

# **THT Journal:**

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Patrick Dougherty, Editor



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*Teachers Helping Teachers (THT) is dedicated to the aid  
and assistance of fellow educators in the Asia Pacific region.*

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## DEDICATION



The *THT Journal* is dedicated to the memory of William “Bill” Balsamo (1943 – 2008) the founder of Teachers Helping Teachers.

“We are more than an organization, we are an idea, a concept.” – Bill Balsamo

## PREFACE

Patrick Dougherty  
Editor, the *THT Journal*

It is with pleasure that I welcome our community to this, the 8<sup>th</sup> volume of the *THT Journal*. The *THT Journal* was begun as a proceedings publication to feature authors who had presented their research and teaching ideas at THT programs in Bangladesh, Laos, Vietnam, the Philippines, Kyrgyzstan, and, later, Nepal. Subsequently, the *THT Journal* expanded its scope and developed into an energetic experiment in collaboration and explication where researchers and teachers from the countries, institutions, organizations, and communities that help sponsor THT programs might also find a venue for their research, reports, explorations, and teaching strategies. Let me introduce you to the authors of the articles in this volume and issue:

**Sabrina Ahmed Chowdhury** is an Assistant Professor at the Department of English Language, in the Institute of Modern Languages, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. She did her BA (Hons.) in English and MA in Applied Linguistics and ELT from the Department of English, University of Dhaka. She has been awarded an M Phil degree from the same department. Her area of research interest and publication in Sociolinguistics are language policy and Judiciary. Her Area of research in ELT covers language skills, classroom teaching, testing and evaluation, development of language proficiency, and material development.

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## **STUDENT ANXIETY IN SPEAKING: A STUDY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE COURSES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DHAKA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

One of the greatest barriers to speaking activities in the English classroom at tertiary level is the anxiety of students. In a country of large population and limited resources, the teachers are unable to implement various types of language learning assistance that are available in countries with more advanced resources. Again, the teachers find it difficult to practice speaking in the classroom with the students who are culturally used to being passive learners. In addition, extreme emphasis on correctness has made the students suffer from the fear of making mistakes. In the English language courses at the University of Dhaka, it is sometimes frustrating for the teachers to try to lower the anxiety level of the students and make them take part in conversations successfully. This research is an attempt to explore the teaching-learning situation and analyze the problem in depth in order to give constructive solutions to the problem of anxiety in speaking.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Speaking a second language is always considered a difficult skill to acquire by the learners. It is both challenging and demanding for the students because a lot of affective factors are involved in speaking. Unlike the skill of writing, there is limited or no opportunity for revision. Again, the matter of what to say is often eclipsed by conventions of how to say things, when to speak, and other discourse constraints (Brown and Lee, 2015). In addition, there is also the tension of being



judged by the face value of speaking. All these put tremendous pressure on the student and often result in anxiety while speaking a second language.

### **RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY**

Students complete twelve years of learning the English language before they enter university. Even then, teachers have time and again voiced their complaint about the lack of speaking proficiency of students. It should be noted here that speaking is not assessed at the secondary and Higher Secondary level. Neither is it assessed in the admission test at the tertiary level. Under the circumstances, it was observed that students lacked speaking proficiency in English and were having problems coping up with the job market which increasingly requires English as a condition for employment (Khan, 2000). As a response, an English language course emerged in tune with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

Practicing speaking in English with adult learners at tertiary level does not seem to be a difficult task for the teacher. However, the teachers are confronted with a lot of obstacles like large classes, lack of logistic support, mixed proficiency levels of students, etc. The students are also used to taking part in passive learning, with teacher fronted classes even with learning language skills, in accordance with the educational culture of Bangladesh. Thus, according to the principles of CLT, communicating in class is a new step for the students. It takes time to get used to the idea of learner interaction in class and comply with what is expected of them. In addition, anxiety to speak in front of a large number of students creates a great barrier to successful speaking practice. As a result, the teacher feels frustrated at the reticence of learners and loses motivation to practice speaking in class. This study is an attempt to address the problem.

## **OBJECTIVE**

The research aims to portray the real classroom situation and discover the sources of anxiety in speaking among the students. It intends to analyze the teachers' efforts to minimizing these problems. The author contends that there are some simple steps that the teachers can follow to lower the anxiety level of students and work for a successful way of teaching speaking in the English language classes at the University of Dhaka.

## **STUDENT ANXIETY, RETICENCE AND LACK OF CONFIDENCE IN SPEAKING**

Language anxiety in its simplest definition is the subjective feeling of apprehension and fear associated with language learning and use (Richards and Schmidt, 2016). Researchers have studied language classroom anxiety in depth. This term refers to the situationally triggered anxiousness that learners experience when they try to interact in the target language during lessons. There are various reasons why students may feel anxiety to speak during speaking activities. Students are often afraid of losing face by making mistakes (Dobson, 1992). They may feel that they are presenting themselves at a much lower level of cognitive ability than they really possess (Hedge, 2000). There may also be a lack of confidence on the part of the student even when they have the linguistic knowledge (Davies and Pearse, 2010). Furthermore, Harmer (2007) also pointed out that some students are reluctant to speak because they are shy and are not predisposed to expressing themselves in front of other people especially when they are asked to give personal information and opinions. On the other hand, Tsui (as cited in Bailey, 2005) found that students' reticence could be attributed to facts like the teachers' intolerance to silence, the teachers' uneven allocation of turns and incomprehensible input from the teachers. Bailey (2005) further pointed out that the teachers themselves can often be creating conditions that contributed to the students' reticence.

## **PREVIOUS STUDY**

A number of researchers, both at home and abroad have studied the problem of student anxiety in speaking. They have found the existence of anxiety in speaking in various contexts. Terkan and Dikkilitus (2015) reported high levels of anxiety at the tertiary level in the Turkish EFL context. According to them, the source of the anxiety came from prior levels where instruction is considerably based on traditional teaching practices performed by a teacher. He/she is seen as the source of information and the authority in the classroom who can freely and strictly control students with little or no attention to their psychological and educational needs. They concluded that this deep rooted anxiety is very difficult to deal with for the teachers in the tertiary level.

Casamassima and Insua (2015) argued that just letting the students speak in groups and pairs is not enough to ensure that they will continue conversations successfully. The teacher needs to guide the students step by step. Students can be motivated to speak, and their anxiety can be dealt with by teaching them to structure their speech. The article discussed some simple strategies which consist of a few steps, are easy to teach and learn, and are easily supported. In language classes, it is very common to find answers from the students in one word or a single sentence. These techniques help the students to deal with their anxiety of what to say and how to express themselves fully. These also help them to share more information and continue conversation successfully.

Student's speech fright was examined by Hopkins and Nicoll (2018). They have reported from Abu Dhabi that with university students, in certain contexts, lack of motivation, anxiety, and cultural constraints make fluency building activities in the classroom a struggle for the teacher. They have used digital applications for real and surreal role playing. This article gives us a good finding that role-playing can be used as an effective way of countering the anxiety of speaking

in a group. However, using digital apps in the classroom individually for all students is a farfetched idea in the Bangladeshi context due to lack of resources and logistic support.

Rahman and Mahmud (2009-10) conducted research on six selected schools in Dhaka city. About 34% of the students were afraid that their classmates would laugh at them when they speak in English. Again, about 44% of the students get nervous when the English teacher asks questions in English. The writers comment that these create obstruction to English Language learning in the Secondary level. We can thus observe that anxiety in speaking is present at the secondary level also. Yasmin (2009) and Siddique (2014) has pointed out that there is an absence of positive rapport between language learners and teachers in primary, secondary as well as higher secondary level. This can contribute to anxiety and reticence in speaking in class.

The problem of motivating the students to learn English at the university level was discussed and analysed by Sarwar (2013). According to her, socio-cultural and socio-economic influences are certainly key issues influencing L2 motivation for students in Bangladesh. Conducting a research on the students of English language courses in the Department of English at the University of Dhaka, she pointed out that there are mainly three types of motivational problems that hinder learning English. First of all, the students are often self-conscious about speaking in English because they feel that making mistakes will immediately be interpreted as a social class statement (belonging to a lower class), making them feel like objects of mockery and ridicule. This is a source of anxiety for many students. Secondly, the past experiences of the students in English classes have caused lasting damage to the students' own perceptions of ability. This leads to language anxiety which ultimately leads to a decline in the level of motivation. Thirdly, large number of students with mixed ability makes teaching difficult and also less motivating for the students. There are similarities between the

course run by the English Department and the language course of the research. However, the research area is too narrow and thus the findings may vary in the present research.

In a previous study on large classes, (Chowdhury, 2013) I have found that in Dhaka University more than half the students in the Arts faculty and close to half the students in Social Science and Institutes suffered from anxiety in Speaking English in their respective classes. It is the anxiety of making mistakes and being laughed at by other people or making a poor impression before others which bar them from speaking in English.

Bashir (2013), in his study on the students of the Department of English, found that in language courses, teachers praised them for their good performances. He commented that this positive motivation contributed to the learner's self-image and self-confidence. However, he also noticed that some teachers criticized the students in the classroom for making mistakes. He concluded that this action may cause anxiety and language shock to students. Here also the research area is too narrow to draw conclusive findings.

Some of the studies are either not done at the tertiary level or has a very limited area of research to account for all the different faculties of the University. Some are done outside our unique socio-cultural context. This study is thus a unique one in the proposed context.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A mixed methods research was conducted to get a better understanding of the situation. Dörnyei, (2015) pointed out that the issue is not whether to use one form or another but rather how both might work together to foster the development of theory. One of the major strengths of mixed methods research is its concept of triangulation introduced in the 1970s (Dörnyei, 2015). Lazaraton (cited in Dörnyei, 2015) prefers mixed methods research because in a combination of

quantitative and qualitative methods, each highlights reality in a different yet complimentary way.

In this study, among all the faculties and Institutes of the University of Dhaka, five randomly chosen departments from five different faculties and institutes were taken under consideration. These were, the Department of Microbiology, the Department of statistics, the Department of Arabic, the Department of World religion and Culture and the Institute of Disaster Management and Vulnerability Studies. Nunan (1992) pointed out that in those situations in which it is not feasible to collect data from the entire population, the researcher must resort to sampling. The target population consisted of the students from these four departments.

At first a questionnaire survey was conducted among the students to identify the problems. There were both quantitative and qualitative questions. Secondly, teachers of the concerned departments were interviewed in light of the findings. Lastly, a class from each department was observed to validate the information found from both the teachers and the students. The classroom situation was also analyzed. Seliger and Shohamy (1989) pointed out that by using multiple procedures in a single study, it is possible to obtain data from a variety of sources simultaneously. Again, through the use of different perspectives or a holistic one a study can gather as much information as possible.

## **FINDINGS**

There was a large amount of data that were collected from the three different types of data collection procedures. Some of the qualitative data was analyzed using the thematic analysis procedure. The findings from questionnaire survey of the students, interview of the teachers and observation of the classes are discussed below:

## Findings from the Students

The students were asked if they were afraid of making mistakes to find out whether anxiety existed among the students. There were 134 responses. There were 84 students who responded that they experienced some sort of anxiety while speaking in English. Only, 37% responded that they were not afraid of speaking in English. More than half, that is 63% students confirmed that they suffered from anxiety while speaking in class.

Among those who suffered from anxiety, 15.22 % of the students reported that they felt shy during pair work activities. 18% student suffered from anxiety during group work. Again the percentage increased if large classes were considered separately. There were three departments with about 80 students in class. About 31% student felt shy and nervous during speaking activities in large classes. Let us look at the table below:

Feeling of anxiety during pair work activities	Feeling of anxiety during group work activities	Feeling of anxiety during activities in large classes
15.22%	18%	30.5%

**Table 1: Percentages of students feeling anxiety in speaking activities.**

The participants explained that they were nervous of making mistakes and were afraid of being laughed at by more proficient students in their class. A participant explained,

*Like most Bangladeshi, I am also afraid of making mistakes while speaking in English because, 'What will people say?' (Participant 13)*

Another, more proficient student observed that they encountered problems during speaking activities because of anxiety among a large number of students. He explained,

*Nervousness and mediocre vocabularies lessen up the smoothness of the conversation. (Participant 66)*

Some also feared ‘going blank’ in the middle of a sentence during a prepared speech which they have to deliver in front of other students. Some proficient students observed that the less proficient students suffer from anxiety because they do not understand the teachers’ instruction during speaking activities and cannot follow the teacher accordingly,

*Because not all the students are fluent in English. So for them it is kind of difficult to understand (the task) what to do. (Participant 26)*

### **Findings from the Interview of the Teachers**

A large number of students feel shy and nervous when it comes to speaking. The teachers reported that there is a certain amount of anxiety among the students. One of the teachers from ELT background stated,

*You cannot possibly help them in a short time because the anxiety they are suffering at this moment, I think, the source of this is starting from their school, then secondary and higher. By the time they come here, twelve years are gone and the anxiety is permanent for them. (Teacher 3)*

One way of lessening the level of anxiety according to a teacher is first to let the students discuss in pairs, then in groups and then speak in front of the class or answer the teacher’s question. Students can be inspired to talk about the things that really concern them. In addition, one of the teachers (Teacher 4) added that in his class, the students are told that for learners it is natural to make mistakes. There is nothing to laugh at as all second language learners make mistakes initially. And the students should not feel nervous about making mistakes. Teachers also mentioned that they create comfortable relations with the students. They do not



point out the mistakes initially but give constructive feedback later on.

The teachers also pointed out that, as part-time faculty appointed by individual department, most of them work full time in other institutions. As a result, they cannot manage to provide extra time to help the weaker students. Again, they feel that personal counseling might help the reticent student sometimes, but in a classroom where there are so many students, it becomes really difficult. Lastly, another teacher stressed the need of practicing speaking in the classroom,

*Speaking is always there. I always try to make them speak because you know, without speaking, if the students do not speak, they will never be able to use English. They will never be able to remove their shyness. So that's why I always focus on this. They have to speak in my class. (Teacher 1)*

### **Findings from the Observation of the Classes**

Class observation reveal that, most of the classes were too overcrowded for the students to keep seated during the whole class time, let alone speak or write comfortably. The students sat on long benches. The linear sitting arrangement in crowded classes made it difficult to execute group work.

Only a few cooperative speaking activities were observed. The teacher spent considerable time asking questions to the students. When the teacher asked a question, he/she gave only one chance to an individual student. This is how the teacher tried to deal with the dominating students in the class.

When students were asked to answer the teacher's question, some clearly lacked vocabulary. However, it was difficult to ascertain whether the students were having problems only due to a lack of vocabulary, or anxiety to speak in front of the whole class. Most of the questions were asked in general and were not directed to any individual student. As a result, only

the proficient and confident students answered. The shy students kept silent. It was apparent that the students suffered from anxiety to speak and only a few students volunteered to answer questions from the teacher.

## **ANALYSIS**

More than half (almost 63%) of the participants are reported to have been suffering from shyness and nervousness. There are reported instances of anxiety when they discussed the problems of group work and also problems in large classes. The participants specified that they felt shy and nervous and were afraid of making mistakes. They were also afraid of being laughed at by more proficient students. Lastly, they were nervous about forgetting words or going blank while delivering prepared speeches in front of the class. So, we can gather that all these students are in fact suffering from anxiety when they have to take part in a speaking activity. Hopkyns and Nicoll (2018) also observed anxiety among tertiary level students at Abu Dhabi.

The interview of teachers and class observation reveals that there is anxiety among the students about speaking. Each teacher dealt with his/her problem in a different way. These consisted of explaining to students that errors are natural and nothing to laugh about, choosing topic for discussion which concerns them, going step by step like pair work, group work and then prepared speech, having friendly relation with students and not pointing out mistakes immediately, etc. All these have to be done collectively to obtain results. In truth, not all the teachers follow the same process. Thus, most of the teachers lacked effort in minimizing student anxiety in speaking. Too much emphasis was observed on prepared speech. Some of the teachers are unaware that this time consuming activity does not help the students sufficiently as this is not communicative. Again, standing in front of 80 people is enough to make a person nervous, let alone speak. So, delivering prepared speech in the introductory classes as a speaking activity chosen by some of the teachers is one of the

main sources of anxiety among the students of these classes. It was also found that a number of teachers who do not have ELT background use this activity more than half of their time which is allotted by them for speaking practice.

Furthermore, one of the teachers (Teacher 3) stated that these students who are suffering from anxiety cannot be helped in a short time. This anxiety is deep rooted. It has started in school and continued through college. Another problem area that the teacher has observed is that the anxiety level of one student may also increase the anxiety level of others. He concluded that it becomes impossible at times to help these students because of time constraints and difficulty of providing individual attention in large classes. He states,

*Personal counseling might help sometimes, but in a classroom there are so many students, it becomes really difficult. (Teacher 3)*

## **SUGGESTION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

In the study, anxiety was identified as a great barrier in speaking practice by both the teachers and the students. The students stated that they feel shy and nervous to speak. Again, some of them are afraid of being mocked at by more proficient students. Most teachers do not seem to be able to deal with this problem successfully because of large classes and time constraints in giving individual attention. Another problem which was found to aggravate anxiety was prepared speech which a student had to deliver in front of a large number of classmates. In addition, due to lack of training in ELT and having to deal with a large number of students often made it impossible for the teacher to deal with this problem successfully. Considering all the circumstances, there are some suggestions that may help.

Large classes should be divided into smaller classes so that students can have a more comfortable and less threatening atmosphere. The teachers will also be able to give individual

attention and help the less proficient learners. Logistic support should be improved with movable chairs and spacious rooms rather than linear sitting arrangement which makes group work cumbersome to execute.

Cooperative learning activities like pair work and group work should be practiced regularly. The teachers should try to reduce the time of whole class conversation in large classes and implement group work. Brown and Lee (2015) pointed out the security of a smaller group as a positive side of group work. In a small group, each individual is not so starkly on public display, vulnerable to what the student may perceive as criticism and rejection. The friendliness of a small group helps learners to feel more secure and therefore more capable of participating.

The teacher should create a friendly atmosphere and concentrate on fluency in the initial stage instead of accuracy which can be focused at a later stage. The students should be reminded time and again that it is natural for second language learners to make mistakes while learning the target language. If the students find the teacher to be understanding the shy students may become more willing to join in the conversation.

Formal presentation of prepared speech should be kept for a later stage. Even then, the presenters should present in small groups before attempting to speak before the whole class. In this way the student will have the advantage of peer correction before attempting to address the whole class.

The course book should be followed for listening and speaking so that the students may feel the security of knowing what type of speaking activities are expected of them. Course books contain examples of natural conversation which can help the students structure their own conversations. Willis and Willis (2007) suggest the use of a course book as these books cater for less proficient as well as more proficient students. The teacher should also give thinking time after introducing a

topic so that the students may decide how to carry out the conversation (Harmer, 2007).

Pronunciation should be taught to the students. Some of the students coming from rural areas did not have the logistic support to correct their pronunciation and may have inhibition talking to more proficient students.

Special Interest Groups (SIG) should be created to give the teachers a forum to share their problems and successes. The faculties should appoint full time teachers to teach in different departments, so that the teachers can manage to give extra time outside class to help the less proficient students.

## CONCLUSION

Since independence, Bangladesh has been a monolingual country (Chowdhury, 2007). As a result, the students never had the opportunity to speak English outside the classroom. Again, the legacy of the Grammar Translation Method that still exists in our country deters students to speak in class. At the same time, the concentration on correctness has made students extremely conscious about their mistakes in speaking, making them prone to reticence and anxiety. The teachers must remember that this deep rooted anxiety will not vanish overnight. Just because they are considerably proficient in writing, the teacher cannot expect them to speak as one would write (Willis and Willis, 2007). It is not possible to attain a difficult and demanding skill like speaking without a lot of practice. All the teacher can do is to be patient and encouraging and try to create a flow of conversation that will ultimately decrease the level of anxiety and draw in the less proficient students so that all of them may have a fair share of conversation time.

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## **USING SITCOMS IN A CONVERSATION CLASS: A CASE STUDY AT HUE UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study was set out to describe the implementation of using English situation comedies in speaking class and explore how it influences on students' motivation as well as their speaking proficiency. The study used both quantitative and qualitative approaches in methodology. Pre-questionnaires and post-questionnaires were delivered to 40 English major freshmen in a speaking class at Hue University of Foreign Languages. Interview data was also collected from both the teacher and the students. Most importantly, five activities were conducted during 4 weeks: Role-play, cultural exploration, controlled debate, dubbing and mediated watching. The research proves that English sitcom indeed is a useful and effective tool for both English learners and teachers of English. Moreover, persuasive figures in this study demonstrate the positive improvement of the students' English speaking proficiency after learning with sitcoms. Especially, both the teacher and the students found that sitcoms brought completely new English learning experience and the students seem to be highly motivated in speaking class.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past decade, many researchers have presented strong evidence that multimedia have useful effects on language learning and increasing learners' motivation because of the rich and authentic comprehensible input (Brett, 1995; Khalid, 2001). It is a well-known fact that sitcom, situation - comedy,



as sources of authentic language input is an important factor in facilitating the learning of English. At the workshop “Short and sweet: using short films to promote creativity and communication”, Donaghy (2003) explores how short films can be used in the classroom, and how teachers can use it to promote creativity, and both oral and written communication by doing communicative activities based around a variety of short films. Stephen Ryan (1998) in his journal on “using films to develop learner motivation” says that “Students will often express an interest in using movies as a medium for language learning.” Similarly, English sitcoms prove to be potential language inputs to create joyful learning opportunity in language classrooms. Due to the fact that sitcom is a situation comedy, it includes also positive emotions, which is very important in language learning.

According to Taflinger (2008), sitcoms can motivate “a positive emotional approach to language learning by exerting emotional influences on an audience or inspiring students to express his/her attitude towards what he/she has watched.” Indeed, humor and laughter play important parts in our life and in the English class as well. Thanks to its humorous nature, active watching sitcoms in the English lessons may enhance and intensify students’ learning. Besides, Lynch (2005) presents the rationale of using sitcoms for teaching in her article: “Sitcoms containing authentic language, are easily obtainable, provide vocabulary, grammar and cultural aspects and are fun for students.” Moreover, according to Sherman (2003), authentic videos are considered a way of entertainment to arouse learners’ interest in tasks and produce enjoyment, which in its turn promotes the students’ motivation. In other words, sitcoms can add interest to the classroom routine and potentially improve students’ motivation. Yuksel and Tanriverdi (2009) concludes that using sitcoms in teaching English for learners is not only for fun and breaking down boredom, but also brings particularly the great effects to learners in which learners have motivation to perceive the lesson effectively, know the variety of new

vocabulary, can master the exact pronunciation, can develop four language skills, can improve memory in acquiring English lessons, can understand cultural aspects of the English-speaking countries, and through sitcoms the teachers and learners can share the same interest and get closer together. In fact, TV series can help learners improve not only their speaking skill and pronunciation but also their vocabulary, sentence structures and sentence patterns. Starting from the early days of *Sesame Street* to the famous sitcoms such as *Friends* and *How I Met Your Mother*, EFL teachers have incorporated TV shows as part of their teaching tools. Many teachers of English have used subtitled sitcoms to teach and encourage student to learn English (Hayati & Mohmedi, 2011; Yuksel & Tanriverdi, 2009).

The art of cinema and its ability to attract people have always been an unbeatable power; therefore, encouraging English learners with this unique experience will enhance the learning and teaching processes. Given these above-mentioned benefits of using sitcoms, the researcher is highly motivated and filled with great enthusiasm for exploiting this topic in depth. Most importantly, whereas a considerable number of studies on relevant issues have been conducted worldwide, research of this kind still seems to be left unattended in Hue University of Foreign Languages.

This study aims at identifying the perceptions of English major freshmen towards the use of English sitcoms in speaking class. It also describes the implementation of using sitcoms to enhance their speaking skill in class and explores how it influences their motivation as well as language proficiency. With these aims, the following research questions are addressed:

1. What are the first-year students' perceptions of the use of sitcoms in speaking class?
2. How does using sitcoms influence the students' motivation?
3. What are the benefits of using sitcoms as a teaching tool in

speaking class?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Sherman (2003) presents a convincing argument for incorporating authentic video material into language classrooms. She provides a variety of practical classroom activities showing how to use video to bring real world language and culture into the classroom in contemporary, engaging and productive ways. According to Tomalin's (1981, p.12) research, "language teachers like video because it motivates learners, brings the real world into the classroom, contextualizes language naturally and enables learners to experience authentic language. Students like it because video presentations are interesting, challenging, and stimulating to watch." As students learn to enjoy watching video materials, they will eventually seek out more of their own time watching for their own pleasure, and their English will improve as a by-product of their enjoyment (Hwang, 2005; Katchen, 1996; Krashen, 1997, cited in Hui – ying, Bai).

By using the videotaped segments, the main focus is on developing the learners' fluency in the process of language acquisition in a natural ongoing day-to-day interaction with native speakers. Usually the teachers should focus on the language, content, and production so as to meet the objectives of the learning process. For example, some certain situations require a material where the medium is "transferable to real life situations, which students are likely to come across" (Stempleki, 1987 p. 12-14).

Using films and TV series in English language teaching (ELT) presents almost countless possibilities today. According to Dalton (2012), a **sit-com** or **sitcom**, a portmanteau of the full term "**situation comedy**", is a genre of comedy centered on a fixed set of characters who carry over from episode to episode. Sitcoms are usually a half-hour series segmented into episodes, where the same characters appear in the same

settings.

In comparison with other series of stories, sitcoms are funny. Each episode the same central characters in the same setting are exposed to a new unexpected comic situation. According to Mills (2009), the comic aspect is therefore the most important distinguishing feature of the sitcom as a genre. Laughter is an indicator of participation, since the sitcom is a social event – "the audience perceptions are quick, shared and simultaneous" (Sherman, 2003).

As watching sitcoms in free time has become more and more popular among teenagers and adults recently, in English class, sitcoms are great tool for English teachers. Unlike feature films, most of the episodes of series are shorts. According to Baddock (1996), it is possible to use a sitcom which lasts about 30 minutes per episode in English classroom. For the study environment, if the teachers choose to show students a movie which normally lasts one hour and a half, it would mean that nothing else but watching the movie can be done during the lesson. According to Bilsborough (2009), another advantage of using sitcoms is that while the individual episodes are shorter, the total time that students can spend with the series is longer, which means more exposure to the language, better promotion of fluency and more second language acquisition (SLA).

In addition, Hlozková (2013) claims that "Another motivational factor in learning English via sitcoms is the challenge and the sense of achievement connected with exposure to the authentic language. Furthermore, sitcoms are powerful means for supporting students in autonomous and lifelong learning" (p.35). Students are exposed to authentic English in real medial intended to native speakers in real situations in daily life. In order to understand what is happening on the screen and what makes people laugh out loud, and enjoy sitcoms as native speakers, students have to know more information about the content by getting more knowledge about vocabulary, grammar structures, and culture

as well as get involved in activities based on sitcoms by teachers in class. Moreover, with many different episodes of the sitcom, there is a plenty of topics providing prompts for discussions or other activities and showing more daily problems solved than any single movie.

What is more, by exploiting sitcoms, humor will be a useful tool to help learners overcome the psychology barrier in classes so they can freely and comfortably get involved in activities given by teachers, because a positive environment in classroom may be more effective and beneficial than a strict and serious one. Thanks to its humorous nature, according to Hlozková (2013), active watching sitcoms in the English lessons may enhance and intensify student's learning.

*Friends* and *Mind your language* were chosen to show in a speaking class in this research. According to Lauer (2004), *Friends* was on air from 1994 – 2004. The sitcom was about a group of friends, Rachel Green, Ross Geller, Monica Geller, Joey Tribbiani, Chandler Bing and Phoebe Buffay, going through massive confusion and fear, past and future romances, family trouble, fights, laughs, tears and surprises, to find success and happiness in life. According to IMDB-the most reliable website about movies, *Friends* is one of the most popular American TV series. Research by Kaplan International Colleges (2012), an international education service provider, found that the long-running American sitcom was the most popular television series for helping people who are studying improve their language skills. The study found that 82 per cent of people said watching television programs helped them learn English while 26 per cent claim to have improved their understanding of the language from watching episodes of *Friends*. Meanwhile, *Mind your language* is an older sitcom which was released from 1977-1986. According to Television Tropes (n.d.), the show is set in an adult education college in London and focuses on the English as a Foreign Language class taught by Mr. Jeremy Brown, portrayed by Barry Evans, who had to deal with

a motley crew of foreign students. The sitcom focuses on Jeremy's hit-and-miss attempts to help his internationally diverse class of students navigate the mazes of the English language and British culture.

Regarding motivation, there are plenty of arguments for using sitcoms in English lessons. First, sitcoms distinguish themselves from other traditional types of teaching materials such as course books or audio recordings (Chen, 1998, p. 21). Second, sitcoms are part of the popular culture; therefore, many nowadays teenagers and young adults are familiar with the sitcoms and their characters (Mills, 2009). Third, sitcoms deal with issues of modern society and learners may identify with the sitcom protagonists' experiences (Chen, 1998, p. 23). Next, students are exposed to authentic English in real media intended to native speakers. Therefore, they want to get information, understand and enjoy sitcoms like native speakers do (Sherman, 2003). Last but not least, learners experience sense of entertainment, satisfaction and achievement since understanding the authentic language is very challenging. Besides the motivation nature of the sitcoms as such, the teacher may raise students' interest and involvement in English learning by using activities and materials around the sitcom that students find engaging (Murray, 2004, p. 6).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Research approaches & participants**

In this study, the research approach is a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. This research took place in a speaking class at Hue University of Foreign Languages. Therefore, the participants included one teacher and 40 students of Speaking 2 Class. The students have the same level of learning English, and they all have learnt English for a long time yet most of them do not speak English in class much, so the researcher chose them to do research. In addition, this study also involved an 8-year-experienced teacher of English who was currently teaching Speaking in this class.

## Materials

There are several factors that make *Friends* and *Mind your language* the perfect candidates for use in this study. On the one hand, *Friends* is full of American culture materials that can be used in class to discuss, for example, the attitude of American towards to the LGBT community, dating, etc. On the other hand, *Mind your language* is full of British culture and its typical sense of humor. Additionally, *Mind your language* is a sitcom that depicts the most common “stereotypes” about people from many countries in the most hilarious way.

## Procedures

One week before the teacher started to show the sitcoms, 40 students in a Speaking 2 Class were asked to fill in the Pre-Questionnaires. After that, they joined the lessons by watching two episodes of *Friends* and two episodes of *Mind your language* in four weeks.

### *Controlled debate*

In the first week, the students watched the first episode of *Friends*. Then the students were divided into two camps on either side of an interesting issue taken from the episode: “Should you cancel your wedding when you realize that you no longer love your spouse?” The students from each side had to stand up and speak out their opinions so as to support their side. Specially, the teacher made sure every student contributed at least one appropriate convincing statement.

### *Role-play and Dubbing*

Next, the teacher took an issue from the second *Friends*’ episode to create a situation which was built based on Rachel’s story: “One day, your parents threatened that they would stop providing you living expenses during college years unless you break up with your boyfriend/girlfriend, what would you do?” The students were asked to form a group of 6 to play different roles as “Monica”, “Rachel”, “Phoebe”, “Joey”, “Chandler”, and “Ross” to solve the given situation. Moreover, the

students had a great opportunity to practice real English pronunciation, accent, and articulation when the teacher asked them to do “dubbing activity”. First of all, they read the English subtitles while watching the scene of the sitcoms. Then, the teacher divided students into different groups in which each student read aloud the script of his/ her character. Next, the teacher turned the volume of the sitcom down. Students in each group were supposed to dub voices of the characters in a convincing way. At the end of the lesson, students would vote to choose the best group.

### *Mediated watching*

In the following week, they had a chance to experience a new sitcom-based activity called “mediated watching”. In this activity, the teacher chose a humorous scene full of action from *Mind your language* and turned the sound of the sitcom down. The students were asked to work in pairs; one of them was sitting backward to a screen while the other one was watching the scene and describing what was happening. After watching the short sequence, the teacher turned the volume up and the student sitting back to the screen turned back to the screen in order to watch the scene. This student could compare and contrast his/her image with reality.

### *Cultural exploration*

In the last week, the students worked in group to find out the nationality of each character based on the funny stereotypes depicted in *Mind your language*. After that, the students listed down the mistakes that the characters in the sitcom make when they speak English and then compared them to the common mistakes that English major students in HUFL often make. After experiencing four lessons, the Post-questionnaires were offered for students to get more data for the research. Besides, after each class, I would interview the teacher and 10 students to explore their perspective towards the activities based on sitcoms in class. The data which had been collected from questionnaires and interview were summarized and analyzed to lead to the conclusion.



## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Students' attitudes towards using English sitcoms in Speaking class before and after the intervention**

According to the collected results, the answers to the question “*Do you like watching English sitcoms with English subtitles?*” were far from being expected. In further detail, the majority of the students (77.5 %) are not keen on watching English sitcoms with English subtitles since most of them admitted that they are big fans of Korean drama while only a small percentage of them (22.5 %) like watching English sitcoms both for fun and for improving their English proficiency. It is surprising to note that most of the students (34 out of 40) showed their interest in the idea of using sitcoms in speaking class while the rest seemed to be doubtful of this new method.

In detail, after the intervention, the students found this way of learning very “exciting”. This proves that English sitcoms not only create a comfortable classroom atmosphere but also have a great impact on the students' mood as they become more excited and motivated in speaking class. Besides, thanks to the activities designed for the students to visualize how English sitcoms were used in a real speaking class, most of the students consider English sitcoms an “effective” tool that could help them improve their oral skill. In addition, using English sitcoms is a “practical” way to encourage students to speak more as well as help them enhance their speaking proficiency. Furthermore, contrary to the negative feelings of the students before sitcoms were applied, fewer of them felt “bored” or “difficult” when they took part in the activities after watching sitcoms. To sum up, after the intervention, the majority of students strongly agreed with the positive feelings that English sitcoms bring to them. This can be attributed to the fact that English sitcoms are humorous, so they can be an ice-breaker to “melt” boredom in classroom. Moreover, as almost all of the students involved in the research are very fond of the idea of using English sitcoms in class, it is unlikely that they find it difficult when learning by this way.

## **The impact of the sitcom-based activities on the students' motivation through using sitcoms in speaking class**

### *Role play and Dubbing*

Based on my observation in the class during four weeks, it is obvious that when the students dealt with new activities, such as “Role play” and “Dubbing” activities, there were more interactions among them. Clearly, role play is an effective activity in speaking class as it either puts students into someone's shoes or puts them into an imaginary situation; therefore, it provokes the students' language ability and brainstorming to produce the real seeking performances. Nearly all of the students claim that thanks to this activity, they could communicate with each other more to share the roles in these activities: they had to talk to each other to figure out the strengths and weaknesses of each person to divide suitable roles for all members. Each person had his/ her own roles, which means, they all had to take responsibility to work to contribute to the teamwork.

For example, in this study, the teacher took an issue from the first *Friends* 'episode to create a situation which was built based on Rachel's story: “One day, your parents threatened that they would stop providing you living expenses during college years unless you break up with your boyfriend/girlfriend, what would you do?” Clearly, this interesting situation gave the students an opportunity to show their attitudes, points of views about one of the most common social issues of youth. 6 students would form a group to find the solution to the question, and then they had to play different roles as “Monica”, “Rachel”, “Phoebe”, “Joey”, “Chandler”, and “Ross” to show their team work's answers. By developing the situation based on the sitcom, the students felt like they were parts of it, and they found interesting to share their thoughts and problem-solving skills. One of the participants said,

*I like it. I talked to my classmates more today. I laughed a lot. The situation was fun and so up-to-date! I felt more comfortable and curious about other groups'*

*performances. All members in my group seemed to be more aggressive, enthusiastic and competitive. Oh, and I enjoy watching sitcoms as well.*

Besides doing role play, dubbing is a very new idea in this speaking class. In this research, students were given a script of particular scene. First of all, they read the English subtitles while watching the scene of the sitcoms. Then, the teacher divided students into different groups in which each student read aloud the script of his/ her character. Next, the teacher turned the volume of the sitcom down. Students in each group were supposed to dub voices of the characters in a convincing way. At the end of the lesson, students would vote to choose the best group. Without doubt, the atmosphere in the classroom was more and more exciting since all the students seemed to be enthusiastic about doing this activity. Specially, a large number of the students claim that through dubbing, they had a great opportunity to practice authentic English pronunciation, accent, and articulation. In fact, based on the analysis of the interview, the students gave positive responses to this activity. One of the interviewees shared,

*Wow! Time went by so quickly. I didn't feel sleepy at all. And I didn't feel stressed either! The sitcom was so funny. My friends seemed to be easier and happier to work with today.*

In reality, the traditional discussion group activity may not guarantee that everybody speaks English in class because some good students would dominate all the time in group discussion while other students may keep silent until the end. By contrast, the activities based on sitcoms have proved to motivate the students a great deal and get them deeply involved in the given tasks.

### *Controlled Debate*

Working with a pseudo-debate format, the students were divided into two camps on either side of an interesting issue

taken from an episode of *Friends*: “Should you cancel your wedding when you realize that you no longer love your spouse?” The students from each side had to stand up and speak out their opinions so as to support their side. Specially, the teacher made sure every student contributed at least one appropriate convincing statement. The focus of this activity was increasing students' confidence, poise, and self-esteem in a more comfortable way rather than just giving them a topic without context. As I observed, the class became a vigorous mini-debate in which the students were motivated to practice and demonstrate their critical thinking skills. Most of the students' comments on controlled debate activity were so positive and encouraging. As one participant remarked:

*This activity was thought-provoking but I didn't feel forced or bored thanks to watching 'Friends'. The sitcom gave me a vivid picture of the topic, like I could use some scenes in the film as prompts for my ideas.*

Fortunately, only a small number of the students (3 out of 40 students) seemed to be not ready for this kind of task. They thought this activity would put them under pressure, and that they were not able to produce the answer as quickly as other students did. This following response was a typical example:

*My vocabulary is pretty poor, so I need more time to find words, grammar structures to form a statement. I felt like I was at a job interview. And if I got picked by Ms. P, and I was not able to give the answer right away, I would lose face. I don't like it.*

### *Mediated watching*

The idea of this activity was inspired from Hlozková (2013) in his Diploma thesis called *Sitcoms as a tool for English Language Teaching*. It was suitably adapted for HUFL English majors; therefore, it brought both students and teacher new experience in learning and teaching English. In this activity, the teacher chose a humorous scene full of action and

turned the sound of the sitcom down. The students were asked to work in pairs; one of them was sitting backward to a screen while the other one was watching the scene and describing what was happening. After watching the short sequence, the teacher turned the volume up and the student sitting back to the screen turned back to the screen in order to watch the scene. This student could compare and contrast his/her image with reality. Interestingly, most of the students claimed that this activity promoted their imagination as well as speaking and listening skills. The teacher used this activity twice in class and the students found it fun and challenging. One of the interviewees recalled,

*I think it's very fun and useful. Describing what is happening on the screen reminds me of describing pictures in FCE speaking test, but we had more fun. I was so eager for my turn!*

As a result, I received many positive comments about this activity; however, seven students thought this one was not interesting. And this following comment is very typical:

*I think it is very challenging and difficult even though we have fun. And the class was noisy. Besides, I didn't understand what my partner said because of her strong dialect. This activity is not really suitable in an oral training class.*

On the one hand, based on the analysis of the questionnaires and interview, I found out that the students would be more excited and eager if they realized the activity might help them perform better in the exams. On the other hand, this activity is quite challenging for a few students in class.

#### *Cultural exploration*

Hlozková (2013) stated that “since most sitcoms are British or American, they contain cultural references to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the

*United States of America. Students are asked to notice as much information about a place in the episode as possible.”*(p.31) In this study, the students would pay attention on the architecture of the American coffee shops, houses, or the British college; what kinds of clothes people wear; what kind of food or drink they order and how people behave in the coffee shop or the cafeteria. Also, the students would notice about the characters’ accents. Most of the students claim that English sitcoms trigger their curiosity; therefore, through watching sitcoms, they had a great chance to explore both American culture and British culture.

Moreover, after show time, the students were shaped in group to find out the nationality of each character based on the funny stereotypes depicted in “*Mind your language*”. In addition, through episode 4 of “*Mind your language*”, the students were asked to list down the mistakes that the characters in the sitcom make when they speak English, then compared them to the common mistakes that English major students in HUFL often make. The students found these activities very motivating and gave them positive comments.

In fact, to speak a language well, one has to be able to think in that language. By exploiting sitcoms in class, both students and teacher agreed that they could be immersed in the culture for a certain amount of time. From the students’ point of view, studying culture motivates them to study the target language as well as renders the study of English meaningful. Thus, without doubt, this activity is one of the most favorite activities voted by the students after four weeks.

### **Effective teaching and learning material**

Based on the results of the interview and classroom observation, it can be concluded that sitcoms are not only an amusing and vivid material that keeps the students interested in both the activities in class and their individual speaking performance, but they are also an effective teaching tool. In reality, by using sitcoms, the teacher could attract the

students' attention as well as get them involved in classroom activities with ease. On top of that, the teacher was encouraged to design more creative and engaging activities based on sitcoms. This finding is of importance in a way that it supports the viewpoint of Willmot *et al* (2012): there is strong evidence that sitcom as a teaching material can inspire and engage students when incorporated into student-centered learning activities through increasing student motivation and enhancing learning experience. The teacher participating in this study shared,

*Sitcom could be an effective and entertaining teaching material. I have used authentic videos (i.e. TV commercials) in speaking class quite often but honestly, thanks to this study, I've learned that teachers could make use of sitcoms to design interesting activities to motivate students and get them involved in every activity. They seemed to communicate with each other more and the atmosphere in the classroom was always cheerful. And that's great! Although it took me more time to design the activities, it's worth it! I still want to use sitcoms in class appropriately.*

What is more, most of the students agreed that the two sitcoms entitled *Friends* and *Mind your language* were more fun, more entertaining, more relaxing compared to textbooks. Indeed, sitcoms are really golden ice breakers to accelerate the process of learning because where there is fear, there is no learning. Furthermore, the language and conversations in sitcoms were authentic and up-to-date, so students could put them into practice in real life. Moreover, a considerable number of students said that watching sitcoms helped them upgrade their listening and speaking skill simultaneously. Several students claimed that thanks to sitcoms, they could learn and remember vocabulary more easily in a certain context. Similarly, after doing some activities, they remembered new words naturally without trying too hard. According to a large number of the

students, authentic accent, pronunciation, stress, melodies were great factors provided by sitcoms, which helped them enhance their speaking skill effectively. Fortunately, only 4 out of 40 students seem not to be really interested in it. One of the participants said,

*Sitcom gave us a great source of daily English. But, we still need formal and academic language for the international speaking test like IELTS. I prefer the traditional textbooks and strict teachers, because, No pressure – no diamond.*

The critical comments actually pointed out the disadvantages of using sitcoms in teaching speaking class; however, except for four particular cases, the majority of the students are aware of the benefits of using sitcom as a learning material.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

### **For teachers**

There are some practical implications for English language teaching and learning with the use of English sitcoms. First of all, teachers can use some other popular sitcoms which are easy to understand, such as *How I Met Your Mother* or the well-known animated sitcom called *The Simpsons*. Secondly, preparing lessons using English sitcoms is indispensable, which requires teachers invest more time and energy. In fact, designing the sitcom-based activities takes time, especially when it comes to choosing appropriate episodes. Therefore, teachers should choose episodes that contain interesting and true-to-life topics to attract students' attention. Besides, the pace of speech in each episode is also taken into consideration. It has to be suited to the students' level or a little above. Also, lesson plans should be carefully prepared so that the teaching time and activities are carried out reasonably. Last but not least, English teachers' task is to promote their learners' autonomy and support self-directed language learning.



### **For students**

Apart from teachers, students are also the ones who must be aware of what to do to improve their speaking ability in class. Using sitcoms can encourage and motivate learners to be more responsible for their learning: they are capable of learning English language via sitcoms on their own at home. In other words, they ought to discover suitable sitcoms and how to exploit them efficiently with or without teachers' request.

### **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The study was carried out on a small quantity of the first-year students at HUFL. Due to time limit, the research cannot study further to find out what challenges the teacher and the students face with when using English sitcoms in class. In other words, this research is carried out on a small scale. In addition, the lack of subtitles in the first episode of *Mind your language* made it harder for the students to understand. At their level, the subtitles would not be really necessary, however, it is better to use them as the sound in the classroom was not always the best.

### **CONCLUSION**

It can be concluded that the participants involved in the study have positive perceptions of using English sitcoms in speaking class. Regarding the impact of sitcom-based activities on the students' motivation, using English sitcoms in speaking class could enhance both the students' extrinsic and intrinsic motivation by getting the students involved in the sitcom-based activities. As for the teacher, it is obvious that sitcoms are amusing and vivid materials that keep the students interested in both the activities in class and their individual speaking performance. Added to this, the sitcoms are considered more fun, more entertaining, and more relaxing compared to textbooks. In conclusion, the benefits of sitcoms are acknowledged by a large number of students and the teacher in the study, hence sitcoms are likely to have great potential for use in teaching English at HUFL.

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## **INTERVIEWS ON ENGLISH EDUCATION IN XINJIANG**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in western China is a unique and challenging setting for English education. In the past decade, Xinjiang's population has experienced a major demographic shift in ethnic composition with Han Chinese becoming a small majority. This complex and changing society has experienced ethnic tensions, increasingly strict security measures and a fear among minority peoples that they are being culturally overwhelmed by Han migration and Chinese government policies.

This paper reports on interviews with two Xinjiang women about their experiences and perspectives on learning English. One interviewee was Han and the other was Uyghur. These interviews were conducted in Turpan city in August, 2019. After post-interview analysis, their recorded answers were compared and contrasted to identify commonalities and differences. This analysis is intended to help English teachers who work in other contexts understand the experiences and perspectives of English learners living in Xinjiang and raise questions for future exploration.

### **BACKGROUND: XINJIANG BEFORE 1949**

Forming the westernmost territorial subdivision of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is a vast area spanning roughly 1.6 million square kilometers and is home to approximately 24 million people (XJTJN, 2019). Xinjiang possesses varied topographic features ranging from inhospitable desert basins and high mountain ranges to fertile oases watered by seasonal rivers. Straddling the historic Silk Road, this territory has long been a complex zone of interaction between powerful

neighboring cultures. Modern Xinjiang shares its borders with Russia, Mongolia, former Soviet Central Asia, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Despite its distance from the Chinese heartland, Xinjiang's status as a route for overland trade and a domestic frontier for energy exploration have given it a special significance for the PRC's leadership (Lim, 2010).

Culturally and ethnically, Xinjiang is a highly complex region. For much of the last 200 years, the dominant ethnic group in Xinjiang has been the Uyghurs, a Turkic and Muslim culture of oasis farmers and town-dwellers around the edges of the Taklamakan desert and in the Turpan basin. Xinjiang's other minority ethnicities include Kazaks, Hui (Muslim Han), Sibo and Mongolians. In contrast, the Han Chinese presence in Xinjiang has historically been small and the province's Sinicization has been a 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon (Millward & Tursun, 2004). Nonetheless, the year 2019 marks the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of what the Chinese Communist Party's official history refers to as "the peaceful liberation of Xinjiang."

### **BACKGROUND: XINJIANG AFTER 1949**

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region was established in 1955. The historiography of the PRC regards Xinjiang as having been an inseparable and integral part of Chinese territory for millennia (Bovingdon & Tursun, 2004), however the region is ethnically distinct from the rest of China and Uyghur political "autonomy" is largely nominal (Bovingdon, 2004; Gladney, 2004). Moreover, suspicions about some minority ethnicities of Xinjiang have existed from the earliest days of the PRC (Dillon, 2014). For instance, many early Uyghur communists were considered too pro-Soviet and less trustworthy (Jacobs, 2016); Wang Zhen, the first PRC military governor of Xinjiang, considered local minorities to be "troublemaking" and earned a reputation for implementing harsh policies of suppression (Cliff, 2016).

From the 1950s until the 1960s, government-orchestrated projects brought significant numbers of Han into Xinjiang;

further migration followed in the economic liberalization of the 1980s and 1990s (Liang & Ma, 2004; Toops, 2004, Wiemer, 2004). Xinjiang has been a major destination for internal Chinese migration and most of the current Han population has been living there for less than two generations (Becquelin, 2000; Howell & Fan, 2011). Han residents have tended to cluster in newer centers of industry such as Ürümqi, Karamay and the newer neighborhoods of older Uyghur cities (Cliff, 2016). In the last decade, Xinjiang's population has transitioned to a Han majority but due to a lack of clarity in official statistics, it is uncertain in which year this change officially took place (XJTJN, 2010; XJTJN, 2019). Although Han in Xinjiang are an under-studied group, it is a diverse population, portions of which have developed a "settler culture" with a self-image of heroically civilizing a backwards periphery for the good of the nation (Cliff, 2016).

The human rights situation in Xinjiang has attracted international apprehension, despite vehement denials from the Chinese government. A general consensus exists among foreign observers that ethnic tensions and the heavily securitized atmosphere in Xinjiang are heavily driven by Han in-migration, economic disparities and political repression (Bovingdon, 2010; Clarke, 2008). Furthermore, a contentious debate has long existed among foreign scholars as to whether Xinjiang can be considered a kind of internal colony (Bovingdon, 2010; Clarke, 2008; Cliff, 2016; Sautman, 2000). Wu and Song (2014) observed that ethnic animosity in Xinjiang has also taken place against a background of growing economic inequality and intensifying labor market competition while Hasmath and Ho (2015) noted that discrimination favoring Han in private sector employment has become a common complaint. Conversely, some Han reportedly resent policies created to increase ethnic minority participation in provincial university admissions and local state employment (Wu & Song, 2014). Other observers have asserted that significant disparities exist in education outcomes, including gaps between northern and southern

regions and poor bilingual education among ethnic minorities (Gao, 2017; Tohti, 2015). Although China's inland provinces have historically been less developed than its eastern provinces and China's ethnic minorities have historically trailed Han in various socioeconomic measures, there is nonetheless a lack of comparisons between Han and ethnic minority populations in the body of sociological scholarship about changes occurring in Chinese society (Wu & Song, 2014; Zang 2008).

External human rights observers have repeatedly charged that the repression of Xinjiang's minorities has long been implemented under a cover of anti-terrorism, anti-radicalism and crime-control measures which intensified amid global anti-terrorism campaigns following the September 11, 2001 attacks (China 2017/2018, 2018; Ramzy & Buckley, 2019). Even before then, violence in Xinjiang had been a special concern of the Chinese government; 162 deaths were reported in approximately 200 incidents between 1990 and 2001 (Hutzler, 2001). The most dramatic violence in Xinjiang's recent history was the Ürümqi riots of 2009, officially called the "7/5 Incident." The 7/5 Incident involved an initially-peaceful protest by Uyghurs which escalated into violent police responses, Uyghur attacks upon Han civilians and communication blackouts. A fuller accounting of the exact events is yet to be developed, but the 7/5 Incident was quickly followed by strengthened security measures, limited online Han criticism of the provincial government, replacement of the governor and a wave of tax and spending reforms aimed at assuaging Han in Xinjiang (Cliff, 2016). Following the 7/5 Incident, Xinjiang has been the site of new, high-tech mass-surveillance techniques such as facial-recognition cameras and complex data-sorting algorithms which monitor people's whereabouts (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2019; China: Big data fuels crackdown in minority region, 2018). Starting in 2017, foreign media began to report mass-disappearances and detentions of Uyghurs and other minorities, creating what the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists has called "the largest



mass internment of an ethnic-religious minority since World War II” (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2019). The Xinjiang “re-education centers” and “kindergartens” house hundreds of thousands of detainees, including children separated from parents, with the apparent aim of suppressing and reshaping minority languages and culture via indoctrination and assimilation (Amnesty International, 2018; Ramzy & Buckley, 2019; Sudworth, 2019). In 2019, “unprecedented” joint statements expressing concern over human rights abuses in Xinjiang were raised by 23 member states before the United Nations Human Rights Council and the UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (Charbonneau, 2019).

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

In August 2019, the author had the opportunity to visit Turpan, a prefecture-level municipality of approximately 600,000 people southeast of Ürümqi. There, he wished to interview Xinjiang natives who had studied English. These interviews were recorded and analyzed to obtain those individuals’ perspectives and learn insights for English teachers working in other contexts. One of the two participants was Han Chinese, the other Uyghur; the author was also curious whether people of different ethnic backgrounds would provide contrasting experiences of English education. Both women had majored in English in their respective universities and regularly used English within their current employment, though with differing levels of ability.

Each interview took place on a different day and was conducted mainly in English, though several answers were partially in Chinese. The interviews were conducted as privately as each situation would allow and no photographs or video were taken. Interviews were documented with a digital audio voice recorder; all recordings took place with the consent of the participants after seeing a written briefing on the project goals and the author’s background. Interviewees had the option to choose their own pseudonym or withdraw at any time. Interview questions were provided to the

participants and reviewed before each session (see Appendix). After transcription, responses were analyzed and compared to find similarities and differences. Interview reparation, procedures and post-interview analyses were guided by methodologies from the book *Interviewing as Qualitative Research* (Seidman, 2006). Also helpful was the author's previous experience of conducting similar interviews with 17 Palestinian university teachers in the West Bank in March, 2017 (Gondree, 2017).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Following post-interview analysis, Questions 8, 10, 11 and 13 (see Appendix) yielded the best responses for comparison. For Question 10, both individuals recalled similar difficulties with studying English. For Questions 8, 11 and 13, both participants differed in their opinions about the best ways to practice English outside of class, what kinds of help they would have appreciated in their studies and their opinions about the role of English education in Xinjiang. The first interviewee, Anna, is a Han Chinese and a native of Ürümqi. She is the daughter of Han migrants who came to Xinjiang in a government-directed development program in the 1960s. She majored in English in university, was (in part) educated in Beijing and currently works as a translator and travel guide in a small private company; her husband is a career military officer. The second interviewee, Gulkiz, is a Uyghur native of Turpan. She majored in English in university, was (in part) educated in Guangzhou, and currently works in hospitality services; her husband works in the same field. Both interviewees use English in their current work, though they use it to differing extents. Anna's English ability is fairly sophisticated and she uses it more regularly at work; Gulkiz uses English on a less-regular basis to communicate with foreign visitors and watch foreign entertainment.

Many of the responses reflected the kinds of problems which commonly impact English learners around the world. For instance, in their answers to Question 5, "What do you think

is the most difficult thing about studying English?” both Anna and Gulkiz reported that English grammar and new vocabulary acquisition had been their most memorable challenges. However, Gulkiz added that a lack of authentic practice and feedback had been a problem for her as well: “I think I can speak English and I can describe my think but I think it's not very real sentence. It's a wrong sentence... so I think English grammar is so difficult for me.” More elaboration on lacking authentic communication and adequate practice opportunities with native speakers were also mentioned in Gulkiz’s responses to Questions 8 and 11.

For Question 10, “What kinds of problems did you have studying English outside of school?” both interviewees respectively agreed on the central importance of practice and self-study in building linguistic competence. They also believed that in order to make progress, students need to develop a willingness to speak and find adequate opportunities to practice. Both individuals’ responses also expressed a conviction about the importance of student agency, self-responsibility and a willingness to do what is necessary for study. Additionally, they contrasted this quality with student reticence or reluctance to invest enough effort in learning and practice. According to Anna:

*A: Practice is very, very important, yeah. But as long as you open your mouth and speak-*

*E: Mhm.*

*A: -you -because some students they- they- you know, they didn't want to- to talk with people. But language is- is important to- to- it's a way for communication so that's very important for you to talk. Then, even though you made a mistake, you are not afraid of talking. This will help a lot, I think.*

Gulkiz also expressed the importance of creating her own opportunities for regular study in her reply to Question 10:

*G: You- just you want to spend the time to learn. I think it's the- you can learn it. But, how many time is not so lazy.*

*E: How many time is not so lazy. What do you mean?*

*G: It's not to study and not to hold on and study ... put it down-*

*E: -so studying time. Studying enough-*

*G: Always in the time to-*

*E: So regular studying.*

*G: Yes.*

While both interviewees agreed on the importance of creating opportunities for regular study and practice outside of the classroom, both participants had their own preferred ways of doing so. For Question 8, “Where do you practice speaking English? What do you think is the best way to practice English?” both women’s answers expressed different individual preferences for how language practice could be conveniently arranged into their lives. For instance, Anna found regular morning vocabulary review activities to be helpful. Her regular work occupied much of her day, so morning offered the most convenient time. Not only did morning review refresh her English vocabulary, but she also believed that it helped to reinforce her recently learned material.

*A: Actually, every day I spend some time reading. In the morning. I think that's very important for me, in my experience, you know.*

*E: What?*

*A: I read aloud, you know, and try to recite the new words.*

*E: Okay.*

*A: So in the morning, at least half an hour reading... reading all the things we have learned....*

*E: So this is, this is a morning review?*

*A: Morning review, yes.*

*E: When you learned something the day before?*

*A: Yes, that's right.*

Elsewhere in the interview, Anna recalled other effective methods of teaching and learning resources which she had experienced in university. One was an “English corner” where Chinese learners could regularly converse with native English speakers on campus. She also described one memorable teacher who supplemented his lessons with music and sing-alongs in class. As a testament to his effectiveness, she still recalled the lyrics to some songs 20 years later.

For Question 8, Gulkiz prefaced her responses by saying that she lacked a “normal environment” for English practice. By this, she meant she had few native speakers to have regular, authentic practice with: “I think I am norma- normal type to practice English because I have never ever have- have a foreigner teacher and I never have a foreigner friend, so I think I don't have... hmm, normal environment to practice English.” Based on her comments elsewhere in the interview, she believed the lack of authentic feedback and live

conversational dynamics were contributing factors to lacking a “normal environment” for learning English.

Despite this, Gulkiz managed to practice listening skills by watching TV and movies. In fact, she specifically said that watching English-language programming was her preferred way of practicing. This was because of the material’s authenticity, entertainment value and its ease of accommodation within her work schedule. She also suggested that this was especially the case when the programming was interesting and enjoyable:

*G: Watching movie.*

*E: Watching movies?*

*G: Yes.*

*E: Oh, okay. All right. All right-*

*G: Best way- I think- I think watching TV is best way to me.*

*E: Watching TV. Okay, what do you watch?*

*G: ...Gossip Girl. Do you heard that?*

*E: Gossip Girl?*

*G: Yeah.*

*E: Yes, I've heard of that. Okay.*

For Question 11, “What kind of help would be good for your study of English?” Anna believed that frequent, authentic listening practice outside of class was most helpful. Furthermore, her answer indicated that listening practice was a task that could be comfortably fit into her workday.

*A: You know, it's very important that we... listen... listen (to) English radios.*

*E: Mhm.*

*A: Uh, yeah... every morning when we go- when we get up, the first thing is that we turn on the- the recorder... and then you can have some English... programs for you to listen to.*

*E: Mm.*

*A: And then you brush your teeth, you wash your face, but at- at the same time you have the English radio over there... so this- this helps a lot.*

Gulkiz's response to Question 11 was, in part, a reiteration of her desire to have more chances to enjoy authentic conversation practice with native speakers: "I think, uh, just make a friend and, uh, makes- you make a- environment, language environment, to practice. Practice your English." She also added that the enjoyment of creating social bonds with foreign friends would make her English practice more fulfilling as well.

The interviewees expressed very different responses to Question 13: "Do you think English education is important for people in Xinjiang? Why or why not?" Unexpectedly, Anna saw English education as a means of teaching language-learning skills, but not necessarily as a way for all learners to develop communications skills. According to Anna:

*A: ...still it's important for all the students to study English.*

*E: Hm.*

*A: I think maybe this will teach them, uh, more abilities. So that although, you know, that when they study English, maybe, uh, it's a kind of ability for them. Yeah. ...it's not really that you can- will use English in your future but, uh, maybe this will teach you a kind of ability to- to study languages.*

*E: Hm.*

*A: Yeah. So, I think it's- it's as important as when you study mathematics, Chinese. So it's not that maybe you'll use math- mathematics in future life but, anyway, this will teach you ability...*

In contrast, Gulkiz saw English, and language study in general, as useful for communication. She argued that English skills were beneficial because they could help a person to travel and forge connections to the wider world:

*G: If you want more language, you can travel and you can speak other people is come from...*

*E: Okay.*

*G: ...and you can know more language and you can know more the world.*

Although she recognized the communicative uses of English and saw value in developing English proficiency, Gulkiz speculated in an unscripted portion of the interview that English language education among Uyghurs may be under-developed.

## **CONCLUSION**

These interviews of English learners in Xinjiang offered a welcome possibility to explore different perspectives about language education from a Han and a Uyghur. The author hoped to gain helpful insights from interviewees' self-



reported viewpoints and find new topics for further research. Unfortunately, these interviews were more limited in scope and yielded less usable information than the author had initially intended. For instance, the author had unsuccessfully attempted to find more opportunities to interview a wider array of people in Xinjiang with a broader mix of backgrounds, sexes, educational levels, ethnicities and places of origin.

Finding cooperative participants for this project was a notably challenging aspect. Because access to universities in Xinjiang is restricted for unaffiliated individuals without invitation, the author had attempted to contact several university English departments and private English schools beforehand. He received no responses to his Chinese-language inquiries, regardless of whether they had been sent by letter, email or phone. In the future, gathering a larger pool of interviewees would require additional time and more thorough preparation, perhaps coordinated with local assistance. Unfortunately, obtaining more local cooperation may be complicated by security restrictions and a general reluctance of people in Xinjiang to discuss issues with foreigners which risk invoking questions of ethnic problems or politics.

Tight constraints on foreigners in Xinjiang and a hardening reluctance to speak about ethnic problems had been reported by an Australian English teacher who conducted interview-based research both before and after the polarizing 7/5 Incident of 2009 (Cliff, 2016). A similar kind of circumspection among locals was experienced by this author as well. Before agreeing to an interview, and despite reading the project information before the interview, Anna had repeatedly stressed that she did not wish to answer questions which were “political” in nature. Additionally, both Anna and Gulkiz wished for extra reassurances that their images would not be used in the project, nor would any part of the audio recordings be released online. A third potential interviewee, a younger Han Chinese teacher in Ürümqi working in a private

after-school program for children, had signaled an interest in being interviewed. Before the interview could begin, she exercised her prerogative to withdraw because she believed that her school owner would not approve of her participation. Only interviewing two subjects was a severe limitation for analysis and it was therefore impossible to draw many impressions about the state of English education in Xinjiang among Han and Uyghurs. Interviewing a larger number of individuals with a wider variety of backgrounds, including current learners of English, could provide more material for analysis in the future.

Among the interviewees' responses, analysis revealed key differences which reflected each person's personalities, interests and lifestyles as well as areas of common ground. For instance, each individual used English to different extents at work and found their own ways of fitting language practice into their respective work schedules. Additionally, each interviewee had contrasting perspectives on the role of language education in Xinjiang. Similarities in their responses included repeated emphasis on the self-ownership of learning and the central importance of practice in language study, especially authentic practice, and the need for students to find adequate opportunities to practice English skills.

## **FUTURE STUDY**

Analysis of these interviews suggested several issues which may deserve future investigation. Gulkiz had, on several occasions, repeatedly mentioned she lacked a "normal environment" for learning English and wished to practice with foreign friends or teachers. What significance does this statement hold for other English learners in Xinjiang? Is English education underdeveloped in Xinjiang compared to analogous inland provinces of China? Given that Xinjiang's relative isolation in the world has decreased due to the Internet and greater openness to international commerce, what kind of opportunities currently exist for creating more enriched English learning experiences? How does the current situation

in Xinjiang affect demand for teaching materials, education services or work opportunities for English teachers? Xinjiang's importance in international trade and tourism is likely to grow in the future, so foreign language education may be beneficial for individuals who wish to be in higher education or expect to enter a more globalized workplace.

Anna commented that English may not necessarily be a useful subject for all students to learn, but would help introduce how to learn foreign languages. This raises questions about how people in Xinjiang feel about the relevance of English education to their own lives and futures. What role does English education currently play in Xinjiang? Do Han and Uyghurs have different perspectives about the usefulness of English education? Do they often have different goals for use of foreign languages? Questions like these could suggest ways that foreign language education be made more relevant and improved for all learners in Xinjiang, regardless of ethnicity.

With minorities in Xinjiang currently being subjected to a concerted campaign of re-education and cultural suppression, acquiring more information about the state of language education in Xinjiang may offer important information about protecting the human rights and culture of Uyghurs, Kazaks and other ethnicities. If members of threatened minorities in Xinjiang wish to communicate their cultural heritage to the rest of the world or enjoy greater benefits from globalization, then improved English skills would be helpful in facilitating these goals. Unfortunately, access for foreign researchers and journalists may continue to be difficult in this highly-securitized province and a greater degree of local assistance may therefore be important for carrying out future investigations. Conducting future study about English education in Xinjiang will not only require time, creative preparation and improved local connections but will also grow in urgency over time.

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### **Appendix 1: Interview Questions:**

1. Please tell me your preferred name and where you are from?
2. Can you tell me about your education and work experience?
3. When and why did you start learning English?
4. Where did you study English? Can you tell me about this place?
5. What do you think is the most difficult thing about studying English?
6. What kinds of materials or books did you use in your classes?
7. How much time did you spend on homework for English class each week?
8. Where do you practice speaking English? What do you think is the best way to practice English?
9. Did you enjoy your English classes? Why or why not?
10. What kinds of problems did you have studying English outside of school?
11. What kind of help would be good for your study of English?
12. How do you hope to use English in the future?
13. Do you think English education is important for people in Xinjiang? Why or why not?
14. Tell me about an interesting or an important experience that you had in English? Why was it interesting to you?

## **THE EMERGENCY REMOTE LEARNING PROCESS OF JAPANESE UNIVERSITY EFL STUDENTS IN A GLOBAL TOPICS COURSE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

When Prime Minister Shinzo Abe declared a state of emergency from April 7 to May 6, 2020 due to the rapid spread of the novel coronavirus COVID-19 in Japan, Japanese universities proceeded with moving courses online for the upcoming spring term. Administrative staff, teachers, and students found themselves preparing for a unique situation conceptualized by Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust and Bond (2020) as “Emergency Remote Teaching” or (ERT). ERT is a temporary, short-term fix of moving traditional courses to an online platform out of obligation; it is not intended to be a sustainable solution of creating online learning systems in higher education (Nae, 2020). Since April of 2020, ERT has become the norm for tertiary institutions in Japan, with university students on the receiving end, engaging in Emergency Remote Learning (ERL). In this study, 29 Japanese university students at a private university in the Kansai region reflected on their ERL experience after completing a Global Topics course in the spring semester of 2020. Students indicated that ERL posed many challenges, particularly when they had to work with peers on group projects. Group projects required communicating with peers who had different class schedules and priorities, which often made group work difficult. With respect to students’ overall ability to adapt to ERL, most students rated themselves as being adaptable because they felt that they had tried their best to complete all tasks on time and participated actively in all Zoom sessions. However, at times, they felt unmotivated. The reflections from these students illustrate how they found ERL difficult but generally rewarding because they could feel a

sense of accomplishment when completing online tasks and learning new technological skills that they could use even after the end of COVID-19.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Japan has been globally recognized for its high-tech contribution by Japanese companies (Nagumo, 2020, April 21). Japan's population is known for being digitally connected (Gobel & Kano, 2014), with smartphone ownership being among the highest in the world (Selwood, 2012). In 2019, the penetration rate of mobile phones was more than 96 percent, with smartphones accounting for 83 percent of the share, whereas the penetration rate of computers in Japanese households was 69 percent ("Breakdown household penetration rate of ICT devices Japan 2019, by type," 2020). Although problems such as online bullying and internet addiction have increased due to the rise in smartphone ownership and the use of Social Networking Services (Tateno, Teo, Ukai, Kanazawa, Katsuki, Kubo, & Kato, 2019), smartphones will continue to play a significant role in the lives of Japanese youth who use smartphones for entertainment and social purposes (Ohashi, 2019).

Despite Japanese university students owning smartphones and having easy access to the Internet, the transfer of their online skills from socializing, shopping, and gaming to online education or research remains minimal (Mehran, Alizadeh, Koguchi, & Takemura, 2017; Ohashi, 2019). In senior high school, Japanese students take courses on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) designed by Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (Lockley & Promnitz-Hayashi, 2012) but are not given many opportunities to apply what they have learned on ICT to other courses including English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses. As the Internet can provide authentic English input, one might expect teachers and learners to capitalize on such online resources for learning English as a second language. However, in Japan, teaching and learning of EFL

remains low-tech and paper-based—textbooks with translations and grammar explanations, CDs, and handouts are predominantly used for studying English to pass high-stakes university entrance examinations (Ohashi, 2019). To the outside world, Japan may be famous for its high-tech gadgets and gizmos, which should imply high-tech learning environments. Unfortunately, Japan’s high-tech reputation does not usually infiltrate into the everyday life and systems in a country that is “surprisingly, sensibly and endearingly low-tech” (Wilson, 2015, November 25).

As previously mentioned, typical Japanese education learning environments are low-tech at best in senior high schools (Ohashi, 2019). Even at the tertiary level, Japanese universities are not what the developed world would consider high-tech. Japanese universities rely primarily on learning management systems (LMS) that have been identified as technology at the most rudimentary levels for developed countries (Nae, 2020). Administrative systems and operations are also low-tech because Japanese work culture places a premium on paper documents that need to be stamped with a personal seal or sent via fax (Wilson, 2015, November 25) and face-to-face meetings to show respect to superiors (Denyer, 2020, April 6). Moreover, many administrative staff members are unable to work from home or at other remote locations because they are only allowed access to work-related information on “safe” and “secure” computers that are located at their place of employment (Denyer, 2020, April 6).

Japanese universities got a rude awakening when Prime Minister Shinzo Abe declared a state of emergency from April 7 to May 6, 2020 due to the rapid spread of the novel coronavirus COVID-19. Japanese higher education infrastructure prior to the outbreak of coronavirus was not equipped for online learning. Consequently, Japanese university administrators were scrambling for ways to move all university courses online for the upcoming spring term beginning in April of 2020. Japanese universities, like many

universities around the world, found that they needed to change to “Emergency Remote Teaching” or (ERT) (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020), a short-term fix of moving traditional courses to an online platform (Nae, 2020). Overnight, instructors had to brace themselves for the reality that they would be teaching courses online using whatever tools made available to them. Most instructors were learning these new tools as they were teaching remotely. Trust and Whalen (2020) aptly note, instructors were “building the plane while flying it” while feeling unprepared for the obligatory ERT journey. Likewise, university students, some taking the back seat whereas others acting as co-pilots of the ERT journey, were also learning new tools in an online learning situation called Emergency Remote Learning (ERL) (Rahiem, 2020).

Presumably when the coronavirus pandemic is over, most university instructors in Japan will revert back to traditional classroom teaching, just as they have always done—face-to-face, low-tech, and teacher-fronted in high-context learning environments (Bray, Aoki, & Dlugosh, 2008). However, it is not clear when this will be or if teachers and students will ever be able to return to the days prior to COVID-19. For some teachers and students, ERT and ERL may have long-term effects on their teaching practices and learning methods. Some Japanese learners may learn to transfer their technology skills from socializing, shopping, and gaming to educational and research purposes. They may even discover new communities or practice (Wenger, 1998, 2000). For example, in EFL courses, students who have never ventured beyond standard textbooks, CDs, and handouts may discover that they can access World English speakers on their own and learn how to combine language learning and technology in ways that will facilitate their transformation into becoming autonomous lifelong language learners (Blake, 2011). Similarly, teachers might continue to use some of the high-tech skills they have acquired during COVID-19 by blending online and offline

teaching practices after the end of the pandemic (Siripongdee, Pimdee, & Tuntiwongwanich, 2020).

Ideally, ERT and ERL will not be something that remains a temporary fix—implemented haphazardly and forgotten immediately after the end of the coronavirus endemic (Jones & Sharma, 2020). There may be long-term positive effects that build on existing principles and practices of learning and teaching, thereby challenging the status quo that online teaching and learning is inferior to brick-and-mortar classroom teaching and learning (Hodges et al., 2020). Hodges et al. (2020) and Oncu and Cakir (2011) beckon teachers to go beyond the perfunctory comparison of online versus offline teaching and learning. For teachers and students to truly understand their experiences during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important for them to take the time to reflect on the learning process rather than the end product of learning (Hodges et al., 2020). Teachers and students have been given this opportunity that requires creative problem solving in teaching and learning in the most unsettling of times. They must imagine a more sustainable future and examine how they could keep adapting their processes so that they will be able to respond to other operational challenges in the future (Hodges et al., 2020). COVID-19 has been and will continue to be a test for teachers who must confront their ingrained beliefs, push boundaries, and promulgate new communities, networks, and interactions for student learning (Raaper & Brown, 2020). There may be other pandemics and emergencies in the future that will force stakeholders in higher education to eschew complacency and rise to the challenges of improving higher education teaching and learning systems for a better future.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

This is a qualitative survey study (Jansen, 2010) of Japanese university students' experiences of ERL. In this study, 29 Japanese university students at a private university in the Kansai region reflected on their ERL experience by answering

a Microsoft Forms survey after completing a Global Topics course in July of 2020. The objective of the study was to investigate Japanese university students' ERL learning process during their first online learning experience in higher education. Hodges et al. (2020) underscore that the process of learning and motivation is connected to learner success and should be the focus of ERL research and evaluation. After all, when students look back at their learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, they will most likely recall how they were taken care of and how they felt about the learning process than what they actually learned in a particular course (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020).

The Global Topics course, a content-based EFL course, was taught in previous semesters by the researcher in classrooms at this private university. Since April of 2020, the researcher moved this course and all of her others courses to an online platform by using various tools such as the university's LMS, Microsoft Office 365 (Microsoft Teams, Outlook, OneDrive, Stream, Forms, SharePoint, PowerPoint, Excel, and Word), and Zoom. She taught this course asynchronously using Office 365 and the university's LMS and synchronously using Microsoft Teams and Zoom. In Microsoft Teams, she created a channel for the Global Topics course so that students could communicate with her and their peers easily using the post, chat, or meet functions. She also used Teams to upload weekly lesson plans and homework.

A significant portion of the grading for the course was based on students completing a group project on a global topic. First, students read literature in English on a global topic of their choice and wrote summaries on the articles they read. Then, they came up with a "How" or "Why" research question on their group's global topic, prepared a Microsoft Forms survey on their global topic, asked classmates to complete their survey, and analyzed and interpreted the data. A Microsoft Teams channel was created for students to post their group's research question and survey. Finally, they gave a 10-minute

group presentation in English on their research by elaborating on why and how they chose their research topic and question, sharing what they learned from the articles they read on their topic, and connecting the literature with the results from their primary research. Students were given the option of giving pre-recorded group presentations uploaded onto the Teams channel or live via Zoom. Half of the student groups chose to do pre-recorded presentations while the other half chose to give the presentations synchronously on Zoom.

The survey (see Appendix 1) was completed by 29, second-year university students during their final Zoom session in July of 2020. Although students were given a choice of answering the survey in English or Japanese, all of the students filled it out in English. On average, students took approximately 15 minutes to complete the survey. The students in the Global Topics course belong to a group of students who are streamed into courses to prepare them for study abroad. Seven students indicated that their main purpose for learning English was to study abroad, whereas other students mentioned that their primary goal for learning English was for their future job or for fun. There was only one student who said that she was learning English to get the credit she needed to graduate. Therefore, most students in this study were highly motivated, attended class regularly, and completed projects and assignments on time. Although their English level varied somewhat, they could write in English on the Microsoft Teams channel, answer and reply to emails and chat in English, and have discussions in English during the synchronous Zoom sessions. All of the students in the Global Topics course passed the course with a score higher than 70%.

The objective of the study was to investigate the remote learning process of Global Topics students at a private university in the Kansai region. The research questions were as follows:

- (1) How do Global Topics students feel about ERL?
- (2) How do Global Topics students feel about taking courses



online in the fall semester?

## **RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY**

Teachers in Japan have a substantial influence on student learning habits and attitudes (Ohashi, 2019). Ohashi (2019) found that Japanese students in EFL classes did not associate using the Internet with second language acquisition because their English teachers had rarely integrated web-based tools into EFL learning. Extrapolating from Ohashi's (2019) study to ERT contexts, one can infer that teachers' attitudes and teaching methods in online courses can impact students' attitudes towards ERL. Therefore, it behooves teachers to examine their positionality or stance as reflected in the choices they make in teaching online. In the end, their attitudes towards remote teaching might influence their students' learning process in ERL contexts.

The researcher who was teaching the Global Topics course had unfavorable views towards teaching online and was unprepared for ERT. However, she realized that she needed to learn new tools that may improve her teaching even after the end of the pandemic. She understood that teaching online did not mean that she should move everything that she had done in the classroom to an online platform. Moreover, she recognized that her overall attitude—that teaching online is inferior to teaching in classrooms—was unfounded (Schlesselman, 2020) as there are as many ways of teaching online as there are of teaching in classrooms. Therefore, when she was teaching the course, she tried to conceal her negative views about technology to ensure that student attitudes would reflect each student's true beliefs. Over time, she developed her “willingness to experience online learning” (Mehran et al., 2017) by using as many of the tools made available to her. She continued to emphasize group work as being an integral part of learning in her class, just as she had done in traditional classroom settings.

## **FINDINGS**

### ***Challenges of Emergency Remote Learning***

Students found learning remotely to be challenging for many reasons. Given that the course required students to work in the same group of three to four students for 10 out of the 15 weeks of the course, it was not surprising that eight students said doing pair work or group work (communicating with peers) was most difficult in remote contexts. They wrote that it was hard to coordinate with other group members who had different class schedules because some of them belonged to different faculties at the university. Furthermore, when some of their peers would not reply promptly to their emails or LINE messages, core members of the group had to do the tasks that were not completed by peripheral members.

Even under typical circumstances of learning in classrooms, group work poses problems for students due to different class schedules, long commutes, or heavy part-time work schedules. In classroom settings, the researcher would normally designate one (90-minute) class for students to work together on preparing PowerPoint slides for their group presentations in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) rooms where the researcher could observe how the group worked together. During the COVID-19 pandemic, as it was not possible to have students work together in CALL rooms, the researcher organized 10-minute Zoom sessions with each group so that students could ask her questions and give her updates on the group's progress. In ERT contexts just as she had done in classroom settings, she had each group select a group leader who would delegate tasks accordingly and be the main point of contact for her.

The students who indicated that group work was challenging were the peripheral rather than the core members of the group. Thus, these peripheral members may have felt that it was difficult for them to work with their group because they were unable to keep up with the pace of the group and communicate effectively with core members when they were unsure of what

to do. Core group members including group leaders gave more positive comments about working in groups in ERL. One student wrote, “I learned that we could make a good presentation by cooperating with members when we couldn’t meet each other face-to-face. This is my first group presentation, so I learned what I need to do for group work.” Even if they had to do everything online, group work in remote learning was not completely different from working in the classroom. As long as everyone in the group kept in touch, met deadlines, and were willing to help others, they could effectively complete online group projects.

Another challenge was learning the technology necessary for ERL. Students were adept at using their smartphones but not as tech-savvy when it came to using computers (Mehran et al., 2017; Ohashi, 2019). As many students had taken other study abroad preparation courses in their first year of university, they were able to navigate the basics of Microsoft 365 (e.g., Outlook, PowerPoint, and Word). However, ensuring that students were comfortable with Zoom, were able to post their work on the Teams channel, and use Forms for survey projects meant that the researcher had to prepare classes or homework assignments targeted to helping students learn the new technology. For example, because primary data collection from peers was an integral part of this course, the researcher devoted an entire class period to creating a Microsoft Forms survey with the class by choosing a topic, brainstorming survey questions and answer choices, filling out the survey, and looking at how the results were presented in graphs and Excel spreadsheets. The researcher felt that if online learning was scaffolded properly so that students had the readiness needed for online learning (Mehran et al., 2017), students would feel more confident in adopting the tools not only for this course but also in other courses. In fact, many students mentioned that one of the most motivating factors of this class was that they were able to learn new technology such as Microsoft Forms or Teams. A student indicated, “I learned how to use Forms. I’ve used Forms for the first time to create

a survey and analyze results, but I thought it's very convenient and easy to use. Especially, I was able to know the results of the questionnaire in detail, so it was easy to use the data in the presentation."

Having a project that consisted of several tasks that required learning new technological tools did help students feel a sense of accomplishment when they overcame obstacles. Some students mentioned that having an arsenal of new technological skills would be useful to them in other university courses or in their future job. In essence, learner preparedness for digital technology (Hubbard, 2013), or preparing students to be able to use the technology they are expected to use, was an integral part of increasing the motivation of learners who may need training to move from being tech-comfy to becoming tech-savvy (Ohashi, 2019). Teachers who feel that they are not as tech-savvy as their students should acknowledge the reality that Japanese students require the transferable technological skills that will make them "skilled in using the same technologies for academic purposes, and able to view these technologies with a critical eye" (Pegrum, 2014, p. 39).

Another problem mentioned was having slow internet connection. Although all of the students used computers for their online courses, some students were unable to enter Zoom sessions or were kicked out during the Zoom sessions due to bad internet connections. Having technical problems while using the Internet reduced their motivation for online learning (Choy, McNickle, & Clayton, 2002). Even though many students said that ERL was a good chance for improving their computer skills, they admitted to feeling frustrated when they were not able to participate because of technical issues. A student commented, "It took me some time to get used to the online environment, and it took me some time to prepare the equipment environment." Fortunately, this student was able to solve his problem by securing the proper equipment and environment needed for learning online. Nevertheless, over

the course of 15 weeks, one or two students suffered from slow internet connection in each Zoom session.

Working online meant that everything was less contextualized and more time consuming than in the classroom. Students did not always feel motivated when learning in low-context online environments. Jung, Kudo, and Choi (2012) argue that stress levels for students from high-context and low-context cultures may differ in online learning situations. Japanese students who are accustomed to learning in high-context environments may find asynchronous low-context online learning to be stressful because they tend to learn better when they have non-verbal or implicit cues from others (Jung et al., 2012). In ERL contexts, students need to learn how to be explicit because there were few signals for “reading the air” (Komiya & Tudor, 2016) as is often required for communication in Japan. The students in this study reported feeling lonely as they spent countless hours working in front of their computer screen. They wished they could get to know their teacher and classmates and “see their expressions” because they wanted to know their personalities and share their learning experiences with others. Although the Zoom sessions gave students a chance to see their peers when cameras were turned on, it was not comparable to interacting with them in classrooms and having deep discussions or informal conversations. In the classroom, students said that they could come to an agreement by observing the reactions of others, thereby finishing tasks more efficiently and effectively. The asynchronous nature of communicating online via LINE meant that students often needed more time and patience to complete the group survey project.

### ***Self-ratings and Preference for Online Learning in the Future***

Students rated themselves (1-5 stars) on their success in adapting to online courses. Out of the 29 students, approximately half gave themselves four stars and the other half five stars. There was only one student who gave herself

three stars. Despite the challenges the students experienced in ERL contexts, they felt satisfied with their ability to work online because they felt that they had tried their best to complete all tasks on time and participate actively in all Zoom sessions. Whatever anxiety they may have had initially about remote learning gradually changed to a boost in confidence in their ability to use technology and work with peers in low-context environments. Given that some Japanese students have limited confidence in using computers for educational purposes (Lockley, 2011), ERL may provide students with opportunities to enhance their perceived competence (Fathali & Okada, 2017) and willingness to use technology for educational and research purposes even after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As it is most likely that the pandemic will not end by the upcoming fall semester, the researcher asked students to rate how they would feel if they had to continue with ERL in the future (see Table 1). Twenty students indicated that they would not be very happy (rating of 1-3 out of 6) if they had to take courses online for another semester. In contrast, three students were very positive (rating of 6) about taking course online next semester.

<b>How happy would you be if all of your classes were online again because of corona?</b>	<b>Number of students</b>
1 (not happy)	5
2	7
3	8
4	5
5	1
6 (very happy)	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>

**Table 1. Student attitudes towards online learning in the following semester**

Although the researcher did not ask students to elaborate on how and why they gave themselves such ratings, the comments from the question about their ability to adapt to online learning environments may indicate that they were relieved to have survived a less-than-ideal situation but would have preferred to learn on campus with their peers and teachers. It is noteworthy though that three students were very enthusiastic (rating of 6) about continuing online again next semester. Two out of these three students were group leaders who were organized and receptive to new challenges. In fact, their groups gave the presentations that received the highest evaluation. These group leaders seemed to enjoy the creative process of trying to learn new skills such as pre-recording PowerPoint presentations and making Forms surveys. It can be inferred then that online learning may be more suitable for Japanese university students who possessed a certain willingness to experience online learning and preferred autonomous learning even before the spread of COVID-19 (Mehran et al., 2017).

## **CONCLUSION**

The reflections from these students illustrate how they found ERL difficult but generally rewarding because they could feel a sense of accomplishment when completing online tasks and learning new technological skills. The main problems students experienced in ERL contexts were communicating and coordinating group work, securing reliable internet access, acquiring new technological skills, and communicating with peers in low-context settings. They also admitted that working on tasks in online settings required more time than in regular classrooms. Although the students felt satisfied with how they managed to learn in ERL contexts, many students were not enthusiastic about resuming online learning in the following semester.

The responses from the students provide a glimpse into the ERL process of EFL students in a particular course. The researcher will be teaching remotely again next semester and

hopes to build on this qualitative survey study by interviewing several students in this study about their ERL experience over one academic year. Seeing how students can grow from their ERL experience may elucidate how the researcher can also support students so that they can become confident online learners and researchers even after the end of COVID-19.

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## **Appendix 1: Survey for Global Topics (Improving Online Courses)**

1. What is your name?
2. What is your major?
3. What is your main purpose for learning English?
  - a. for my future job
  - b. for study abroad
  - c. to pass standardized tests (TOEIC, TOEFL)
  - d. for fun (watching movies, listen to music, etc.)
  - e. to get credit
  - f. other ( )
4. This term, you had to take all your courses online. What, if anything, was the most difficult thing about taking online classes for you?
  - a. using the technology (LMS, Zoom, Teams, Microsoft 365)
  - b. doing pair work or group work (communicating with classmates)
  - c. finishing assignments on time
  - d. communicating with the teacher
  - e. staying motivated
  - f. other ( )
5. The focus of this class was for you to conduct research on literature (articles you read), come up with a WHY or HOW research question, create a Forms survey, collect data from your classmates, and give a group presentation. What do you think you learned from doing this group research project?
6. If you could make this group research project more successful, what kind of suggestion could you give?
7. For the group research project, you had to work in small groups. What do you think was the biggest challenge (difficulty) of working in a group without having the chance to actually meet face to face?
8. How do you rate your success in adapting to online courses? (1-5 stars)
9. Why did you rate yourself as you did for question 8?

10. How happy (on a scale of 1-6) would you be if all of your classes were online again because of corona? [6 is very happy]









## **THT Journal: The Journal of Teachers Helping Teachers**

The *THT Journal* is a publication of the Teachers Helping Teachers (THT) Special Interest Group of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT). It is dedicated to exploring and promoting best practices in language education.

