



Chinese Learners and Pacific Languages: Online Journeys in NZ During COVID-19



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ABSTRACT

This article reports on research that examined the unique experiences of Chinese international students learning Pacific languages at the University of Auckland. In response to COVID-19 border restrictions between 2020 and 2021, the university transitioned classes into online delivery. This study explores the question: how do online Pacific language learning experiences of Chinese international students compare with in face-to-face classroom settings? Drawing on my own critical auto-ethnographic reflections and an interview with a Chinese international student who studied a Pacific language in this setting, this article argues that the lack of interactions in the online setting was the biggest challenge to their learning, posing practical barriers to building *vā/wā* (relational space), which is integral to the effectiveness of learning in a Pacific setting. Furthermore, online learning bereft of in-person cultural exchange could potentially accentuate cultural complexity for Chinese students studying Pacific languages in Aotearoa New Zealand, as they are negotiating their Pacific language learning between learned Chinese, developing Western and being exposed to Pacific pedagogical approaches for the first time.

KEYWORDS

chinese international students,
online language education, pacific
languages, building *vā/wā*,
pedagogy

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Fu, L. (2025). Chinese Learners and Pacific Languages: Online Journeys in NZ During COVID-19. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, 29(i), 92-108. <https://doi.org/10.61468/jofdl.v29i1.705>

INTRODUCTION

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10.61468/jofdl.v29i1.705

Pacific languages learning is gaining more popularity among international students in recent years as a gateway to learning about and engaging with the Pacific culture. Even though Pacific languages are largely unknown in China, the expanding investment of Pacific language teaching programmes prompted by China's diplomatic policies, especially in recent years, has started to attract more students to learn those 'novel' languages.

Since China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, the teaching and learning of LOTEs has been reinvigorated and given new values and emphasis by the government. Pacific language teaching in China is an emerging area largely driven by China's BRI initiative push in the Pacific region in the past decade (Zhang & So'oa'emalelagi, 2019). With the aim of establishing a talent pool of experts in Pacific languages and Pacific studies to support the BRI, starting from July 2018, with the Ministry of Education's support, Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU), well known for its excellence in foreign language teaching, has been sending students to universities to learn Pacific languages (Du & Thomsen, 2021). This Pacific Islands Countries (PIC) language teaching programme has been developed to facilitate the rollout of the BRI in the eight Pacific countries with which China has established diplomatic relations with and which have also signed up to the BRI. This strategy serves as a way to promote better understanding between China and those Pacific states (Zhang, So'oa'emalelagi, 2019). Students placed on this programme are expected to pass rigorous selection criteria by the university, and are subsequently sent abroad to learn a specific Pacific language. The students are also flagged as potential future teaching staff for Pacific languages at BFSU.

In 2019, I was successful in gaining entry into the BFSU PIC language programme and chose Cook Islands Māori as my Pacific language focus. There were another three students recruited into the programme. Each was assigned a different Pacific language: Niuean, Tok Pisin and Fijian. Before our entry into the PIC language programme, an earlier cohort of three students had already started their study towards a master's degree in Pacific studies at the UoA, each respectively enrolled in a Pacific language course as well, theirs being te reo Māori, Tongan, and Sāmoan.

In the same year, I started my two-year postgraduate study in Pacific studies at the UoA. Due to the rapidly changing Coronavirus pandemic, in 2020, the New Zealand government announced travel restrictions that barred entry into the country from all foreign nationals from mainland China. Since then, together with many Chinese students, I have had to remain in China and continue my studies there. In the following years (2020 and 2021), I have continued to learn Cook Islands Māori through one-on-one tutoring online classes with my tutor. My peers who were learning Tongan, Sāmoan and te reo Māori had already completed stage one and stage two language courses in New Zealand and were taking stage three offshore online courses offered by the UoA in the first half of 2020.

As an emerging phenomenon, little research has been published on Chinese learners' unique experiences of Pacific language learning. To date, only two studies have been published on the experiences of Chinese international students studying in a Pacific studies programme (Du & Thomsen, 2021; Luo &

Thomsen, 2021). However, neither study considers the added layer of complexity presented by online language learning.

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On the other hand, the development of online Pacific language learning in recent years, specifically in our case for Chinese international students learning Pacific languages online, is still a relatively emerging area of research enquiry. Therefore, in order to begin to fill this gap, incorporating my participant's and my own experiences of learning Pacific languages online, this study adopts an intercultural perspective in Pacific language learning and teaching, to serve as an initial endeavour to fill this research gap by specifically focusing on the experiences of Chinese international students with studying Pacific languages online at the UoA. In doing so, this study also aims to offer insights around the pedagogical and intercultural ramifications concerning the current online Pacific language programmes in New Zealand and what this speaks to in relation to China's interest and development of the Pacific language learning programmes.

In simple terms, this study explores the following question: how do online Pacific language learning experiences of Chinese international students compare with those in face-to-face classroom settings?

Positionality Statement

Pacific studies is centred around Pacific Indigenous research paradigms, which validate and are critical to Pacific understandings of contextual places, spaces and knowledges. This is also a reflexive critique of mainstream Western research approaches that impose imperialistic ethnocentric framings which can misrepresent and disempower Indigenous communities and their knowledges (Koya-Vaka'uta, 2017). In decolonising Pacific studies, Terence Wesley-Smith (2016) emphasised the "empowerment rationale", which calls for an incorporation of indigenous epistemologies and perspectives grounded by indigenous experiences and ways of knowing.

Gani and Khan (2024), in their interrogation of the positionality's potential colonial and racial implications, elucidated that by advocating for a reparative approach to scholarship that moves beyond performative reflexivity, researchers should critically assess the implications of their methodological choices. In this article, the deployment and articulation of a Pacific Research Methodology (PRM) generate intellectual insights specifically through Pacific ways of negotiating knowledge (Koya-Vaka'uta, 2017).

As a Chinese PhD candidate in Pacific studies, I identify with Pacific values such as respect, reciprocity, and relationship-building, which underpin PRM, as similar concepts are core values of Chinese familial and social relations in which I was raised. I argue that the values of PRM share profound similarities with Chinese culture, which acknowledges a relational self.

Vā/wā is a concept central to many Pacific cultures and worldviews which connects to a relational space in-between holding separate entities together (Thomsen, 2020). The notion of vā encompasses holistic forms of personal identity negotiated and expressed through co-belonging and relationship building (Thomsen, 2020). Similar ideas can be found in the Chinese philosophies of Confucianism. In the Chinese Confucian tradition, the self is largely defined in terms of one's roles in family and society and one's relationship to others. This concept of self that emphasises one's social roles

and relationships to others as major constitutive parts of one's personal identity has long-standing implications for Chinese ways of thinking and worldviews (Jiang, 2006).

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Thus, I feel it necessary and meaningful to draw wisdom from Pacific Indigenous Methodologies to honour and centre Pacific knowledges and communities that have generously contributed to my education and development and to seek common grounds and meaningful engagements between Pacific values and Chinese epistemologies, rather than simply adopting a conventional mainstream Western methodology from a Euro-centric perspective.

Critical Auto-ethnography as a Research Method

As a Chinese international student who has been learning Cook Islands Māori language virtually for over a year due to the impact of COVID-19, this study also incorporated my personal experiences using critical auto-ethnography as a research method. In this study, the self-reflection of my personal experiences of taking both face-to-face and one-on-one online Cook Islands language classes could capture and produce meaningful first-hand sources of knowledge for further interpretation in a broader socio-cultural context. Therefore, I consider this reflexive auto-ethnographic method, if utilised critically and analytically, as a valid and appropriate approach for this research.

Talanoa Dialogue as an Interview Method

In this study, I used the protocols of talanoa dialogue as a guideline to my interview procedure. Talanoa is a research method in PRM for qualitative interview inquiry entrenched in Pacific oral traditions as participatory, inclusive and transparent conversations (Thomsen, 2020). Talanoa was developed as a methodological concept by Sitiveni Halapua and Timote Vaoleti in research practices (Fa'avae, Jones & Manu'atu, 2016). Even though no Pacific people are participants in this research, I argue that talanoa, which is underpinned by relational values, is an appropriate framework and guide to inform my interview methods, especially as this research deals with intercultural issues of Pacific language education. Unlike conventional interview protocols, in which participants' responses are centred around a series of fixed questions and researchers are only facilitators in this process, talanoa allows researchers to contribute their own ideas and experiences to the data collection. Talanoa positions participants as co-constructors of knowledge instead of mere informants used to draw data from (Thomsen, 2020).

As illustrated previously in my positionality statement, I deem my use of talanoa in this research not as an authentic Pacific talanoa. This is what I term a hybrid approach. As a Chinese PhD candidate in Pacific studies, my positionality, which has now been impacted by this education in Pacific research values, ethics and methods, gives me a unique space to negotiate communication with my fellow Chinese participants who shared similar experiences and cultural values as me. The deployment of talanoa dialogue guided by principles of PRM will help me gather data and honour Pacific research praxis.

The Participant(s)

The participant is a senior student who was enrolled in the master's programme for Pacific studies. Due to the travel restrictions arising from the Coronavirus pandemic, he was forced to stay in China for half a year, taking online classes to

complete his degree. During this period, he took a Sāmoan language course that was delivered completely online for both international and local students who couldn't be on campus. Informed written consent of the participant to take part in the research has been obtained prior to the interview.

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This interview data is combined with my own personal auto-ethnography as a Chinese student of the Cook Islands Māori language. As the UoA does not currently offer Cook Islands Māori at stage two and stage three, I have been learning Cook Islands Māori in a one-on-one setting with my tutor. My experiences represent a different form of online language learning, which shares similarities as well as nuanced differences with the participants.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Interactive Experiences in Traditional and Virtual Classroom

PARTICIPANT: A lack of interactions in the online classes could cause you to feel no sense of involvement, which would discourage your motivation. If you have a question, you need to write an email to the instructor after class. Sometimes you can't explain it clearly in an email.

One of the biggest challenges identified in our discussions regarding the differences between online and face-to-face learning modes was the issue of communication and interactions. The participant felt that online learning made this difficult for both the students and the instructor. In general, we both acknowledged that we could maintain a stronger connection with the instructor in conventional face-to-face mode because instructors and students could have direct access to both verbal and non-verbal cues that are important to interactions. Furthermore, we did not have as many opportunities to have casual talks with our instructors after class as we did in our face-to-face classes. In the case of online learning, we experienced feelings of distance from the instructor, felt the interactions less personal and were aware of the less mediated interactions with the instructor that took place online.

RESEARCHER: I remember once in my stage one face-to-face classes, after the class, our instructor organised a *kaikai* (feast) for the whole 101/G class, we had Cook Islands dishes and talked for hours. Our instructor told us stories about her family and community and we shared ours. We really enjoyed the time being together.

This excerpt demonstrates how, in Pacific ways of teaching, face-to-face interactions are crucial, as this is an important way to nurture *vā* (relational space) in the Pacific learning environment (Thomsen et al., 2021). *Teu le vā* is a significant Samoan philosophy and methodology in guiding Pacific pedagogy which emphasises the nurturing and valuing of sacred relational space that connects the learners and the teachers in the process of knowledge creation (Thomsen et.al, 2021). With fewer personal interactions taking place between the instructor and the students, the need to *teu le vā* could hardly be fulfilled.

PARTICIPANT: At stage one, all the questions from the instructor are very basic. You dare to answer because you know everyone in

this class are at the similar language proficiency level with you. It's okay to make a mistake because everyone is starting from scratch. However, at more advanced stage, there could be stark differences in students' performances in class. Some students could answer questions entirely in Sāmoan but for me as a non-Sāmoan background student, I could only use English instead. So I felt frustrated and didn't want to be laughed at and lose face in class.

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From the excerpt above, the perceived factors promoting or hindering the participant's oral participation in class can be related to perceived self-efficacy and the fear of losing face. In this study, due to perceived linguistic deficiencies, a lack of cultural background, and external peer pressure, the participant appeared to lack confidence in oral participation. He did not perceive himself as having the language competence in Sāmoan to speak up at ease like his peers. The low self-efficacy associated with the lower language proficiency compared with his classmates consequently intensified his fear of losing face which made the participant reluctant to respond to online interactions in class.

PARTICIPANT: Besides the interactions between the lecturer and students, the communications between peer students are also very important. When we were in our stage two face-to-face classes, students were divided into different groups to make up a story or dialogue together or modify each other's speech drafts. You get to know each other through interactions, like their family genealogies, where they come from, which islands their families live on. Sometimes you can even gain insights from those small chats which you can't learn from the formal lectures.

RESEARCHER: Even though I had great interactions with my tutor in my one-on-one classes, I still felt something was missing in my learning as I couldn't connect with my peers who were learning Cook Islands Māori like me.

What this excerpt has revealed is that both the participant and I were willing to build and maintain stronger connections with our peers in class and acknowledged that interactions with our classmates were conducive to facilitating learning and could enable us to become more engaged in our own language learning. Face-to-face classes allow for more interactions in the course, as well as a sense of togetherness that can help build a learning community. Haythornthwaite et al. (2006) suggested that members of a learning community could develop interpersonal and communal ties that increase the flow of information, availability of support, and cooperation among all members. However, despite our desire to interact with our classmates, the process was disrupted by the shift to online mode.

PARTICIPANT: I still have personal contacts on social media such as Facebook and Instagram with some of my classmates from my stage one and stage two classes. However, during our online classes at stage three, I didn't know any of my classmates. After the lecture, we wouldn't have any personal communications with each other. I don't mean to over-emphasise, but I can't even remember any names of my classmates at stage three.

Both the participant and I agreed that online learning made us feel detached from our learning community. This echoes Tu's study (2001) which indicated that in social interactions, Chinese learners are accustomed to employing more social context cues in their processing of information. Yet those social context cues are documented to be difficult to deliver in computer-mediated communication (Tu, 2001). As my participant mentioned, even though there were possibilities for him to communicate with his Pacific classmates through online group discussions at stage three, he didn't feel connected with the Pacific peers because he didn't have the opportunities to interact or have informal conversations that typically happen in traditional classrooms. This is because casual talk and organic shared experiences between students often form a place before, during and after classes. This, in turn, from our experience, resulted in a lack of familiarity between students, which made interactions and collaboration in online discussions much harder.

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Reflections on Intercultural Encounters in the Online Setting

PARTICIPANT: I think a specific and clear teaching aim is important because it will let students know what knowledge they will obtain from the lecture. What I think might be useful is that at the beginning of the class, the lecturer states what the three important language points are that we'll learn in that session. Then the lecture will be centred around those three language points. At the end of the lecture, the lecturer spends a few minutes summarising and reviewing those language points to reinforce our memorisation.

RESEARCHER: I have the same feelings with you. What I really liked about my stage two and three online tutoring is that the design for each class of my tutor was very clear. I think something we wanted to improve in our future classes was that we didn't settle any particular goals for each class. This was because the criteria was really hard to define in remote learning.

An important recurring theme that emerged in our discussions was our desired pedagogical design or approach to Pacific language courses, which was teacher-centred. Both the participant and I demonstrated an apparent preference for a systematic, structural and content-based teacher-centred approach for our Pacific language learning. The emphasis placed on the instructor's pedagogical approach sits very much in line with previous studies, which show Chinese students' preference for a teacher-centred pedagogy (Huang & Brown, 2009; Jackson & Chen, 2018). In Kang and Chang's (2016) study on the learning preferences of learners from Confucius cultures, they found that students favoured a type of curriculum that is heavily loaded with content knowledge, a well-structured, transparent and clear-cut course design, which has explicit criteria such as exams for measuring learning progress and performance. Both the participant and I admitted that we preferred the point-by-point lectures with outlines and key points clearly presented.

PARTICIPANT: To be honest, I was not accustomed to the online discussion-based classes I took during stage three. Our stage three course was focused on deepening our understanding of various Sāmoan cultural activities. I felt like this course was

overwhelmingly difficult to me. All the readings were in Sāmoan which I felt very hard to comprehend by myself. I couldn't directly consult the instructor or my classmates before or after class like in traditional classrooms. In our online discussions, many of my classmates especially Sāmoan heritage students had a high level of language proficiency and cultural familiarity, so I felt my contributions to the discussions were very superficial. This caused me to inhibit from joining the discussion.

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This excerpt shows how the participant was not accustomed to the learner-centred or discussion-based pedagogy in the Western language learning classroom, which precipitates a higher level of independent learning. In Western institutions of higher education, instructors assume the role of facilitator rather than absolute authority (Kang & Chang, 2016). Students are seen as self-directed learners and co-constructors of knowledge. Previous studies shows that it is not uncommon for Chinese students to find it difficult to transfer smoothly to the Western education system because of the culturally implicit nature of Western classroom conventions, which could cause emotional loneliness and anxiety that discourages learning confidence (Mathias, Bruce & Newton, 2013; Jackson & Chen, 2018). However, the online environment seems to add to the barriers Chinese students experience when seeking direct help from their instructors or classmates due to a lack of in-person interactions with them. Those interactions and communication could become more important to Chinese students' Pacific language learning process as they move on to more advanced courses, where they may encounter language problems and difficulties they cannot solve on their own.

PARTICIPANT: I think the best way to learn Pacific culture is through being part of a cultural event to experience it. When you really had the experience of participating in it, you would instantly learn about the authentic proceedings of an 'ava ceremony. I remember once I had the experiences of participating in the 'ava ceremony during the Sāmoan language week celebrated in Auckland. I could actually see the chief orator welcome all the guests while the participants sat cross-legged on the floor in a semicircle. The chief orator called out "Ia Manuia." The audience clapped hands in a slow, loud manner. The drink was then served in a strict order that reflected the social rank of the guests being served. This experience can never be substituted by watching visual images or videos or reading an abundance of texts.

RESEARCHER: I agree. I participated in the Te Maeva Nui 2019 Cook Islands cultural festival. I watched Cook Islands live drum dances performed by different dance groups representing each island they are coming from. Legends of the Ariki leading their kōpū tangata (people) to the lands were told through their language, performance and music. Through the various narratives of stories telling the history of Polynesian seafaring and settlement, I started to develop a deeper understanding of why family genealogy is so important to Cook Islanders as it is entrenched in the intimate spiritual connections of the Cook Islanders in modern society with their ancestors.

This excerpt demonstrates that we both acknowledged that Pacific cultural learning should not be viewed simply as pieces of factual information presented or explained by the instructor. Instead, it should be regarded as a process in which language learners are able to have authentic experiences about how Pacific culture permeates and shapes the lives of Pacific people, which echo Pacific ways of knowing and learning. As Konai Helu Thaman (1997) states, for most Pacific people, “culture is not something to be defined or debated; it is lived and continually demonstrated as a matter of behaviour and performance” (p. 123). Vernacular and cultural traditions are considered as inherently sacred, stored and passed on orally for the benefit of future generations (Thaman, 1997).

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Based on this excerpt and guided by insights from Pacific scholars, I argue that the spiritual dimension inherent to Pacific values and worldviews that is the essence to the Pacific languages and cultures can never be ‘acquired’ from a Western instrumental approach that tends to separate them from the people and communities that live in them. As a non-Pacific learner, the best way of engaging with Pacific languages and cultures is through learning with respect and humility from authentic, culturally immersive experiences in the Pacific cultural contexts. However, in reality, for our Chinese cohort learning Pacific languages at the UoA, our exposure to the immersive cultural environment was largely limited to the Pacific cultural events held in Auckland. Since we transitioned into online mode, our opportunities for cultural immersion have been directly cut off.

DISCUSSION

Building Vā/Wā in the Online Setting

Compared with face-to-face conventional learning, a lack of interactions with instructors and Pacific peers was identified as the biggest issue with our online language learning. Upon reflection, both the participant and I acknowledged the positive impacts of maintaining strong connections with our instructors and peers on our Pacific language learning and expressed our disappointment over the decreasing interactions in the online setting. In a face-to-face context, classroom activities and the informal interactions between instructors and students give students a sense of involvement that helps them to form a learning community. In line with Chen, Bennett and Maton’s (2008) findings, in online classes, my participant reported the feeling of an absence of learning community due to a lack of interactions with his instructor and classmates.

However, the profound influences of our inability to connect with our instructor and Pacific peers in our online learning extended beyond the failures to establish a learning community that is beneficial to our language learning. Nurturing relationships and holistic interpersonal connections are central to Pacific ways of being (Thomsen et al., 2021). The instruction-based online Pacific language learning with less personal connections with instructors or peers tends to sit in opposition to Pacific values of collaborative, relational and culturally responsive ways of knowing and learning.

In this scenario, this article suggests that creating a learning environment that centralises positive, respectful and reciprocal relationships between the instructors and students is also significant to Chinese students who attach great

importance to interpersonal relationships. As indicated in Chen, Bennett and Maton's study (2008), Chinese students not only expected to have intellectual communications but also desired to establish interpersonal connections with their learning community.

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Du and Thomsen's (2021) study on the experiences of Chinese international students in Pacific Studies posits that due to significant cultural differences, there often formed a Chinese "bubble" where Chinese students tend to interact primarily with Chinese students despite the desire from Chinese international students to interact with their Pacific peers. This is significant, as the only Chinese student in a Pacific language learning classroom, the online learning mode seems to pose more practical obstacles to building meaningful interactions with our Pacific peers. This has the potential to accentuate the cultural gap between Chinese students and their peers. This is also significant as the participant indicated that because of his perceived lack of Sāmoan language competency and cultural familiarity, he was reluctant to participate in group discussions, which seemed to be the only channel for him to communicate with his Pacific classmates in online classes.

This reluctance to participate in group discussions in online classes of the participant as I believe, can be attributed to the concept of face that many previous studies identify as a significant factor that impacts the way Chinese students behave in Western classrooms (Du & Thomsen, 2021; Li, 2017; Tu, 2001; Zhong, 2013; Tan, 2018). The notion of face is highly salient in Chinese society, which is regarded as "the most delicate standard by which Chinese social intercourse is regulated" (Kinnison, 2017, p. 33). This concept is well-known to be complex and multi-faceted in Chinese culture. Face relates to one's self-image in public, associated with one's success, as measured by Chinese society. Under the social pressure of maintaining their reputation in society, people are particularly concerned about their public image and tend to hold back if there's a risk of losing face (Kinnison, 2017).

In this study, the participant indicated that a way to gain face was through speaking fluent and accurate Pacific language in class. Speaking up voluntarily in front of others with errors ran the risks of being judged negatively by the instructor and the peers, or in other words, losing face. Influenced by the virtues of collectivism, Chinese students are taught to emphasise harmony and avoid potential conflicts (Kinnison, 2017). Hence, in group discussions, Chinese students tend to exhibit face-saving characteristics (Kang & Chang, 2016). Therefore, the fear of losing face means they would rather remain silent in class than speak up with the possibility that they may make mistakes or trigger disagreement from others, which has been shown in my participants' experiences.

As Kinnison (2017) has pointed out, the presence of witnesses and the relationship with the witnesses are the most influential factors. This also echoes Manegre and Sabir's study (2020) which argues that students' second language production improves with the decrease of performance anxiety in front of the instructor and peers in the online setting. In light of this, compared with traditional classroom learning, virtual learning mode seems to provide a protective shield for Chinese students to speak up without being noticed by the instructor or peers, as students can turn off their cameras.

For my participant who was the only Chinese student in his class, his presence was much more apparent. Therefore, his concerns around losing face did not decrease with the transition to online classes. This was despite there being no other Chinese students in the classroom with him. This suggests that Chinese international students are still impacted by the desire to save face despite not being around other Chinese students. Tu's (2001) study is important to reference here as they found that face-saving characteristics are displayed even outside of the classroom.

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Unravelling the Interplay Between Different Pedagogical Approaches

Pedagogy in itself is not value-free, as it includes a consideration of teaching intentionality. Pedagogy serves as a powerful channel of integrating values into teaching in educational settings (Ava, Airini & Rubie-Davies, 2011). Learning Pacific language at a Western tertiary institution of Chinese students has been an exercise in navigating the tensions between the Chinese learning preferences and patterns, the Western structure of education and Pacific ways of knowing which underpin Pacific language learning. What this research clearly demonstrates is the complexity associated with Chinese international students and what their participation in Pacific language learning courses at a New Zealand university represents. However, the online learning environment exacerbates the cultural tensions.

Through our discussions, the participant stressed the importance of a systematic lecture organisation and expressed his views of how extant authoritative language knowledge can be transmitted and internalised in an effective and efficient way from his perspective. The participant regards language learning as a process of knowledge accumulation, with lecturers taking the instrumental role in imparting new vocabulary, grammatical rules and cultural knowledge to the students. Mathias, Bruce and Newton (2013) argue that Chinese students learn through a four-stage process, including memorising, understanding, applying and questioning or modifying. This was evident in how my participant and I both approached our learning of Pacific languages with the influences of Chinese culture of learning. The Chinese culture of learning derives from the Confucian ideology around education, where Chinese learners prefer a teacher-centred approach and tend to expect their instructors to give detailed information and explanations regarding the lesson contents and put key points and outlines in a clear form (Huang & Brown, 2009; Jackson & Chen, 2018). Both my participant and I are more accustomed to assessment-oriented instructions so as to receive directions on how to obtain higher grades.

By contrast, Western institutions of higher education emphasise Socratic dialogic practices in classrooms, encouraging critical thinking and engagement in discussions, which are advanced to push students to assume a higher degree of responsibility to probe into issues (Jackson & Chen, 2018). This could mean that discussion-based pedagogy may not meet Chinese students' expectations of key knowledge points directly presented by the instructors for each class. As the participant stated, he found this discussion-based pedagogy ineffective toward his learning at stage three.

Jackson and Chen's (2018) study found that discussion-based pedagogy was the most frequently cited source of anxiety for Chinese international students who participated in their research. My participant recalled that because of a lack of

cultural background and a lower Sāmoan language competency compared with many of his Pacific classmates, he felt he was not able to adapt well to discussion-based language classes at stage three. As Maican and Cocoradă (2021) indicate in their study, students who are experiencing difficulties in their studies report intense negative emotions due to decreased guidance from instructors in online learning settings. Faced with those extra challenges of disconnection and isolation from their instructors and peers, Chinese students could feel more pressure and anxiety in their Pacific language online learning.

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An important observation here relates to how Pacific languages are being taught to Chinese learners through a Western pedagogy. For students who are of Pacific heritage, learning Pacific languages is a crucial way to maintain and preserve their cultural identity and connect to their communities (Taufeulungaki, 2004). For non-Pacific learners of Pacific languages like us, learning Pacific languages also provides a gateway into understanding Pacific Indigenous values and worldviews. Previous studies have emphasised the importance of integrating cultural awareness into language learning programmes for an overall enhancement of intercultural communication competence (Soomro, Kazemian & Mahar, 2015). This means that the process of learning a Pacific language requires not only practising linguistic skills but also must involve meaningful engagement with cultural ways of being within which the language lives in order to achieve proficiency in intercultural communication (Soomro, Kazemian & Mahar, 2015). Learning Pacific languages goes far beyond memorising words and basic grammar rules. Pacific languages are deeply embedded in Pacific indigenous values, cultural beliefs and worldviews (Taumoefolau, 2017). As a non-Pacific learner, mastering the nuances of Pacific languages is tied to one's ability to understand Pacific ways of knowing, which underpin the powerful uniqueness of Pacific peoples' lived experiences. This was acknowledged by the participant and I when we spoke of the significance of participating in Pacific community events and cultural rituals, connecting us to the use of language in its everyday Pacific context. The online space, however, ultimately cut off our ability to access this.

CONCLUSION

This study has also forced me to think about our experiences of being educated in a Western-dominated pedagogical approach to Pacific language education in the university setting. My participant mentioned that he experienced book explanations regarding Sāmoan cultural customs through their online classes, which could not compare with his culturally immersive experiences he had in-person in Auckland that enabled him to embrace the authentic Sāmoan way of performing ceremonies or rituals. More importantly, this book-based approach reflected a more Western perspective of learning and teaching, which reflects a colonial way of teaching which is underpinned by a power exercised over those 'being studied.' This intellectual colonisation in Western education institutions has been contested by Pacific academics who have been striving for years to decolonise and bring about a paradigm shift to reclaim Pacific knowledge and ways of knowing (Thaman, 2003).

It is important to note that my participant and I both agree that the best practice of learning Pacific languages is through participating in culturally immersive experiences. Pacific pedagogy that emphasises learning within a cultural context, informed by and validating Indigenous knowledge, values,

worldviews, and experiences, could be a more effective method for teaching Pacific language and culture, benefiting both Pacific and non-Pacific students. However, there is a sense of unexplored territory, where we as Chinese international students, are learning these anti-colonial practices in a colonial, Western university.

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In terms of potential popularity and sustainability of Pacific language learning in China and other countries abroad, the question becomes: how will any teaching methods that are responsive to Pacific ways of knowing be cultivated in an online setting? As students from China, it was the relationship building and culturally immersive experiences that became essential to our Pacific language and culture learning in this new context. In Thomsen et.al's study (2021), with the adoption of Pacific pedagogies, Pacific early career academics (PECA) struggled but found innovative and culturally inclusive ways to nurture *vā/wā* with students in the online mode utilising strategies including placing students' needs as priority, sparing extra time outside classroom for students, and sharing personal experiences. With the development of Education Technology in diverse learning environments, a wide variety of technological tools such as interactive multimedia content, gamified learning modules, and virtual simulations are contributing to a paradigm shift from traditional teacher-centred approaches to more student-centred learning (Kumar et.al, 2024). Virtual communities can be created to engage learners emotionally and facilitate communication (Jing et.al, 2024). The integration of emerging technologies, including virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), further enhances experiential and hands-on learning by offering immersive and engaging educational experiences. These innovations support more personalised, flexible, and active forms of knowledge construction, aligning with contemporary pedagogical goals in online and hybrid learning environments. However, there is still an acknowledgement that how best to practice Pacific pedagogies online with the assistance of technological tools has not yet been determined.

Acknowledgments (optional)

The author would like to thank Dr Patrick S. Thomsen for his helpful review on the early drafts of the article. Also, thank you to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments.

The authors acknowledge that in the editorial, copyediting and formatting processes adopted by the journal, editors make use of Grammarly and Gemini Pro 2.5 tools. They are assured of the academic integrity of their work.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no competing interests.

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Please cite as:

Fu, L. (2025). Chinese Learners and Pacific Languages: Online Journeys in NZ During COVID-19. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, 29(i), 92-108. <https://doi.org/10.61468/jofdl.v29i1.705>

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