

Negotiating Online CFL Pedagogy: Teachers' Practices, Beliefs, and Challenges in Malaysian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The increasing reliance on online learning in higher education has transformed how language instruction is delivered, how learner participation is monitored, and how assessment is conducted in digital classrooms. For teachers of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL), this shift is particularly demanding because effective language teaching depends heavily on communicative participation, visible learner response, and immediate instructional feedback. This study examines the teaching and learning practices employed by CFL teachers, the pedagogical beliefs that inform these practices, and the challenges that shape their implementation in online higher education contexts. A qualitative exploratory approach was adopted using semi-structured interviews and short reflective notes involving six CFL teachers from higher education institutions in Malaysia. The data were analyzed through inductive thematic analysis. The findings reveal that teachers employ blended learning structures, interactive reinforcement activities, and multiple digital communication channels as adaptive strategies to sustain participation and language practice. Their instructional decisions are strongly informed by beliefs concerning learner accountability, assessment authenticity, visible response, and the teacher's facilitative role. However, these pedagogical intentions are consistently mediated by contextual pressures such as increased workload, technological instability, and reduced classroom immediacy. The study demonstrates that online CFL teaching is best understood as a process of negotiated pedagogical adaptation in which teachers continuously reconcile instructional ideals with practical digital constraints. By offering an integrated account of teaching practices, teacher beliefs, and contextual challenges, the study contributes a more context-sensitive understanding of online language teaching and highlights the need for sustained pedagogical and institutional support in digital learning environments.

Keywords: Chinese as a Foreign Language, online teaching, teacher beliefs, teaching practices, pedagogical adaptation

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of online learning in higher education has significantly reshaped language education, requiring teachers to reorganize lesson delivery, learner interaction, assessment, and communicative support within digital environments (Ferri et al., 2020). For teachers of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL), this shift is particularly demanding because effective language instruction depends heavily on oral participation, pronunciation monitoring, immediate feedback, and sustained student response.

In online settings, however, these pedagogical processes cannot be transferred mechanically onto digital platforms. Teachers must continuously adjust not only the tools they use, but also the ways they structure interaction, monitor learning, and sustain student engagement.

Such pedagogical decisions are closely influenced by teachers' beliefs. Teachers' beliefs shape how instructors define effective learning, interpret student participation, evaluate assessment authenticity, and determine their own instructional roles. At the same time, the enactment of these beliefs is often conditioned by contextual

constraints such as limited online visibility, weak student responsiveness, technological instability, and increased preparation demands.

Although previous studies on online language learning have separately examined instructional strategies, teachers' beliefs, and online teaching challenges, these dimensions are often treated as parallel discussions. As a result, there remains limited integrated understanding of how CFL teachers' pedagogical beliefs, enacted teaching practices, and contextual constraints interact within actual online teaching environments.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the teaching and learning practices employed by CFL teachers in online higher education contexts, to examine the beliefs that inform these practices, and to investigate the challenges that shape their implementation. By examining these dimensions together, the study seeks to provide a more holistic understanding of how online CFL pedagogy is continuously adapted in practice.

Guided by the objectives of examining online CFL teaching from the perspectives of instructional implementation, pedagogical beliefs, and contextual constraints, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What teaching and learning practices are employed by CFL teachers in online higher education contexts?
2. What beliefs do CFL teachers hold regarding effective teaching and learning in online environments?
3. What challenges do CFL teachers encounter while implementing online CFL instruction?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teaching and Learning Practices in Online CFL Contexts

The literature on Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) education shows that online teaching has gradually shifted away from conventional teacher-centered delivery toward more interactive and learner-responsive pedagogical arrangements. In digital environments, teachers are increasingly required to structure lessons in ways that sustain communication, learner participation, and continuous reinforcement despite the absence of physical classroom immediacy. As a result, online CFL teaching frequently emphasizes communicative engagement, collaborative participation, and active learner involvement through technology-supported activities (Li & Li, 2024; Wang & He, 2023; Han & Qiu, 2024; Chen et al., 2023).

A commonly reported practice is the use of flipped and blended learning arrangements, in which instructional explanation is partially transferred to asynchronous spaces while synchronous sessions are used for discussion, oral practice, and clarification. Such arrangements are generally viewed as effective because they allow greater flexibility and create more opportunities for interaction during live sessions (Li & Li, 2024; Wang & He, 2023; Chen et al., 2023; Ho, 2020).

In addition, the use of learning management systems, video conferencing tools, messaging applications, and gamified digital exercises has become increasingly common in online CFL classrooms. These tools enable teachers to extend communication beyond scheduled class meetings, provide repeated reinforcement, and monitor learner participation through multiple channels (Han & Qiu, 2024; Ferri et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2023). Rather than functioning solely as technological supplements, such tools often become part of the pedagogical routines teachers rely on to sustain learner attention and maintain instructional continuity.

Despite these documented practices, much of the existing literature remains strategy-centered, primarily identifying what digital methods are used rather than examining how teachers continuously adapt such methods within the practical demands of everyday online language classrooms.

Teachers' Beliefs Regarding Teaching and Learning

Teachers' beliefs are widely recognized as a central dimension of teacher cognition that shapes how instructors interpret classroom situations, evaluate learner participation, and make pedagogical decisions (Borg, 2003; Borg, 2006). Teacher cognition encompasses the knowledge, assumptions, and belief systems that influence teachers'

instructional behavior, often functioning as an internal framework through which classroom events are understood and acted upon.

Within online CFL education, these beliefs include teachers' perceptions of effective pedagogy, learner responsibility, assessment credibility, and the role of technology in supporting language development (Taghizadeh, 2022; Yang, 2019; Zhang & Liu, 2014). Previous studies suggest that teachers frequently hold a combination of learner-centered and form-focused orientations. While they may endorse active participation, communication, and learner autonomy, they also continue to value repetition, guided correction, and close instructional support. Such coexistence of beliefs often shapes the complexity of online teaching implementation (Yang, 2019; Pan & Chen, 2021).

Teachers also tend to perceive online and blended learning positively in terms of flexibility, accessibility, and self-paced review, yet many remain cautious about whether digital instruction alone can ensure meaningful language practice. Concerns over learner passivity, superficial participation, and assessment authenticity frequently influence how teachers evaluate the effectiveness of online learning environments (Alzubi & Nazim, 2025; Morrison & Sepulveda-Escobar, 2022; Hartono & Murniati, 2024).

More importantly, prior teacher cognition scholarship suggests that teachers' stated beliefs do not always translate into practice in direct or stable ways. As argued by Phipps and Borg (2009), enacted classroom behavior is often mediated by contextual teaching conditions that may reinforce, reshape, or constrain teachers' pedagogical intentions. This indicates that teachers' beliefs should not be viewed as static pedagogical positions, but as orientations that are continuously negotiated during actual teaching implementation.

Challenges in Online CFL Teaching Contexts

Despite the growing normalization of online and blended learning, previous studies consistently report that language teachers continue to face substantial pedagogical and technical challenges in digital environments. One recurring issue is the expansion of instructional workload, as teachers must invest additional time in preparing digital materials, learning unfamiliar systems, redesigning classroom activities, and modifying assessment procedures (Taghizadeh, 2022; Adsız & Dinçer, 2025; Ferri et al., 2020).

Interaction-related difficulties are also frequently highlighted. Teachers often report low student participation, reduced spontaneous communication, camera-off behavior, and difficulty maintaining a sense of classroom community, all of which weaken the immediacy that language learning normally depends on (Taghizadeh & Ejtehadi, 2021; Rajaraman et al., 2024; Adsız & Dinçer, 2025). In online language teaching, such reduced visibility can make it difficult for teachers to judge attentiveness, comprehension, and learner response with confidence.

Technical and infrastructural limitations further complicate the teaching process. Unstable internet access, device limitations, unfamiliarity with digital platforms, and home environment distractions may repeatedly interrupt communication, reduce lesson continuity, and affect both instructional delivery and online assessment (Joshi et al., 2020; Ferri et al., 2020; Wang & He, 2023).

However, much of the literature reports these challenges descriptively as external barriers, with limited attention to how such contextual pressures actively reshape teachers' pedagogical beliefs and enacted classroom practices. Consequently, the role of challenges as mediating conditions in online CFL teaching remains insufficiently theorized.

Overall, previous studies have documented the use of digital teaching practices, the influence of teachers' beliefs, and the challenges associated with online learning. However, these dimensions are frequently discussed as separate strands of inquiry, resulting in a fragmented understanding of online CFL pedagogy. There remains limited integrated research that simultaneously examines how teachers' instructional practices, pedagogical beliefs, and contextual challenges interact within a single online teaching environment. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by providing a more holistic examination of how these dimensions intersect in online CFL classrooms.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is guided by an integrated conceptual perspective that views online CFL teaching as the product of continuous interaction between teachers' pedagogical beliefs, enacted instructional practices, and contextual online constraints. Teachers' beliefs influence what they perceive as effective language learning, meaningful assessment, and appropriate learner participation, while contextual online challenges mediate the extent to which these pedagogical intentions can be directly implemented. As a result, teaching practices are understood in this study not as fixed applications of teacher belief, but as negotiated pedagogical adaptation shaped by both internal instructional priorities and external classroom realities.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the teaching and learning practices, teachers' beliefs, and challenges experienced by Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) teachers in online higher education contexts. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to obtain an in-depth understanding of teachers' lived experiences, pedagogical reasoning, and perceptions regarding online teaching, which could not be adequately captured through numerical measurement alone (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Participants and Sampling

The participants consisted of six CFL teachers teaching in higher education institutions in Malaysia. Participants were selected through convenience sampling based on accessibility and willingness to participate. Nevertheless, they were considered information-rich cases because all had direct and sustained experience in conducting online CFL instruction.

Although the sample size was relatively small, qualitative inquiry prioritizes contextual depth and experiential richness rather than statistical representativeness. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the recurrence of similar responses across participants, the dataset was considered sufficient for identifying preliminary thematic patterns relevant to the study objectives.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews supplemented by short written reflective notes. Semi-structured interviews were selected to allow the researcher to address predetermined questions while also providing flexibility to probe emerging issues and clarifications during the conversation. Each interview focused on participants' online teaching routines, pedagogical choices, beliefs regarding effective language learning, assessment considerations, and challenges encountered in sustaining student engagement.

To complement the spoken interview data, participants were also invited to provide brief reflective notes describing their online teaching experiences, including instructional practices they commonly employed, difficulties faced during online sessions, and reflections on students' responsiveness. These written reflections provided an additional layer of participant-generated data that supported comparison with the interview narratives.

While the study primarily relied on teacher self-reported accounts, the combination of interviews and reflective notes enabled limited within-participant corroboration by allowing the researcher to compare consistency between teachers' oral explanations and written reflections. Nevertheless, broader triangulation through classroom observation or student feedback was beyond the scope of the present study and is acknowledged as a limitation.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis following the general procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). All interview responses and reflective notes were first transcribed and read repeatedly to

achieve familiarity with the dataset. During this familiarization stage, the researcher identified recurring meaning units and notable expressions related to the three focal areas of the study, namely teaching practices, teachers' beliefs, and online teaching challenges.

The second stage involved open coding, in which segments of data were labeled according to their substantive meanings. Similar codes were then compared, clustered, and grouped into broader analytical categories. Through iterative comparison across participants' interview transcripts and reflective notes, these categories were gradually refined into overarching themes and subthemes.

The coding process was not conducted as a one-time linear procedure, but rather as a recursive movement between raw data, provisional codes, and emerging interpretations. Analytic memos were maintained throughout the process to record preliminary insights, thematic links, and researcher reflections. Emerging codes were repeatedly revisited and compared across interview transcripts and reflective notes to identify convergent patterns, divergent experiences, and recurring pedagogical concerns. This recursive comparison enabled the researcher to refine thematic categories while ensuring that the final interpretations remained closely grounded in participants' accounts. In this way, analytical trustworthiness was strengthened through sustained revisiting of the data and continuous alignment between raw responses, provisional codes, and final themes.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and participated voluntarily. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and pseudonymous labels (T1–T6) were used during data reporting to protect participants' identities.

FINDINGS

Participants Background

The study involved six participants who were CFL teachers in higher education institutions in Malaysia. The participants comprised three female and three male teachers, with teaching experience ranging from one to eight years. This variation provided a range of online teaching experiences relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. Participant information is presented in Table 1.

Participant	Gender	Years of Teaching Experience
T1	Female	8 years
T2	Female	8 years
T3	Female	7 years
T4	Male	5 years
T5	Male	3 years
T6	Male	1 year

Table 1. Participants Information

RQ1: Teaching and Learning Practices in Online CFL Contexts (Theme 1: Teaching and Learning Practices)

Blended Learning as an Adaptive Pedagogical Arrangement

The findings indicate that all participants adopted blended learning approaches by integrating synchronous and asynchronous instructional modes through various digital platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, LMS, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Telegram. However, the participants did not employ blended learning as a fixed or institutionally prescribed model. Rather, it functioned as an adaptive pedagogical arrangement that enabled them to redistribute instructional content, communicative practice, and learner monitoring across different online spaces.

Most participants reported using asynchronous sessions to provide pre-recorded explanations, theoretical notes, and reinforcement exercises, while synchronous meetings were reserved for revision, dialogue practice, pronunciation correction, and question-answer interaction. As T3 explained:

“I prefer using blended learning. For the asynchronous class, I provide materials focusing on theoretical content in the form of pre-recorded videos together with short exercises using digital forms. Students need to watch the video and complete the exercises before the live session. During the synchronous class, I revise the content through communication practice with students, such as reading dialogues, correcting pronunciation, and conducting question-and-answer sessions.”

Similarly, some participants indicated that live sessions were intentionally shortened in terms of direct lecturing so that more time could be allocated to student interaction, discussion, and communicative drills.

These responses demonstrate that blended learning was not merely adopted because online education required multiple platforms. More significantly, it was used as a compensatory instructional strategy to overcome the limited immediacy of virtual classrooms. By transferring explanatory content to asynchronous spaces, teachers were able to preserve synchronous time for oral reinforcement and interaction, which are particularly critical in second language instruction.

This suggests that blended learning in online CFL classrooms is better understood as a negotiated pedagogical adaptation rather than a simple technological arrangement.

Interactive Reinforcement and Gamified Follow-Up Activities

Another recurring instructional practice involved the use of digital reinforcement activities through applications such as Kahoot, Quizizz, Wordwall, and Microsoft Forms. These tools were primarily employed after live sessions to consolidate vocabulary, sentence patterns, and topical understanding in less formal but engaging ways. T3 stated:

“After the live session, I usually give students simple tasks such as games through Kahoot, Quizizz, or Wordwall to conclude the topic in a brief and relaxed manner.”

Participants perceived these gamified tools as useful not only for checking understanding but also for reducing the monotony and emotional fatigue commonly associated with prolonged online learning. Instead of relying solely on conventional worksheets or direct questioning, teachers attempted to create lower-pressure participation opportunities in which students could continue engaging with the lesson content.

However, the findings also show that such interactive tools functioned mainly as supplementary reinforcement rather than replacing formal teaching. Teachers still maintained control over the main instructional sequence and used gamification selectively to sustain attention and motivation. This reflects an important balancing act between maintaining academic seriousness and creating learner-friendly online participation spaces.

Continuous Monitoring of Student Response Through Multiple Channels

A particularly strong pattern across participants was the constant effort to secure student response despite limited online visibility. Participants reported using both synchronous and asynchronous means to monitor participation, including random name calling, oral questioning, attendance tracking, chat responses, WhatsApp communication, and simple Chinese command prompts. T2 described the process vividly:

“I have to think of many ways to make sure students respond during online teaching even when there are internet problems, device problems, or background issues. If there is no response, I will call names randomly. If they still cannot respond orally, at least they need to type in the chat panel. It is very difficult to ask them to switch on cameras or give direct responses.”

Similarly, T4 explained that simple Chinese instructions were deliberately used to test spontaneous comprehension:

“Besides using Quizlet, after the first six weeks I usually give common phrases or simple instructions in Chinese such as qǐng dǎkāi shèxiàngtóu or qǐng dǎkāi màikèfēng to observe whether students can respond.”

These excerpts reveal that obtaining student response in online CFL teaching was not a passive process but a continuous pedagogical struggle requiring teachers to improvise multiple channels of communication. In physical classrooms, student attentiveness can often be inferred through eye contact, gestures, or immediate reactions. In online settings, however, such visual cues are greatly reduced, forcing teachers to deliberately engineer moments of accountability and response.

Therefore, student participation was not simply monitored; it had to be actively manufactured through repeated prompting, random checks, and alternative response pathways.

Teaching Practices as Compensatory and Highly Flexible

Taken together, the findings reveal that the teaching practices adopted by participants were characterized by flexibility, compensation, and continuous adjustment rather than straightforward digital transfer of conventional teaching methods. Teachers did not simply move face-to-face lessons onto online platforms. Instead, they redistributed content delivery, created supplementary interactive tasks, and employed multiple response-monitoring techniques in order to preserve language practice and learner attentiveness under conditions of reduced classroom immediacy.

This indicates that online CFL teaching practices are fundamentally shaped by the need to compensate for the loss of physical classroom presence. As a result, pedagogical decisions become highly adaptive and situational, requiring teachers to constantly modify how, when, and through which medium interaction is sustained.

RQ2: Teachers’ Beliefs Regarding Teaching and Learning (Theme 2: Teachers’ Beliefs)

Beliefs in Blended Learning as a Support for Learner Independence

All participants expressed a generally positive belief towards blended learning, particularly the integration of synchronous and asynchronous modes. However, their responses suggest that this positive orientation was rooted not merely in technological convenience, but in the belief that online learning should create more opportunities for students to conduct self-study, repeated revision, and independent access to instructional materials.

Participants believed that pre-recorded videos, digital exercises, recorded live sessions, and easily accessible notes allowed students to revisit difficult content according to their own pace and circumstances. This was considered particularly important in online language learning, where students may miss parts of live instruction due to internet disruption or reduced concentration.

T1 explained:

“Students need to follow all planned learning activities, make their own notes, and do self-study. They cannot depend on live class alone.”

This indicates that participants viewed blended learning as pedagogically meaningful only when students utilized asynchronous resources responsibly. In other words, teachers did not see digital flexibility as inherently effective; they believed its success depended on whether learners were willing to assume greater independence beyond scheduled class meetings.

Thus, blended learning was closely associated with a belief in learner self-management rather than mere instructional convenience.

Beliefs about Student Response as an Indicator of Real Learning

Another strong belief repeatedly expressed by participants was that student response serves as one of the most important indicators of actual learning progress in online classrooms. Because teachers could not physically

observe students continuously, oral, written, or behavioral responses became crucial signals through which they interpreted comprehension, attentiveness, and engagement.

T3 stated:

“Student response can be seen through two-way interaction during live sessions, through group WhatsApp or personal WhatsApp, and also when they begin using simple Chinese greetings such as xièxie, búkèqì, or nǐhǎo.”

Participants therefore believed that even seemingly small student reactions carried diagnostic significance. Response was not interpreted merely as participation for attendance purposes, but as evidence that students were cognitively processing and beginning to internalize the target language.

This belief also explains why teachers repeatedly called names, required chat replies, or issued simple commands during online sessions. Such practices were driven by the conviction that silent presence could not be equated with actual learning.

Hence, participants’ instructional insistence on response was underpinned by a deeper belief that language learning must remain visible and observable despite online invisibility.

Beliefs about Assessment Authenticity and Preference for Oral Evaluation

Assessment emerged as one of the clearest areas in which participants’ beliefs were explicitly articulated. While teachers acknowledged that asynchronous assessments conducted through Microsoft Teams or digital forms were practical, time-saving, and paperless, many participants questioned the reliability of such assessments as indicators of students’ genuine language proficiency. T1 commented:

“I prefer oral assessment because it is conducted live and gives teachers the opportunity to observe students directly. There is a very obvious score gap between oral assessment and the other assessments.”

Similarly, T4 stated:

“I prefer assessment to focus more on oral performance because it reveals students’ real ability. Other forms of assessment may open opportunities for students to copy by using another device.”

These responses reveal that participants strongly associated authenticity with direct observability. Teachers believed that spontaneous oral performance was harder to manipulate and therefore more accurately reflected pronunciation, comprehension, and communicative readiness. In contrast, asynchronous written tasks were viewed with suspicion because students might rely on translation tools, external help, or imitation.

This indicates that teachers’ assessment beliefs were not shaped solely by practicality but by a deeper concern for preserving evaluative trustworthiness in an environment perceived as difficult to monitor.

Beliefs about Learner Commitment as the Core of Successful Language Learning

Across participants, there was a consistent belief that the effectiveness of online CFL learning ultimately

depends on student commitment rather than teacher method alone. Teachers repeatedly emphasized that no instructional strategy, regardless of how creative or technologically sophisticated, would succeed if learners were passive or unwilling to engage. T5 expressed this emphatically:

“There must be commitment. Even if we use the best method, if students have no commitment, the learning outcomes will not be achieved. The main thing is commitment. I mean the commitment to complete all tasks and participate in all learning activities.”

Several participants also believed that students should actively revise vocabulary, make notes, practice pronunciation, and expose themselves to Chinese language input beyond the formal classroom. Some even recommended songs, videos, and communication with native speakers as additional self-initiated learning strategies.

These responses suggest that participants conceptualized online language learning as a distributed responsibility in which teachers provide guidance, structure, and materials, but students remain the decisive agents of progress. This belief places strong emphasis on learner autonomy and sustained self-discipline.

Beliefs about the Teacher's Role as Facilitator and Emotional Supporter

Participants consistently believed that the teacher's role during online teaching extends far beyond transmitting syllabus content. In addition to planning lessons and conducting assessments, teachers felt responsible for facilitating active learning, monitoring students' emotional condition, and providing encouragement during a period of heightened stress and isolation. T4 noted:

"Teachers need to be ready to change from conventional methods to digital methods. Teachers also act as facilitators and need to create active learning which they have to let students ask questions, expose them to real situations, and help them learn instead of spoon-feeding. Besides that, we need to care about students, chat casually, and know how to approach them."

T5 further stated:

"Besides teaching, we also play the role of counsellor. We need to listen to students' frustrations and understand their situation."

These statements demonstrate that participants viewed effective online teaching as involving substantial relational labor. Teachers were expected not only to teach language but also to maintain students' morale, reduce online fatigue, and create a sense of personal connection despite physical separation.

Therefore, participants' beliefs about teaching were fundamentally holistic: instructional success was perceived as inseparable from emotional attentiveness, learner encouragement, and active facilitation.

Teachers' Beliefs as a System of Accountability, Authenticity, and Support

Overall, the findings reveal that participants' beliefs are not isolated opinions about separate classroom matters, but an interconnected pedagogical system built around three central concerns: learner accountability, assessment authenticity, and sustained teacher support. Teachers value blended learning because it can support learner independence, insist on student response because visible engagement is treated as evidence of learning, prefer oral assessment because it preserves authenticity, and view themselves as facilitators because online learners require stronger motivational guidance.

This demonstrates that teachers' beliefs function as an interpretive framework through which they evaluate what counts as effective online language teaching. Rather than uncritically accepting digital teaching formats, participants continuously filtered online practices through concerns over responsibility, visibility, trustworthiness, and human connection.

Across participants, however, these pedagogical beliefs were not enacted without tension. Although teachers consistently valued visible learner response, oral participation, authentic assessment, and learner commitment as indicators of effective language learning, the online classroom often limited the extent to which such ideals could be fully realized. Restricted visual access, delayed student feedback, unstable internet conditions, and passive online attendance repeatedly forced teachers to rely on partial alternatives rather than ideal pedagogical conditions. This suggests that teachers' beliefs functioned less as fixed teaching prescriptions than as pedagogical ideals that were continuously negotiated within constrained online implementation.

RQ3: Challenges in Online CFL Teaching Contexts (Theme 3: Challenges in Online Teaching)

Intensified Workload and the Burden of Digital Preparation

All participants described online teaching as substantially more exhausting and preparation-intensive than conventional face-to-face instruction. The burden was not confined to conducting the lesson itself, but extended to learning unfamiliar systems, preparing digital materials, designing online activities, troubleshooting technical issues, and maintaining communication with students beyond class time. T5 expressed this plainly:

“It is exhausting. It’s all about the system. Before this we could probably just bring a book and pen to teach, but now there is so much to do. We need to study the system and prepare all the materials.”

Similarly, several participants acknowledged that online teaching required them to think much more carefully about how to simplify explanations, sequence activities, and create digital alternatives for classroom exercises that were previously easier to conduct physically.

These responses indicate that the challenge was not simply “more work” in a numerical sense, but a qualitative transformation of the teaching profession itself. Teachers were compelled to function simultaneously as lesson planners, content digitizers, platform managers, and technical troubleshooters. Consequently, pedagogical labor became both broader and more fragmented.

Limited Communication and Difficulty Sustaining Participation

A second major challenge involved the severe reduction of spontaneous communication between teachers and students. Participants repeatedly reported that online classrooms weakened the sense of togetherness, limited natural interaction, and made it difficult to obtain immediate responses from learners. T1 noted:

“One challenge of online learning is student participation. Students do not feel a sense of togetherness and communication is quite limited because we cannot see their faces.”

T2 similarly admitted:

“When classes are online, one of the biggest challenges is asking students to give responses during class.”

These statements suggest that the issue extends beyond ordinary classroom silence. In online settings, teachers lose many of the social cues that normally help them judge attentiveness, hesitation, confusion, or willingness to participate. Without facial expressions, body language, and the ambient energy of physical classrooms, even simple question-answer interaction becomes more uncertain and effortful.

As a result, participants experienced online teaching as a pedagogical space in which communication had to be repeatedly initiated, requested, and engineered rather than naturally unfolding.

Technological and Environmental Constraints

Participants also identified unstable internet connection, device limitations, uncondusive home environments, and insufficient digital familiarity as recurring barriers that complicated online teaching implementation. T5 explained:

“Among the online learning challenges are internet problems because I stay in a rural area, noisy surroundings, lack of IT skills, and no prior experience conducting online classes.”

This excerpt illustrates that technological constraints were not experienced as isolated technical incidents but as overlapping structural pressures affecting both teachers’ confidence and lesson continuity. Teachers had to constantly adjust expectations, repeat explanations, simplify activities, or tolerate delayed participation because online teaching was dependent on conditions that were often outside their direct control.

Therefore, technological challenges introduced an additional layer of unpredictability into already demanding pedagogical work.

Professional Growth, Emotional Maturity, and Increased Adaptability

Despite these difficulties, participants also acknowledged that prolonged engagement with online teaching gradually produced positive changes in their professional competence and personal outlook. Many reported increased technological literacy, broader familiarity with digital applications, improved lesson planning discipline, and greater creativity in instructional delivery. T3 reflected:

“Online learning has improved my technology skills. I learned editing, new applications, and how to deliver information in a brief and focused way. Proper planning and effective delivery are very important, so students do not feel burdened.”

More notably, some participants described emotional changes in how they perceived students and managed expectations. T3 further stated:

“Online learning made me stop placing too many expectations on students because I am not in their situation, so I became more neutral and open-hearted without hard feelings. I feel more emotionally mature.”

This is a particularly significant finding because it shows that teachers’ adaptation was not purely technical. The pressures of online teaching also cultivated emotional flexibility, empathy, and greater sensitivity toward students’ hidden circumstances. Teachers gradually learned that rigid instructional expectations were often incompatible with the realities students faced during remote learning. Thus, challenges in this study functioned not only as barriers but also as catalysts for professional resilience and relational maturity.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that online CFL teaching cannot be sufficiently understood as a simple combination of digital teaching practices, teachers’ pedagogical beliefs, and online classroom challenges treated as separate dimensions. Rather, online instruction emerges through the continual negotiation among these dimensions, where each repeatedly reshapes how the others are enacted in practice. Teachers do not implement pedagogical beliefs in a direct linear manner, nor do they adopt digital tools as neutral technological choices. Instead, instructional decisions are constantly adjusted between what teachers pedagogically value and what online classroom conditions realistically permit. This reveals online CFL teaching as a form of negotiated pedagogical adaptation shaped by both internal instructional priorities and external digital constraints.

Participants’ accounts reveal that their instructional practices were marked by considerable pedagogical flexibility. The use of blended learning, gamified reinforcement, digital messaging, and multi-channel response monitoring did not emerge merely as technological preferences, but as practical attempts to preserve communication, learner attention, and language practice despite reduced classroom immediacy. What emerges here is that online teaching required teachers to redesign not only the medium of delivery, but also the pathways through which interaction and participation could still be sustained.

This finding is consistent with teacher cognition scholarship which argues that pedagogical beliefs are not always translated into practice in direct or stable ways but are frequently mediated by contextual teaching conditions (Phipps & Borg, 2009). Teachers may strongly value interaction, learner accountability, and authentic assessment, yet the realities of technological unpredictability, limited student visibility, and fluctuating responsiveness often require those ideals to be adjusted in practice. In this sense, the present study supports the view that enacted teaching is shaped as much by contextual negotiation as by pedagogical intention.

A closer reading of the findings also suggests that the digital strategies reported by participants should not be interpreted as isolated classroom techniques. The use of messaging applications, oral questioning, random response checks, or asynchronous preparatory tasks reflects a deeper compensatory effort through which teachers attempt to recover pedagogical control and maintain visible evidence of learning in an environment where student engagement is often uncertain. This reinforces earlier observations that online language teaching tools

often function less as optional technological enhancements than as pedagogical mechanisms for sustaining interaction and instructional continuity under disrupted learning conditions (Ferri et al., 2020).

At the same time, participants' beliefs provide the internal pedagogical logic behind these adaptive practices. Teachers consistently emphasized learner commitment, visible response, assessment authenticity, and the teacher's facilitative and supportive role. This indicates that participants were not simply concerned with completing online lessons according to schedule, but with preserving what they considered meaningful indicators of genuine language development.

These pedagogical priorities, however, were repeatedly challenged by contextual pressures. Increased workload, weak student participation, technological instability, and limited visual access to learners disrupted ideal lesson plans and often forced teachers to recalibrate both instructional expectations and communication strategies. Consequently, the relationship between belief and practice was not linear. Teachers did not enact their pedagogical beliefs in straightforward or unmodified ways; rather, they continuously negotiated between what they ideally wished to achieve and what online classroom realities realistically permitted.

This point extends previous online CFL studies that have largely documented digital tools, blended learning techniques, or technological barriers in descriptive terms (Li & Li, 2024; Ferri et al., 2020). The present findings indicate that online CFL pedagogy is more accurately understood as a process of negotiated pedagogical adaptation in which teachers repeatedly modify teaching structure, assessment decisions, learner monitoring, and emotional expectations in response to changing contextual demands.

The central contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that online CFL teaching should not be viewed merely as the application of digital tools to conventional pedagogy. More fundamentally, it involves a continuous effort by teachers to preserve pedagogical visibility, learner accountability, communicative engagement, and evaluative authenticity under conditions that repeatedly weaken direct classroom control. In this sense, online language teaching is better understood as an ongoing process of pedagogical recalibration in which teachers repeatedly reconcile instructional ideals with constrained online realities.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the study involved only six participants drawn from higher education CFL contexts in Malaysia. Although the qualitative design enabled in-depth exploration of teachers' experiences, the relatively small sample limits the broader transferability of the findings to other institutional settings or language teaching populations.

Second, participants were recruited through convenience sampling based on accessibility and willingness to participate. As such, the study may not fully capture the perspectives of CFL teachers working under different institutional demands, technological infrastructures, or learner demographics.

Third, the study relied primarily on self-reported data obtained through semi-structured interviews and short reflective notes. While these sources provided valuable access to teachers' pedagogical perceptions and lived experiences, they remain dependent on participants' subjective articulation of their own practices. The absence of additional sources such as classroom observations, teaching artefacts, or student feedback limits broader triangulation and restricts fuller verification of how stated beliefs are enacted during actual online instruction.

In addition, because the study is based on teachers' retrospective narration, the data may foreground consciously expressed pedagogical beliefs more than tacit classroom behaviors that might only become visible through direct observational methods. The findings should therefore be understood as interpretive and exploratory rather than conclusive representations of all online CFL teaching contexts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Several recommendations may be drawn for future research as well as for pedagogical practice. First, future studies should involve a larger and more diverse pool of CFL teachers across different educational levels, institutions, and regional settings in order to examine whether similar patterns emerge across broader online

teaching contexts. Comparative studies may also provide deeper insight into how contextual factors shape teachers' pedagogical adaptation differently.

Second, future qualitative investigations should adopt richer multi-method data collection by incorporating classroom observations, lesson artefacts, student feedback, or recorded online teaching sessions. Such evidence would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how teachers' articulated beliefs correspond with their enacted classroom behaviors.

Third, further research should examine more explicitly the ongoing negotiation between teachers' pedagogical ideals and the practical limitations of digital classrooms, particularly in relation to learner passivity, assessment authenticity, and emotional support. Exploring these tensions over longer teaching periods may yield more nuanced understanding of teacher adaptation.

From a practical perspective, professional development programs should be strengthened to support CFL teachers not only in digital platform usage, but also in online interaction management, authentic assessment design, and strategies for sustaining student engagement. In addition, educational institutions should provide continuous technological and pedagogical support, including reliable infrastructure, access to digital tools, and ongoing instructional mentoring, in order to help teachers respond more sustainably to the demands of online language teaching.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine online CFL teaching through three interconnected dimensions: teachers' instructional practices, pedagogical beliefs, and the challenges encountered in digital learning environments. Taken together, the findings reveal that online teaching is not merely a matter of transferring face-to-face instruction onto digital platforms, but a continuous process of pedagogical adaptation shaped by both teacher intention and contextual limitation.

The participants' accounts show that online CFL instruction requires teachers to remain highly flexible in structuring lessons, monitoring learner response, and maintaining communicative engagement. At the same time, their instructional decisions are deeply informed by beliefs concerning learner accountability, visible participation, assessment authenticity, and the teacher's supportive role. These pedagogical priorities, however, cannot always be enacted directly, as they are repeatedly mediated by technological unpredictability, reduced classroom immediacy, and increased instructional demands.

Viewed in this way, the study highlights that the relationship between belief and practice in online teaching is fundamentally negotiated rather than linear. Teachers are required to continuously reconcile what they pedagogically value with what digital classroom realities permit, producing forms of teaching that are compensatory, context-sensitive, and professionally demanding.

Overall, this study contributes to a more integrated understanding of online CFL pedagogy by highlighting that meaningful online instruction depends not only on access to digital platforms, but on teachers' continual ability to recalibrate practices, expectations, and pedagogical decisions in response to unstable classroom realities. By foregrounding the negotiated relationship between teaching practices, teacher beliefs, and contextual challenges, the study extends existing descriptive accounts of online language teaching and reinforces the need for stronger pedagogy as well as institutional support for sustainable digital instruction.

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Conflict Of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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