

Video Conferencing effects on Student Culture and Motivation in L2 English Classrooms

Jason TACKER

Abstract

Due to the Corona virus pandemic, classes in Japan at the university level had moved online and in some cases continue to be online in prefectures that are still struggling to lower the levels of the virus in the local populations. The inception of online classes was quick and did not take certain aspects of university life into consideration, such as how important it is to student motivation to have an identity congruent with their own concepts of what a student is. This paper examines the connection between culture and student motivation in Japanese EFL classrooms. Using survey data from a Japanese University and applying the concept of collectivism from Hofstede's (1980) Cultural Dimensions Theory, this study contributes to the literature on motivation as it relates to student identity. It argues that classes taught through video conferencing do not motivate students as well as traditional face to face classes. To its detriment, video conferencing education takes away the students ability to signify that they are students through collectivist behaviors that they would normally exhibit in a physical context such as a university with physical objects such as desks, blackboards or writing utensils. This inability to signify to their group as well as to themselves that they are "students" creates an incongruent identity that does not match with how they understand what a student is, leading to a lack of motivation.

Keywords: motivation, classrooms, Japanese, EFL, culture, identity

Video conferencing has made it possible to continue education at university during the Covid-19 pandemic. Video conferencing for classrooms have been quickly implemented and applied to what were once face to face classes. Months after world-wide implementation, many problems have arisen, such as the now famous "Zoom fatigue", the term for the feeling of exhaustion from interacting through video conferences frequently and on a daily basis. In the EFL or English as a Foreign Language classroom, both teachers and students have

the unique experience of contending with not just zoom fatigue, but a combination of new problems brought on by the change in classroom experience.

Video conferencing is not a traditional education platform, and the distance that it may gap virtually is much wider when compared to face to face classes' offline. The chasm that using video conferencing creates may be too wide and difficult for students to bridge themselves, when it involves their culture, identities, and motivations for being university students in EFL

classes.

Zoom: De Facto Video Conferencing Software of Online Education

Many universities have adopted the use of Zoom, the most popular video conferencing software currently in the world. Its educational adoption is due to being free and easy to use by anyone with a limit of one hundred people for a single forty five minute session.

Figure 1.
Zoom employees on a large group chat.



Note. From Group Video Chat and the Need for Fun, Physical Interfaces [Photograph], by A. Fischer-Cox, (2020)

Zoom allows a host to control a session (the bar at the bottom of the screen) along with any number of co-hosts that can help manage. During a session, the host can use a virtual white board, Powerpoint, or a number of other screen share options to better present or facilitate the session audience. Hosts and co-hosts have the power to mute or unmute session attendee's microphones, but never have the option of turning on attendee's cameras. Finally, hosts can start and stop meetings as well as push session attendees into separate "breakout" rooms for small group work or discussions.

Problems of EFL Video Conferencing in L2 English Classes

The swift change in classroom dynamic from face to face to video conferencing created new problems in communication within English L2 classes faced by teachers and Japanese Students. Firstly, students are often reluctant to speak up in language classes even when face to face, but when students had the power to control their camera and microphone, they could essentially "turn themselves off" from the class while appearing to be actually attending the class. More often than not, students needed to be asked to turn on cameras and microphones for utilitarian use only, such as giving presentations. If I did not ask them to be active, they would not be. For many there was a legitimate reason for this; some had limited internet usage and the use of video or audio would use their internet bandwidth very quickly. On the other hand, some had non-educational reasons for keeping their cameras and microphones off, such as talking on the phone with friends, or playing games on smartphones, or some other activity. In other cases, some did not have computers or internet at home, thus they had to use their smartphones. In face to face classes such limitations are non-existent.

As the above picture shows, while a typical zoom session looks as if it is a group conversation in video, everyone is physically separated into other locations. The video conferencing session created a false sense of community, but something known to be completely like the traditional classroom as students were alone in their designated spaces. This "separate but together" situation only allows for the limited amount of interaction that video conferencing

can allow, video and sound. On the rare occasions students turn on their cameras or microphones, students and facilitators may see someone's face and hear their voice, but participants' body language is lost, as are those behaviors and other forms of communication or cooperation that come with being physically present in a classroom together.

When in the typical face to face classroom, if students are to practice speaking or working together in small groups, as a teacher it is much easier to manage, because everyone is in the same room and only the small groups move a short distance away. A teacher is still able to walk the classroom and monitor student progress in whatever activity they are doing, and respond to questions quickly if need be. With video conferencing, such as Zoom's "breakout" rooms, virtually "walking" the classroom and answering questions expediently are problematic. In breakout rooms you must constantly be jumping from one to another. These groups are all separated from each other in virtual space, and unlike a face to face classroom you cannot see or hear the whole class even when they are in small groups, you simply must concentrate on the group at hand. In this way, you cannot passively monitor the whole, and those groups that you are not with at the very moment could be doing anything at all. I have experienced students not doing their group work activities, or not using cameras or microphones when asked, mainly because I wasn't watching them at all times or my presence was not felt like it could in a face to face classroom.

The combination of these problems of video conferencing did not make for a terrible classroom experience, but neither did they adequately replace the traditional face

to face classroom. Many teachers found it demotivating to look at a black screen of names in every class and even less motivating to have a "parakeet" -like effect of having to see only themselves in the video conferencing screen, as if talking to themselves.

For the stated reasons, teachers of EFL have felt demotivated by lecturing through video conferencing. How did it affect the students? Did it have an effect on them? This research originated from a simple question posed to a university student. The student was asked. "Do you like having Zoom classes?" The student without hesitation replied, "No, because I don't feel like a student."

Japanese students being separated into individuals, alone in their homes, taking online classes, would have had an effect on their motivation. This is presumed due to the knowledge that the Japanese are a collectivist culture. Collectivist cultures are group-oriented, they put the well-being of the group above the individual, and expect that all members of the group are loyal to the common cause (Hofstede, 1980). Collectivism is a national culture trait that is part of the Cultural Dimensions Theory. The theory posits that culture represents a likely set of behaviors from citizens with a common mental programming. A person from a specific culture may not express a culture trait as strongly as others, but everyone of that culture espouses it to some degree (Hofstede, 1991). It would be logical that forced separation through video conferencing from home, or away from the university, would somehow change the way they feel about themselves as university students and how motivated they feel to be attending classes online each day. To investigate how students were affected, EFL classes were surveyed for their

opinions to answer the question:

Does the individualization of collectivist culture through video conferencing have an effect on motivation in EFL classrooms?

Materials and Methods

Seventy students, both male and female, were surveyed about motivation, community (collectivism), and identity at Akita Prefectural University through using Zoom for video conferencing classes. Two questions from the survey were dropped due to inconclusive results or irrelevancy. Questions were worded in a way as to not be straightforward, to save students from dealing with questions of a low contextual nature. Being too forward in questioning could have been problematic, as it is not a behavior that is nurtured as it is in western cultures.

Results of ズームの授業 survey question 1

1. 以下のどちらがより学習の意欲を高めますか：ズームの授業、または、対面の授業？
Which is more motivating for learning: Zoom classes or face to face classes?
ズームの授業 (Zoom) 20.00% 14 students
対面の授業 (Face to face) 80.00% 56 students

Question 1 indicates that 80 percent of students found that face to face traditional classes are more motivational than zoom or video conferencing classes.

Results of ズームの授業 survey question 2

2. 以下のどちらがより教育的コミュニティとつながっていると感じますか：ズームの授業、または、対面の授業？
Which feels more like a connected educational community: Zoom classes or face to face classes?
ズームの授業 (Zoom) 11.43% 8 students
対面の授業 (Face to face) 88.57% 62 students

Question 2 shows that students feel more like university students and a cohesive community, with a large margin of 88.57% who prefer face to face classes to video conferencing classes.

Results of ズームの授業 survey question 3

3. ズームの授業と対面型の授業、どちらの方がより学習ができると思いますか
Do you think you learn more in zoom classes or face to face classes?
ズームの授業 (Zoom) 22.86% 16 students
対面の授業 (Face to face) 77.14% 54 students

The third question was testing for a feeling of motivation by students in either version of the classroom. 77.14% of students felt they learned more or were more motivated in face to face classrooms.

Results of ズームの授業 survey question 4

4. 他の学生と一緒に勉強する対面型の授業の方がズームの授業よりもいいと思いますか。
Do you think being in a face to face classroom with your student peers learning together is better than zoom classes?
はい (Yes) 80.00% 56 students
いいえ (No) 20.00% 14 students

Overwhelmingly, students felt that a face to face classroom with its community and ability to more easily share information, cooperate and be around other students was more motivational than video conferencing.

Results of ズームの授業 survey question 7

7. 他の学生とはつながりががないズームでの自宅学習の方がより学習ができると思いますか。
Do you think you learn more in zoom classes disconnected from your student peers by being at home?
はい (Yes) 25.71% 18 students
いいえ (No) 74.29% 52 students

The final question was slightly more direct and inquired about the feeling of community or collectivist culture of the classroom. 74.29% of students did not think being individual and taking classes from home through video conferencing helped them learn more.

Results and Analysis

The questions on the survey, while limited in number, indicate that students were not as motivated in video conference classes as they were in traditional face to face

classes. In questions one and two, over eighty percent of students found face to face classes more motivational and collectivist than Zoom video conferencing. Questions three, four and seven indirectly indicated that within a base margin of seventy four percent up to eighty percent, students believed they felt more motivated and part of a collective group working together in face to face traditional classrooms.

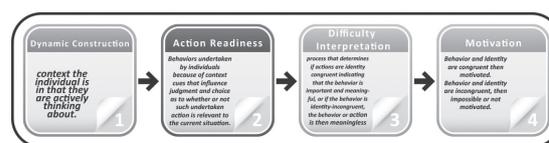
Thus, to answer the question: *Does the individualization of collectivist culture through video conferencing have an effect on motivation in EFL classrooms?* Yes it does, but it does not explain the *why* of the situation. To get to the core of how motivation is broken down through video conferencing, the student's perceived identity must also be added to the equation.

How we as people see ourselves and react to a situation through our dress, behavior and expressed national culture traits are extremely important to our motivation in any given location or context. In this way, the Identity-Based Motivation theory explains this sufficiently. The Identity-Based Motivation Theory (IBM) proposes that individuals are most motivated to act in ways and make sense of their environment using behaviors, actions and language that is congruent or consistent with their perceived identities (Oyserman, 2014). The identities that individuals believe they have are context dependent, meaning that identities that people espouse are a function of situational cues (Oyserman, 2014). The Identity-Based Motivation Theory builds upon theories of social, situated and grounded cognition which starts with the principle that a person's thinking is influenced by the context in which that person is thinking (e.g., Smith and Collins, 2010).

The IBM consists of three parts that define when an individual would be motivate-

d or not motivated at all. "Dynamic construction" is the malleable context that a person is thinking in because all people are sensitive to their immediate environment. The next step is "Action readiness", behaviors undertaken by individuals because of context cues that influence judgment and choice as to whether or not such undertaken action is relevant to the current situation. Lastly "Interpretation of difficulty" the thought process that determines if actions are identity-congruent indicating that the behavior is important and meaningful, or if the behavior is identity-incongruent, the behavior or action is then meaningless (Oyserman, 2014).

Figure 2 .
Identity-Based Motivation Theory



Dismantling Identity

Video conferencing education through programs such as Zoom are in conflict with both collectivism and the various other behaviors that learners exhibit to signal both that they are students in a university as well as that those signifying practices are important for them to be motivated through construction of their identities. Video conferencing takes EFL students, or students in general out of the context of the behaviors that they exhibit for themselves and to others about their identities. University is a physical place for a congregation of students to announce their identities to each other through actions and behaviors.

First, using Identity-Based Motivation, consider the identity as a "university student". Whether being a student comes to

mind, what it means to be a student, and what actions are connected with the feeling of being a student, depends on what is constrained and afforded within a particular context. "University student" could be a social trait that is linked to group membership, such as being in the football club, festival organization club or being counted as a student in one of the various university facility rooms. Associated "student" behaviors could be pro-social, and include cooperation in classrooms, study groups, cafeteria gossip or riding in trains or cars together. Individually, actions could simply be signifiers such as how students use language at university, wearing certain clothing to university, eating cafeteria food and carrying lunch boxes with homemade-tea in a thermos. What happens then when the actions and behaviors for "student" become too difficult? Does it mean they are not really students and should quit trying? (Oyserman, 2014)

Secondly, Consider IBM with respect to exhibited national culture traits such as the importance of collectivism to Japanese students. For collectivists, cooperation is key and in Japan "students are inclined to work with peers and provide assistance when needed" (Rosenberg, Westling, & Mcleskey, 2010). Personal success is not as important as the collective accomplishment; students prefer to work in groups for the group's benefit (Faitar, 2006). Collaborative learning, group environments, and the like are extremely successful in comparison to individualizing students. National culture traits such as collectivism are tangible aspects of culture. It should go without explanation that we view ourselves and others identities through the lens of culture. Since national culture traits, as was stated by Hofstede (1980), are behaviors espoused by people with a common mental program-

ming, then those behaviors that identify people as part of a culture would also be an important part of identity and motivation.

In short, video conferencing is the demotivating factor for university EFL students. Students are unable to have a place for context, a place where the group "university students" are able to act out their behaviors indicating that they are indeed university students:

- *They do not go to an actual physical place called "University"*
- *They do not interact in the usual daily behavior at university with other students or teachers that signify themselves.*
- *They do not dress for social situations while using video conferencing, something they must do when leaving the house.*
- *There are no physical objects symbolizing "university": desks, whiteboards, computers, projectors, cafeteria food... etc.*
- *They do not use the language of the subculture called "university students" while in the home.*
- *Students do not study in the same way as before, disconnected except through the internet, making group work difficult and problematic.*
- *They lack collectivism as video conferencing separates all students into homebound individuals.*

These and other examples create multiple instances of identity incongruence, which can cause students to feel as if the behaviors do not match the current identity being given through video conferencing. Thus, they become unmotivated, or in other situations they give up, turning themselves off to the virtual classroom by not using their camera or microphone in an attempt to find behaviors that are more congruent with the situations they are in, such as household chores.

Conclusion

A link between how people think and the actions they take is a long understood and accepted concept in Neuroscience and Psychology. The Hebbian Principle states that "any two cells or system of cells that are repeatedly active at the same time will tend to become `associated`, so that the activity in one facilitates activity in the other (Hebb 1949, p. 70) or `neurons that fire together wire together`. When we take action (How we feel or behave) the underlying neural connections are activated and reinforced. Activating the neural connections increases the frequency and intensity of the corresponding behavior. Thus behaviors originating on powerful neural connections makes it very difficult to change them.

The quick and dramatic change in classroom dynamic from traditional to video conferencing in order to keep students in the educational system was truly the only response when dealing with the epidemic given that the alternative was no education or interaction at all. Given enough time, students would get comfortable with the "new normal" of education through video conferencing and break free of the Hebbian associations that they had for the traditional classroom, culture traits would most certainly be modified, and the behaviors and actions would change to signify or symbolize a new way of education. In the current time however, the outcry to return to traditional classes by students, parents, and faculty, have cut the possibility short, much to the relief of all parties involved.

Video conferencing did not function optimally in a collectivist culture such as the Japanese. The Japanese are group oriented, and thus identity is linked to belonging

to groups, and behaviors are extensions of identity as they signify group belonging. When collectivists are individualized in video conferencing, group cohesion is broken and the behaviors that signal group belonging lose their meaning along with student motivation because as the Identity-Based Motivation theory states behavior must be congruent with the perceived identity they belong to.

References

- Faitar, G. (2006). Individualism versus collectivism in schools. Retrieved from <http://www.collegequarterly.ca/2006-vo109-num04-fall/faitar.html>.
- Fischer-Cox, A. (2020) *Group Video Chat and the Need for Fun, Physical Interfaces* [photograph] Retrieved from <https://adamfishercox.com/group-video-chat-and-the-need-for-fun-physical-interfaces/>
- Hebb, D.O. (1949). *The Organization of Behavior*, New York: Wiley Retrieved from [https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/1097-4679\(195007\)6:3%3C307::AID-JCLP2270060338%3E3.0.CO;2-K](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/1097-4679(195007)6:3%3C307::AID-JCLP2270060338%3E3.0.CO;2-K)
- Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Hofstede, G. (1991). *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. London: McGraw-Hill.
- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* (2nd ed.). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.
- Hofstede, G. (2016). *The Hofstede Center: Strategy-Culture-Change*. Retrieved February 15, 2020, from <http://geert-hofstede.com/>
- Hofstede, G., & Hofstede, G. J. (2004).

Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind. London: McGraw-Hill.

Oyserman, D. (2014), "Identity-Based Motivation: Core Processes and Intervention Examples", *Motivational Interventions (Advances in Motivation and Achievement, Vol. 18)*, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, pp. 213-242.

<https://doi.org/10.1108/S0749-74232014000018006>

Rosenberg, M., Westling, D. & McLeskey, J. (2010). The impact of culture on education. Retrieved from

<http://www.education.com/reference/article/impact-culture-education/>.

Tacker, J. (2020). ズームの授業 (Survey on Zoom classes) Retrieved September 3rd, 2020, from

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/JC6C8W7>