# Chinese Students' Video Showing Experience During COVID-19 in 2020

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## Abstract

When teaching shifted to online during the 2020 spring semester, Chinese students and instructors relied on online learning platforms and social communication tools to cope with the situation. Many of the apps offered real-time video interaction, however participants often did not show themselves on video. A lower percentage of video showing was incongruous with the massive use of video conferencing apps. This paper tries to find out Chinese students' video-showing behavior and understand their reason to show and not show themselves through a survey and a reflection. Personal, technical unpreparedness and lower engagement in the at-home environment were the major hinderance for not showing video and the instructor's request was the major reason for showing video. This paper provides novice understanding on Chinese students' video showing behavior, as well as suggestions for creating more engaged online learning environment.

**Key words:** Video showing; Online teaching; Video guidance

## 1. INTRODUCTION

During spring of 2020, students in China, as well as students across the globe, were told to switch to online learning due to the spreading of COVID-19. Teachers were notified of online teaching from a few days to a few weeks in advance. In a short time, they had to design, plan and prepare for remote teaching. Teachers relied on synchronous and asynchronous communication tools, online learning management platforms and tools, such as Blackboard, Moodle, ZOOM, Google Meeting, Tencent Meeting (a Chinese equivalent of Google Meeting), social apps and so on to engage students.

Although online teaching was reported with no apparent difference from face-to-face teaching (Goertler & Gacs, 2018), learner engagement and motivation are major concerns of online interaction (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020). Especially in language teaching classes with a high dependence on interpersonal communication, lack of personal connection or a community atmosphere where facial expressions or body language might miss, could render a lower engagement (Gacs, Goertler, Spasova, 2020). Instructors tried various methods such as video conferencing, PowerPoint, virtual classes, and a combination thereof, to deliver content, assess student learning, and interact with their students in the distanced learning environment (British Council, 2020).

Previous research on online-based instruction is predominantly focused on aspects of course designing, planning, implementation, and assessment. Video showing is seemingly an apparent and natural thing to happen in a synchronous teaching environment. However, in our own teaching, it was interesting to find that during the webinar time, some students did not use video and were reluctant to do so. So, we are curious about what Chinese students think about video showing in the online learning environment. After all, online language learning should also include sufficient input and output, interactions, content delivery, communication with peers and instructor, as well as social bonding with peers. We could not help

wondering why they did or did not show video and how they perceived video showing or non-video showing in their learning and class interaction.

## 2. THE RESEARCH

In order to figure our students' attitude on video showing, we designed a questionnaire with 21 self-generated questions in 3 parts: part 1) general questions on sharing video, part 2) questions for those who showed themselves and part 3) questions for those who did not show themselves in online class meetings. All students needed to answer part 1. Students who used video answered part 2 and those who did not use video answered part 3. The overall α of the questionnaire is 0.875, which indicates the high reliability of the questions.

At the end of May, 2020, the survey was sent out and closed one week later. In total, 203 student participants, distributed across 19 provinces and municipal cities in China (Figure 1), responded to the survey questions online voluntarily. The respondents are undergraduate students from language classes, primarily English classes.
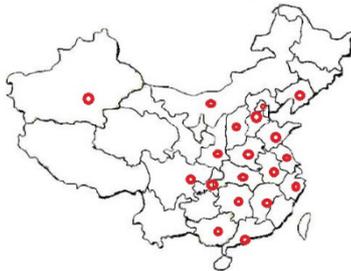


**Figure 1**
**Participants' Geography**

## 3. RESULTS

Although the data we collected may not represent all language classes in 2020 Spring semester, the findings revealed some interesting reasons why or why not some Chinese college students' show video during online learning. The findings and implications could guide instructors to understand their Chinese students better and hence design their teaching and guide students when taking online classes in the future, hopefully.

### 3.1 Question 1: Whether to Use Synchronous Apps

Firstly, we wanted to know in the online class times whether Chinese students used online-based synchronous applications or social communication tools (mainly ZOOM, Tencent Meeting, Dingding etc. in mainland China) and whether the teacher and students showed themselves on video (Table 1). As seen in Table 1, when delivering online classes during the semester of Spring 2020, the students reported that over 90 percent of their instructors utilized a teleconference app and nearly 70 percent of the instructors

showed themselves on video during the online class time. However, only 37.4 percent of the student participants said they showed themselves on video.

**Table 1**
**Using Apps and videos (total participants=203)**

|  | Percentage | |
|---|---|---|
|  | No | Yes |
| Use a teleconference App with video capability | 9.4 | 90.3 |
| Teacher showed himself/herself on video | 31 | 69 |
| Students showed themselves on video | 62.6 | 37.4 |

(Reliability: α=0.875)

The number (90.3%) of classes using apps and video to facilitate online teaching is higher than the number (51%) in British Council's survey worldwide (British Council, 2020). One possible explanation is due to the better technology infrastructure, educational equipment, and support for online-based teaching and learning in China. Teleconference apps seem to be one of the major choices for the language instructors at Chinese colleges during the special semester to cope with the rapid switch to remote learning. However, the use of video found in the current survey is not as widespread as the use of apps in general.

Based on the data above, nearly one third of the instructors did not use video when teaching the student participants. Meanwhile, nearly two thirds of students did not show themselves on video. Although a high percentage of video-showing does not guarantee quality online teaching and learning, in an online education environment, especially in language learning community, the decreased teacher-students and student-student interaction may indicate reduced opportunities for input, output and interaction; consequently, this could hamper online language communication for those who did not interact in real-time.

### 3.2 Question 2: Reasons to Show or not to Show Video

As mentioned in Table 1, slightly more than one third (37.4%) of the students showed themselves on video and two thirds (62.6%) of the students did not show themselves on video among the 203 respondents. Table 2 and Table 3 revealed more details about why or why not students showed themselves on video.

**Table 2**
**Reasons for Showing Video (Participants=76)**

|  | Percentage |
|---|---|
| The instructor asked us to do this | 59.2 |
| Class communication is better | 41.1 |
| The instructor/class required us to do this | 31.6 |
| I feel I am really taking a class | 28.4 |
| I can see facial expressions | 12.6 |
| Hope others can turn on their video like I do | 9.5 |
| I did it because I wanted to do it | 9.2 |
| I can see body language | 8.4 |

(Reliability: α=0.912)

In the above table, more than half of the students specified that their teacher suggested using video to

show themselves. Nearly one third of respondents said their teacher requested them to use video, even students did not want to. Only about 9 percent of them showed themselves on video voluntarily. It is thought-provoking to discover that instructors' requirement or encouragement plays a major role in students' video-showing behavior and a lower percentage of Chinese students would show themselves on video initially.

Reasons for respondents' video-showing behavior include better class communication, resemblance of real classroom, learning better, and better self-monitoring of class interaction. Specifically, some students valued facial expressions and body language as important factors in learning language and are conscious about video-showing effect, which resembles a F2F learning environment. About 10 percent of the students even wished other students who did not show video would do as they did. This indicates that students are aware of the significance of non-verbal communication in an online teaching and learning environment, regardless of encouragement or requirement to use video by their instructors.

**Table 3**
**Reasons for Not Showing Video (Participants=156)**

| | Percentage |
|---|---|
| I am wearing pajamas during online class | 45.3 |
| Too many faces on screen are distracting | 40.4 |
| I don't want other to see my room | 35.5 |
| I don't want others to see where I am | 33 |
| I did not wash my hair | 29.1 |
| I did not wash my face | 23.2 |
| I can work on other things while taking the online English class | 16.5 |
| The internet at my home is slow so I cannot turn on the video | 12.9 |
| I don't want my teacher call my name to answer questions | 11.3 |
| Saving battery | 4.4 |
| My smart phone camera is not working | 0.5 |

(Reliability: α=0.871)

As Table 3 suggests, five of the reasons for not showing video are associated with personal readiness, and three of the reasons are related to the equipment they use to take classes online. So personal issues and technological equipment issue are two major reasons that the student participants did not show themselves on video.

Showing video also means showing their personal life in online class environment: their hair, faces, the clothes they wear, and their surroundings, which may embarrass them if they are not ready. The second problem is related to technology readiness: the internet bandwidth and technology problems of their electronic devices. The survey results found that the students might have not prepared themselves for online classes personally and technically due to a sudden transition from F2F learning to online learning. Situated in an informal family environment and learning content that used to be taught in

F2F environment is a new challenge for the students.

In the informal learning environment, like home, students may not spend enough time preparing themselves personally for attending an online class. Consequently, to avoid embarrassment, they chose not to use video.

Another interesting issue reflected in respondents' feedback was classroom involvement. Without video-showing, they are more likely to be uninvolved in classroom activities. What is more, some students intentionally avoided participating in learning by turning video off. As classroom management is important in F2F and online learning environment, in distanced learning it might be worsened if there is a lack of visual supervision.

### 3.3 Question 3: Perceived Differences in Learning With and Without Video

To know how video or no-video affect their online learning, student participants answered questions comparing their previous F2F learning in five aspects: frequency of class participation, quality of participation, class atmosphere, subject learning, and students-teacher interaction. Video-showing and no-video-showing groups both answered the same questions.

In the video-showing group, over 60 percent of the students felt using video was much better than no video showing, including those who had been requested to use video. About 10 percent of the students thought the above-mentioned five aspects were worse (Figure 1).
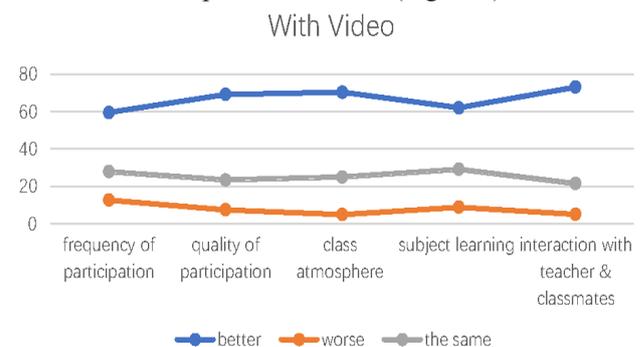


**Figure 1**
**Students Who Showed Themselves on Video**

In contrast, in the no-video-showing group, up to 50 percent of the students felt that there was no difference in terms of frequency and quality of class participation, class atmosphere, subject learning, and students-teacher interaction (Figure 2). Up to 20 percent of the students supposed that all the five aspects would be better if they turned the video on. Interestingly, even if they imagined online learning would be better with video on, they did not take an initiative to share video nor to make any changes. About 30 to 40 percent of the student participants thought the above-mentioned 5 aspects could be worse with video on. The two groups of students seemed have inconsistent, if not contradictory perceptions on class participations, interactions, and learning environment.

## Without Video
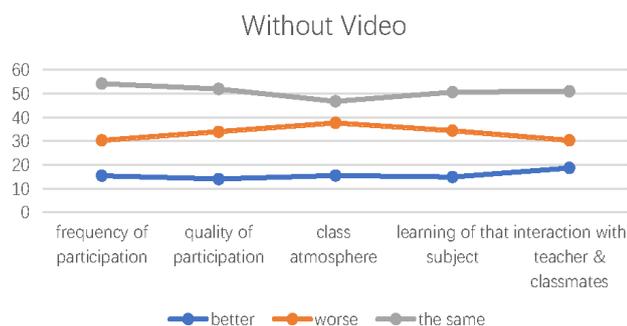


**Figure 2**
**Students Who Did Not Showed Themselves on Video**

Due to a lack of knowledge on students' video-showing behaviors—a taken-for-granted aspect by many instructors in distanced learning, this study hopes to increase an understand of Chinese students' video showing behaviors, and hence create a better remote learning environment. Generally, in the Spring semester of 2020, most of the instructors used online-based synchronous apps or social communication tools and two thirds showed themselves on video calls even though more than two thirds of the students did not. Also, a majority of the students showed video due to instructors' requests and felt the positivity in interacting with teacher and students.

For students who did not share video, the three major concerns were unwillingness to share personal condition, equipment unreadiness, and refusal for class participation at home. As for subject learning, class interaction and class atmosphere, more than half of the students, especially those who did not use video, felt no difference than before when they were in F2F classroom. However, their perception is divergent from the students who showed themselves on video, whom felt the class learning environment, their participation, and interactions with teacher and classmates were better. The differing perception of the video-showing group and no-video-showing group is worth further investigation.

Although it is recommended to treat online classes as equal to traditional face-to-face classes—preparing students to take the class, reminding students to create a regular study space, eliminate distractions, and participate actively (Hodges, Charles B., et al., 2020), the sudden and massive transition from traditional classes to online classes in 2020 Spring rendered many Chinese teachers and students underprepared. According to this study, helping students to prepare to take online classes both personally and technically, to find a suitable study space, and ways to actively involve students are still needed.

The following sharing is from an international instructor who has managed the video-showing dilemma in his remote teaching. From his story we might get insights on how to motivate unwilling students to use the camera and involve and engage them in a distanced learning environment.

## 4. AN INSTRUCTOR'S REFLECTION ON VIDEO-SHOWING

When I asked students to begin using video, students resisted at first. When I inquired why some did not want to share video, their answers aligned with the survey result. They did not want to reveal their personal condition, not only their self, but also their clothes and their home. Through discussion, we acknowledged the unusual new online environment and compared it with the normal classroom. In a normal classroom, students admitted, they would of course show themselves. I asked what was different. As it turns out, many of them had not prepared for the online class.

After the conversation, the resistors began to prepare for class in a more normal way. They brushed their hair and wore normal clothes for a class. They also prepared their desks or their learning environment, arranging things for a better look. Quickly, those problems were solved.

Additionally, it helped to get everyone on camera soon, and keep them on camera. Once we established this as a default, the students quickly stopped resisting and became more comfortable. I regularly called on every student, and together we explored and practiced various ways of interacting online, with gestures, signals from apps, direct responses, and so on. I tried to vary the style of interaction regularly to provide variety. Before long, almost everyone was on camera all the time.

The few who were not on camera usually had technical difficulties. They often solved the problems without any assistance from me. It was common for students to alert me to problems prior to class and to regularly try to join with the rest of the class. In fact, I suspect that at some point the students began to feel that being on camera was normal, and they wanted on some level to be part of that normality, rather than be an outlier.

It seemed that initially encouraging them to use video resembled encouraging participation in a normal class. They were accustomed to one thing and needed to develop a new mode. As their confidence grew and their familiarity increased, their expectations changed and the new situation became comfortable to them.

I felt the interaction was very positive for our classroom atmosphere and their learning. Students in my own classes seemed to feel the same way. This would align with previous survey result—students who did share video felt it brought a positive effect. This may be because of the interactive nature of language classes, and my teaching style which encourages lots of interaction.

Of the platforms available, I selected Zoom because of its "Breakout Rooms." This feature allowed me to put students into small, private groups and monitor their activities. As with the larger online class situation, at first students resisted speaking on video in the groups. In fact, upon arrival in the small groups, some would turn off their video again. Slowly they developed positive

habits. Eventually, they spoke more freely in these private groups.

My own desire to use video arose from my attempt to replicate normal class interaction. In the online class, I missed the interaction of a normal class and sought to recreate that. Upon reflection, I realize how much value I place on interaction in my teaching. Even prior to using video, I looked for ways to increase class interaction in the texting environment. Thus, my prior experience shaped the way I approached and assessed teaching online.

I held a very positive attitude toward using video, and I put effort into presenting a good image with good quality sound for my students. I tried to model the behavior or product that I wanted from students. From time to time, we discussed how videography factors might be important in future video conferencing or interviews in the job situation. We examined ways to improve the technical and aesthetic aspects. This positive and constructive attitude toward using video and a steady attention to how to improve it may have had some effect on students as well. Therefore, it is possible that not only my teaching style, but also my general attitude toward the situation made the students more conducive to using video and made them more open to its positive aspects.

## 5. CLOSING REMARK

Although literature revealed many factors contributing to effective online learning teaching and learning, such as careful designing, planning and a systematic model (Meskill & Anthony, 2015; Plonsky & Ziegler, 2016; Hodges, Charles B., et al., 2020; Gacs, Goertler & Spasova, 2020), this specific use of video has scarcely been studied. Video use, being trivial among many seemingly more urgent issues related to online teaching in 2020 spring, has been unattended.

However, the current survey on video camera use in 19 provinces and among 203 Chinese students brought up new understanding on their video use during video conferencing time. The current study showed that while teleconferencing and social apps were massively adopted by over 90 percent of the instructors, the use of video in teleconferencing time was much lower both for instructors and students—two thirds of instructors and one third of students had video on. Personal and technical unpreparedness and unwillingness to be involved in class communication were the major reasons for video-off behaviors.

From an international instructors' reflection on his video guide to students, taking small steps guiding, familiarizing, and facilitating students to use video could create a more engaged online learning environment. But instructors mentioned in this study and world-wide were striving to teaching students online in this new mode, deliver the content remotely, manage unfamiliar educational technology. Thus, video-showing among other video-related issues seemed less noteworthy. The British Council survey (2020) pointed out that video guidance and technical support to teach remotely is one of the primary support instructors worldwide needed. Here we propose more notice should be given to students' video-showing behavior and more subtle guidance on video camera use is needed when administrating online classes.

The current survey may not be generalized to other online classes nor countries. Nevertheless, for instructors, especially international instructors, it should not be assumed that every student needs to and will have video on in an online class environment. It would be wise to talk about any issues and perceptions about using video camera openly and solicit students' opinions about what works best for teaching and learning, or conducting an online learning readiness survey as researchers suggest (Gacs, Goertler & Spasova, 2020). This study adds new understanding on Chinese students' video-showing behavior and provides insights for instructors to create a more visible, present, authentic online synchronous learning environment in remote teaching in the future.

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