of people (Hirst, 2007). Given this active learning process, students’ and teachers’ identities are not fixed; they are multiple, fluid and impact L2 learning (Pennycook, 2000). Identity negotiation is an ongoing process in which students assert, define, modify, challenge and/or support their own and others’ desired self-images (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 217).

### Emergency Remote Teaching and Interactions

In higher education, various forms of online and blended learning have become the new normal. ERT refers to a fully remote approach: ‘courses originally designed for in-person instruction that has been modified for online instruction for emergency situations’ (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021b, p. 279). Previously, online teaching has been implemented as a response to regional or national crises or disasters (e.g., earthquakes, tsunamis; Rush et al., 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic represented the first time ERT was implemented on such a grand scale. The literature has shown that the design and implementation of ERT depends on contextual and human factors (Moorhouse, 2020; Zimik & Kachchhap, 2022), such as teachers’ and students’ access to technological resources (e.g., laptops, tablets, Internet bandwidth; Ku, 2021; Starkey et al., 2021) and technological readiness (e.g., possession of the ability to facilitate interaction or troubleshoot technical problems; Rehn et al., 2018).

Interactions are essential if students are to develop interpersonal connections and establish their presence in the classroom, though they take different forms in online and face-to-face classroom environments. Online interactions often occur via chats, blogs, emojis, emails, polls and forums (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2022). However, being physically distant from others can make it difficult to establish one’s identity (Moore, 2007). Online learners may have varying degrees of presence in a class, depending on their degree of participation and whether they interact anonymously or openly. Previous studies have established that interactions (verbal and non-verbal) in online learning are vital to increasing students’ satisfaction with the learning environment (Limperos et al., 2015), though this can be more challenging in ERT (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2021). While there is growing literature on English language teachers’ response to ERT (see Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021a) and many studies on identity formation and negotiation in face-to-face contexts (e.g., Norton, 2000; Richards, 2006), identity construction and negotiation in ERT has attracted little attention to date.

## Methodology

### Context of the Study and Participants

This preliminary study involved students in an undergraduate course on English literature offered at a university in Wuhan, China - the epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic. The course was an elective available to English majors, who had passed the admission score of key universities in the Chinese National College Entrance Examination and would pursue a career as an English teacher after graduation. The participants were all mainland Chinese students who spoke Mandarin as their first language (L1). Therefore, they were a culturally and linguistically homogenous group. The students were between 18 and 20 years old; 24 were female, and one was male. The female teacher was 52 years of age and had over 30 years of face-to-face teaching experience but no previous online teaching experience. The first author received permission at the university level to observe and audio-record online classes. All of the participants gave informed consent.

### Data Collection and Analysis

A qualitative approach was followed in this study as the researchers aimed to arrive at a rich understanding by collecting in-depth interview data (Creswell, 2008). This data came from a focus group interview with five students about their learning experiences and an individual interview with the teacher to understand her experience delivering ERT classes during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Table 1). The interviews were designed to facilitate an understanding of identity construction and negotiation during ERT. The first author served as a facilitator and designed an interview guide to elicit insight into the participants' experiences. For example, one of the questions asked to the students was, 'How did your teacher create a connection between the course and online learning?' Some questions for the teacher were, 'How did you interact online with your students?' and 'Why did you select certain materials?' The focus group interview lasted 65 minutes and the individual interview 40 minutes. Both were conducted in Chinese using video-conferencing software to minimise person-to-person contact. They were audio-recorded, transcribed and translated.

TABLE 1  
*Demographic Information on the Interview Participants*

Participants	Age	Gender
S1	20	Male
S2	19	Female
S3	20	Female
S4	18	Female
S5	20	Female
T	52	Female

The data collected was subjected to iterative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researchers read and re-read the transcripts and independently generated initial codes, which were shared via a Google Document and discussed and clarified before themes and subthemes were identified. Finally, representative quotes were selected. Two member checks were performed to ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative data. Each participant received a copy of the transcript and results

## Findings and Discussion

Four themes addressing the research question emerged during the analytical process, as shown in the final thematic map (Figure 1). In what follows, excerpts from the students' and teacher's experiences

illustrate how their identities changed. The excerpts reveal the complexity of their respective ERT experiences and suggest strategies that could be implemented to promote positive interactions in ERT learning.

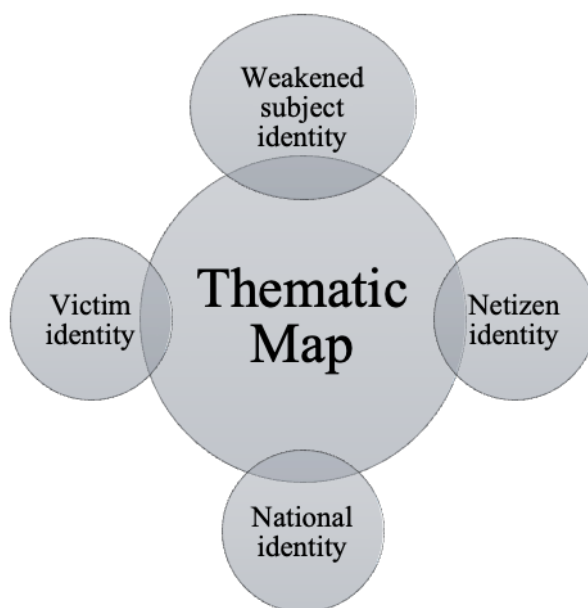


Figure 1. Final thematic map illustrating the five themes identified in the analysis.

### Theme 1: Weakened Subject Identity

The dominant theme was weakened subject identity due to the lack of interaction and communication caused by the perceived distance (see Moore, 2007). The students and the teacher perceived the online classroom as 'silent'. The interaction was often perceived as teacher-centred and, as S3 shared, the teacher 'performed a one-man show,' so the students could only 'sit, watch, and listen.' This was due to unfamiliarity with the technology. For example, the interviews revealed that both the teacher and students were unaware and unable to take advantage of many online platform features (see Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2022). The interviews revealed that the chat box was perceived as especially 'messy'. It was a 'confusing' place to ask questions and receive answers, thus further constraining students' desire to express themselves. This was because the students tended to post overlapping questions in the chat box instead of using their microphones or raising a hand (either physically in front of the camera or through the use of an emoji) and waiting for their turns. This made it difficult to follow who posted and when they posted, determine if their questions were answered and ask follow-up questions. S1 thought that following the chat box 'wasted much time in class', taking valuable time from the teaching of the subject matter. In general, students found it difficult to initiate and sustain active participation in the online classroom, as expressed by S4: 'It was hard for us [students] to express ourselves online due to the limitations of online learning'. The perceived limitation of online communication may reduce students' learning and success in their studies.

As the comment above illustrates, the absence of face-to-face communication was not conducive to learning. The lack of student-student and student-teacher interaction made it difficult to 'understand complex concepts of English literature such as rhythm and foot in the poem, and we can only explore the meanings by ourselves' (S4). According to Ss, this made online learning 'very stressful'.

In the interviews, the teacher discussed feeling stressed about the lack of opportunities for quality interaction. Issues such as an inability to observe students' facial expressions and body language or provide immediate feedback made it challenging to assess student comprehension. Additionally, the teacher shared her fear of inaccurately judging students in the online classroom due to her limited

interactions with them. ‘I can’t see their faces, only a blank screen’, she said. ‘I miss the interaction, their expressions, reactions, and this has created an impression of each student’. As this comment shows, the lack of ability to observe the students face-to-face or via video and interact with them made the teacher cautious. Additionally, the students expressed negative attitudes about the lack of face-to-face communication and experienced difficulties interacting with peers, the teacher and the content, weakening their subject identity.

## Theme 2: Netizen Identity

The second theme explored was the evolution of the students’ netizen identities during ERT. Although the students considered the chat box disorganised, on deeper reflection, they thought that it was considerably more relaxed and casual than face-to-face interaction. At the beginning of ERT, the students attempted to use formal language when communicating. However, all gained confidence over time and began using slang, emojis and informal language. S2 noted that it was normal for students to ‘use Internet slang, for example, “Jiang Lei” [sense of shock] during unstable Internet bandwidth’.

Furthermore, the teacher often made humorous and ironic comments, such as ‘COVID-19 is a little bit naughty’, to create a more relaxed atmosphere. This informal mode of communication created a comparatively informal environment in the online classroom, which was surprising; traditionally, communications between teachers and students are quite formal. The use of slang and emojis changed their perceptions of one another, and built a closer teacher-student relationship (see Crombie, 2020).

Another factor that contributed to identity construction was how participants communicated during online instruction. For example, students mentioned that some of their peers appeared to be very shy and unwilling to contribute online but had behaved differently in earlier face-to-face encounters. This observation implies that student identity is somewhat fluid: it is affected by how and with whom students interact (see Seargeant & Tagg, 2014).

## Theme 3: National Identity

All of the participants agreed that COVID-19 had a devastating effect on Wuhan and their personal lives in February 2020, when an overnight compulsory lockdown policy was implemented. At the time, they felt deeply uncertain about the future. The literary works the students studied in their classes stimulated their patriotism, sense of duty and awareness of the need for cooperation to serve Wuhan and the nation. One participant, S1, spoke of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: ‘When the protagonist decided to plot revenge, his struggles and hesitation...made me understand the importance of weighing the balance between self and other, individual, and country’. Another student, S3, echoed this, adding, ‘I also have a strong sense of social responsibility now’. Students felt that literature made them realise the importance of taking responsibility not only for themselves but also for society as a whole (see Norton & Toohey, 2011). It also strengthened their awareness of responsibility as a Chinese value. S4 explained this notion of ‘being a Chinese’ as something that ‘requires prioritising the collective interest’. Thus, the students’ national identity was constructed to a certain extent by the literature and other content selected by the teacher during ERT. As such, the teacher’s cultural awareness impacted students’ motivation and learning performance.

## Theme 4: Victim Identity

All of the participants emphasised that they felt victimised by the COVID-19 pandemic. This theme relates to the psychological hardships encountered by the teacher and students alike. The students reported that the teacher tried to alleviate this feeling and create a positive, optimistic learning environment by referring to well-known national heroes in mainland China. For example, one student

commented: ‘The example story of Dr Wu made me understand the situation we are facing and provided inspiration to continue to study hard and that as a society, we should cooperate’.

The students also felt that the teacher’s strategy of using prominent figures from challenging times in Chinese history as examples in the literature course helped them to understand the existing situation better. S1 mentioned that ‘these examples made me feel more interested in the literature course’. Overall, the interviews confirmed that this teaching strategy helped the students become more aware of themselves and perform better academically (see Berzonsky & Adams, 1999). The students also said that some of the teacher’s comments - for example, ‘please maintain a good state of mind and a positive attitude’ (S4) and ‘together we can get through this challenging moment’ (S2) - contributed to a feeling of togetherness during the learning process (see Mercer & Gregersen, 2020).

Because the participants lived at the epicentre of the COVID-19 outbreak, many suffered from depression and/or other psychological disorders (see Zhong et al., 2021). By expressing concern for the students and their families, the teacher helped to comfort the class members. She explained that one of her aims during the lessons was to ‘comfort students by the power of literature’. She wanted to create a community in which students could support each other, learn from history and, together, reflect on the past, present and future. Another strategy she employed was always expressing gratitude to them for attending the class - for example, by saying ‘thank you for coming to my class in such a difficult situation’. These strategies helped to create a social relationship of equality among the participants, as opposed to a hierarchical power relationship (see Luke & Freebody, 1997) in which participants had to negotiate their identities.

## Conclusion

The aim of this preliminary study was to explore identity negotiation and construction during ERT among undergraduates in a literature course offered in Wuhan, China - the epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our findings suggest that most of the participants experienced weakened subject identity due to the limited quality of the interpersonal interactions offered by ERT. However, the participants’ language when communicating via the chat box became more informal over time; they began to employ slang and emojis. The students also noticed that some of their peers communicated differently online than they did face-to-face; this changed their perceptions of certain fellow students.

To motivate the students, the teacher taught classic literary works and referenced well-known figures from Chinese history. These strategies made the students more optimistic and helped them to develop a sense of national identity.

Based on these findings, we suggest teachers (i) adopt an asynchronous backchanneling platform to organize students’ questions and subsequent answers; (ii) use students’ first language to relieve their language anxiety; (iii) incorporate emojis and Internet slang in the online classroom; and (iv) be aware of students’ culture and incorporate a caring philosophy to enhance students learning motivation and performance in ERT.

The study highlights the fact that identity is not fixed but rather highly complex, dynamic and diverse (Moya, 2006). It is constructed through the coupling of social, cultural, historical and institutional values with active experiences and interactions. It is how we make sense of ourselves and create who we are (Day et al., 2006). In a future longitudinal study, we will further evaluate L2 students’ identities, identity construction and identity negotiation to ascertain the long-term effects of ERT and the impact of choices made in the learning process on the construction of identities.

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