The influence of cultural background on teaching and learning in synchronous online sessions

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Abstract

Distance-education technology has moved towards multimedia-oriented systems which allow an effective synergy of synchronous and asynchronous interaction. Virtual classrooms have become more and more popular, providing a multi-media context for synchronous teaching and learning at universities world-wide. This dissertation investigates the impact of cultural background on teaching and learning in synchronous virtual classrooms from the perspective of teachers at universities.

Nineteen interviews were carried out via Skype with 17 teachers from five different countries. A phenomenological approach was used for the data analysis to find the "essence" of the experience of using a virtual classroom for synchronous online conferencing. Three themes emerged from the data analysis: Culture and its effects, Technology, and Pedagogy. Within these themes, the participants explained their views of the various aspects that define culture, explained their own cultural backgrounds and reported their experiences of stereotyping, gender-related issues, using a webcam and recording in their virtual classroom teaching. Furthermore, the effects of technology in relation to teaching in multi-cultural virtual classes were addressed. Finally, the pedagogical impact of teaching in a virtual classroom with students from diverse cultural backgrounds was analysed.

The results show that there were two layers of cultural impact arising from the teachers´ and the students´ cultural background. The first one was the obvious existence of different cultures and what the teachers experienced consciously. This included awareness of adjusted didactics when teaching in a virtual classroom with diverse students. However, there was a second level, which revealed that the teachers were showing behaviours related to the theories of white ignorance (Mills, 2007), double-consciousness (Du Bois, 1994) and even panopticism

(Foucault, 1977) without being aware of it. Thus, the desired concept of multiculturalism (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004) in virtual classroom teaching was not exercised.

However, it was concluded that a virtual classroom can be used as a safe environment for students and teachers from diverse cultural backgrounds if the teachers are aware of their own presence (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000), their cultural background and which effects their belonging to a "dominant" culture will have on their own behaviour and that of their students. If managed carefully, the virtual classroom offers a mixture of tools that can be used appropriately for creating interactivity and constructing knowledge with diverse participants; e.g., text chat can be used as a discussion tool for students who are too shy to speak into a microphone. Future studies are recommended to investigate the perception of students from various cultural backgrounds, as the research presented in this thesis focused solely on teachers´ experiences.

Key words: synchronous online conferences, online teaching, virtual classroom, e-learning and cultural influences in synchronous online teaching.

Contents

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List of Abbreviations

CMC   Computer Mediated Communication

CALL   Computer-assisted Language Learning

CD-ROM   Compact Disc Read-Only Memory

ICT   Information and Communication Technologies

IPA   Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IT   Internet Technology

MBA   Master of Business Administration

MEd   Master in Education

MAODE   Master in Online and Distance Education

OU   The Open University, UK

OUBS   The Open University Business School, UK

PhD   Doctor of Philosophy

TEL   Technology Enhanced Learning

TILA   Telecollaboration for Intercultural Language Acquisition

UK   United Kingdom

USA   United States of America

VC   Virtual Classroom

VLE   Virtual Learning Environment

List of Figures and Tables

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter introduces the research I conducted and explains my interest in the area. The research comprised interviews with teachers at universities in different countries and was carried out via Skype and personal meetings. I begin by describing my personal background and interest in virtual classroom teaching, and clarify in detail what I mean by the term "virtual classrooms". Then I explain the aims and purpose of this research and identify the research questions. Subsequently I describe possible weaknesses of this study and present the intended audience. This chapter concludes with an overview of the structure of the remainder of this thesis.

1.1   The definition of cultural background in the context of this thesis

In this research, I wanted to take a situated and dynamic view of the cultural practices of ethnic and racial groups as suggested by various researchers (Cole, 1998; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Joo, 1999). This means that culture is not static; people change over their lifetime depending on the context, such as the kindergarten and school they attend, and their choice of studying or professional development. Furthermore, it would be wrong to assume that certain cultural categories can be used to generalise people, as this would mean for example that every German would be the same as another German regardless of any differences in the cultural influences they encounter. For this thesis, the focus was initially on place of birth, place of upbringing, gender, ethnicity and language as criteria for one´s cultural background. However, participants brought up more aspects, that in their views contributed to forming their own cultural background, such as life style or religious beliefs, which then were added to my definition of culture. Therefore the definition used in the context of this study and thesis is:

"Culture consists of different criteria such as place of birth, place of upbringing, gender, ethnicity, language, religious beliefs and choice of lifestyle, which together form one's culture at a given moment in time; it is also fluid according to context and undergoes continuous development for each person during their lifetime."

1.2   My personal background

According to Creswell (2013) it is essential to include a personal statement about the researcher's experience and the circumstances that lead to curiosity about the area of interest. The rapid progress of technology significantly influences computer-based learning in distance education. Due to its pedagogical impact, one of the most important aspects is interactivity which has three main components: student-student interaction, student-instructor interaction, and student-content interaction (Moore, 1989). Distance education technology has moved towards multimedia-oriented systems which allow an effective synergy of synchronous and asynchronous interaction.

In 2001 I took an online course called "Telecoach" with the University of Paderborn which focused on the didactics of teaching online using the first version of "Centra" (now "Saba") and "netmeeting" for synchronous audio conferencing. I then started teaching people how to use audio/video conferencing, with the software "ilinc", for a private company. In 2004 I started tutoring "The Professional Certificate in Management" for the Open University Business School (OUBS), and from 2006 on, I have been running a pilot test using audio/video conferencing for meeting my students at times when we did not have any face-to-face tutorials. In 2008 I received the Open University Teaching Award for my efforts in implementing

synchronous online audio/video conferences in the course I was tutoring. The OUBS introduced the software "Elluminate" in 2009, which is a synchronous e-learning environment that can be described as a virtual classroom (Almpanis, Miller, Ross, Price, & James, 2011).

Since 2009 I have been advising various course teams on the implementation of Elluminate and have been holding online and face-to-face training sessions for their tutors on how to use the virtual classroom for teaching online. Furthermore, I was tutoring two courses in business management which used Elluminate as a compulsory component for the tutors (the students' attendance is voluntary as with face-to-face tutorials). In my role as a teacher, I experienced that real-time interaction in these virtual classrooms allows simulation of a face-to-face classroom learning situation (Goodyear, 2002). However, there is a growing body of research (e.g. Hampel & Hauck, 2006; Kramsch, 2006) that argues for a radical change from aiming for simulation to accepting that computer-mediated-communication offers completely different communication modes. Nevertheless, it can also be discussed, whether there is any difference between the two forms of teaching or only between the ways interactions are mediated in them. Furthermore, with technology used in face-to-face classrooms and the use of smartphones, the differentiation between online and offline has become somewhat blurred.

Kramsch states that "in order to understand others, we have to understand what they remember from the past, what they imagine and project onto the future, and how they position themselves in the present. And we have to understand the same things of ourselves" (2006, p. 251). Therefore, she suggests a shift from "communicative competence to symbolic competence" as communicative competence derives not only from information, but "from the symbolic power that comes with the interpretation of signs and their multiple relations to other signs" (2006, p. 249). This approach is useful for teaching and learning in virtual classrooms, as students and

teachers need to interpret a variety of semiotic modes (e.g. written language, spoken language, images and icons).

I also agree with Salmon (2003), who argues that synchronous conferencing via the Internet provides a feeling of immediate contact, motivation, and even some fun to the students, which is especially valuable for distance learners. At present I teach with the University of Hamburg in a blended learning format, where I have implemented regular virtual classroom meetings to a project management course and I teach students how to use the software "Adobe Connect Professional", which is another synchronous e-learning setting that can be defined as a virtual classroom (Almpanis et al., 2011)

Having seen the rapid development of technology allowing synchronous interaction to become what some might regard as technically flawless, I experienced that the cultural background (the term will be explained and discussed later in detail) of teachers and students may also influence teaching and learning, e.g. have an impact on the oral and written interaction that takes place in the virtual classroom. This relates to Thorne's concept of "cultures-of-use" in which he argues that "Internet communication tools, like all human artifacts, are cultural tools" and that "e-mail, instant messenger, and forms of synchronous chat, are deeply affected by the cultures-of-use, or to borrow a biological term – phenotypic characteristics, evolving from the manner in which these tools mediate every communicative practice" (2003, p. 38). As stated at the beginning of this section, I wanted to take a more situated view on culture, which in relation to learning is following Lave and Wenger (1991) who argue that learning is situated, meaning that it is related to the culture and context in which it takes place. Including social interaction as an important component of situated learning, Lave and Wenger developed this approach further resulting in the concept of

"Community of Practice (CoP)" (1991) with its components domain, community and practice. Wenger defines Communities of Practice as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (2011, p.1). Thus it can be argued that students and teachers form a community of practice by taking part in virtual classroom sessions.

However, the definition of culture itself in the literature is extremely wide-ranging, from the early explanation by Tylor (1924, p. 1), who states that "Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, moral, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society", to Kluckhorn and Strodtbeck (1961), who differentiate between five orientations of value which range from people, nature, time and sense to social relations. Later, Hofstede (2005) provided five cultural dimensions: power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance and the short-term orientation and long-term orientation towards time. In 2010, Hofstede added a sixth dimension, namely indulgence versus self-restraint.

However, from my point of view, these are generalisations which ignore hybridity, for example, people whose parents are German and English. I am German but studied for my Master in Online and Distance Education (MAODE) at a British University, likewise am studying for my PhD at Lancaster University. My students at the Open University and at the University of Hamburg are also from various countries all over the world. In my private life, I live together with my British partner, and our son is raised bilingual and bi-cultural. The assumption that every German or Briton or every member of a specific cultural group should be the same is not only simplistic but absolutely incorrect. Furthermore, as explained by McSweeney (2002),

Hofstede´s original data were based upon a study with employees of IBM, assuming that in IBM there is just one single organisational culture and thus that all differences between IBM employees could be categorised depending on their nationality. Additionally, the data he used for his categorisation were mostly limited to responses from "marketing-plus-sales employees" (McSweeney, 2002, p. 95). With this approach, as stated by McSweeney,

> [Hofstede is] maintaining the convenient, but fantastic, assumption that throughout the world, members of the same occupation, regardless of diverse entry requirements, regulations, social status… each share an identical world-wide occupational culture (2002, p. 99).

Baskerville (2003) also criticises the collection of data by Hofstede, stating that units were "exclusively determined by the nations in which IBM had branches" and that "simply enough, each nation was deemed one culture." The belief that this is unacceptable is supported by Wildavsky, who explains that "cultures are not countries, and there is generally more than one culture in one country at any one time" (1989, p. 71). More recently, Oztok criticises the still existing "idealist and normative" frameworks in "online learning research" (Oztok, Zingaro, Brett, & Hewitt, 2013, p. 160). He explains that categories might be explanatory and thus easily used but that "we cannot assume that individuals will choose to enact these particular identities in particular situations and at particular times".

This research unites the two areas which influence my life, namely teaching in a (synchronous) virtual classroom and cultural diversity, by investigating how they influence one another. I agree with Gutiérrez and Rogoff, who state that academics from across many disciplines see a problem of "essentializing people on the basis of a group label and have underlined the

variability that exists within groups and their practices" (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003, p. 20). To name only a few, Ess (2002), Ess and Sudweeks (2005) and Pegrum and Bax (2007) criticise the conceptualisation of culture "solely as an attribute of individuals inherited from national characteristics, and the problem for online learning solely as one of appropriate design for cultural difference" (Goodfellow, 2008, p. 553). Hauck argues that this results in a shift of attention to "the cultural dimension of technology use (with regard to language learning see, for example, Thorne 2003), and the negotiation of "learning cultures" specific to online environments" (2010, p.21).

However, there was evidence in my own courses with students from all over the world, and in my teacher training, that there are notable differences in the way teachers and students with diverse cultural backgrounds act both in face-to-face settings and in the virtual classroom. In my private life, I also experience differences, for example, the "English politeness of expressing feelings" versus the "German direct statements of what is meant". The problem with the understanding of culture as viewed by Hofstede (1986), for example, is that it does not help with teaching in a virtual classroom, with its limitations regarding the interpretation of body language, for example. This research intends to find out which aspects of the participants´ culture have an impact on their behaviour in the virtual classroom and thus, how teachers can address these issues and thereby add quality to their performance.

1.3 Aims and purpose of the research

There is a growing body of research published on cultural influences on teaching (Ess, 2005; Goodfellow & Lamy, 2009; Huss et al., 2015); but what is new about this research is to bring the cultural influences together with their influence on interaction in synchronous online

teaching. This is pedagogically important as virtual classrooms (as defined in Section 1.4 The research setting and Section 2.3.2.4 Virtual classrooms) are becoming a standard tool in many universities. However, there is a shortage of appropriate literature that deals with the specific issues that differentiate teaching in a virtual classroom from traditional classroom lectures. It is important for the quality of synchronous online teaching in virtual classrooms if universities want to use them not only to save costs but as adequate means of teaching at university level.

Apart from my own interest stated earlier, this research is important because virtual classroom teaching has become more and more popular at universities in many countries (some are using it to save costs but also to reach a more dispersed student body). This research will provide further insight into how cultural aspects are influencing the usage of virtual classrooms in online teaching. There has been research on interactivity in synchronous online sessions over the past years, for example Martin et al. (2013) researched learner-learner, learner-instructor, learner-content, and learner-interface interactions of students in the United States of America (USA). However, it focuses on students of one area in the Southeast of the USA and does not investigate the impact of their cultural background on the interaction taking place, as students and teacher were asked questions about how they interact but not about any cultural aspects that may have influenced their interactions.

Hofstede (1986), for example, argues that students from collectivist societies are expected to speak up only in small groups, while students from individualist societies are expected to speak up in large groups. This static view has been taken over in online education literature; but it categorises students into groups without investigating the aforementioned dynamic that is evident when researching culture. According to Parish and Linder-VanBerschot:

cultural diversity remains apparent among learners, perhaps owing to deeply rooted cultural values and modes of thinking that are difficult to separate from learning processes (Nisbett, 2003). A growing appreciation of cultural diversity is demonstrated by more than its acknowledgement and tolerance, but also by a desire to preserve that diversity as a valuable asset for addressing the many challenges faced by the global community now and in the future. (2010, p. 2)

Therefore, the way it influences synchronous online discussion had to be explored, and I am presenting my findings in this thesis. This research will be important to teachers at universities and higher education institutes which are using virtual classrooms. However, it will also be interesting for the universities which are offering these courses, as the more successful their delivery is, the more students will be attracted to enrol. It will also reveal how the quality of teaching in a virtual classroom can be improved by considering the cultural aspects that affect behaviour in a virtual classroom, and thus will be important for the students who take the courses. To summarise, up to now, the literature addresses the need for collaboration in learning (Vygotsky, 1987), the need for interaction in distance education the different types of interaction (Anderson, 2003; Moore, 1989) and the influence of cultural diversity in teaching and learning (Hannon & D'Netto, 2007; Liu, Liu, Lee, & Magjuka, 2010).

This study researches how teaching and learning in virtual classrooms acknowledge cultural practices of different groups in different situations (using different tools available in the virtual classroom such as chat, speaking, video), and in a further step, how interaction in synchronous online sessions can benefit from this knowledge.

1.4 The research setting

This research investigates the experience of University teachers of using a virtual classroom for synchronous online sessions. Virtual classrooms are designed to provide the opportunity for tutors to interact in real time (synchronously) with their students, or for students to interact with each other, as depending on the setting the tutor does not have to be present in the virtual room. Participants in these synchronous sessions can talk to each other via microphones; they can use a chat facility, express their current feelings with the use of emoticons and, depending on the setting, use a video camera to transmit real-time pictures of themselves. All of these tools can be used both for learner-learner and for learner-instructor interaction following Moore's (1989) interaction types. Furthermore, the tutor can split the students into groups and send them into breakout rooms, where they can perform group activities on their own. This feature is intended to imitate group work in face-to-face settings. There are some limitations; for example, it does not easily allow looking at another group's work. However, it provides opportunity for learner-learner and learner-content interaction (Moore, 1989) as students can for instance discuss relevant course material. Nevertheless, it is important to consider learner-environment and instructor-environment interaction as teachers and learners are both interacting with the medium and via the medium. This circular interaction bears specific affordances, like promoting interactions or enabling collaborative learning. Hampel and Hauck (2008, p. 259) describe these as "socio-environmental" strategies.

Moreover, most virtual classrooms have an integrated whiteboard, where the tutor can upload Microsoft (MS) PowerPoint slides and other documents, and onto which both tutor and participants can write and draw. The tutors can also share their desktop, or ask students to share theirs, if interesting documents need to be viewed. Thus, learner-instructor, learner-learner and learner-content interaction are possible (Moore, 1989). Websites can be opened and shared to

provide access to relevant information. This falls into a fourth interaction category following Martin et al. (2012) who added learner-interface interaction to Moore's (1989) original categories.

Once the students have entered the virtual classroom, the interaction usually starts in the form of technical support, followed by using ice breakers to ease any tensions students may feel. Chlup and Collins (2010) state that icebreakers inspire learners to engage in interaction with their teachers and peers and thus encourage their learning. Interaction in the main part primarily depends on the content of the tutorial, varying from a lecture-type mode by the tutor, for example in Finance tutorials to group discussion of students with the tutor on their experiences in Management tutorials. The rationale behind is that the mathematical aspects of Finance as a subject need explanation which do not allow discussion. However, Business Management offers a variety of topics which can be discussed, for example motivation theories and their applicability on a certain group of employees. Often, break-out rooms are used for student-student discussions, with the tutor only checking in to see whether they run smoothly, thus primarily focusing on learner-learner and learner-content interaction (Moore, 1989).

Studying in a virtual classroom allows participants from all over the world to talk and interact with others at the same time, regardless of where they are situated. For example, one can physically be located in a tiny village in Bavaria but still take part in a synchronous discussion with people who are in New York, Hong Kong, Lancaster, etc. The virtual classroom also enables students to ask questions and to get an immediate answer from their teachers, just as if they were in a traditional face-to-face classroom. However, one of the main advantages of using a virtual classroom in distance education is the social aspect of students meeting each other at the same time. This can overcome the "loneliness of the distance learner" (Falloon, 2011). Studying at a distance is often combined with studying part-time, which causes a lot of pressure

for the students as they have to combine their professional and family life with their studies. Being able to discuss these issues with peers synchronously can make a huge difference to the success of studying.

However, there are also drawbacks to synchronous online sessions in comparison with asynchronous forms of online learning, which does not need simultaneous access as it occurs in delayed time (Johnson, 2006). One of the most distinctive advantages of asynchronous learning is the additional time for reflection (Meyer, 2003) which is not existent in synchronous online sessions. Furthermore, as Hewitt (2005) points out, in asynchronous threads students can follow up various discussions in different threads at the same time, which is not possible in synchronous online sessions. Oztok et al. state that "many authors highlight the benefits of threaded asynchronous CMC compared to synchronous CMC and face-to-face courses, including time-independent access, opportunities for heightened levels of peer interaction, avoidance of undesirable classroom behavior, and support for multiple learning styles" (Oztok, Zingaro, Brett, & Hewitt, 2013, p. 88).

Nevertheless, sometimes studying at a distance is also the only way people can attend a university, for example, if they are immobile or have certain anxieties. For them, meeting other students in a virtual classroom can be the only time that comes close to attending a traditional university, including some kind of "belonging" and "campus feeling". Again, these are factors that will help students to succeed in their studies, as immediate teacher and peer support are available.

To gain further insight into the work of university teachers with such virtual classrooms, this study investigates their experience in using virtual classrooms with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The study itself was carried out by analysing data conducted in interviews with the teachers, using a phenomenological approach for the data analysis.

1.5 Research questions

As stated beforehand, I wanted to find out from teachers in the field how they perceive the influence of cultural background on possible interaction in synchronous online sessions in a virtual classroom. The existing literature covers both the fields of culture and online teaching, and research has been carried out on the relationship of cultural aspects in teaching in a virtual classroom predominantly in the field of language teaching and learning. However, I wanted to add to this knowledge in areas outside of language teaching. In order to accomplish this, I decided to research the following questions:

- How do teachers perceive the impact of cultural background on the way students interact with them and each other in the virtual classroom?
- In which ways does their own cultural background shape the didactics of their teaching in virtual classrooms?
- Which strategies and tools do teachers use to develop interactive synchronous online sessions with diverse student groups?
- In the teachers' perceptions, how can communication in the virtual classroom be enhanced with students from diverse cultural backgrounds?

1.6 Research approach

In this study, a qualitative interpretivist approach was used to collect data. I began by creating an interview guide (Bryman, 2012). As the main source for data collection, I used semi-structured interviews which were conducted via Skype (as most participants were in different

countries at the time of interviewing). These interviews were transcribed and the data were analysed using a phenomenological approach in order to research the "essence" (Husserl, 1931) of the meaning that the researched phenomenon has for those who experienced it (Giorgi, 1997). More detail is provided in Chapter 3 about my research design and the data collection methods utilised within this study.

1.7 Limitations and weaknesses of my research

One limitation might be my own bias due to the considerable experience I have in the field, as I have witnessed different student behaviour in multi-cultural classes, both face-to-face and online. Therefore, I had to ensure that I was not only selecting teachers who would confirm my own perceptions. Chapter 3.3 "Participant selection" explains the process in greater detail. However, being aware of it and having dealt with this in the past five empirical studies, I felt prepared to address this issue. These studies were carried out as module papers within Part One of this PhD programme in E-Research and Technology Enhanced Learning at Lancaster University. For example, I explained my role as the researcher for this thesis in great detail to the participants (for those who knew me as a former colleague, for example). I also sent an information sheet to all participants prior to the interviews which explained my role, the use of the data collected and the voluntary nature of participation in the study (see Appendix 1). Another crucial point was to evaluate critically whether and how my analysis could be influenced by my own experience. Chapter 3.6.2 "Data Analysis" explains my form of "epoché" (Moustakas, 1994) and other steps undertaken to avoid bias in the analysis.

The outcomes of the research may have also been affected by the use of different software in different universities. In my experience, some software is more user-friendly than others. For

example, Ilinc automatically shows a picture of the participant when the camera turns off or is de-activated, which is a nice feature when the use of webcams is impossible due to bandwidth problems. However, if the teacher has to implement the pictures herself, it is very difficult. Additionally, some software (e.g. Adobe Connect, ilinc, Blackboard) has features that allow more interaction than others, for example, the use of breakout rooms for group work. Therefore, the choice of the software, which in most cases was not up to the participants but made by the institutions they teach for, might have influenced the experience of the teachers I have interviewed.

The student body of the individual universities might have also played a role in the results due to their varied technological background as, for example, interaction is easier with a fast-working Internet as there is no delay in audio or video transmission. Interestingly, issues with low bandwidth were reported in parts of Great Britain, whereas in remote regions of Russia, where I expected such problems the Internet access was fine for the participants and their students. Lastly, the differences in experience of the teachers might have influenced the results as some of them started using synchronous online sessions earlier than others. Nevertheless, as I will explain in Chapter 3, I searched intensively for participants who shared the experience of teaching in synchronous settings. Therefore, the number of participants combined with their experience with technology will provide an appropriate view into the experience of teaching in a virtual classroom.

Lastly, my own definition of culture certainly had an impact on the data collection and analysis, as I had to focus on some criteria in the beginning of the interviews and thus might have led the participants in a certain direction. Nevertheless, the development of the interviews showed that the participants felt free to add their own definitions and to criticise the given ones. Therefore, the data argue to be of value despite the initial bias.

1.8 Summary of chapter 1

In this chapter I introduced the background of the study, which is trying to add to the research about how cultural background - initially defined by place of birth, place of upbringing, gender, ethnicity and language - influences student-student, teacher-student and student-content interaction (Moore, 1989) in a synchronous online teaching environment. After explaining what I meant by virtual classrooms, I identified the research questions and illustrated the target audience, namely teachers who are using similar software to hold synchronous online sessions with their students and universities which are considering implementing virtual classrooms into their curricula. Finally, I showed possible limitations and weaknesses of this study.

1.9 Overview of the remainder of the thesis

- o Chapter 2: Discusses relevant literature on concepts connected to the research questions.
- o Chapter 3: Discusses the methodology and methods used, the research design, data collection and analysis. It explains the role of the researcher and clarifies the ethics of this study.
- o Chapter 4: Provides the results of the data analysis in three themes and sub-themes and thus presents the "essence" (Husserl, 1931) of the participants' experiences in a narrative form and addresses the research questions.
- o Chapter 5: Concludes by providing implications for practice, ideas for future research and ends with final reflections.

Chapter 2: Literature review

This chapter reviews the literature that informs my research. I begin by explaining some of the countless approaches to the term "culture" in the existing literature, and explain the one I have chosen for this thesis. Then I examine the existing literature on cultural ways of learning. Afterwards I explore the current literature on teaching and learning online, beginning with a brief overview of synchronous and asynchronous approaches. I end the section with literature on virtual classrooms as they were the means of delivery used by the participants I interviewed. I continue with literature that combines the topics of my interest in the section on the influence of cultural background on teaching and learning in synchronous online sessions.

2.1 What is culture?

Obviously, it is impossible to think that I can provide a complete answer to this question in one section of a thesis, when a Google search (May 2016) in 0.54 seconds provides 1,510,000,000 entries on the term, and alone 6,000,000 entries for books about culture. Universities worldwide - University of London (UK), Heidelberg University (Germany), University of California (USA), University of Hong Kong (Hong Kong, SRA, China) to name only a few - are offering entire Master programmes on culture. Therefore, I am not trying to provide in any form one comprehensive definition of culture. Rather, I want to highlight a few significant approaches in the 20th century which show the complexity and probably impossibility of an all-inclusive definition of culture.

Significantly, Williams (1983, p. 87) described culture as ''one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language". This statement might be rooted in the different

uses of the term "culture" in the nineteenth century. In the following, three different ways of defining culture are stated. First, Arnold (1869) defined culture with reference to special intellectual or artistic accomplishments, which means that only a few members of any social group possess culture. Secondly, Tylor (1924) referred to a quality possessed by all people. He believed that there was one culture which could develop through one progression, and that culture was universal. In his opinion, all societies were in principle similar and thus could be ranked according to their diverse levels of cultural advancement.

> Tylor argues that the institutions of man [sic] are as distinctly stratified as the earth on which he lives. They succeed each other in series substantially uniform over the globe, independent of what seem the comparatively superficial differences of race and language, but shaped by similar human nature acting through successively changed conditions in savage, barbaric, and civilized life. (1889, p. 269)

His stages of development range from savagery to barbarism to civilisation. He defines culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society".

The third use of the term culture was developed by Boas (1940) and his students, stressing the uniqueness of the many and varied cultures of different people or societies, rejecting the value judgements that are characteristic of both Arnold's and Tylor's views of culture. In his view, neither a distinction between high and low culture nor an evaluation such as savage or civilised should define culture. Boas (1940) introduced the idea of "cultural relativism", which sees culture as a product of one specific history. He believed that a culture can only be understood by a complete survey following scientific standards and ethical behaviour.

Later, in, at the time, a ground-breaking study, the American anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhohn critically reviewed concepts and definitions of culture, and compiled a list of 164 different definitions (1952). They also provided a history of the word "culture" which alone covers 28 pages. In their view,

> culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other, as conditional elements of future action. (1952, p. 181)

Decades later, Schwartz (in Avruch, 1998, p. 17) states that "culture consists of the derivatives of experience, more or less organized, learned or created by the individuals of a population, including those images or encodements and their interpretations (meanings) transmitted from past generations, from contemporaries, or formed by individuals themselves.". Another author often cited for his ideas of culture is Hofstede (1994, p. 5), who sees culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another". However, as I will explain later in greater detail, I find his way of categorising people entirely inadequate, as it completely dismisses people who have parents of different nationalities, for example, or people born to the same nationality parents but within a different country.

Later on, Matsumoto (1996, p. 16) finds that culture consists of "the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next". This definition is in line with Pierre Bourdieu´s work in the 1970s that is known as "cultural reproduction" (Bourdieu, 1993) and describes how cultural issues, as for example social inequality and elite status, are transmitted from one generation to the next. I agree that some cultural aspects are indeed taken from one generation to the following. However, at the same time, thinking about the social rights movement in the USA in the 1960s for example, or the German student movement, it can happen that a generation deliberately dismiss or counteract their parents' culture. Spencer-Oatey offers the most appealing definition:

> Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the "meaning" of other people's behaviour. (2008, p. 3)

Alternatively, one could follow Avruch (1998, p. 14ff) and explain culture by what it is not, with his six "inadequate ideas" about culture: "1. Culture is homogenous. 2. Culture is a thing. 3. Culture is uniformly distributed among members of a group. 4. An individual possesses but a single culture. 5. Culture is custom. 6. Culture is timeless". This attempt might seem negative, but in my view, provides a very good explanation of what culture should be when using the ideas as antonyms.

Nevertheless, although Baldwin et al. offer 313 definitions of culture in their book "Redefining Culture: Perspectives Across Disciplines" they still argue that:

Perhaps we should avoid such a totalizing effort to provide a single definition of culture. Maybe, in the end, we should lead the reader simply to be aware of the contradictory definitions, each built within its own discourse. This we would conclude... that culture is beyond control, beyond a variable, with rich and varied definitions and subtleties of meaning. Rather, it is an empty sign that everyday actors and social scientists fill with meaning. Culture, as a signifier, can be understood only in the context of its use. (2006, p. 72)

I agree with their statement but at the same time had to provide some form of guidance of what I mean by "culture" for the participants when I designed the interview questions.

Therefore, initially the characteristics of culture were defined as place of birth, place of upbringing, gender, ethnicity and language to grasp a few aspects of culture that seemed important at the time. However, after conducting a more intensive literature review, it became clear that, while these are parts that may form culture, most importantly culture is not something that is once assigned and then absolute, but changes over time and due to experience and life events. This insight was confirmed when I conducted the interviews, and it soon became clear that the participants considered different aspects of life as part of their cultural identity, for example their religious beliefs or chosen life-style of living in a homosexual relationship.

As stated in Chapter 1.1, the definition I am using for the thesis is that one's culture consists of different criteria such as place of birth, place of upbringing, gender, ethnicity, language, religious beliefs and choice of lifestyle, which together form one's culture at a given moment in time, as culture undergoes continuous development for each person during their lifetime.

As the attempt to explain what culture *is* fails to reveal any productive outcome, the more interesting question to investigate is what culture *does*. Therefore, the following section will explore the relationship between culture and learning.

2.2 Cultural ways of learning

According to Nisbett (2004), cultural values and modes of thinking are deeply rooted in a person and therefore are difficult to separate from learning processes. Parrish and Linder-VanBerschot (2010) add that this cultural diversity is appreciated by teachers and should be preserved in the design of online teaching. Cultural differences in educational settings have been examined by various authors. For example, Hofstede (1986) provides a basic model of cultural dimensions, which is frequently used by other authors (Bovill, Jordan, & Watters, 2014; Cronjé, 2011; Jippes et al., 2013) to give advice on teacher-student interaction and aspects to consider when designing effective teaching environments. He identified four cultural dimensions: power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity and uncertainty avoidance. Later, Hofstede added a fifth dimension, the short-term orientation and long-term orientation towards time, in an attempt to "avoid cultural bias" (2005, p. 30). However, these categories generalise countries, and do not address people who have parents of two nationalities or are living and teaching in a country in which they were not born. These categories also imply that every person who has the same nationality parents and lives in the country his parents and themselves are born in are exactly the same, which is per se not true. Therefore, those generalisations would not work for my participants. This does not mean that cultural bias does not exist or should be avoided. Our culture is part of who we are and we can use the existing

diversity to learn from each other, for example, to open our eyes to diverse traditions and accept difference without judging.

Amongst others, Signorini et al. (2009) ask for a more critical approach to Hofstede`s (1986) model. They argue that it has inconsistencies; for example, he sees differences in educational philosophies between the East and the West, but at the same time thinks of Germany and Japan as masculine societies. Baskerville (2003) emphasises that Hofstede's (1986) model does not give justice to the complexity of culture. McSweeney (2002) criticises Hofstede's (1986) work by arguing that organisational, national and occupational cultures are not independent of each other. Both authors' works are not based upon online teaching but, to a certain degree, can be adapted to it. For example, student-centred education as described in Hofstede's "small power distance societies" (1986, p. 313) is used in OU Elluminate tutorials, too. However, Hofstede (1986) concentrates on cultural differences in a generic way, which is not suitable for the present study. Following Ess (2002) and Ess and Sudweeks (2005), they "critique an essentialist view of culture reflected in a tendency to conceptualise culture" (Hauck, 2010, p. 21) and to see it "solely as an attribute of individuals inherited from national characteristics, and the problem for online learning solely as one of appropriate design for cultural difference" (Goodfellow, 2008, p. 553). To address the need for a different view on cultural differences, Thorne (2003) investigates the cultural dimensions of using technology with his concept of "cultures-of-use" and Goodfellow and Lamy (2009) ask for the utilisation of "learning cultures" explicitly for online teaching and learning.

Ess (ibid.) himself draws on Koch's (2006) view of "online scenarios" as "culturally coded spaces" where elements from various cultural backgrounds come together and allow individuals to create their own, new identity. However, here it is argued that the extent to which individuals or telecollaborative partners can take part in the coding and/or decoding of the elements that

come together in online settings depends at least partially on learners' awareness of the available modes and their respective affordances. In line with Lamy and Hampel (2007) it appears from the results of this study that users' individual perceptions of modes and affordances have the greatest influence on online communication and thus also on telecollaboration.

Whilst Cronjé (2011) provides a successful example of cross-cultural communication between professors from South Africa and students from Sudan, the communication was not carried out online and therefore is different from my research. Goodfellow and Lamy (2009, p. 14) offer a "summary of frameworks of cultural analysis outside the online world" with the intention to find appropriate solutions for online settings. This is useful for online settings in general; however, this thesis will explore the influences on synchronous virtual classes specifically.

Cultural differences have also been examined by Heffernan et al. (2010) who concentrate on Asian and Western learners and say that due to Confucianist influence, for example, Asian learners view learning as a moral duty. Biggs (1996) points out that in Asian cultures teachers are respected and seen as a model of morality and knowledge. However, the study concentrates on cultural differences in learning styles in blended-learning programmes, not on those appearing in synchronous online settings. Al-Harthi (2010) investigates cultural differences between Arabian and American students regarding two of Moore's (1993) components of transactional distance (structure and interaction) and how they relate to the self-efficacy and help-seeking. However, the students were not meeting in synchronous virtual classrooms but in face-to-face tutorials and during fixed office-hours on campus.

One study was carried out by Buchanan et al. (2008), in which three different universities - University of Wales (UK), University of Washington (USA) and University of KwaZulu Natal (South Africa) - examined issues of racism, using the Blackboard Virtual Learning

Environment. Although cultural aspects were described regarding language, culture, and social context related to discrimination, synchronous discussion was neglected to avoid time zone clashes. Cultural differences in learning of Australian, American and Asian students are also recognised by Lanham and Zhou (2003), who conclude that blended learning in the form of synchronous (in a virtual classroom) and asynchronous online teaching will be beneficial to address those. In their later research they suggest the use of wikis for breaking the ice between cultures (Lanham, Augar, & Zhou, 2005). However, they are not focusing on synchronous online tutorials.

Li et al. argue that "culture plays a very important role in influencing the ways people think about, feel about, and view new technology" (2001, p. 417). They also quote Collis (1999) who raised the following questions, which need to be resolved: "How might different aspects of culture be predicted to affect students' reactions to the Internet? How can web sites be designed to adapt to different expectations and students' preferences, especially those related to culture?" (Li et al., 2001, p. 417). Joo (1999) claims that there is an urgent need to eliminate linguistic and cultural obstacles to the Internet and provide all students around the world with an equal chance to access information and communication over the Internet. In conclusion, culture plays an important role in determining whether the Internet will bring a new level of cross-cultural communication and interaction to education.

LaPointe and Gunawardena (2004) argue that audio and visual components in synchronous virtual classrooms assist in bridging cultural differences and furthermore create communities of practice. For example, they discovered that the perceptions of the American teachers and their Taiwanese teaching assistants varied a lot on different topics discussed. They also found that the use of emoticons varied as Asian emoticons look different from those commonly used in the US. Nonetheless, a sense of synchronous intimacy was created and personal stories

shared. However, their study was based on students in Taiwan, whilst my research is into the experience of teachers in various countries with most of them located in Europe. This is important, as in LaPointe's study, students from the US cooperated with students from Taiwan, which allows a comparison between Asian and US-American cultural aspects. However, European teachers and students add other experiences to this study. Most of the studies take place in business management scenarios, as business studies attract a high number of international students (Ramanau, 2016), whilst my participants are also teaching English as a foreign language and various subjects in the fields of education, science and law.

Huss et al. (2015) examine teachers from two different countries, the USA and Israel, thus touching on cultural aspects through place of birth; but the synchronous online communication is just one small aspect of their paper. Additionally, the relatively small number of participants hinders the study's capacity to provide powerful arguments. Furthermore, this study went beyond the single-minded approach of gender and considered varied perspectives, whilst Huss et al. (2015) only interviewed female participants. In his latest work, a chapter in the "Handbook of Research on Strategic Management of Interaction, Presence, and Participation in Online Courses", Moore (2016) offers an intensive evaluation of the possibilities and needs for interaction in online classes as well as the opportunities given by the latest technology. He touches on the use of virtual classrooms but it only covers a very small part of the chapter, whereas this work focuses on synchronous teaching in virtual classrooms.

In their book chapter "More teaching in less time", Mandernach et al. (2016) provide an extensive list of valuable advice on how to enhance interaction in online teaching, with one section about the possibilities of using a virtual classroom. Nevertheless, it is just one small section and it does not show the experiences of teachers, but is more a handbook on how to teach successfully. In another recent study, Herbert et al. (2015) examined teachers' perceptions

of online professional learning programmes. They also looked at cultural aspects, but they also were investigating a whole programme, not only the teaching experience in a virtual classroom.

Ramanau (2016) conducted a study with part-time students in an online international management course and examined cross-cultural differences. The group was comprised of students from Continental European countries and the UK. However, his students were "only" management students, and the communication in the course mainly took place in asynchronous fora offering the possibility to post text messages. There were some meetings in a virtual classroom, but it was not the focus of the research which it is in this study. Gutiérrez and Rogoff (2003) criticise that research on culture often results in pointing out deficits of certain groups. Therefore, they suggest talking about differences in cultural styles using cultural-historical theory, to avoid generalisation by treating cultural differences as individual traits. This approach avoids categorising people of different cultural background and thus is leading in the same direction as this study.

Another issue relevant to cultural background and the influence on teaching and learning is the impact of first impressions and stereotyping. In their study "Forming impressions from stereotypes, traits and behaviours" Kunda and Thagard (1996, p. 284f) explain the historical development of interpreting impressions. They state that Asch (1946) and Anderson (1968) "assumed that the full range of information known to characterize an individual is integrated into one's impression of that individual". Then they explain that more recent models, such as Brewer's (1988) dual process model and Fiske and Neuberg's (1990) continuum model of impression formation, challenge these views and share the key assumptions that "it is necessary to distinguish between stereotype- or category-based, top-down processes on the one hand, and attribute-based, piecemeal, bottom-up processes on the other hand". However, Kunda and

Thagard propose "that rather than being processed serially, stereotypes and individuating information are processed simultaneously, and jointly influence impressions of individuals as well as each other" (1996, p. 285). Additionally, Spencer et al. report that the existing research shows contradicting results. They state that "some theory and research indicate that when individuals perceive members of groups for which there are well-known stereotypes or when they are exposed to group or stereotype labels, stereotypes may be activated spontaneously and often without awareness." On the other hand, theories would suggest "that although stereotypes can be activated unintentionally and outside of awareness, stereotype activation is not a fully automatic process in that other factors can inhibit it" (1998, p. 1139f).

These arguments explain the existence of first impressions, from where they originate and how they develop. However, it is important to look at what impact they have when people from a dominant culture interact with those from an inferior one, like the white teachers in this study in interaction with their Asian or black students. In their study on the impact of "colorblind" ideologies on students of colour, Lewis et al. differentiate between two strains of racial stereotyping, which they call academic and behavioural stereotyping (2000, p. 77). They report that their findings about the negative effects of stereotyping on black students confirm earlier studies by Chan and Hune (as cited by Lewis et al., 2000) about social and economic discrimination of Asian Americans and the pressure to perform academically because of it, ignoring individual traits. According to Lewis et al., both academic and behavioural stereotypes:

> originate both from vestiges of older, genetically based racist notions and from nouveau, culturally based explanations. They are based on the expectation by Whites that all

students of color are experientially expert in their group's minority experience, which is often equated with poverty. (2000, p. 78f)

In this study, however, the most evident assumption of the minority experience was not poverty, but the educational system (Asian or Russian). Nevertheless, the effects on the students of the group are the same, namely that they either have to conform with the behaviour expected from their group (e.g. being the "silent Chinese") or conversely, to follow the mainstream, which in this case would be to act like white Europeans or Americans (e.g. speak up in discussions in the virtual classroom). Following Essed, the people who are stereotyped "face a range of experiences where they are constructed as "Other," excluded, and made to feel inferior" (as cited in Lewis et al., 2000, p. 78).

Regarding the impact of stereotyping in online environments, Walther et al. (2015) argue that controversial results are found in the existing literature about the extent to which computer-mediated communication (CMC) enables or hinders positive social interaction. Some authors believe that CMC has the potential to support stereotypes (Epley & Kruger, 2005), whilst others believe it can reduce them (Walther et al., 2015). The existing literature though focuses on asynchronous communication via e-mail or online fora, or on the combination of both asynchronous and synchronous communication in blended learning scenarios. This study, however, specifically explores synchronous communication in a virtual classroom. Therefore, tools are available to decrease prejudice, e.g. when only audio is used. Nevertheless, the participants reported behavioural differences that they experienced.

There has been intensive research into computer-mediated learning and teaching in the context of foreign language learning and teaching (see, for example, Hampel & Stickler, 2005, p. 317, who provide a skillset for tutor training in computer-mediated language teaching in their

"pyramid of skills"), which can be used for online teacher training in any subject. Hampel and Stickler (2012) also researched the use of videoconferencing to support multimodal interaction. Again, their study is situated in the field of foreign language learning, which is different from the focus of this study. Hauck and Youngs (2008) investigate the impact of telecollaboration on task design in their study with students of French at Carnegie Mellon University, US, French learners at the Open University, UK and French native speakers at the Université de Franche Comté, France. While not directly related, some examples can be found in other domains. Subject to the constraints of transferability, it can be argued that the existing research in the field of foreign language education (see also Ess and Suedweeks, 2005; Goodfellow and Lamy, 2009; Pegrum and Bax, 2007; Thorne, 2003) can be applied to other areas as the layer of foreign language education is only one layer of mediation put on top of technology-mediated teaching and learning.

Therefore, this study aims to add to the existing research in the field of computer-mediated foreign language learning, with the goal to provide an insight into teaching and learning in virtual classrooms for other subject areas (e.g. business or law). However, virtual classrooms do not exist as stand-alone tools and thus it is important to explore the wider field of online teaching and learning, which is addressed in the following section.

2.3 Teaching and learning online

As a next step, I introduce a brief overview of the existing literature on online learning and teaching, as my research focused on that environment.

First of all, the existing literature offers a variety of approaches to and terms related to online teaching and learning, for example, computer-mediated communication (CMC) or technology enhanced learning (TEL). Liang and Walther (2015) explain that CMC "involves sending messages through computer networks such as the Internet" whilst Chan et al. (2006, p.7) refer to TEL when digital technology is used "to support human learning". Specific to the area of language teaching and learning, the expressions network-based language teaching (NBLT), telecollaboration, computer assisted language learning (CALL) and computer-mediated language learning are used. According to Warschauer and Kern (2000), NBTL describes the use of global or local communication networks in foreign and second language education. Belz (2001) defines telecollaboration as a type of NBLT, where "distally located language learners use internet communication tools to support dialogue, debate, collaborative research and social interaction for the purposes of language development and cultural awareness". CALL is described by Levy (1997, p.1) as "the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning". Hampel and Hauck (2006, p. 3f) use the term computer-mediated language learning "when using Internet-based computer-mediated communication technologies for language teaching and learning (e.g. email, internet relay chat, or, more recently, instant messaging and audio-conferencing)". They also point out the need "to take into account the fact that communication is mediated by the computer, thus factoring in the modes and affordances that the computer offers and considering how meaning is made in these new multimodal environments" instead of replicating face-to-face classroom situations (Hampel & Hauck, 2006, p. 4). In this section, I look at some approaches to teaching online, which involve active synchronous moderation by a teacher (or instructor or tutor) in a location remote from students, which means that distance learning is facilitated using technology. I will illustrate some of the most popular approaches and specify literature on the use of virtual classrooms, which are the means used by the participants I interviewed for this research.

2.3.1 Synchronous online teaching and learning

Synchronous interaction occurs when both the teacher and the students are online and communicating with each other at the same time. Depending on the technology available, students can see hear (e.g. Skype audio calls) and see (e.g. Skype video calls) each other and/or send text messages. One advantage, as argued by Kung-Ming and Khoon-Seng (2005), is that teachers only know how to provide help to students who need it when they have the possibility to observe their participation in a classroom. The opportunities for learning through discussions in real time, brainstorming, debates and most importantly, the possibility of immediate feedback are significant advantages of synchronous interaction. This research focuses on synchronous interaction in virtual classrooms, which are usually embedded in the aforementioned virtual learning environments.

However, it is interaction itself which plays a crucial part in online learning. As Ng (2007, p. 1) points out, "an important issue in online delivery is whether it can provide an interactive learning environment for the participants", which means the existence of regular patterns of written and/or oral communication between the instructor and students and among students. Ng´s (2007) work can be traced back to Bates's study (1989) in which he argues that interactivity should be the most important criterion for the choice of media for educational delivery. In addition, Holmberg (1989) describes interaction as a defining and critical component of the educational process, which also applies for synchronous online conferencing. Martin et al. (2012) argue that Thurmond and Wambach's (2004) explanation of interaction would fit best to synchronous virtual conferencing. They state that interaction consists of "the

learner's engagement with the course content, other learners, the instructor, and the technological medium used in the course".

Hauck and Hampel (2008) have developed this approach further and argue that the medium itself has affordances that have an influence on meaning-making and communication, which again has an impact on how the teacher's and student's cultural background influences interaction. This circular argument calls for "socio-environmental" strategies, which Hampel and Hauck describe as "how students made use of particular functionalities of the online learning environments, that is, the available modes and their affordances" (2008, p. 295). Examples for such strategies are the acceptance of silence in the virtual classroom or the use of text chat to compensate for the lack of spontaneity. This study also investigates the influences of cultural backgrounds on interaction in virtual classrooms but expands into areas outside of foreign language learning and teaching.

The existing literature offers a considerable number of studies researching interaction in synchronous online tutorials. However, beyond the extensive research in foreign language teaching and learning stated earlier (Hampel & Hauck, 2010; Hampel & Stickler, 2005; Hauck & Youngs, 2008) the focus often lies on the use of just one tool, for example synchronous chat (Burnett, 2003) or on whiteboard interaction Hewett (2006). Nevertheless, this study focuses on synchronous interaction in virtual classrooms which include a variety of tools and the influence of cultural background on using those. Martin et al. (2012) conducted a study on the perception of interaction by students, and emphasise the importance of interaction within a synchronous virtual classroom. Their study reveals that synchronous communication in the virtual classroom will definitively have a positive effect on interaction. This confirms Aydin's (2008) recommendation that a synchronous virtual classroom (e-class) may increase student-

student interaction because it is motivational to learners. However, Kung-Ming and Khoon-Seng (2005) report findings from Fillicaro (2002), who stated that increasing numbers of students would decrease the possibilities for interaction. In her view, virtual classrooms can only be used for those levels of Bloom's taxonomy which represent thinking skills at the knowledge, comprehension, and application levels.

Oztok et al. (2013) combine the two forms of online interaction and examine contributions of synchronous and asynchronous interaction and the pedagogical consequences of using both in the same environment. However, the synchronous element in their study is synchronous private messaging whilst the virtual classrooms I am investigating allow both speaking synchronously and videoconferencing.

One of the most influential theories in distance learning is the theory of transactional distance, which was developed by Michael G. Moore (1989). In his theory, Moore explains distance as "a psychological and communication space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner" (1993, p. 22). In his view, three interactive components are essential to shorten the transactional distance and thus offer a meaningful learning experience. These components are dialogue or interaction between learners and teachers, structure of the programme, and autonomy (the degree of self-directedness of the learner). Moore (1989) provides three types of interaction essential in distance education, namely learner-content, learner-learner and learner-instructor. Later, Moore states that:

> since the theory of Transactional Distance was written, the most important evolution in distance education has been the development of highly interactive telecommunications media. This is the family of teleconference media - i.e., the use of interactive computer

networks and audio, audio-graphic, and video networks, which may be local, regional, national and international and are linked by cable, microwave and satellite. (in Keegan, 1993, p. 32)

He explains that a new form of dialogue is possible, which he calls "inter-learner dialogue", which in his words "occurs between learners and other learners, alone or in groups, with or without the real-time presence of an instructor. By audioconference, videoconference, and computer conference, groups can learn through interaction with other groups and within groups."

Martin et al. (2012) add another dimension to Anderson´s (2003) research, as they look at learner-learner, learner-instructor, learner-content, and learner-interface interactions. Additionally, Sims (2003, p. 110) states that "learners taking on a more participatory role" are essential determinants of the success of interactive, computer-enhanced learning environments. However, as Martyn (2005) points out, fostering interaction in online conferences requires the provision of instructional and social types of interaction. Therefore, a balance between content-related work and ice-breaking activities needs to be found. The pedagogical approach should be flexible and situated, thus giving teachers the competence to use technology and in turn help their students to maximise their learning (Hoven, 2006). Thus, "experiential modeling" (Hoven, 2006, p. 9) supports the idea that social presence plays an important role in online teaching. However, it should also be related to other presences, such as teaching and cognitive presence (Garrison et al., 2010).

According to Garrison et al. (2000, p.88) "a worthwhile educational experience is embedded within a Community of Inquiry (CoI) that is composed of teachers and student - the key

participants in the educational process" and their CoI framework "assumes that learning occurs within the Community through the interaction of three core elements: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence." Garrison and Arbaugh describe cognitive presence as the extent to which learners construct meaning through sustained reflection and discourse, whilst social presence is "the ability of learners to project themselves socially and emotionally, thereby being perceived as "real people" in mediated communication" (2007, p. 159). The third element, teaching presence is seen "as a significant determinant of student satisfaction, perceived learning, and sense of community" (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007, p. 163). This framework was developed for asynchronous interactions and it has been used for studying teaching presence in blended contexts (Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes, & Garrison, 2013). Furthermore, CoI is looking at teaching presence but does not provide enough theoretical background for explaining cultural practices as the sum of dynamic and contingent social interactions. To address this, this study explores teaching in a virtual classroom, with the focus on the influence of cultural background on synchronous interaction.

Rovai and Jordan (2004) state that learner-instructor interaction initiated by developing interactive course activities increases the perception of learning online. Interestingly, Picciano advises not to mix interaction and presence by stating: "interaction may indicate presence but it is also possible for a student to interact by posting a message... while not necessarily feeling that she or he is part of a group or a class" (2002, p. 22). However, recent research into the relation between presence and interaction of participants in MOOCs shows that learning can take place even if students decide not to interact whilst being present (Beaven, Comas-Quinn, Hauck, Arcos, & Lewis, 2013).

2.3.2 Forms of synchronous online teaching

At this point, I will provide a brief explanation of different forms of achieving synchronous online teaching and learning, namely instant messaging, audio/videoconferencing and virtual classrooms. The intention is to show examples of some of the different approaches to synchronous teaching and why using a virtual classroom makes a difference to the work of the participants in the study. Instant messaging, audio/videoconferencing and virtual classrooms can be embedded into a virtual learning environment, such as MOODLE or Blackboard, for example. According to Dillenbourg, Schneider, and Synteta, virtual learning environments can be identified by the following features:

- A virtual learning environment is a designed information space.

- A virtual learning environment is a social space: educational interactions occur in the environment, turning spaces into places.

- The virtual space is explicitly represented: the representation of this information/social space can vary from text to 3D immersive worlds.

- Students are not only active, but also actors: they co-construct the virtual space.

- Virtual learning environments are not restricted to distance education: they also enrich classroom activities.

- Virtual learning environments integrate heterogeneous technologies and multiple pedagogical approaches.

- Most virtual environments overlap with physical environments. (2002, p.3)

Therefore, the synchronous online tools described in this section can be part of a virtual environment.

2.3.2.1 Instant messaging

Instant messaging is an online chat that offers transmission of text via the Internet in real-time. At the moment, popular instant messaging providers include Viber, WeChat, Instant Messenger and WhatsApp. Some teachers also use the text chat facility of Skype which is then also real-time but ignores the audio and video functionality of the system. Some of the advantages of such a synchronous system are stated earlier in the section. However, it can also avoid prejudice as the participants are neither seen nor heard. One of the participants (Helen, 2016) pointed out that this was an advantage for older teachers, who otherwise might "look" outdated but without seeing their age might be perceived differently and accepted for their knowledge rather than being put into a mental box because of their age. Sometimes, instant messaging is used to accompany classroom teaching, as stated by another of the participants (Norman, 2016). He sees an advantage for group work with students who are less out-going and thus prefer to write.

2.3.2.2 Audio- and videoconferencing systems

At the moment, the most well-known audio- and videoconferencing system is probably Skype, which can be used with or without a webcam and, as stated beforehand, also includes an instant messaging possibility. Another feature of Skype is that participants can send documents as attachments to their text messages. Thus, regarding the tools offered for simultaneous synchronous communication, videoconferencing with Skype can be placed in the middle between Instant messaging and virtual classrooms. The use of audio and video conferencing in language teaching (Hampel & Stickler, 2012) has been researched quite intensively. However, one disadvantage of Skype (and other software for that matter) is that it works fine with one-

to-one but often gives rise to technical issues when a considerable number of participants connect. Accordingly, existing research in this field often also includes cultural aspects due to the field of language teaching, but there are still not many examples of teaching in a virtual classroom. For example, Martin et al. (2012) and Falloon (2011) research interactivity in virtual classrooms, Palloff et al. (2007) investigate online learning communities and Daniel et al. (2003) examine social capital in virtual learning environments. However, they are not researching the impact of cultural influences on teaching in virtual classrooms.

2.3.2.3 Virtual classrooms

Virtual classrooms, when compared with other synchronous communication tools that can also be part of a virtual learning environment, such as Skype or instant messenger, allow the greatest variety of online tools, as depending on the software, the use of audio, video and text-chat is possible. Furthermore, face-to-face group work can be simulated in virtual breakout rooms. Depending on the setting of the room the teacher or both the teacher and students can upload files, share documents or even their screen, and write and draw onto a virtual whiteboard. The entire session or parts of it can be recorded and thus offer an additional asynchronous form of usage. Depending on the technical knowledge and personal preferences, the teachers and students can use a webcam to broadcast real-time pictures of themselves, which helps interpret facial expressions and thus reduces the evident difference between face-to-face and online teaching immensely.

At the moment, software applications on the market that are used as virtual classrooms are Blackboard (which replaced Elluminate), Adobe Connect, WebEx, Horizon Wimba, Ilinc and GoToWebinar. However, it is important to state that many of them were originally designed for

businesses and therefore it is important to think of pedagogical approaches which consider that fact.

2.4 The influence of cultural background on teaching and learning in synchronous online sessions

Although there has been a significant rise in the number of articles in the field of synchronous online teaching in international settings and cultural aspects have been addressed by a considerable number of articles, this study adds to the existing and growing body of research which has its origin in telecollaboration (Hampel & Hauck, 2006; Hampel & Stickler, 2005; Hauck & Youngs, 2008) and has now moved beyond the boundaries of online language learning and teaching (Moore & Simon, 2015), as it concerns how teachers experience cultural practices in virtual classrooms. This is important, as teachers need to be aware that cultural backgrounds influence interactions in virtual classrooms as well as in a face-to-face setting. It is also important that research in an online educational environment differs from pure categorisation following Hofstede's (1994) widely challenged but overwhelmingly cited work. Teaching and learning in a virtual classroom are becoming more and more a standard approach for universities. Therefore it is necessary to research what impact cultural background has in this specific online environment.

2.5. Summary of chapter 2

In this chapter I have provided an overview of the literature that informed this research. I started with an attempt to show the various definitions of the term "culture" in the existing literature and my approach for this thesis. Afterwards, I examined the literature on cultural ways of learning, followed by the literature on teaching online, with the sub-section of synchronous delivery and the various forms of synchronous online environments. This section ended with a focus on virtual classrooms as they are the means of delivery the participants used in this study. Then I looked at the literature combining my topics of interest in the section on the influence of cultural background on teaching and learning in synchronous online sessions. This last section explained the places where I saw that research can be added to the existing literature which concerns how teachers experience cultural practices in virtual classrooms and why it is necessary to investigate the impact cultural background has in this specific online environment outside of language learning.

Chapter 3: Research design

In this chapter I describe my research design and its significance for the setting of this research. I explain the reasons why I used qualitative research in this social science context, and explain which methodology and methods I chose. I provide details about the participants, and explain how the research data were collected and analysed. In addition, I recognise my role as the instrument of the research and my influence on interpreting the results. Finally, I provide information about ethical concerns related to this research.

3.1 Epistemological and ontological position

My philosophical perspective fits into the idea of social constructivism (Crotty, 1998). I believe that knowledge is "constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (Creswell, 2003, p. 9). I also believe that people develop subjective meaning of the world they live in, and therefore I am going to research the view of the participants about this specific context of their work. Furthermore, I understand that my own background shapes my interpretation of the data: to acknowledge that, I write in the first person. However, in the research for this thesis, I try to interpret the experiences others have about the use of virtual classrooms. Generally, a study trying to answer *how* or *why* things exist in a certain way indicates that a qualitative study would be most suitable (Gay, 2009, p. 13). This permits the development of hypotheses about how the behaviour occurs, in contrast to a quantitative approach, which would test hypotheses (Gay, 2009).

Merriam and Simpson (Merriam & Simpson, 2000, p. 27) suggest that, if it is discovered "that no theory fits the phenomenon under investigation, the one study goal may be to formulate a

theory and/or hypothesis to explain observed events or behaviour" (2000, p. 27). However, as I have chosen a phenomenological approach to research in this thesis, I did not even want to formulate a hypothesis, rather to study and analyse the experiences of the participants with the phenomenon in detail with the aim to get to the "essence" (Husserl, 1931) of their experience. I chose phenomenology as a method of inquiry because I agree with its basic principle that reality is made up of our perception or understanding of objects and events (the so-called "phenomena"), meaning that these objects and events do not exist independently of our consciousness.

3.2 Research methodology

For the data collection and analysis of this thesis the most suitable methodology uses a qualitative approach, as the questions I am researching concern experiences of people, including their perceptions. As explained later in the analysis, there are differences between the two, as people sometimes perceive their actions different to what others see in those. For example, a white male teacher might not perceive his behaviour as dominant whilst it might be experienced differently by his black female student. The aim is to answer questions of "why" and "how" which shall provide an understanding of complex issues, rather than testing a pre-existing theory, as done in quantitative research. Furthermore, the aim was to research the "essence" (Husserl, 1931) of the meaning that the researched phenomenon has for those who experienced it (Giorgi, 1997). Phenomenology was chosen as the suitable methodology as the father of the method, Husserl (1931) invented the principle "zu den Sachen selbst", meaning "towards the things themselves" which is also known as descriptive phenomenological inquiry. The different

approaches of phenomenology were investigated further, entering a process of choosing my approach to the methodology, which is explained in greater detail in the following sections.

3.2.1 Phenomenology as a research methodology

This section provides a short overview of the history of phenomenology to explain different approaches within phenomenology, and their influence on my approach to phenomenological research (see Appendix 9 for more details).

Phenomenology is an inductive qualitative research approach embedded in the philosophical traditions of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Husserl's (1859-1938) interpretation of phenomenology (Descriptive Phenomenology) developed from post-World War II positivism, which it rejects. Husserl (1931) believed that our experience is shaped by the thoughts, ideas, etc. we have of it and, therefore, the researcher needs to go back to the phenomenon itself, seeing things as they really are without any prejudice. This can be achieved through reduction and *epoché,* in which the researcher uses a first person point of view, stating one's own experience with the phenomenon before gathering data to ensure that the experience of the participants is gathered and not one's own. Husserl's student Heidegger (1889-1976), however, thought that bracketing was unjustified because hermeneutics presumed previous understanding. He strongly believed that it was not possible to deny our experiences related to the phenomenon we study, as he believed personal awareness was essential for phenomenological research.

Later Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), and others interpreted and developed these approaches further. More recent influential advocates of the

two major approaches to phenomenology are van Manen (1990), who follows hermeneutic (interpretive) and Moustakas (1994) with his version of transcendental (descriptive) phenomenology. In addition, Giorgi (1997), Colaizzi (1978), Creswell (1998) and many others provided interpretations of and advice on how to analyse data in phenomenological research. I will discuss this further in section 3.6.2 *Data Analysis,* whilst in the following section I will explain my approach to the methodology, which honours Husserl's (1931) approach using a first person view but follows the ideas of Heidegger (1962), acknowledging that the researcher's view is never completely objective.

3.2.2 My approach to phenomenology

Phenomenology is intensively described in the literature, for example, producing 837,000 hits in Google Scholar alone in less than 0.05 seconds (May, 2016). Nevertheless, the title of *one* paper by Kleiman (2004) describes the intention of my research in a nutshell by defining phenomenology as a method to "wonder and search for meanings". Phenomenology is used to research in great detail perceptions of people in regard to their experiences in their everyday life. The intention of this study was to get insight of what teachers experience when they use virtual classrooms with their students to gain understanding of the participants' meanings and perspectives of their everyday life (Schwandt, 2000). Due to the relatively new technology, it is not yet described extensively in the literature, as not many people have experienced it. Therefore, phenomenology, with the goal to get to "the essence" of the phenomena, is judged to be the appropriate method. The attempt is to find a way of explaining *"what"* teachers experience when teaching in a virtual classroom and *"how"* they experience cultural practice in virtual classrooms. Therefore, phenomenology was chosen, since it emphasises subjectivity

as knowledge is constructed by collecting and analysing the experiences and feelings of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). In the following figure the process from the initial experience of the participants to the results of the study, namely the essence presenting the structure and texture in a narrative form, is illustrated:
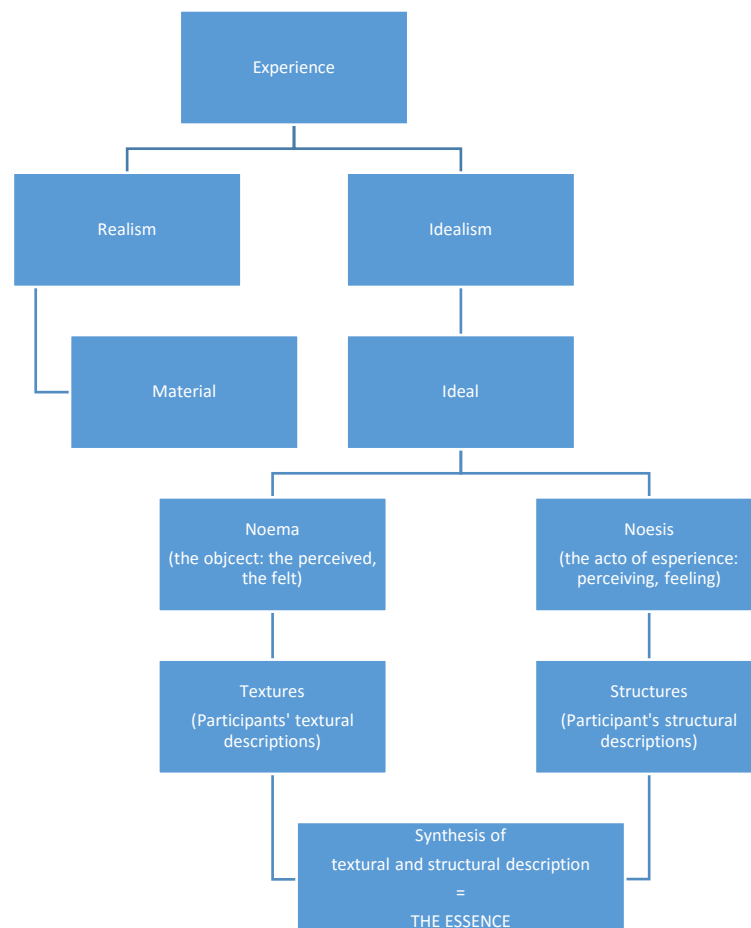
Figure 3.1: My approach to phenomenology (adapted from Cilesiz, 2010).

Relating to this study, the subjects are university teachers who use virtual classrooms for synchronous online sessions, whilst the object is teaching in a virtual classroom. In this study, while teaching in a virtual classroom is the noema of the experience, the act of teaching which is differing from teacher to teacher is the noesis of the experiences. Structures are "the underlying and

precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced; in other words, the "how" that speaks to conditions that illuminate the "what" of experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). In this study, these are the themes that emerged from the data which are described in Chapter 4. The textures are presented as a narrative that explains the perceptions of the teachers of teaching in a virtual classroom by using verbatim quotations from the data. The essence is presented in the result of the study addressing the research questions at the end of Chapter 4.

I have chosen phenomenology because of my interest in how an individual perceives their description or interpretation of an object or an event, in this case the experience of teaching in a virtual classroom. Broadly speaking, interpretive phenomenology can be utilised when the research question asks for the meaning of the phenomenon, and the researcher does not bracket their biases and prior engagement with the question under study but interprets the results. Descriptive phenomenology can be employed when the researcher wants to describe the phenomenon under study and brackets their biases. However, van Manen (1990) states that hermeneutic (interpretive) phenomenology may use line-by-line reading, existential analysis or thematic analysis, albeit there is no fixed method, meaning that with each study the researcher has to find out how to do it. According to Merleau-Ponty (as cited in Langan, 1962), this means that phenomenological researchers are constantly "perpetual beginners" (an expression first used by Husserl which Merleau-Ponty adopted to explain his view of phenomenology), acknowledging that there is no single approach that suits all phenomena. Additionally, he is convinced that one should acknowledge that it is impossible to be free of bias.

Nevertheless, sensibility of a certain kind of engagement with the world (Langan, 1962; van Manen, 1990), namely to develop an attempt to see the individuality of the phenomenon in all of its complexity and weirdness and the ability to illuminate the phenomenon in the text is a common feature of successful phenomenological research. Husserl's method is fascinating, and

the idea of bracketing and epoché makes complete sense regarding his attempt to combine a scientific and philosophical approach to research. However, reading more about the different developments within phenomenological research and thinking, on reflection my own position is in agreement with Heidegger's (1962) statement that interpretation happens in the moment of description. Heidegger explains further that the "moment" is the sum of all the moments prior to that moment, which means that the moment is a continuum from the past to the future. Therefore, interpretation is always a component of research.

My prior knowledge shaped the design of the interview questions, the way the interviews were conducted and how the data were analysed. Interestingly, this awareness happened during the attempt to bracket my knowledge by writing an epoché when I realised that this process would not result in a different approach to the study. As different issues in virtual classroom teaching were researched during the first two years of my studies at Lancaster University, including interviews with participants in empirical studies beforehand, I had already thought a lot about how to avoid bias and how to ensure that the participants would see me as a researcher, not a colleague. The first step to avoid bias was to inform participants about the intention of the research. However, this can also cause a certain form of research bias, the so-called social desirability bias, meaning that participants answer in a way that will be viewed as favourable (Nederhof, 1985). Therefore, further measures were employed, such as creating interview guides and deliberately telling those participants who knew of my experience in the virtual classroom to ignore it for the interview and "talk to me as if I was five years old". As stated above, an attempt to epoché was made and led to the realisation that a certain kind of objectivity was ensured, but that in my world-view, total objectivity cannot be reached through bracketing or at all in qualitative research.

Furthermore, due to my own experience in the field, I am part of the research study as my experience lead to questions in the interviews that people with less knowledge of and practice in virtual classroom teaching would have not asked, for example how using break-out rooms might have helped with diverse groups. However, the existing knowledge helped to concentrate on the experience of the participants, as the environment they were working in was familiar. Therefore, they did not have to explain the technology supporting it or the design of the virtual classrooms they were using, and could simply concentrate on expressing their experiences with it. Furthermore, it created an open and trustworthy atmosphere for the interviews, as I could empathise with the special online environment in which the participants worked in.

Phenomenology is also specifically suitable for exploring cultural aspects of behaviour in virtual classrooms, because as explained earlier, culture has a different meaning for different people. Therefore, it is essential to examine their perceptions of the experiences they have while teaching in synchronous sessions with people of diverse cultural backgrounds. Further, sensitive topics, such as talking about religious beliefs or experienced illness as part of one's culture need the intimate approach of in-depth interviews that not only allow but acknowledge subjectivity of answers. Often, cultural aspects are related to feelings and emotions and phenomenology addresses these aspects as it investigates lived experiences of the participants.

Furthermore, as Cilesiz explains, phenomenology is an excellent choice for research in educational technology:

> Specifically, phenomenology as an approach to studying experiences can fulfil important functions in educational technology research by (1) enabling the study of experiences with technology in-depth and in a multifaceted and comprehensive manner;

(2) providing a unifying framework for a research agenda on experiences with technology; (3) providing a theoretical and philosophical framework as well as a consistent methodology and methods; (4) providing clear guidelines on sample selection, data collection, data analysis, ethics and validity, which would facilitate its adoption in the field; and (5) generally strengthening the qualitative basis of educational technology research. (2010, p. 493)

3.3 Research method

To develop the interview questions in earlier papers in the PhD programme, an "interview guide" (Bryman, 2012, p. 471) was utilised, with a set of questions prepared but also with prompts along the way. Charmaz explains the value of such guides as "initial frameworks for opening the interview conversation rather than as recipes to follow". She also calls them a resource to help increase:

the visibility of standpoints on the topics such as those emanating from their gender, age, class, racial, and health statuses and the relative power embedded in them. As a result, tacit ethical issues, hidden assumptions, and taken-for-granted standpoints can become apparent through scrutinizing interview guides. (2015, p. 1613)

However, with the choice of phenomenology as the methodology, and following Moustakas (1994) the pilot interview started with two broad questions: "What have you experienced?" and "What was the context or situation of this experience?". This seemed suitable as due to the

delicate nature of the research asking questions directly about how one person treats a person of another culture would have not provided objective answers (as nobody wants to be discriminatory, even if their behaviour in the situation was full of prejudice). In the first interview, considered as the pilot interview, the participant went completely off topic. Nevertheless, I agree with the existing literature (e.g. Marshall, 2011) that the interviews in phenomenological research should be open or semi-structured, so that the participants have space to express their experience in detail.

To get better information about the actual phenomenon but without losing the freedom for the participants to address their experience, prompts were used alongside the initial questions. This worked very well, although questions were changed over time due to the difficulties during the first interviews, which will be explained in the following section.

3.4 Participant selection

"In qualitative data collection, purposeful sampling is used so that individuals are selected because they have experienced the central phenomenon" (Creswell, 2003, p. 220).

In this study, the participants were selected because they share the central phenomenon of having taught in a virtual classroom. Furthermore, their students have diverse cultural backgrounds regarding their gender, ethnicity, nationality, etc. Additionally, the participants themselves range from white male American to Dutch female Muslim, thus representing diverse cultural backgrounds defined initially when the first selection took place. Those criteria were place of birth, place of upbringing, gender, language and ethnicity. Although the sampling was convenience, the attempt was made to find participants who would "best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question" and that they were "willing to reflect on and share this knowledge" (Creswell, 2003, p. 185).

Regarding the size of the sample, Morse argues that it is determined by numerous factors including:

> the quality of data, the scope of the study, the nature of the topic, the amount of useful information obtained from each participant, the number of interviews per participant, the use of shadowed data, and the qualitative method and study design used. (2000, p. 3)

Following this approach, I have interviewed 17 participants who teach online and use synchronous teaching in virtual classrooms. Sixteen participants were working in universities at the time of the interview, whilst one had recently retired. Two of the participants were interviewed twice as they had courses coming up which exactly met the criteria for the thesis, namely using virtual classrooms with students of diverse cultural background.

At the time of the interviews the participants lived in Germany, the United Kingdom (UK), Russia, the Netherlands, Hong Kong and Australia and were working with students from Europe, Asia and the US. I knew the participants from my work with the Open University (OU), the University of Duisburg-Essen, the University of Hamburg and from a EuroCall conference I attended in Lyon in 2010. The participants have various cultural backgrounds as they were born in the UK, the United States of America (USA), Germany, Russia, Belarus and the Netherlands. They were brought up in various countries, have different gender, and speak various languages. One interview was carried out in German and English, the other 18 interviews were carried out in English.

The central phenomenon investigated, however, was teaching in a virtual classroom in English regardless of whether this was the mother language of the teachers or students. The students were taught online and they were placed in the UK, the USA, Germany, France, Russia, Australia, Asia and the Netherlands, again with various genders, mother languages, and nationalities, depending on their university's student body.

In the existing literature, the "ideal" sample size for phenomenological research varies, sometimes even by the same authors. For example, in his early work, Creswell (1998) suggests a sample size of five to 25 for phenomenological research; but later (Creswell, 2013) he reports examples ranging from one (Dukes, 1984) to 325 (Polkinghorne, 1989), with Dukes (1984) then recommending three to ten subjects. Giorgi (1997) states that the usual range is one to a maximum of about 10 participants. In total, I interviewed 17 participants combining purposeful sampling with snowball sampling, as it turned out that although carefully chosen, three of the participants changed the way they were teaching to face-to-face and asynchronous online teaching, which meant that their experience of the phenomenon was not up-to-date for this research. One participant unexpectedly stated that she was not using synchronous online conferences on principle as she felt they were discriminative per se. As it turned out, some participants were not teaching in synchronous online sessions frequently enough.

Thus, after 10 interviews, it was obvious that the search for "useful information obtained by each participant" (Morse, 2000, p. 3) had to be continued and this led to finding more participants who experienced the phenomenon, through even more purposeful sampling. Another eight participants were found who met the criteria, six of them through the online network "LinkedIn", where I asked specifically whether they were currently using a virtual classroom. Another two participants were found through snowball sampling. This meant that

they were recommended by participants who already had been interviewed. As mentioned earlier, two of the prime candidates were going to teach another course synchronously with students from various cultural backgrounds shortly after the first interview. Thus, the decision was made to interview them again to get a further and fresh experience of the phenomenon.

Considering the given variations of participant numbers in the literature and coming back to the factors of Morse (2000) mentioned earlier, a sample size of seven participants was appropriate for the "scope of the study" and the "nature of the topic", as synchronous teaching in a virtual classroom is not yet widely used in universities and therefore for the purpose of my thesis those seven participants would be a sufficiently representative number to show common experiences of the phenomenon. The participants used different software for virtual classrooms, namely Adobe Connect, Elluminate, one software written for the university similar to Elluminate, and BigBlueButton. However, as all of these virtual classrooms provide the same tools for synchronous communication (audio, video, text chat, breakout rooms), the gaining of perceptions about the phenomenon was not influenced by the different software across the sample. Most importantly, the participants provided rich data that yielded several rigorous arguments. Therefore, in the sense of Kvale (1996, p. 165) who states that "to the common question "How many interview subjects do I need?" the answer is simply, "Interview so many subject that you find out what you need to know"", saturation was achieved.

Therefore, for the purpose of answering the research questions of this thesis, enough information was collected, resulting in being able to use 8 interviews for the analysis. Nevertheless, the interviews triggered ideas for further investigations, which I will explain further in the section "Future research" in Chapter 6.

To preserve anonymity of my participants I created new names for them. Their cultural diversity, regarding the countries they are related to, are shown in the figure below:
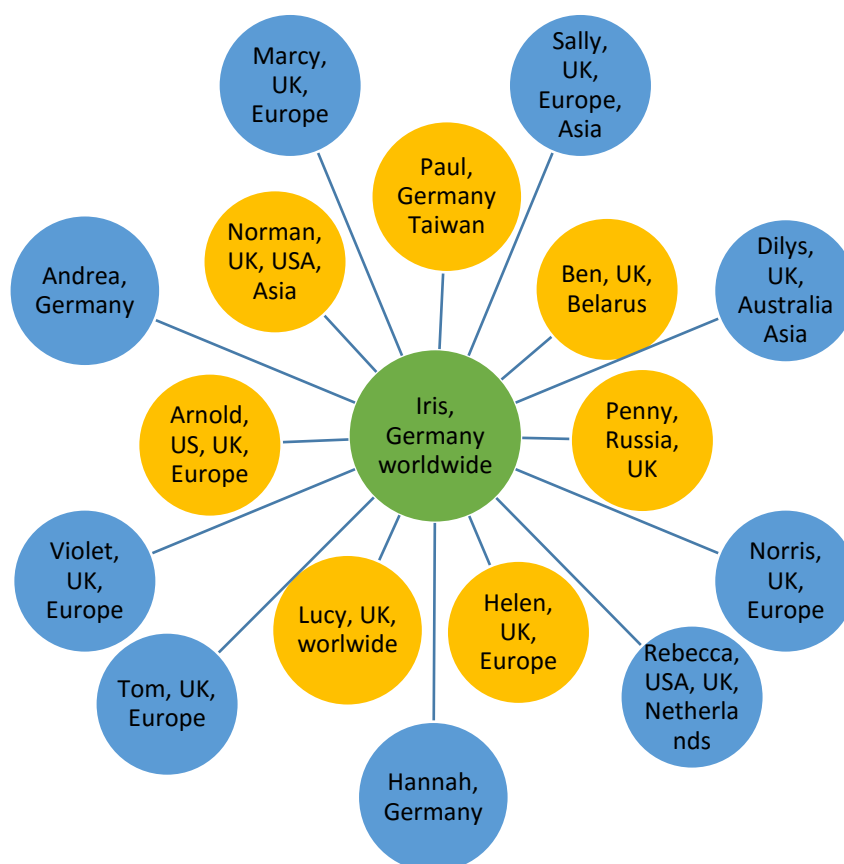
Figure 3.2: Participants and the countries they are connected with.

The participants whose in-depth interviews were used in the following results are Ben, Paul, Arnold, Norman, Penny, Lucy and Helen (shown in the inner circle). As stated earlier, the data from the participants shown in the outer circle were not investigated further, as it turned out that their experience of the phenomenon central to this study (teaching in synchronous online sessions) was either outdated, not deep enough (characterised by the time and number of synchronous sessions held) or not existent (as they were teaching online but only asynchronously or in Second Life).

One criterion the participants had in common is that geographically they were distant from their students, but through the virtual classroom that distance was overcome.

3.5 Role of the researcher

As Charmaz (2006, p. 15) points out, "neither the observer nor observed come to a scene untouched by the world. Researchers and research participants make assumption about what is real, possess stocks of knowledge, occupy social statuses, and pursue purposes that influence their respective views and actions in the presence of each other".

I see my role in accordance with Barrett who states that:

> you, as the researcher, have to be the instrument yourself and you're really forced to make sense of the data in your own meaningful way. There's no "calculate" button to push, and I think that uncertainty makes it difficult. But I think I've learned that's exactly why it is so rich—because you are forced to really, honestly search the data, your experiences, and your intuitions to make sense of your central phenomenon. (2007, p. 430)

Furthermore, my own expertise in the field allowed me to ask deeper questions and thus bring originality to this research. I was also able to react to nuances of answers of the participants in the interview about situations happening in the virtual classroom, which I would have not sensed without my own experience of teaching in a virtual classroom, and then to probe further. For example, when one of the participants (Penny) stated that she "championed" I knew that she was talking about being chosen to conduct a leading role in introducing the software Elluminate to her courses at the International Institute of Management LINK, because a few

years ago, I had similarly been a "champion" for my faculty with the Open University. Thus I could empathise with her which according to Kvale (1996) and Bryman (2012) is a significant criterion of a successful interviewer.

People without my background might have asked other questions and thus might have come closer to Glaser and Strauss's (2009) version of being an objective researcher or the view of quantitative researchers, who distance themselves from the participants and the research question. However, the role of the qualitative researcher is participatory (Merriam, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). I agree with Charmaz (2006) who believes that deep and new insight can only be collected by interviewers who are able to ask profound questions and empathise with the participants, which in return creates an atmosphere of trust and thus significant answers. Furthermore, the phenomenological discipline I am using commands that the researcher will be one of the participants, and the other participants are co-researchers (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994).

One potential limitation of my own experience in the field was that being an "insider" could have led to overlooking issues that are crucial but taken as granted, for example the acceptance of missing out facial expressions when only using audio-conferencing. Obviously, more objectivity would be possible with less knowledge of the field. However, the participants shared their experience with their own teaching and such experience is never exactly the same experience with two different people. Even if one had held the same course with the same students, one's personality, and more importantly one's perception of what happened, would have been different. Thus, my knowledge in the field helped to understand the situation but did not lead to overlooking important issues that someone less experienced might have witnessed.

3.6 Data collection and analysis

3.6.1. Data collection

When talking about interviewing skills, Charmaz reflects that

> … skilled interviewers are simultaneously attentive and analytic. This attentive and
> analytic stance also fosters learning how to couch follow up questions about abstract
> ideas that arise during an interview in the research participant's language. Intensive
> interviewing demands a multi-faceted engagement with the topic and research
> participant. The seeds of a compelling analysis reside in the researcher's interpretation
> of the data. Not only does an interview response shape an interviewer's subsequent
> questions but also the analytic direction of the study may lie in specific interview
> statements. (Charmaz, 2015, p. 1614)

As stated beforehand, I ran a pilot interview after which I realised that I had to change the
questions because they did not get to the actual topic I wanted to ask about. I also recognised
in some of the subsequent interviews that, although I thought I had carefully applied purposeful
sampling, some of the participants had either very little experience with the phenomenon, or
their experience was out-dated, or they even refused to try out the phenomenon, e.g. one of
them stated that she found synchronous virtual classroom sessions discriminative per se.

Nevertheless, the questions asked in the interviews with those participants and their answers
shaped my interview skills, so that I was able to conduct even better interviews with the

participants following. Furthermore, the research questions could not be fully addressed with the initial group of participants, as they did not experience the phenomenon in question. Therefore, more participants were found through more purposeful sampling, which meant that I asked specifically for experience with teaching in synchronous online sessions (in contrast to asking for experience in online teaching in general previously). In the end, I interviewed a significant number of participants with experience of the phenomenon under study. Apart from the second one, which was face-to-face, the interviews were carried out using Skype as I live in Germany and the participants live in the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, Russia, the Netherlands and Australia.

For the interviews, we used a webcam so that it was possible to interpret facial expressions and pauses which are nuances of the experience and thus lead to more insight. However, only audio was recorded as this situation was the most comparable to a face-to-face interview. As soon as I told the participants that I would only record the audio, they all reacted positively and seemed to relax, which was very important as the interviews should be conducted in an environment that is comfortable for the participant (Kleiman, 2004). The interviews were recorded using the software Callnote. Later I listened to them again and again and transcribed those selected as best fitting the criteria for the data analysis.

After transcribing the selected interviews, I e-mailed the transcriptions to the participants and asked them to let me know if they wanted anything changed or added to the texts. This procedure helped to encourage a transparent and trustworthy interview process (Mercer, 2007). Some participants asked for alterations due to spelling mistakes which gave the words different meanings, for example, "ICU" and "I see you". With one participant, I had to ask for clarification because even after listening many times, I did not understand a few words due to

her strong Russian accent. Once the transcripts had been approved by the participants, I created pseudonyms to ensure that the data remained anonymous.

3.6.2. Data analysis

Moustakas (1994) describes two methods for data analysis in phenomenological research: the Modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen and the Modified Van Kaam methods. The first approach fits this research, as I am also very passionate about the research questions investigated and the approach asks for the involvement of the researcher from the beginning (rather than expecting no prior knowledge of the field of enquiry). In this method, the researcher is the first informant contributing to the research (Moustakas, 1994). The method is also very popular among researchers (Creswell, 1998), which probably relates to the fact that it provides a clear description of the steps to undertake, which also attracted me to use it at first. However, the standard process includes bracketing (Merriam, 1998; Moustakas, 1994) which I did not use in the format proposed.

The latest approach to analysing phenomenological data was developed by John Smith (1996) and is called *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (IPA). IPA also searches for perceptions of individuals of an event or state in contrast to finding an objective documentation of the event or state itself. It combines Husserl's descriptive approach with hermeneutics as it is also interpreting the participant's statements. Thus, the researchers try to make sense of the participant's attempts to make sense of their own experiences, which generates a double hermeneutic approach. Many steps of this approach explained by Smith (1996) are similar to my approach and although IPA is mainly used in psychological and health studies it is suitable

for this study, as it will show the super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes that emerged from the data analysis in a comprehensive narrative.

In accordance with Kleiman (2004, p. 18) who argues that "there is no real right or wrong, only the requirement for choosing a methodological framework to be followed, dependent on, for example, the context of the research, the scholarly status of the researcher, the purpose of the research and the use to which the results will be put," and after long considerations and for the reasons I described earlier, I decided to undertake the following steps (Creswell, 2007, p. 82) to conduct phenomenological data analysis:

1.   I went through the data in the transcripts and highlighted *significant statements,* sentences or quotes which provided understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon of cultural practice in virtual classroom teaching. This step is called *horizonalisation* by Moustakas (Moustakas, 1994)

2.   Then I developed "clusters of meanings from these significant statements into themes" (Creswell, 2006, p. 82), which means I grouped the topics into units of meaning.

3.   As a next step, I wrote a *textural* description of what the participants experienced including verbatim quotes.

4.   Thereafter, I wrote a *structural* description which explained the context that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon, which is sometimes called *imaginative variation* (Moustakas, 1994).

5.   Finally, following the textural and structural description, I wrote a composite description presenting the *"essence"* of the phenomenon, also called the essential, invariant structure by Creswell (2007).

Colaizzi (1978) adds more steps, asking the researcher to return to the participants to discuss the analysis, through which the participants may offer new data which is then implemented in the analysis. In contrast to this approach, Giorgi (2000) argues that it is mandatory for the researcher and not the participants to conduct the phenomenological analysis. I agree with this approach, as I also think that the participants would not talk about the actual experience any more but about the interpretation of their experience. However, to address the trustworthiness of my interpretations, I sent the relevant chapters to the participants quoted and asked them whether they would agree with results. Furthermore, by using line-by-line coding I ensured that I used the words of the participants and not my own. Additionally, I continuously reflected critically about my choice of themes and thus ensured that the data analysis produced valid results. In total I analysed data from 132 pages of transcripts from 19 interviews. The original interview questions, an excerpt from one transcript of an interview, two sample memos and examples of the coding process are provided in the Appendix (see Appendices 3-7).

My aim was that the readers would feel what Creswell (2007) stated, namely that they appreciate what it is like for someone to experience the phenomenon of cultural practice in a virtual classroom setting.

3.7. Ethical considerations and validity

I interviewed teachers on their experience, opinions and emotions in synchronous online teaching sessions. Therefore, it was important that they respected me and they were confident in the way I treated the data they provided. To achieve this, I sent each of them a statement with my research intention, approach and ethical considerations which also explained how the data

were handled and most importantly, that the participation was voluntary. I also ensured that each participant received a transcript of the interview I conducted; and I accepted corrections, although in the event they were only requested by one participant. Due to the methodology employed and the role of the choice of participants, this was a low risk project.

Furthermore, the following measures were undertaken to ensure validity of the data:

- o Awareness of my own experience in the field with my form of epoché
- o Informing the participants about the content and purpose of the study
- o Using an interview guide
- o Verbatim transcription of the interviews
- o Sending the interview transcripts back to the participants for checking, amending and corrections
- o Use of line-by-line coding
- o Constant re-reading and checking of the themes and subthemes
- o Sending the final narrative back to the participants to ensure my interpretations reflected their experiences

3.8 Stages of this research

Figure 3.8 shows the different steps I undertook to complete the thesis. The only step that cannot be illustrated effectively is the ongoing literature review which took place during the whole process of writing the thesis.

Figure 3.3 Stages of my thesis.

3.9 Summary of chapter 3

This chapter has described the research design I used in this study. I provided a critical perspective on phenomenology as a research methodology by explaining its history and commonly chosen styles, and explained my own approach used in this study. Then, I described the research methods used, the way the participants were selected and my role as the researcher. This was followed by an explanation of my ontological and epistemological perspective, and

of the data collection and analysis process. Furthermore, I described the ethical issues that I had

to consider. Finally, I illustrated the different stages of this research.

Chapter 4: Results

In this chapter, I present the results of the phenomenological data analysis. The discussions of the findings are supported with quotes from interview data, documentation, personal interpretation and relevant literature. Three super-ordinate themes emerged from the analysis. These are: Culture and its effects, Technology, and Pedagogy. These themes are presented together with their sub-themes in a narrative form that displays the "essence" of the experience (Husserl, 1931) of teaching in a virtual classroom and the possible impact of cultural issues on it.

4.1 Theme 1: Culture and its effects
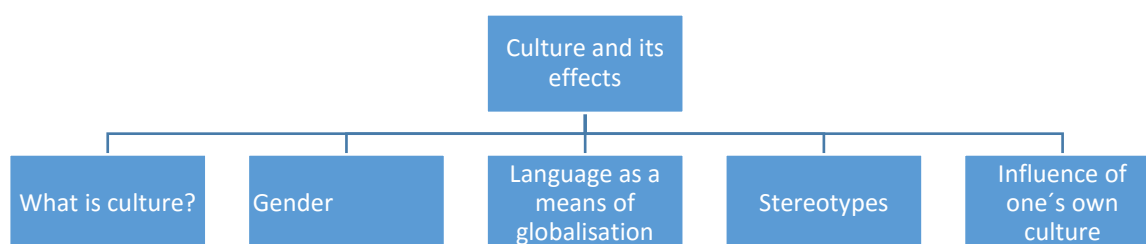
Figure 4.1: Super-ordinate theme *Culture and its effects* with sub-ordinate themes.

The above figure illustrates the first super-ordinate theme "Culture and its effects" and the related sub-ordinate themes "What is culture?", "Gender", "Language as a means of globalisation", "Stereotypes" and "Influences of one´s own culture". The theme "Culture and its effects" represents a compilation of what culture consists of for the participants. Although some criteria are specific to one person, all participants share opinions in the following six categories.

4.1.1 What is culture for me?

The participants agree that there is not one single unified definition of culture that would be comprehensive and suitable for every person. These experiences completely contradict Hofstede's (1986) ideas of pushing people all over the world into just five cultural dimensions. In contrast, they seem to support Boas's (1940) work, which states that culture is unique to one's particular history.

Ben is a Belarusian university teacher, who currently lives and works in the UK. He holds a PhD in Educational Technology and is employed at a British university that has a long tradition in online and distance learning. He has both taught online and experienced a virtual learning environment as a student. Ben also researches cultural aspects in business management courses. He argues that culture "*is a term which means different things to different people and it also depends what you have in mind and culture is a very broad concept*". To support the argument, he talks about his latest study, in which he investigated Russian students studying business management with a British university part-time at a distance.

> *So anyway, just an example of how complex it can be: During my study with people who were practising managers, mature students, quite you know, sophisticated users of technology, many with a genuine background. Some of them in my interviews, when I asked about, I asked about different things, I asked also about technology and learning, how they liked or disliked the [university name] approach where some synchronous elements were brought in. Some of them said: "Oh, it´s cultural. It´s not us. It´s not Russian, we like face-to-face teaching.*

However, Ben realised, when he was asked further, that what his students meant was that they did not like virtual classrooms as they "*wanted to bond together with other people*". Therefore, it was the way they liked to socialise, showing one trait of their personality. In this case, as Ben states, "*many people kind of like deciding important things face-to-face, so it is not so much cultural. There are many layers of culture which may even have more impact than their national culture*".

In Ben's view, his argument supports the ideas of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which Vygotsky describes as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving, and the level of potential development as determined by problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers'' (1978, p. 86). Thus, Ben´s students would prefer face-to-face teaching, not because of their nationality, but because it is easier to gain help from each other and to work collaboratively when physically meeting in a traditional classroom. Nevertheless, his argumentation seems to fit better into concepts of socialising, albeit ZPD has aspects of socialising, namely the scaffolding itself.

Although Ben´s earlier statements seem to contradict Hofstede (1986) and his flawed categorisation, Ben later states that he agrees with Hofstede on a basic level.

> *Looking at the level of national cultures, I think that I would agree on the basic level of Hofstede that cultural background is probably your up-bringing, the values and beliefs and assumptions which I am sure you can read about in the wonderful world of cross-cultural studies. So, I think for the purpose of this conversation we can delimit that. Beliefs, assumptions and values that are ingrained in people at the level of their national*

cultures, although we all know about the limitations and their complexity, that the reality of the world is much more complex than that.

So, although it is obvious that Hofstede's (1986) categories are debatable, the initial classification is accepted. One reason for (even if only initially) accepting such categories is the ease of thinking in such patterns. If people are grouped, it is much easier to add certain characteristics and provide an easy understanding of behaviour. However, it should not be overlooked that popular studies in this alarming direction are rooted in management studies (Hofstede, 1986; Trompenaars, 1997) and that a great proportion of business management (e.g. sales and marketing) has the goal to find customers, and thus addresses groups of people. However, just because certain groups of people share the same interest in a product, for example, it is absolutely false to apply categories to human beings. History, and especially World War II German history, has shown the horrifying consequences that attitude can have. Obviously, it does not mean that authors like Hofstede and Trompenaars have wicked intentions; but it is important to be aware of the danger that instructions on how to place people into classifications carry. This study shows, however, that even highly qualified, caring and truly nice people classify and group things in their environment; in this case their students. Nevertheless, as this is a natural human behaviour, it is not a problem per se, provided that the groupings are not based upon inappropriate concepts. Or, as in Ben´s case, the existing categories are questioned.

Another participant was Paul, who is a retired German Professor of Linguistics, who used virtual classrooms with his students, researched blended learning scenarios with European pupils and during this study was carrying out a blended learning intensive course with a Taiwanese university. For him, finding a definition of culture is more problematic:

I mean it is always very difficult. I mean I don't know how you, I mean this whole notion of culture. What is cultural and what is personal? In connection with intercultural communication and the soft topics we preferred in our projects, such as talking about school and meals and fashion and these things instead of hot, critical incident topics, I feel it's very important to see that you communicate, interact with someone and that there are certain characteristics in that person's behaviour, communicative or otherwise, and you just don't know whether they are cultural or just personal.

Paul reinforces his statement with another example from a study with pupils from Europe including Turkey, Bulgaria and Italy, where it also was not clear which issues had an impact on the behaviour of the students in their online communication. He states that "*[they] noticed that the Turkish pupils were so direct and almost impolite*". So, the teachers thought of possible causes for this behaviour and asked themselves: *"Is this an issue of politeness or is it just that their English wasn't that good? So, this might have an influence. The gender thing, male and female, it might also have an influence."*

A similar attitude is found in Ess's critique (2009) of the suitability of Hofstede's categories to the online context. Ess argues that Hofstede's work sees national culture as "something largely fixed and shared in equal degrees by all its members" (2009, p. 22). However, this approach does not consider regional cultures within a culture (e.g. northern and southern France). He also states that different people might reflect different proportions of the categories - Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism-Collectivism and Power Distance - given by Hofstede (1986). Nevertheless, Ess, like Ben earlier, states that Hofstede's findings remain a useful starting point

for the analysis of cultural aspects of online communication but the framework needs to be expanded and refined.

Hewling (2005), for example, provides a study of intercultural communication in an online course which also contradicts Hofstede´s results. In her study, concerns about authority were expressed primarily by a North American student. However, following Hofstede´s framework, people from North America belong to a low-power distant country and thus should not encounter any problems in stating their views openly.

Furthermore, according to Gunawardena, "in online communication researchers are more interested in how national, as well as other cultural identities such as ethnicity, youth culture, and gender, etc., interact with intercultural communication online" (2013, p. 186).

Another participant was Lucy, who is a Dutch lawyer and was brought up in Argentina, the UK and the USA. At the moment, Lucy lives in the UK and teaches international development and law at a British university in a blended learning format. For her, culture constitutes a variety of factors as she states: *"I think, you know, obviously, culture is not one thing."*. Lucy also points out that culture will change over time, as in her words "*more and more people are going to be a mix of things*". As an example, she talks about my own situation and states:

> *You are German born and bred, Mr. Iris is English born and bred and your junior will be a mix of things but some of that will still be Western Europe. But increasingly, you will have all kinds of varieties in that sense and I think that makes for a more interesting palette and something as tutors we need to be aware of, but without it going the other way, in a sense of: "Oh, I know, I have just seen her name and I just stick Iris in the German box". Because you may have travelled the world or you may not have travelled the world but read books and not just watched the German version of Fox News.*

Lucy's statement is in line with many researchers, for example, Goodfellow and Hewling (2005), Goodfellow and Lamy (2009), Ess (2009) or Ess and Sudweeks (2005), who criticise Hofstede's (2005) framework for describing national cultural characteristics and find it unsuitable for understanding cultural aspects in multi-national online learning. As Goodfellow points out, "it is characteristic of online learning cultures that the negotiation of personal and social identities is integral to learning, just as a critical awareness of culture is integral to a nonhegemonic model of online learning" (2009, p. 176).

Penny holds a PhD in molecular genetics and an MBA and has been teaching online since 2009. She was born in Russia and has lived there all her life. Penny explains that in Russia, regions are divided by another criterion, namely the business sectors prominent in them:

> *You see we have, I told you, difference because of our business education. We interpret the difference between Russian regions in terms of business. Are there many foreign companies, global companies, large companies, large businesses? Are there, what sectors of economy can be represented, agriculture or maybe oil extraction or something like this. And if you speak about some standard, because there the corporate sector is different but I am not an expert in that. So, what can I say about the specify of online teaching in different regions.*

To summarise, all participants agreed that it is difficult to find a definition for culture, as *"cultural background can mean all kinds of things"*. The differences in the attempts to define culture were based upon the participants' specific life histories and what they thought might form one's culture. The participants were also uncertain whether certain behaviour of their students was based upon a cultural aspect, e.g. their nationality or gender, or it was a personal

trait. There was a basic acceptance of categories provided by Hofstede (1986) but also contradictions. Some participants grouped people by the sector they worked for, some by their language (native and non-native speakers). Another participant suggested that people are "*a mix of things*" (Lucy, 2016). Another participant, Paul points out that:

> *we need to meet up with a person on a personal level and only with a lot of experience, background reading and what not, is it possible to make generalisations regarding to whether a certain trait is influenced by the person's culture, or not.*

The confusion of the participants confirms the conclusion of Signorini et al. who argue: "that culture cannot be reduced to immutable concepts such as nationality or other regional geopolitical constructs" (2009, p. 262). It was evident that there was an agreement that there is no single simple definition of culture, and that superficial categorisation does not work once the reasons for certain behaviour were looked at closer.

4.1.2 Language as a means of globalisation

The predominant language in both the interviews as in the teaching of the participants was English. Sometimes it was used as a "lingua franca" in a group of non-native speakers. For Ben, the use of English offers some advantages, as he points out that more students will understand English to a certain level than, for example, German. He argues that: *"many of them not having English as their first language but they are actually fluent enough to follow the course in English and complete it"*. However, he also expresses the view that only native speakers are able to understand the nuances that arise in spoken English. He explains what this means for a non-native speaker in a virtual classroom:

> *The disadvantage I think is that a lot of teachers and educators in English speaking countries assume that levels of fluency and awareness of all the cultural nuances and assumptions behind what a classroom looks like, how you should behave are the same, you know. If you have finished at a Swedish or Dutch or German school, the systems seem to function in a similar way but they might not actually be able to express their thoughts in the same degree of precision and the same, you know, the same being aware of all the nuances that come with language use.*

In Ben's view, this is a disadvantage that can disempower students. However, he differentiates between non-native speakers from European countries and Asian countries, because *"their level of fluency is so close and because culturally they are so close to English speaking countries they just happen to do quite well"*. However, he points out that *"there is the silent Chinese phenomena, because we have a similar culture and if learning levels are quite different from native speakers, you could have a bit of a problem and you can have a bit of void in the*

sessions." Hampel and Sticker (2005) concluded from studies of audio- and videoconferencing at the Open University that students with basic or intermediate language skills in the target language needed more support than expected. These experiences from teaching languages in synchronous settings can be even more intensive when the foreign language is not the subject of the lesson but an additional object to be learned while, for example, taking a course in business management.

Norman is a British teacher who works freelance for universities across the world. He is both teaching English as a foreign language as well as teaching teachers how to use technology such as Adobe Connect. He reports that in the virtual classroom the participants who are native speakers tend to speak more, whilst their non-native peers prefer using the text-chat option to join the discussions by written messages.

> *There are people who aren't so confident with their English who are quite happy to use the chat. Whereas you tend to get the native speakers who will turn on their microphones to ask the questions. So, I definitely think that is a factor. And I have that a couple of times in my training. I had a session the other day where I had a lady from Saudi Arabia who was online, it was only an hour session but you know, she simply texted at the beginning and said: "[name of participant], my English isn't that good, I prefer to write in the windows.*

Nevertheless, Norman argues that due to the possibility of using the chat in the virtual classroom, one can get students involved in the discussion without them having to speak.

Another participant, Arnold, is an American teacher who holds a PhD in Learning Sciences and a Master of Education (MEd) in Educational Technology, and works for a British university where he is primarily involved in teacher training. Prior to this position he was holding virtual classroom sessions with another British university in their Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme. Arnold points out that in face-to-face settings, students can count on additional support, e.g. other students sitting next to them or interpreting body language. In the virtual classroom, however, this possibility is lacking and he had to adjust to that.

> *I think the thing I recognize as being very different to a face-to-face setting was, that I was aware that students who had English as a second language in a face-to-face setting, were able to rely on other support structures in that face-to-face contact, that they weren't in the online context.*

However, he then contradicts himself by stating that it did not make a difference whether students were native speakers but then arguing that they were contributing the most.

> *My experience of it was relatively across the board, I didn't see a tremendous difference among students for whom English was their primary language. So, those who were actively contributing and participating were almost exclusively those who had English as a first language. So, am I, have I just contradicted myself?*

Thus, even when, at first thought, no difference is perceived, it is clear that in reality differences occur. Arnold explains further that amongst native English speakers he did see a further similarity with North American, American and Canadian students. Therefore, their confidence

in participating might be a combination of being a native English speaker and their educational background.

> *What I would say is that almost always the students who participated, who actively participated and engaged in my synchronous online tutorials were students who had English as a first language. So, those who spoke English as a second language, definitely, I got the expression that they were holding back. I didn't get a lot, I didn't get as much interaction and that interaction included things like clarifying questions as well as sort of participating in and responding to prompts and questions that I posed.*

Paul argues that it depends on the level one has in the foreign language, but in his view this is not different from the situation in a face-to-face classroom.

> *Well, I mean just depending on how comfortable you feel in a foreign language, of course it is easier or less easy to communicate. In my case, all these students were English students, and they wanted to become English teachers, so their English was generally quite good. Some are very good, of course some are not that good. And in this respect, of course, some had more difficulties communicating, but that was not different in the online environment compared to face-to-face interaction.*

However, in this case, all participants and the teacher were non-native speakers and research shows that people who use a third language as their "lingua franca" each understand it rather well. Seidlhofer, who has conducted empirical research into the lingua franca use of English, defines lingua franca as "any lingual medium of communication between people of different mother tongues, for whom it is a second language" (2004, p. 211). In this definition, a lingua

franca has no native speakers, which was correct in Paul's and Penny's experiences as in none of their courses were English native speakers present. However, in the courses Lucy and Ben are teaching, native speakers were also present as they are teaching at a British university. The other participants in this study were native English speakers themselves.

The situation can be interpreted in different ways when using the concepts of globalisation and multiculturalism. The term globalisation is widely used but following a sociolinguistic definition stands for "a phenomenon which emphasises inter-connectedness across the globe and which encompasses a number of significant economic, technological and cultural aspects" ("Globalisation", 2004). Positively speaking, the technology of the virtual classroom helps in connecting people from all over the world, which is happening in this study, too. However, one key criticism is that globalisation also encompasses homogenisation caused by the hegemony of the Western world, which exports its values to the rest of the world, destroying cultural values of countries with less power. The use of English as a lingua franca can be seen as one piece of evidence for such a development, as cultural values are transported with language.

The concept of multiculturalism can be traced back to Boas's (1940) ideology of cultural relativism, which explains that cultures are neither higher or lower, or more correct, than others; but human beings see every culture through the lens of their own culture and judge the other culture based upon the norms of their own culture. Multiculturalism thus aims for the acceptance of cultural differences, where differences in groups are openly discussed, taken into consideration and even highlighted. Apfelbaum et al. (2010) argue that multiculturalism can foster appreciation of other people's perspectives and better understanding of them by imagining their point of view. In this study, one could argue that using English as a lingua franca with native English speakers present would rate one language higher than other

languages, and would thereby undermine the multicultural aspect when only one language is used. However, for the group of participants in this study, English was the language most people can speak. The courses taking place in Asia were using English as it was the subject of their studies (English as a Foreign Language), and the Asian participants in the other groups choose to study at universities in the UK. If the study had taken place in Columbia, for example, the lingua franca would probably have been Spanish.

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Lucy confirms that a lingua franca between non-native speakers who share their mother language will work. However, she points out that this can cause problems if non-native speakers with a different mother language are also present in the group.

> *What I noticed is for example, if a German speaks English, they have a certain accent, so fellow Germans will understand that German English much better than Latinos. I have been to sessions where, and that was outside the [name of the university] to clarify, I had Latinos speak English, where their English was atrocious, but fellow Latinos could follow and knew exactly what the problem and non-Latinos said: "You might as well be speaking Chinese."*

So, whilst Paul discusses the experience of teaching a homogenous group of German students who share a lingua franca (English), Lucy's experience with heterogeneous groups of international students who use English as a lingua franca is quite different. She feels that students who lack a certain level of English cannot express themselves appropriately. However, many students who sign up for a course in English use this to study English and the actual subject at the same time, which Lucy explains as *"they think they can get two birds for one stone and sign up for an English module which is exciting and then improve their English on*

the side". This causes problems as students who are insecure try to find ways to express themselves that constitute plagiarism.

> *In the assignment, they feel that they have to use Google translate or are much more at risk of plagiarism because I had students caught up with turn in and what turned out the case was not that they were stupid or anything but they were not confident about their English language ability to convey their ideas properly so they thought what better to convey than the originals.*

Furthermore, as Lucy's mother language is Dutch, she relies upon the students' ability to explain themselves in English as a lingua franca.

> *You know, it can be a number of reasons, some students will take the microphone a couple of times, but then struggle and then stop participating because, you know, they are so keen, they want to participate but then actually stumble in their language and they know they have to do it in English because I don't speak Somali or Pakistani or whatever and then they stop talking. Or, you have students who are maybe quite confident, they start talking but actually because their accent is so strong it is very difficult to follow.*

Lucy points out that she as a teacher feels responsible that all students should be able to understand the communication and that this can be difficult because students cannot change their language skills easily (as in Lucy's case, the subject is not English but International Law). She feels that *"even if they speak English but it is so crooked or has such a strong accent, it is difficult to follow and as a teacher I have to sometimes balance that nicely"*. For Lucy, it is

important but often difficult to find the right balance of engaging the students to talk but also ensuring they are understood correctly by every participant in the online session.

> *It is not just relevant that I can follow what student A is saying, but also is this clear enough for student B to F to understand it or is it too much jargon in that sense. And if not too many students offer to engage if you have one that engages, you are so grateful, you don't want to put them down, but sometimes you do have to, as diplomatically as possible, suggest things and you know, it is difficult how to suggest that because they can't change their level of English or their accent overnight.*

Paul reports later though, that for him letting students speak in their own language for a while was a means of interrupting an otherwise very long synchronous online session in the virtual classroom. He felt that he was still involved as he could follow who was talking via the webcam broadcast, which meant he could ensure that everybody was participating in the discussion. In his view, this student-student interaction (Moore, 1989) was more important than his own understanding of what was talked about in this specific time frame.

In contrast to Lucy, Helen does not think that language has a huge effect in total but points out that there can be subtle misunderstandings. She also argues that regional accents in English can be as difficult to understand as variations between American and British English.

> *I think that on the whole, the language doesn't have a huge effect but I think there can be some misunderstandings, which is probably just do to with minor changes, minor ways in which the language is used, whether you are somebody in the West of Scotland or somebody maybe in the North-East of Scotland and somebody in the South of*

England, there might be some words that are used in a slightly different context. I think that is probably, the most kind of difference I would get with people in the UK. And there can be some differences with Americans and the way that they use language or certain words that they use.

Helen strengthens her argument with the following example*: "For instance, the word "quite": if they say something is quite good, they mean that it is fantastic, if we say something is quite good we mean it is really rather mediocre*". However, as she points out, these subtle differences usually occur in conversations and thus can be clarified easily: *"That would be more something which would happen in a conversation with someone and then you would have to tease out what they mean"*. Nevertheless, it is a contradiction to her earlier statement that language does not have an impact on the teaching. The example shows that even between English speaking cultures, one is considered of higher value than the other. It also supports a study by Carrie on attitudes with reference to English accents, where he concludes that "cognitive evaluations of speech are based on two dimensions: competence and social attractiveness". He also explains:

Within this EFL context, RP [Received Pronunciation, the standard British accent] and GenAm [General American] exhibit a dichotomous relationship. Whilst RP occupies the high-status position and GenAm the low-status position, the latter often rates more highly than the former for solidarity. Spanish participants generally desire to emulate RP speech and the overall preference for RP is consistent with findings from other European contexts. (2016, p. 17)

Another participant, Ben, feels that it was easier for non-native speakers to participate in a traditional face-to-face classroom because *"you can have smiles and you can have body*

language, just being in the same environment such as a room for a few minutes maybe hours make people more grown to contributing". Nevertheless, there are tools in the virtual classroom that can compensate, to a certain extent, for the lack of non-verbal communication. Most virtual classrooms have a tool to show the participants current status with so-called "emoticons" or "status-symbols" which, for example, show a raised hand, applause or laughter. Furthermore, typically there is a video application included in the virtual classroom, which allows broadcasting real-time pictures of oneself. Obviously, the webcam shows only part of the body, mostly the face and if many participants have the webcam on at the same time, these pictures can be very small and thus make the interpretation of facial expressions more difficult than in a face-to-face class (Guichon, 2010).

To summarise, all participants stated that English as the predominant language in their teaching worked well as a lingua franca for non-native speakers. As language is one essential part of one's culture, the teachers had to adapt the way they talked to be understood by their students. This adjustment is needed in the virtual classroom where audio transmission is still the primary means of communication and thus facial expressions or body gestures that help understand a foreign language are missing (Develotte, Guichon, & Vincent, 2010). The differences experienced in participation were mainly related to oral conversations. It was obvious that native speakers were more likely to use the microphone and to actively take part in discussions. Quite frequently, however, students would use the text chat to compensate for their lack of confidence in speaking with written messages.

4.1.3 Gender

Although the interviewees were carried out with eleven women and seven men, none of the women noticed any influence of gender in their teaching. However, when using the theory of intersectionality, gender is just one agent that cannot be analysed separately but only in relationship to other social categories such as race, class, sexuality, etc. (Valentine, 2007). The theory of intersectionality was significantly influenced by the work of Crenshaw (2015), who studied ways in which the interactions of gender and race negatively influenced Black women's chances on the American labour market. According to Walby et al., Crenshaw and the two other key authors in the field of intersectionality, McCall (2005) and Hancock (2007), "share a common starting point in the rejection of a focus on gender only and of generalizations from some women to all women (Mohanty, 1991), but diverge in how they conceptualize the relationship between multiple inequalities" (2012, p. 225). For this study, gender was the category in the foreground; but it is also certainly related to class and race and sexuality, which was evident in the results.

The fact that there were only few comments by the female participants can be related to their high social status as university teachers, with some of them in leading positions in their faculty. Moreover, all of the participants were White and either European or American, with both countries considered as dominant Western cultures. Interestingly, Arnold - a white, male North-American - reflected most about the topic, stating:

> *I think, I mean I am fairly certain, that my sort of maleness and my maleness and my whiteness and my sort of, you know general demeanour can't have not had an impact on other people and on the students, I was working with. I did notice very clearly that it*

was often a case that students of colour... I would often find, if I had students of colour and especially through black women, again for many of whom English was not their first language and they would hold back and contact me separately. So, they would contact me by e-mail, they would engage with me by e-mail. Occasionally, they would ask for a chat by phone, those kind of things.

However, in his reflection Arnold provides more than one attribute that could have caused the specific behaviour. Apart from his gender, it could also have been his ethnicity, or there again, his language and the way students felt intimidated by one or all of these criteria. One reason could be white ignorance as described by Will (2007), which means that because he belongs to the dominant culture of being a White male American, he might not see that he treats people who belong to a different culture differently. One piece of evidence for this would be that he specifically comments on his experience with black students, and especially with female black students. Thus, to a certain extent, he is aware that the behaviour is different, but he does not relate it to his own.

In contrast, Norman states that he has not experienced an influence of gender. Indeed, he finds that teachers of different sex react in exactly the same way when it comes to (first time) online teaching:

I think one biggest experience for me is actually being on the other side, where you train a teacher to use Adobe Connect and suddenly say, o.k. you are going to deliver this class and most teachers, men and women just freeze.

Nevertheless, Norman is a white British man who combines three power agents in one, namely being white, male and an award-winning teacher. Thus, it could be argued that he might not see that students who are less powerful in one category at least, as he is their teacher, might feel differently (Walby et al., 2012).

In contrast to Norman, Paul admits that he cannot provide an educated answer, as *"this is really difficult to say because most of them are female. Well, it is the same in the humanities in general"*. This is an interesting statement, raising the question whether Paul due to his power position as a white man of a high social standing is ignorant of gender-related discrimination. However, as men seem to be the minority group in his professional field, it could be that gender-related discrimination does not play a significant role.

Helen also argues, that in her view, neither in her own studies nor in her teaching has she experienced gender-related issues. Regarding her studies, she explains:

> *When I was an undergraduate, there were actually a rather small number of women in my classes but I have to say I never felt discriminated against but it did often feel that there were very few of us and an awful lot of them.*

However, Helen is white and a teacher, which gives her a certain power position. Thus, she might not realise that from this position she does not feel discrimination, although it does take place in her surroundings. This is related to the issue known as "white ignorance" in the literature (Mills, 2007). Regarding her teaching, Helen admits that she might have a certain picture in mind, which she explains as *"a kind of typical physics student bloke type thing as opposed to the women"*. However, she feels that her teaching is more about helping individuals

regardless of their gender. To confirm this, she states: *"I don't believe I treat the women differently from the men. I don't believe that I encourage the women for instance, compared to the men I teach"*.

Helen also points out that both the field she is working in and the times we live in might have an influence on her experiences, which supports the theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2015; Hancock, 2007; McCall, 2005) as her social status and race are probably outweighing any discrimination that could have arisen because of her gender (e.g. a black woman working in a grocery store would have different experiences).

> *I think I may have been very lucky that I have not experienced any sort of direct discrimination at all or not felt it and of course now I am in a field that is quite the opposite. If I go to staff development conferences and it is 80% women, and I don't know whether the men feel that in some way they are being discriminated again. I don't think so but it is possible they do feel like they are in a minority. No, I think I have probably been very lucky and it has probably partly to do with the time that I was teaching and the individuals I have come across. I think if it had been 10 years earlier that I started at University, I started at University in 1980, and if it had been 1970 it would have been completely different matter.*

Penny offers a similar experience. In her view, women behave differently not because of their gender but depending on the sector they are working in. She states, that *"those who are much more inclined to think entrepreneurial, they are more quick in mastering those techniques"*. To enrich her argument, Penny offers the following example:

So, when I invited groups to join a community on Google Plus or to enter a voice thread
and leave there some comments and so, they also think more entrepreneurial minded,
they join easier and quicker, and those who work in a more established structure, who
work for state or maybe, for example in Russia, alcohol production is all regulated, it
is very strongly regulated sector.

To summarise, the experiences regarding the impact of gender on the behaviour in the virtual classroom were varied. Interestingly, the female participants of the study were less conscious of gender-related issues than the male participants. However, this probably relates to the theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2015; McCall, 2005) which explains that gender is not an isolated category but has to be interpreted in relation with other social categories such as class and race. Once these relations were included in the analysis, discriminative segments were visible.

4.1.4 Stereotypes

Although all participants stated earlier that culture for them is a mixture of many criteria, they still offered many examples of stereotypes into which they would, at least at first, place students. This is a common phenomenon as nobody can really distance themselves from first impressions, as explained in Section 2.2 Cultural ways of learning. For example, Lucy saw differences in the general attitude to certain issues between Chinese and German students:

For example, if I got a Chinese and a German in the class, you know as far as feasible,
you know if I am aware that you know the Chinese have an issue with questioning
authority I won't use it in those words but I need to, as feasible as possible, then try to
have an indirect manner to try to get students to think about things without them

realizing that I am basically indirectly affecting the foundation of their culture. And you know, if they are German, I try to, as far as possible suggest that I have a little bit of understanding that Germans have such thoughts and how about if they look at it from a different angle.

It was obvious that the Asian culture was most prominent in comparisons. Norman added: *"So, yes, I have noticed that. I noticed it a little bit with some of the sort of Asian students… I notice that generally they don't speak but they do sometimes write in the chat pod."*

Paul is subtler in his expressions, but still points out that there are issues with Asian students. Nevertheless, he immediately argues that the cultural difference is a minor influence in the virtual classroom, with the bigger issue relating to the continuing focus on face-to-face teaching.

I mean there are clearly these cultural/intercultural things, when I think of Japan and Taiwan and so forth. But then there is the need for learner preparation, teacher education. I mean we are so deeply, I mean including us with a certain amount of experience in online learning and teaching, we are still so deeply, deeply influenced by teaching being face-to-face and in the classroom. I find it amazing, I mean how strong this is and which by the way makes it very, very difficult in schools to change things.

Norman, however, found a way to enhance participation of Asian students in face-to-face teaching by adding technology into the classroom. Thus, he still exercises behavioural blindness as described by Lewis et al. (2000), because he wants Asian students to adjust their behaviour to mainstream Western behaviour. The fact that he is unaware of it can be related to the theory

of white ignorance defined by Mills (2007). In this example, he is not using a virtual classroom, but an online chat facility in addition to students sitting in a traditional classroom (obviously, the students would need a computer and access to the Internet during the lesson).

Asian students maybe a bit reluctant to speak in their groups but when it comes to them perhaps discussing something and then writing their ideas on the screen, so you are not actually asking them to speak aloud, but they are talking in their groups and then are just sharing their ideas via TodaysMeet, we have noticed definitely over the years that it is another opportunity for student who are kind of perhaps, shy, perhaps worried a bit about their language level. I always find a lot of my Asian students, well not always but sometimes they are not familiar with the idea of working in groups and discussing things. I think that they learn it pretty quickly. So, you know, it gives them another meaning to use, it gives them an outlay. It gives them a way to present themselves where perhaps they haven't got that face problem. They haven't got to stand up or be expected to speak, or perhaps they are lacking confidence because of their language.

Although Norman's experience on this occasion describes a face-to-face teaching situation, the effect can be similar in a virtual classroom, as the chat facility is an integrated tool. Thus, shy students, regardless of the reason for the shyness being cultural or personal, can communicate without actually speaking by sending written messages.

Paul explains that both he and his colleagues have experienced a lack of participation with Japanese students, but that he does not yet know how to deal with it. He argues, that *"this is certainly also a cultural issue."* When talking about his colleague, he describes that she is involved in teacher education and in a brief discussion mentioned that for her it was frustrating

that *"they won't interact, they just sit there and they don't interact"*. Paul adds, that he had similar experiences with a student from Kyrgyzstan, and that he *"…noticed the same with Chinese students"*. However, he pointed out that he did not really have many foreign students in the traditional classes, where the virtual classroom was used on top of face-to-face teaching.

Later, Paul was teaching a blended learning course for a university in Taiwan and discussed possible preconceptions and their causes with his students. He stated: *"We talked about the educational system and there have been changes of course and many of the stereotypical expectations we entertain turned out to be true for the older generation but not necessarily today."* In his view, in Taiwan a lot is changing with respect to teaching and language learning towards a stronger focus on communication. However, he also feels that examinations are very important and in his view *"this destroys good learning"*.

By addressing the differences between the German educational system and the Taiwanese one, Paul used the concept of multiculturalism (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004) and thus showed that he accepts the value of both cultures as equal. Thus he established an open and safe environment for his teaching in the virtual classroom.

Lucy explains that in her subject, law, she can see a "typical" behaviour in Chinese students:

> *I mean I am generalizing a little bit but for the sake of examples you know Japanese students or students from that direction, Chinese students, too, find it really difficult to do critical analysis. Not because they are stupid but generally because they have been brought up not to question authority. So, when you tell them, yes you read in a court*

case this is the situation but you are allowed to completely disagree you can clearly notice that you know they don't know what to do.

Lucy explains further that people have first-sight conclusions about other people, and that that also happens between students and teachers, as well. Therefore, it is important for teachers to be aware of it, as she points out:

I can say I am a global nomad, I don't feel nationalist in one sense or the other, I am happy I have got a Dutch passport because I can travel to so many places others can't, etcetera, etcetera, but in reality, you know when people see my name, when people see what I look like they will make all kinds of judgements, whether justified or not.

Ben elaborates about a phenomenon known as "the silent Chinese", which can be found in the literature (Hwang, Ang, & Francesco, 2002) and describes the quietness of Chinese students in management classes primarily. Hodkinson et al. conclude that while many Western university teachers are aware of the "silent Chinese student" phenomenon, few understand its underlying reasons, especially the "kiasu" mindset and its relationship to other cultural elements. "Kiasu [afraid to lose out, meaning selfish behaviour] actively impedes the interaction of international Chinese students with their teachers and restricts collaboration with peers, thereby limiting educational achievement" (2014, p. 40). However, in this study, Ben experienced a different behaviour and states: *"Yeah, but, I met several students from Hong Kong for example, and actually some Chinese students with some experience they would be as confident as anyone"*.

To summarise, the majority of participants gave examples of stereotypical behaviour involving Asian students, which is also reported in the existing literature (Hwang et al., 2002; Lewis et

al., 2000; S. Hodkinson & Poropat, 2014). As stated earlier, forming first impressions and then categorising people accordingly is a natural human behaviour (Asch, 1946). However, it is important how one acts in following up on these impressions, e.g. whether they become means to discrimination or they are used to question one's viewpoint. What is different from the existing literature is that most of the teachers evidently seem to be aware of holding a certain bias and try to find ways to deal with it, contrary to the theory of "white ignorance" (Mills, 2007; Swan, 2010). For example, Paul offers discussion time in the native language (Taiwanese Hokkien) or in a lingua franca shared by his students (Mandarin Chinese), although the dominant language is English. This could be interpreted as racial stereotyping in the form of a gesture of someone from a dominant culture (Feagin, Vera & Imani as cited in Lewis et al., 2000); but in his case, as he does not speak either of the two languages, it is a sign to show that he accepts the students' culture as equal. Fewer examples included Russian and German typecasts, for example Lucy's statement: *"Yeah, as normally with Germans, you would not associate smileys."* However, Lucy also is aware of stereotyping as she experiences it herself as a female Muslim wearing a headscarf. Therefore, in her teaching, she tries to explain to the students how the same event can be interpreted differently depending on who experiences it, e.g. discussing both the Argentinian and British arguments on the ownership of the Falkland Islands.

4.1.5 The influence of one's own culture

Following the participants' explanations of what they consider as "culture" at the beginning of this chapter, this section reports their feelings of how their own culture influenced their teaching in the virtual classroom. The difference from the last section on stereotypes is that here the teacher's own culture is discussed. Earlier, the focus was on stereotyping of the students

exercised consciously or subconsciously by the teachers, whereas in this section the teachers report about their own cultural background and situations in which they were affected by it themselves.

The most passionate answers derived from the interview with Lucy, who explains her own background's influence as: *"Oh, significantly."* She explains that she was born in the Netherlands but grew up in Argentina and the United Kingdom, at the time where those two nations were at war with each other over the Falkland Islands. Thus, she experienced different cultures and this made her experience the existence of perception and different views:

> *I don't have as fixed a view, I hope, as some others. So, I am not nationalistically precious about something. I mean the explicit case of indeed in the morning being told that the Malvinas were Argentine and in the afternoon with exactly the same conviction being told that the Falklands were definitely British. This may be one example but it really made me consolidate that idea that you can justify and present things with the same conviction…*

She points out that she feels *"like a global human"*. This means that she does not feel offended or bothered when, for example, people want to say something about Dutch residents. She actually feels that as a teacher, this attitude should be normal; but in reality, this is not the case.

> *And you know, from a professional point of view, we shouldn't ever mind, but obviously as humans we feel much more comfortable talking about Africa than about their own culture. We don't mind talking about tribes here, tribes there and how they kill each*

other. But when we say actually say the Dutch and the Germans in NATO are also not behaving totally nicely, then you know many will feel that it is too close for comfort.

Lucy thinks that here exposure to different cultures helped her cope with the challenges of teaching students from diverse cultural backgrounds. She points out that *"if I myself had not been exposed to different cultural aspects it would be quite a challenge for me to be more understanding and respond appropriately".* She feels that even if teachers realise that they need to respond differently to students from various backgrounds, they might not be able to. She argues that *"if you have a limited cultural background yourself, you have a limited repertoire of solutions so to speak to apply".* For example, she is sensitive to student behaviour that might be related to their cultural background:

> *I think I am quite sensitive to a much wider variety of students presenting themselves, so in the sense of, if they present themselves in a certain way, I will say: "Oh, I think it is because it may be related to their Chinese culture." So, I can't just tell them: "Give me critical analysis", I need to be much more appreciative if I use those words in that sense, you know I am basically asking them to challenge the foundation of their culture, which is very offensive. So, I think, in that sense, you know, it helps me to have a wider understanding of students' potential challenges and how they may present themselves and because of my own background, I have a wider repertoire of means to respond to that because indeed.*

Lucy elaborates that it does not matter whether one has been exposed to the same culture as the students, what is important is the awareness of differences and a certain kind of sensitivity.

In Lucy´s case, this sensitivity might also originate in her experiences with the exposure of her religious beliefs, as she is a Muslim who wears a headscarf. However, she states: *"I don't think my personal religion has as a conviction as such. I mean I was brought up with no religion and then later on decided, I was convinced by Islamic teachings (….), obviously other teachers have been convinced by others."* Nevertheless, she argues that it helped her as she experienced all three states, namely non-religious, transition and Islamic beliefs. However, she also admits that she knows that "*Islam is currently not really flavour of the month*".

This means that Lucy has to be more conscious about what she says in the virtual classroom, as she wants to avoid students thinking she takes a certain position because of her obvious religious beliefs. She provides an example, stating:

> *You know with things like drone attacks, and I say there are people who have this view and there are people that have that view and in regards to international law that is where life stands. I need to be almost overly explicit that I am not taking a certain stand because I am Muslim in a sense, you know it is because I am against drones because they are killing the Yemenis and the Pakistanis who happen to be Muslim. No, I have a certain understanding of drones because of my legal background. But because I am Muslim and quite visibly so, I need to doubly ensure that my students appreciate that I am not personalizing or conveying my personal political conviction but trying to help them understand the boundaries of international law which is that particular module, around, you know, whether it is legally allowed to just go and do drones.*

Lucy is almost contradicting herself, as she claims to have no fixed views but having been objectified for her religious beliefs, she expects people to think of her in a certain way when

they see a picture of her. This is a behaviour confirming Du Bois's (1994) theory of "double-consciousness" which he explains in the following way: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (England & Warner, 2013, p. 966). Du Bois (1994) is talking about Black people but his theory can be used to explain Lucy´s behaviour; the attempt to explain herself and to find ways to (at least initially) hide her real self by not using the webcam as she expects her students to see her in a certain way.

Obviously, many issues Lucy has with wearing a headscarf and the first-sight impressions students have of her, would also occur in a traditional face-to-face classroom. However, in that setting it would be easier for her to see the reactions and body-language of her students and react accordingly. Given that in most virtual classroom settings at her university webcams are not used, she needs to rely upon interpretation of audio and text chat messages. However, as stated above, she can also use the virtual classroom to hide her real self by not using the webcam (or a picture).

Thus the virtual classroom offers the possibility of presenting oneself in a way one chooses to. For example, by avoiding the webcam and microphone the identification of the real-self regarding one's gender, race, age or class is difficult if not impossible. This is a process of self-presentation, which has been described by Leary as "the process of controlling how one is perceived by other people" (as cited in Attrill, 2015, p. 6). Attrill explains further:

> Self-presentation occurs when people carefully monitor, manage and present the self in a certain way with the intention to maintain a certain image of oneself to another

person(s) (Brown, 2007). This manipulated presentation in turn affects how people create their own image of themselves (Harter, 1998; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008). (2015, p. 6)

In Lucy's case, when she avoids the webcam, she presents herself as if her religious beliefs were not influencing her teaching as the students will not judge her for wearing a headscarf and thus expressing her devotion to Islam as a religion. In turn, she believes that her religion does not influence her teaching, whilst in reality it does.

Nevertheless, as Lucy describes the interrelation between the teachers' and their students' cultures: *"Well, once people hear you speak, your accent is quite obvious."*. This means that even if teachers themselves want to or can ignore their cultural heritage, their students might have assumptions or prejudices themselves.

> *When we speak to students you need to be aware not only about their culture but about your own culture where indeed, you know, I might want to ignore my Dutch heritage but when people see my name, they will make assumptions. And sometimes, subject to the topic, if it is for example an Indonesian in the class I would almost anticipate any challenge and say: "Look, you know the Dutch colonialized the place and you know all kind of things", so that they appreciate that there is no red line on topics that can't be discussed as long as it is module relevant. I am not going to say that certain topics are off limit.*

Again, Lucy is conscious about what other people see in and of her, which can be related to Foucault's theory of "panopticism" (1977). The term relates to the Panopticon, a design for a

modern prison by Jeremy Bentham in 1843 (Birch & Hooper, 2012), which allows watching the prisoners from a central tower whilst they cannot see this tower and thus do not know whether they are watched or not. Foucault explains that "the prisoner thus becomes the principle of [their] own subjection, as they constantly police their behaviour in the fear that they might be observed all the time" (Schwan & Shapiro, 2011, p. 130). For Foucault, this is the form of discipline in modern societies with people "internalizing their own sense of being". In this study, Lucy is "the principle of her own subjection", as she is not online thinking about what people might think about her appearance (the headscarf identifying her as a Muslim) but also what they might think about her nationality, for example. Obviously, in her case this is almost a vicious circle as the racial stereotyping to which she is subject confirms that some people do think of her in the way she thinks they do. As stated earlier, she experiences that "Islam is not the flavour of the month right now" and her students question what she is teaching as the headscarf shows that she is a Muslim. This religious belief, however, is in the current political climate often confused with the political aspect of being a terrorist.

However, as Lucy lives and teaches in the UK, the current political restrictions of the government (2015/2016) also influence her acting in the virtual classroom:

> *Well, I mean, something that more recently explicitly affected my, one is, you know the British governments positioning that they need to be really careful about extremism in education and as a teacher I need to report students and students need to report me as a teacher if they think there is anything extreme.*

Thus one of Moore's (1989) three types of interaction, namely student-instructor interaction, is influenced not only by the obviously involved people but also by an outside party, the government.

In Lucy's case, as she is teaching a subject called Boundaries of International Law, with a key unit on counter-terrorism, she needs to be very careful that her religious belief, as one part of her own cultural background, is not perceived as supportive to terrorism. This is a specific issue related to her religious beliefs as a Muslim, to which, for example, a white Catholic would not be exposed. The current political situation, however, has created an environment full of fear and hate against people who share the same Islamic religious beliefs, regardless of whether they are utterly peaceful or indeed terrorists.

To a certain extent, this is the same attitude as categorising people because of their nationality (Hofstede, 1986). Therefore, it is of utmost importance to treat people as individuals to ensure that peaceful, innocent teachers like Lucy are not forced to defend themselves because they supposedly have the same religious background as terrorists. Otherwise, history is repeated, as not too long ago, all Germans were supposed to be Nazis. Today, it is not a national but a religious category that is in Lucy's words "not flavour of the month". However, the underlying tendency of judging people because of one criterion they share (e.g. nationality, religion or colour) needs to change fundamentally. Obviously, it is easier to put a whole nation or religious group into one box rather than dealing with each person individually. However, it would certainly help to make educated decisions rather than spreading hatred and aggression as can be witnessed in the current political climate.

As Lucy is teaching at a postgraduate level though, she needs to, for example *"tickle people's mind and say: "Listen, there is another view beyond American military view""*. That does not mean that she supports this view but that she wants to show that *"there is ten equally parallel valid views and they are generally formed because of peoples' backgrounds"*, e.g. if the family of a Pakistani student was killed by American drones. Again, Lucy has to defend herself from accusations because she is subject to stereotypes and to current cultural bias against Muslims.

> *Well, I mean, something that more recently explicitly affected my, one is, you know the British governments positioning that they need to be really careful about extremism in education and as a teacher I need to report students and students need to report me as a teacher if they think there is anything extreme and obviously because of the types of topics I discuss like you know, boundaries of international law and one of the key unit topics is around counter-terrorism, I need to be, I feel I am explicitly needing to be careful what I say.*

Lucy experiences that because of her appearance, she should act differently than if she were not wearing a headscarf:

> *But I need to be often extra conscious that I make it overly clear that that is from the legal point of view and I am not imposing my view, you know whilst normally you could almost leave that unsaid. But I feel I have to explicitly make that clear like you know, not to the extent that "Please don't report me for being a terrorist" but a quite balance between tickling people's mind and say "Look, you know understanding where a different view comes from, doesn't mean that you love it or you condone it. It just helps*

you have a wider understanding that how come things are so difficult in the United Nations."

One could argue that it would be the same in the face-to-face setting. However, the difference is that face-to-face teaching is usually not recorded whilst virtual classroom sessions can be recorded. These recordings are compulsory at many universities, as they allow students who cannot attend the synchronous sessions to listen to them afterwards. And this flexibility attracts many part-time students to distance education.

> *I think the other aspect, more generally for your studies is not just the topic content but also the aspect around online synchronous versus offline is that nowadays we are having to record things. So, when in a face-to-face offline tutorial, you know, you have discussions and you make off-the-cuff remarks about this, that or the other, hopefully the students will go away with the key ideas. When it is recorded, I have heard colleagues, and I am sure I will be next, is having students quote you word by word from the online tutorial and that then affects how as a tutor you are able to behave yourself, because you can't relax too much and let the discussion flow.*

Another participant, Helen, explains that she went to a comprehensive school which was also a Catholic school, and that although she does consider herself as a *"person of no religion"* this part of her life still influences her thinking today.

> *But yes, my upbringing, you know in my upbringing there was right and wrong and compassion and kindness and sin and you know the devil and all of that kind of stuff. So, I suppose there is quite a lot of cultural background there.*

Therefore, although at first Helen does not consider religion as part of her present culture, it is evident that her beliefs relate to her Catholic upbringing and certainly influence her teaching. She states that she also:holds *"the sort of West of Scotland cultural background which has its sense of humour which is all often about putting people down"*. In other words, *"there is a term called "slagging someone off" and that is the sort of common thing. So, there is lot of, you know, that kind of teasing"*. However, what she calls "teasing" and what she gently describes as part of a regional behaviour, might be unpleasant or even upsetting for students who come from a different cultural background.

Nevertheless, Helen does not think that her cultural background was influencing her teaching. She states that: *"Well, I have been thinking about this, Iris, and actually finding it quite hard to see where my cultural background could be affecting the sort of teaching I have"*. However, as one's thinking cannot be separated from one's behaviour, there might be an influence on her teaching that Helen may not be aware of, as it is deeply rooted in her personality. Moreover, as Helen is a white European teacher, she belongs to a dominant culture (Scott & Marshall, 2009) and might not realise that this influences the way students from inferior cultures experience her teaching. This kind of behaviour is known in the literature as "white ignorance" (Mills, 2007; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007). Mills states:

> Inevitably, then, this will affect white social cognition—the concepts favored (e.g., today's "color blindness"), the refusal to perceive systemic discrimination, the convenient amnesia about the past and its legacy in the present, and the hostility to black testimony on continuing white privilege and the need to eliminate it to achieve racial justice… these analytically distinguishable cognitive components are in reality all

interlocked with and reciprocally determining one another, jointly contributing to the blindness of the white eye. (2007, p. 35)

Although Mills writes about the USA, the concept of white ignorance fits the behaviour of white people against people of colour anywhere in the world, and also in this study. More recently, Medina reaches even further, and talks about meta-ignorance and "cognitive and affective numbness with respect to racial matters", and calls this "ignorance of one's racial ignorance and insensitivity to one's racial insensitivity" (2013, p. 38).

Helen explains that for her, because of the subject she teaches (science), her background does not affect interaction with students (Moore, 1989). What makes a difference to her actions when it comes to helping students in general, for example, if they are facing a crisis, is that she experienced a severe illness in her twenties.

> *I mean for me, probably it is not my cultural background, but you know, for four or five years, I was very ill and so I think that probably has made me much more empathetic to people who have some kind of difficulty in, you know, whatever it might be. Whether it is a health problem or some other type of problem. Because your own life experiences are for some people it is: I had it hard, so you can have it hard, too. That is the way it affects them. With me, you know, I had it hard and would rather have nobody else suffer through something like that and what we can do to help. So, I suppose that is less a culture but more a life experience thing.*

Helen also believes that through life experience, one can evolve from the cultural background one experienced as a child:

So, thinking about terms of my life experience and my cultural background I might have started off, so for instance from that sort of very Catholic background, you have a very strong, even if you are no longer a Catholic you still have that very strong sense of what is right and what is wrong. And what should be punishable and what one should feel guilty about and I would say that life experience and the way that I think about what life is, and how individuals can manage with their lives to some extent, I am almost like allowing myself to change that very rigid cultural kind of background I have from my childhood and my upbringing and so that I become, things in life are much less black and white and right and wrong.

Thus, Helen opposes the strict concept of cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1993), as she changes parts of her original culture. This is confirming my earlier statement that following generations often deliberately dismiss or counteract their parents' culture. Helen consciously chooses to differentiate herself from the strict Catholic upbringing in her family which contains the strict belief in right and wrong. She states that her aim is *"in management terms to manage people in a very kind way which is not necessarily influenced by, you know, my background"*.

Another participant, Penny, describes her background as "pure Russian", as over generations her family was born and stayed in Russia. But she also points out what is more important to describe herself, namely the traits she holds.

I suppose it [the cultural background] is Russian, because I am Russian. I am very pure Russian, because all my father, grandfathers, grand-grandfathers, they are all Russian and they were farmers. My father is from Moscow region and my mother is from Ryazan,

a region next to Moscow. But you see, I am very inclined to establish some community. I feel myself very well in a community and I always exchange my share, my opinion, my techniques, my knowledge. And the more I share it, the more, somehow I manage to get more then I give to others. It is not very good for business in short term, but in long-term it is very good. So, after that, speaking about my appreciation of community as a teacher.

To summarise, the study revealed two levels of influence of the own culture. The first consists of the consciously stated criteria of nationality, community, experience of health problems, upbringing, etc. However, there was a second level of influence the participants did not realise, which was the fact that they belong to a dominant culture (white, European and American, and some male) and as teachers have an additional position of power. Thus, their behaviour can be interpreted as white ignorance (Mills, 2007; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007), although they certainly did not intend to act this way.
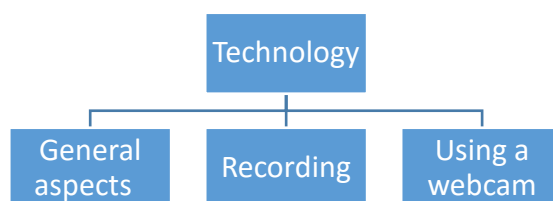
4.2 Theme 2: Technology

Figure 4.2: Super-ordinate theme *Technology* with sub-ordinate themes.

The above figure illustrates the second super-ordinate theme "Technology" and its related sub-ordinate themes "General aspects", "Recording" and "Using a webcam". The following section describes the experiences of the participants in terms of the influence technology had on their teaching of students from diverse cultural backgrounds in the virtual classroom.

4.2.1 General aspects

Systems have to be in place to ensure reliable Internet access and enough bandwidth to use all tools in an appropriate way. This seems obvious, but interestingly was more a problem in rural parts of Germany and the UK than in distant regions of Russia. This seemed bizarre even for Penny, who has lived in Russia all her life and states: *"First of all, I was surprised when I discovered that all Russian regions, even distant, they are well covered with Internet."* However, she investigated the situation and found that *"according to last data, 70% of population in Russia (older than 16 years) are using Internet"* and that she thinks that *"the coverage of Russian population with Internet is now about 70%"*.

Penny explains the situation with the importance the Internet sector has for the Russian economy, and that the Russian government has realised this and taken concrete steps to foster Internet usage.

> *You see, in Russia it is an important moment. In Russia, the attitude of online teaching and learning has changed greatly. First of all, our president Putin realized that there is very little, very few economic sectors that are growing and the Internet is amongst them. And he has found a special person, special advisor on Internet. His name is German Klimenko, I follow him at social networks. So, our authorities realized it.*

Furthermore, the educational system continues to undergo reforms and the importance of using the Internet for education has been noticed. Penny states: *"Our education has been reformed for several years… I wouldn't say that there is a lot of success but the authorities, the education authorities put online education, distance education as an absolutely must. Any higher education, K12 education, private sector is moving towards it".* Additionally, Russian´s youth is eager to utilise the Internet or in Penny´s words: *"And besides, which is very important, the new generation is eager to know why and they are much more ready in Russia to apply Internet as a tool, not just as a media to entertain".*

This is a very important statement, as some of the existing literature seems to contradict her view by seeing the existence of so-called "digital natives" critically. Jones and Shao (2011) explain that the young generation might be able to play online but is not yet prepared to use the Internet for educational purposes without guidance.

With regard to more practical issues, Paul also states how important it is to check the actual hard- and software for the students, as they might not be able to do that themselves:

> *We introduced the environments BigBlueButton and also OpenSim and we checked out the technology. So they all brought their notebooks to the course and then we logged in and we made sure that they had all these things available and that it worked.*

Paul learned the importance of technical checks from a former project he was involved in where students took part in online sessions from home. He explains the situation as follows:

I mean, of course when they work from home, they don't have technicians when you run into a problem concerning sound and these things. Something we noticed in our project was, that there were problems with the settings and people are usually not able to take care of these problems themselves. So, it is necessary to have someone at the institution who is sufficiently experienced and it is also very, very helpful if you can sit down together with the students and check things out and make sure that everything works. If it is only online, it is very difficult to tackle these problems.

To summarise, the results show that generally the access to the Internet is not problematic anymore, even in distant areas of Russia. However, it cannot be assumed that younger students, who have grown up with online technology, automatically know how to use it for learning. These findings, which are specific to virtual classroom teaching and learning, contradict the expression of "Digital Natives", which was originally used by Prensky (2001) and describes the young generation as Internet Technology (IT) literate per se. However, ten years later, Prensky states that the term was used as a metaphor and that he is shocked

that how many supposedly well-educated, thinking people just can´t take a metaphor. Rather than see it as a way of looking at and naming a phenomenon that was clearly taking place (i.e. young people often knowing more about digital technology than their parents or teachers) some denied the whole thing. (2011, p. 15f)

Obviously, it is a bit of an understatement as Prensky´s career has certainly evolved with it over the last 15 years. However, it is important for the teachers that technical support is available, as this is a role they cannot take on in addition to their teaching.

As stated in earlier sections, it is obvious that technology needs to function when teaching is carried out in a virtual classroom. However, as Norman points out: "*Well, I think one of the things is as well that you have to be very careful is that the students expect the environment to be similar to the classroom*". For example, students who have not been in a virtual classroom before might expect that they can speak in the same way as in a traditional face-to-face classroom. However, first of all, they need to get used to the functionality of the built-in microphones, e.g. they have to physically learn how to turn them on and off. Secondly, the students need to be aware that if they all have the microphones open at the same time, this will cause audio problems in the form of feedback. Students also need to understand that the quality of real-time broadcast of their videos depends on a high-speed broadband. Thus, usually, not all webcams can be turned on at the same time.

However, in Norman´s view, "*we are beginning in a way to see a pattern in lots of the technologies that come online now*". For him, "*the most important thing now really is to start to drill down and start to understand these tools and really because a lot of what we have been doing up until now is really kind of anecdotal*". This means, we need to explore the impact of these tools on teaching further, as for Norman, "*there seems to be a different relationship that is built up between the teacher and the student when it is online. That is not necessarily a bad relationship, it is just simply a different type of relationship*".

Another participant, Paul thinks that "*this whole concept of multi-modal approach*" will be very useful in the future, as it offers students "*the opportunity to engage in whatever they are more comfortable with.*" This means that communication can take place via video, text-chat or in the forum at the same time. Another issue Paul raised was that students need to be prepared for learning with tools like the virtual classroom. Although the younger generation are called

"digital natives", in Paul´s experience, *"that does not mean that they know how to make best use of these things for educational purposes, for learning purposes."*

Penny confirms this approach which she calls "high tech" but also points out the difficulties involved:

> *We should try to develop an environment, a learning environment which is close or better to high tech, to traditional high tech. And we now have a great amount of tools to do that and we have access to these tools as they are not expensive.*

For Penny, the situation at the moment is exciting, as many resources for online teaching are freely available. She states that in Russian a new expression is calling the situation *"education communism"*. However, in Penny's view, this status quo might change again soon and that is why for now, one *"should master that and enjoy it"*.

Another participant, Ben, adds that he believes that any culture is grouped with other cultures into clusters, for example, an Anglo cluster, Germanic, cluster or Latin Culture in Europe, etc. In Ben's view, *"there are some differences as to how they use technology and that is tied to differences in educational systems and probable in national cultures"*. This argument refers back to categorising and confirms what Ben stated earlier about accepting the principles of Hofstede's (2001) national clusters. However, it ignores that people do not act in a certain way because they share the same place of birth. It also disregards the fact that people evolve and that technology is international per se.

4.2.2 Recording

The participants reported both positive and negative experiences with the recording of their teaching sessions in the virtual classroom. Arnold, for example, mentioned that using the recording function did influence his teaching. He believes that it influenced both his own and his students' behaviour in the way that it does not allow a learning environment, which engages the co-creation of knowledge for those who are only listening to the recording. He states:

> *As a social scientist and as an educationalist, I am very mindful of and very focused on the potential and the need of the sort of co-creation of knowledge and the learning environment as an opportunity to engage in meaning making. And so, me, when I am recorded, I am aware that there is no one, apart from those who are in the synchronous session with me, when I am recorded, essentially what is happening, is there is no co-construction of knowledge.*

For him, the reasons are that *"there is only people who are able to take what I say and interpret it in their own way and move on. There is no conversation that is available."* So, because of the possibility of listening to the sessions afterwards, there was only a limited number of students actually present in the synchronous session. Therefore, Arnold felt that he was not able to support the desired co-creation of knowledge and thus, he was unsuccessful in trying to *"encourage people to consider could be made sense of in a meaningful way in their context and in their world view, you know, in their mind world, in their meaning world"*.

Another participant, Paul, however, feels that it is normal that recordings have an effect but that this wears off after time:

Yeah, I mean this is something fairly general, not only with regard to online communication or video communication, but also in earlier years when we did recordings with learners and in connection with thinking aloud studies. After a short warm-up they seemed to forget about the microphone and they just did their, in this case, thinking aloud activities and I think it is the same here.

Actually, Ben had some experience with the recording of synchronous online sessions from a student's perspective as he is also finishing an online MBA as a part-time student. Therefore, from a student's point of view, using the recording was based upon different factors, for example commitments from the full-time work or private events that would interfere time-wise. He states that as a student, *"a lot depends on how important you think the session is going to be"*. Apart from a personal preference, however, it also depends on whether these tutorials are an integral part of the studies or an add-on to traditional classroom teaching.

 Ben explains further:

For example, in stage one of the MBA where many of the face-to-face tutorials were replaced by online sessions, it's quite a different story. I think I tried to attend every one of them because they were seen as the core of the teaching, you know, of sort of teaching delivery.

Obviously, those synchronous sessions that dealt with examination preparation are also highly popular amongst students, as Ben recalls: *"You know, when students hear TMA [Tutor Marked Assignment], they are interested"*.

For Ben, the recording of virtual classroom sessions is *"the same as the valid social science phenomena when people know they are being recorded or watched they pay attention and are very aware at the beginning but towards the end they sort of go into default mode"*. Ben explains that in this default mode, both students and teachers almost forget about the recording. However, in his view, students are less aware of it, as they usually have questions on their minds which make them attend the synchronous sessions. Then, he points out:

> *If they are not terrified during the presentation they would raise their hand and ask but other than that, you know, people use chat on quite a limited basis. So, I think it is more true of teachers possibly than of students but again, when you are used to this kind of things, like being on camera like TV presenters are used to behave in a certain way and it almost becomes their second nature. It is not a second nature but sort of like their usual manner.*

However, Lucy feels that recordings have a negative effect on spontaneity and on the flow of discussions in the virtual classroom. She argues that in face-to-face sessions in traditional classrooms, when discussions take place one can make *"off-the-cuff remarks about this, that or the other, hopefully the students will go away with the key ideas"*. In contrast, when sessions are recorded, students can quote the teacher word by word, as they can replay the session as many times as they wish. According to Lucy, *"that then affects how as a tutor you are able to behave yourself, because you can't relax too much and let the discussion flow and say: "Oh, that's of you to say, Iris and what about this?""*.

Lucy explains that recording the sessions has its advantages for people who are unable to attend because they live in a different time zone or have additional requirement issues, which stop them from participating in a face-to-face class. However, in her view, the downside of the recording of synchronous online sessions is it can influence *"some of the you know spontaneous discussion, especially with some other more sensitive topics, I don't want to get myself into trouble."* Lucy provides an example from her teaching, where she tries to trigger thinking of postgraduate students:

> *So, I need to sometimes play it too safe or add five sentences just to clarify that you know, explicitly reiterate, when I say: Standing in the shoes of the Jihad in Somalia, I am not condoning what they are doing, I just think that at postgraduate level in order to have a better understanding, you need to [have] stood in all the stakeholders' shoes. And one of these stakeholders' shoes in the situation of Somalia is the Jihad. And some students find that really threatening, so I have to clarify, but without using these words, you know, I am Muslim, yes I have been to Mogadishu, but that does not mean that I condone what they are saying. The only reason I am asking you to do it is for the academic reason that I think it will help your understanding, and sometimes by having to explicitly verbalise all of that it just ruins part of the spontaneity if that makes sense?*

Obviously, Lucy's situation is special in this group of participants due to the combination of her religious beliefs and the subjects she is teaching. However, it is an exemplar for the issues arising and influencing teaching in a virtual classroom for many teachers world-wide in the current political climate.

Nevertheless, Helen also states that:

Some people find the online environment very intimidating and prefer face-to-face situations because they are just not used to it and are scared they will do the wrong thing or that they are being recorded. Recording is a huge issue I think, and if they are being recorded, who is going to see it, you know where it is going to appear on the Internet.

To summarise, the participants found the use of recordings of virtual classroom sessions beneficial for students who could not attend due to health issues, time-zone differences and private or work-commitments. However, they also stated the danger of changed behaviour both of the students and the teacher, especially at the beginning of the synchronous session, where the participants are still aware of being recorded.

4.2.3 Using a webcam

Most of the virtual classroom software on the market includes the option of using a webcam, and students can use the integrated webcam of their laptops (nowadays a standard hardware component) or an external webcam which can be placed on top of their monitor when using a personal computer. With the increasing popularity of *Skype*, a free application which provides video chat and voice call services, the use of webcam in one-to-one conversations is quite common. However, in educational settings in a virtual classroom, the webcam is one of many tools and the practice of using it is still controversial. Norman, for example, states: *"I don't really think it (use of webcam) is that important. I normally use it in the introductions, so say Hello. What I often do is freeze it".* The latter means that he stops the transmission but the

picture of the last moment of transmission stays visible in the virtual classroom webcam window.

Norman reports that he experienced the same behaviour with students at the University of Berlin:

> *It's quite interesting that the same thing for the students, the students actually like to be seen on the screen, but they are quite happy that their webcams are frozen, so although the students are participants they are allowed to turn on their webcams. I can give them webcam rights and then freeze their webcams on the screen, so literally just have a screen with about 20 little webcams in the thing but for the student it is quite important.*

Interestingly, Norman contradicts himself by stating that the webcam was not important, but also that students would love to see it, as he believes in student-centred teaching. Many researchers in the existing literature advocate the use of real-time video broadcast (Develotte et al., 2010; Guichon, 2010; Guichon & Hauck, 2011; Wang, 2007). Norman also states that in professional training about the use of webinars that he undertook with Cambridge University Press *"their focus was very much about looking professional, the background you have in the room, put something up behind you, like a screen etc."*. However, until now his own focus was more on using a variety of tools *"to increase the amount of interactivity that takes place",* for example, *"lots of video, webcam, chat, note taking, whiteboard, PowerPoint, bla, bla, bla... breakout rooms"*.

Actually, Norman admits that it was only this interview which made him aware of further issues with the webcam, or in his words: *"So I think, to be honest with you I am conscious about that*

now. Up until now I have never cared at all about that, but yeah, obviously, it is something that you should consider." Norman also points out that he *"would always focus on the teaching as taught teaching rather than thinking about the webcam".* He appreciates the webcam as one aspect of teaching in a virtual classroom but reminds that the webcam is consuming a lot of bandwidth and thus the choice of using it might not be a pedagogical but a technical issue.

> *Obviously, say when you are using the webcam that is actually using up, you know you are sending more information down the Internet, so sometimes just from the point of view of the quality of the sound or the quality of your presentation you may decide to turn the webcam off or to pause the webcam. It is not always simply a question of whether you want to have the webcam on or not. Sometimes it is simply practical to turn it off.*

So, Norman usually uses the webcam primarily at the beginning and at the end of his sessions in the virtual classroom to introduce himself and at the end to say: *"Right, let's have an open chat. Let's have your webcams on, fire away your questions, raise your hand and then I will call your name out. You can then ask your questions".* His intention in doing so is to help organise the discussion in the beginning and to say Goodbye "in person" in the end.

Another participant, Arnold, reports that he would either use the webcam or put up a photo in the virtual classroom. He says: *"I would always, if I wasn't broadcasting my video I would certainly sort of broadcast it for a while and then take a photograph and sort of leave it at the screen so that people could sort of see me and remember who I was".* Like Norman, he asks his students to turn on their webcam, as well.

Paul recalls a journal article he read in the Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) journal about the experience of online language teachers using a webcam, where both the participants and the teachers felt uncomfortable in doing so. Paul explains that he understands the situation from a teacher's perspective:

> *For teachers, of course there is this pressure of being visible all the time. These poor teachers, they teach one student after the other. So, they sit there for eight hours or more and they want to stretch their legs and have a cup of coffee and walk around, and all of these things were mentioned.*

The learners, however, stated other arguments for their discomfort: being in their private environment, not properly dressed, women not wearing make-up, etc. Apparently, the conclusion of the article was to turn the webcam off, which in Paul's opinion is completely the wrong approach. He thinks that *"it would rather be necessary to help them become professional learners"*, which means *"to develop a professional attitude for learning online"*, which includes having *"a certain space in your home where you can do these things"*. He also emphasises the importance of seeing oneself *"in order to monitor your appearance"*. However, the difficulty was that in Paul's experience, students have different levels of awareness, meaning that without seeing themselves, they might not realise that their microphone is dangling around. However, this can cause problems with the audio-broadcast and also cover part of their face, which is disturbing for the other viewers.

For Lucy though, due to her choice to show her religious beliefs as a Muslim by wearing a headscarf, using the webcam is a far more sensitive matter. She states:

It is quite obvious what my faith is and I don't think it is relevant for my teaching. I think I am professional enough to question everything and everybody, but sometimes feel that especially before I had a chance to engage with students, if when opening a session, I put my Mac-shot [screenshot from an Apple Macintosh laptop] big on the screen I fear that maybe some students will put me in a whole and put it in whole what they feel comfortable seeing, and I don't want to limit that.

She reports from a session with students from the military sector, where she experienced the following reactions:

We had a very nice session, I mean the military folk had fairly traditional military views, etcetera and then when I put up the last slide where it says "Any Questions" which does have my Mac-shot but it is consciously at the end and not at the beginning, you could almost hear the gasps, because I am not precious about someone making a certain thing about this and that, because what happens in Afghanistan and Pakistan is not religious, it is purely political and economical and all kind of other things… So I think, even though we could not see each other, and there only was voice, but it was almost like audible silence if you know what I mean.

Lucy explains further what her feelings are about what would have happened if she had broadcast her real-time appearance at the start of the synchronous tutorial in the virtual classroom:

Yeah, I mean in that sense I hope it convinced the students that indeed, you know, I may look like something but actually if you take that away, you see a different vibrant. I think

if they would have seen me too consciously beforehand they would have made up their minds, put me in a pigeonhole and it would have been very difficult for me to then come out of that in their view even if I would have said exactly the same things.

One could argue that women can be faithful Muslims without wearing the headscarf, so when asked about the reason for not choosing this option for her teaching, Lucy responded: *"I wear scarf so "what you see is what you get" (not to impose on others)"*. This is an interesting contradiction as she makes the exception in the virtual classroom by not transmitting a real-time video broadcast. However, as will be explained in Section 4.5.3, her behaviour is related to the subjects she is teaching, namely International Law and International Development.

For Helen, not using a webcam has a completely different background, as she would not face any judgement about her religious beliefs. However, she thinks that it is one of the advantages of working in a virtual classroom that without the use of a webcam, prejudice can be reduced. This supports the views of Walther et al. (2010), who advocate the use of webcams in online settings. Helen points out that the main reason why they are not using video for synchronous online working is the need for a high-speed Internet connection, for an uninterrupted transmission of the picture while keeping a high audio quality. However, she feels that to some extent in their system (Blackboard collaborator) *"you don't know what age somebody is, you don't know what colour somebody has"*. Although because of the name the gender is usually clear, in her view *"there is much less, sort of automatic type-casting, that sort of thing, that maybe you don't want to go on in your head but goes on anyway"*.

Helen emphasises that for her this is a major advantage of online teaching in contrast to face-to-face teaching, as she states:

I have always thought that that's one of the huge advantages, that you can't just automatically have a picture of what somebody can do or cannot do or, you know, how intelligent they are or not intelligent just based on what they look like.

In total, the experiences of the participants of using a webcam in the virtual classroom varied from appreciation to avoidance. Half of them appreciated the possibility of broadcasting their video or a "frozen" picture *to "use as much of the functionality as [they] could"* and to try to *"integrate it into the activities that [they] were doing in the session" (Arnold).* The other half, however, consciously decided not to use the webcam to avoid prejudice caused by broadcasting a picture of themselves which would show their age, ethnicity and religious beliefs.

However, prejudice is not avoided by not using the webcam, it is simply not made obvious. Thus, the teachers chose to show only part of their identity. This behaviour is comparable to the findings of Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) on self-presentation in the online world. Whilst they describe embellishment by their participants and argue that this "can be viewed as a subtle and limited form of persona adoption" (2013, p. 10), some of the participants in this study go further and hide a distinctive part of their persona when they use only audio in their virtual classroom sessions. Bullingham and Vasconcelos's work refers to Goffman's (1971) book on "presentation of self in everyday life", and concludes that his framework can be used for online settings. Both in real life and online, people deliberately chose to project a given identity when put "front stage" but with editing of some facets. They also argue that this might happen unconsciously or "when there is no obvious obligation to present one's self as one appears offline" (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p. 10). However, in this study, the choice

of some participants of not using a webcam is deliberate and thus one can no longer describe this as a limited form of persona adoption.

To summarise Theme 1, *Culture and its effects*, the participants explained that for them, culture consists of many criteria, from place of birth to life experience. They stated that language plays a role in online sessions, as the most commonly spoken one was English. The experience of influence on the virtual sessions varied, however, from "only in nuances" to "substantial". All participants reported that their own cultural background had a certain influence on their teaching, for example, their "male whiteness" (Arnold) or their obvious (through wearing a headscarf) religious beliefs. The main argument though was that there was not one prominent criterion but a mixture of the aforementioned criteria that formed their own teaching in the virtual classroom, or as Paul states: *"So it is a whole mix of things that influence how well things go in online education"*. Furthermore, there was an evolutionary development reported, or in Helen's words:

> *My life experience and my work with the [name of the university] has so strongly influenced the way that I think now and the way that I work and I do things with my students, that I think that my cultural background is not quite so important anymore.*

So, the different attempts to define culture were based upon the participants' specific life histories and what they thought might form one's culture. One participant thought that her upbringing in one country's educational system whilst living in another country with which the first country was at war during that time (the UK and Argentina) influenced her culture. She also stated that her religious beliefs as part of her culture should not influence her teaching. However, she was contradicting herself as on the one hand she explained wearing a headscarf

as "*what you see is what you get*" (*Lucy*), but on the other deliberately did not use a webcam to avoid her students seeing her.

Another participant explained that she would see any influence of her language or gender on her teaching; but later stated that expressions have different meanings in English, depending on whether it is US or British English. She also did not realise that as a white native speaker and a teacher she carries a certain position of power, and that students from a less dominant culture might well be experiencing disadvantages. A similar statement regarding gender was made by one participant, who reported that he did not experience any difference in behaviour. However, as he was white, male and from the USA, he also belonged to a dominant culture. Both examples showed that "white ignorance" (Swan, 2010) can be found in virtual classroom teaching, too.
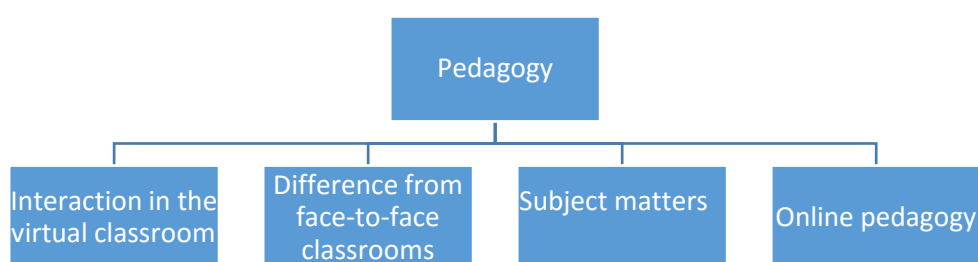
4.3 Theme 3: Pedagogy

Figure 4.3: Super-ordinate theme *Interaction* with sub-ordinate themes.

The above figure illustrates the third super-ordinate theme "Pedagogy" and its related sub-ordinate themes "Interaction in the virtual classroom", "Difference from face-to-face classrooms", "Subject matters" and "Online pedagogy". Within this topic, the participants

reported about interaction specific to their synchronous online sessions and about the differences from their experience with traditional face-to-face teaching.

4.3.1 Interaction in the virtual classroom

In the existing literature, Moore's (1989) three types of interaction - student-student interaction, student-teacher interaction and student-content interaction - are a well-known categorisation. In this study, the participants were asked about the influence of cultural background on interaction in the virtual classroom, which resulted in statements within these categories but also touched a fourth and fifth dimension, namely student-technology interaction and teacher-technology interaction.

For Ben, it is important that teachers who taught in audio-conferences in a certain course for a long time investigate the style of other institutions, traditions and subject areas to get inspired. He provides the following examples:

> *[The faculty of] Sciences have built quite an impressive body of experience in their sessions. Languages, they run exams in synchronous sessions. Their first attempt was five years back and it was a disaster as far as I understand, but now they developed this you know approach where you can actually can the oral part of the exam using audio. Don't ask me how but they did it.*

For Lucy, there are notable differences, which she lists as: "*there is differences due to age, there is differences due to confidence, irrespective of cultural background, there is differences due to experiences with the online synchronous environment*". Lucy adds that the online

environment, with all the functions that can be activated by clicking on buttons, can itself be overwhelming. Lucy also experiences different stages of interaction, as at the beginning students are often shy to speak in a virtual classroom setting, because they cannot see the teacher and the other students and thus feel uncomfortable. However, once they are used to the environment, students relax. For Lucy, "*the explicit cultural thing will come up with some of the content stuff*" after that stage, which influences interaction in a different way again.

Another participant, Helen, points out that in her field, science, there are "*quite a lot of students in maths, who pretend their microphone is not working. So actually, we have whole new ways of interactivity for them*". For Helen, the most important issue is to ensure that the students feel comfortable in the online environment right from the start. She explains how this can be achieved:

> *Basically, if you get people chatting about something non-threatening, e.g. the weather where they are, you can help create an informal atmosphere. If you can be informal with a group and people feel comfortable and relaxed and safe, then eventually most of them will actually be happy enough to raise their voice to raise a question, even if it is only in the text chat.*

Whilst literature exists about the use of so-called ice-breakers in adult education (Chlup & Collins, 2010), only a few can be used in virtual classrooms due to the lack of physical presence (for example throwing a ball from participant to participant is impossible in the virtual classroom). Nevertheless, in Helen's experience, some people seem to enjoy participating in a virtual classroom session, but are not interacting at all. However, as Helen clarifies:

…whilst I as a tutor can't see them getting anything from it because they don't interact, and it's true that they might not get as much as I want them to get out of it, they do however get something or they wouldn't come – and it can be helpful for some students.

Helen also states that for her, *"the way I would interact with students or that I interact with the staff that work for me, I think that is an evolutionary thing and that one always learns from one's own experience and moves on"*. This statement contradicts the categorisation by Hofstede (1986) which places people into fixed groups which never change. Helen explains her development further by talking about how facing a severe illness has influenced her empathy for people who need help, and created a desire to be able to support other people.

Penny adds that in her view, student-student and student-instructor interactions (Moore, 1989) are not different due to regional backgrounds but based on the sector the students are working in:

I would say that I do not see a strong difference between the students based on origins. It is very more expressed on sector, depending on sector. Those who work for state, for government, those who work for larger businesses, those who work for small business and those who work in services or for manufacturing. Much more difference than with regions.

To provide an example, Penny compares a student who is a marketing director of a children's café with a student who works for the government. Apparently, whilst *"she is well-organized, she is very quick, very responsive"* and she *"is intended to work more, maybe, with smaller steps"*. Therefore, if the teacher uses tools of the virtual classroom to offer a combination of

student-centred and teacher-centred interaction (Moore, 1989) with group-work in breakout rooms and MS PowerPoint slides to explain new material, both types of students (those who are self-directed and those who need more support from the teacher) can be supported in their learning.

4.3.2 Difference from face-to-face classrooms

The majority of the participants stated that they experienced limitations in the virtual classroom regarding their interaction with students. One of the reasons given for the lack of interaction was the lack of possibility to interpret non-verbal communication. This supports the argument for using a webcam, but in the aforementioned discussion about the use of live video broadcast, the participants agreed that it would only partially compensate for the lack of seeing students in person in a traditional classroom. Arnold describes a typical situation he experienced:

> *So, maybe it is something about me or it is something about the medium, but we found, I found it very difficult to draw students into the, into interactivity in a synchronous setting. So, I would propose questions and would ask for responses and people were just silent. They would not participate, not engage.*

Arnold states that using group work in so-called breakout rooms in the virtual classroom brought more engagement, but not as much as he experienced in a traditional face-to-face classroom. Arnold also missed the non-verbal signs that show understanding, and therefore he felt he had to compensate for it:

Yes, so I would do things like, I would compensate by doing things like repeating myself, I would repeat main points and kind of underline them in a sort of very specific way, make them explicit - more explicit than I think I did in face-to-face settings.

In practice, as Arnold felt he had to repeat content and give more time for consolidation than in face-to-face teaching, the allotted time for the tutorials was challenging. Furthermore, Arnold reported that students who were non-native speakers were facing greater difficulties in synchronous online sessions than in face-to-face classrooms, as they could not rely upon the same support structure from their peers. He explains this further as "*you know leaning over to a classmate and sort of asking for a clarification or having potentially visual stimulus in the face-to-face setting, as well.*" Another participant, Ben, shared the same view, stating that: "*of course culture-wise there are differences, because you miss a lot of the non-verbal clues that happen in the face-to-face situation.*" Nevertheless, as Wang and Hsu (2008) report, virtual classrooms can approximate face-to-face teaching by enabling social presence of students and their teacher.

Another point the participants raised was that it takes a lot more time to create situations in the virtual classroom that could provide the same learning experience than it would have taken in a traditional face-to-face setting. One participant, Arnold, provided a comparison, stating that "*just to cover, you know, a third of the amount of content that we would cover in a face-to-face setting in a single tutorial felt like a real achievement, actually*". Teachers in a study carried out by Kear at al. (2012) reported similar issues, as most material, e.g. whiteboard slides, need to be preloaded. Often teachers realise that material that they have prepared for their traditional face-to-face sessions does not necessarily work in the virtual classroom, too. For example, MS PowerPoint slides with a lot of text in small font.

Another difference from face-to-face sessions reported by the participants in this study was the number of students who actually participated. This number was much lower than in a traditional setting. The comparison is valid as it was made by those teachers who were teaching in the same course design, which means both face-to-face and synchronous online tutorials were a voluntary option for the students. Another reason why students were not participating can be the use of recordings as discussed earlier in Section 4.3.3. However, it also had an effect on interaction as Arnold describes as follows:

They could go back later if the synchronous time wasn't working for them and so they would go back and listen to them and this lent to students a sense that this was a sort of talk and talk tutorial, where my job was to tell them the content they needed to learn and they could soak it up and, you know, they could just tune in any time and listen to my lecture.

Additionally, the choice of software used by the universities had an influence on the level of difference between traditional classroom and virtual classroom teaching. For example, some software only allows one presenter to provide a lecture which "*is actually not very helpful from when you are trying to encourage a sort of constructivist learning*" *(Arnold).*

Especially in postgraduate studies, where students need to discuss complex concepts, the participants felt that the virtual classroom interaction was harder or impossible. For example, Arnold states: "*So, I wasn't able to, for instance, pose questions for people to verbally process or consider and then for that verbal processing to be a shared sort of experience*".

Another participant, Paul, shared a more positive experience with the virtual classroom when he used it for project meetings. Nevertheless, he recognised that in follow-up meetings which were taking place in a face-to-face classroom, certain issues were addressed that had been left out in the virtual classroom. As a reason, he states that these topics that were not directly related to the agenda came up "*in the time in-between, the coffee break, walking together to the restaurant, and all these things.*" Paul argues that in an online-only environment, it is important to be aware of this lack of social contact and that ways need to be found to compensate for it. This means that the construction of social capital seems more difficult in virtual classrooms than in face-to-face settings, although following Bourdieu "social capital is the sum of the resources, *actual or virtual*, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (1992, p. 112). Nevertheless, Julien sees a new form of social capital developing from Bourdieu´s ideas through online interaction, which he calls "digital social capital" (2015, p. 365).

However, during the sessions, as regards presenting and discussing a certain topic, Paul found that the "*participation was kind of similar to face-to-face*". This was possible because presentations created with MS PowerPoint slides could be uploaded in the virtual classroom and the students could raise questions in the text-chat or verbally.

Interestingly, although Paul did not see a great difference from face-to-face settings, he saw a difference in interaction between the behaviour in the virtual classroom and the asynchronous fora:

I noticed differences in follow-on discussions and this is probably what is known, like some people, some students in my case, who were not that visible in the face-to-face classroom, when we had forum discussions going, they all of a sudden contributed long posts and I was so amazed with what they have to say.

Another participant, Ben, points out that at his university more synchronous online sessions are implemented into the courses, and as they are provided in a lecture style, he feels that this is rather similar to typical face-to-face lectures.

Helen though points out that one great advantage of virtual classroom sessions is that students can take part who are homebound for various reasons, e.g. disabilities, phobias, agoraphobia or simply having a child and nobody to look after it during the time traditional face-to-face lessons take place. However, she also sees a few disadvantages, such as less personal contact, as breaks are not spent together, but *"if there is a coffee break, well everybody is off and gets their own coffee, you know, so the medium does tend to be more formal, especially with a larger group that is"*.

Helen also describes that in her experience interaction in a virtual classroom is more formal, as without the act of hand-raising and talking one after another, the environment can become scary. This can be the case when all microphones are open at the same time and participants can hear many people speaking without being able to see who is speaking. It can also happen that students forget that their microphone is on, and then non-course-related conversations are added to the mixture of voices. Obviously, by using a webcam the situation can be defused but in reality, the webcams are often not used.

Helen points out that one advantage of the virtual classroom is that if most of the conversation takes place in the text chat, unless someone states *"in my country, we do such and such"* the cultural background is not openly declared. She explains, that: *"it is invisible but in a face-to-face situation, it is always visible"*. Another advantage Helen pointed out is that for students who are shy or embarrassed, the online environment makes it easier to come forward, as they will not have to stand up in public and they can even choose not to speak and simply write text messages in the chat. Helen adds, that *"there is this possibility of almost adopting a different persona from the one that is normally displayed to the world"*. Obviously, this can be an advantage but also lead to the danger of pretending to be someone else, by creating a specific online identity (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013).

Paul pointed out that you cannot teach as many hours in a row as in face-to-face settings: *"So we had long, long sessions of three hours and of course, you can't do online teaching over three hours on a stretch"*. However, when he had to prolong the time of online-sessions, as his Taiwanese students could not work through the course material outside the class, he would lighten the situation in the virtual classroom by letting them speak in their native language for a while. He also observes that if his course with Taiwanese students had been purely online and not blended, which means it had some face-to-face teaching, it would have been more difficult to develop the atmosphere that made it a rewarding experience for both him and his students.

> *If it were just online, I think it might be more difficult with these students because of their cultural background, because they are usually more shy. And I think we were very lucky with the small group and all this made it possible to develop a very positive and open relaxed atmosphere.*

Nevertheless, Paul provides a suggestion for dealing with the situation, if courses are offered purely online:

> *It might also be necessary to introduce a preparatory phase if it is just online. To introduce a preparatory phase where you enable students then to get to know each other. Of course, there are these tasks and exercises that support these things and I think this is very, very important.*

To summarise, the participants stated that the interaction in the virtual classroom had certain specific aspects, especially the lack of non-verbal communication, that could only partly be compensated for by the use of tools offered in the software, e.g. emoticons. Nevertheless, for shy students, regardless of whether that trait comes from cultural background or personality, it can be easier to communicate and interact in the virtual classroom up to the point where they could even become a different persona. The differentiation between face-to-face teaching and online teaching is widely acknowledged in the literature (Dendir, 2016; Johnson, Aragon, Shaik, & Palma-Rivas, 2000; Moon, Passmore, Reiser, & Michaels, 2014), and thus the results of this study are in line with the existing literature. However, it can be argued that the comparison is fundamentally wrong, as there is not really any difference between the two forms of teaching but only between the ways interactions are mediated in them. For example, all forms of interaction, such as student-student, student-teacher and student-content interaction (Moore, 1989), take place in both settings. Moreover, with technology used in a face-to-face classroom and the use of smartphones the differentiation between online and offline, as explained earlier, has become blurred.

4.3.3 Subject matters

Generally speaking, the participants reported a difference between undergraduate and postgraduate teaching in a virtual classroom due to the fact that in postgraduate studies students are expected to discuss and answer questions that are not easily observed. For example, Arnold states: *"I think that is because in a Master's degree course thinking about big concepts and large, you know sort of theories and ideas, it is actually, you know, they are not multiple choice situations."* Furthermore, participants saw an enormous difference in the subjects that are taught in a virtual classroom. The most evident difference was reported between science and social sciences. Arnold summarises his experience as follows:

> *I think if I were, if we were teaching sort of mathematics or you know sciences or other kind of subjects where epistemologically there was more a bit of an ability to tickle and engage students to engage their understanding, than that would be much more useful, but I found it very, very difficult in a theoretically dense social science's teaching situation.*

Another argument was that the course design had an influence within the subjects, meaning whether the courses are self-directed or need student-student or student-teacher interaction (Moore, 1989). As Ben points out, *"part of that [interaction] was driven by the course design, so the course does not actually, the courses do not actually make a synchronous interaction essential. So, if you do it, it helps"*.

Further differences reported, namely in the way science and social science are taught, can clearly also be found in a traditional classroom. For example, Lucy summarises the advantage

of teaching mathematics in any classroom regardless of whether virtual or face-to-face as, *"you know in math, 1 plus 1 is 2 in every language and every culture"*. To explain her argument further, she states:

> *As I said, if I were teaching math, I don't think I would be encountering 90% of some of the cultural issues I need to be aware of. But because of the topics I do, I have to be aware of them and I need to be conscious how I am perceived, how I may affect the way I am being perceived, how I can affect making the most of students by being aware of their cultural background.*

In this study, only Lucy was teaching International Law and International Development. However, her experiences regarding the impact of culture on teaching in a virtual classroom are reliable as she has been teaching the subject and has been using this technology for many years. It is also realistic that other teachers teaching the same subject will have similar experiences.

For Lucy, *"the explicit cultural thing will come up with some of the content stuff."* She states that, in her view, for example, students with an Asian educational background find it difficult to perform critical analysis. This relates back to the traditional Asian education where the teacher has a very high reputation and cannot be criticised. Nevertheless, it can be difficult to judge whether a student is unable to perform critical analysis or prefers not to share it with others. This can be caused by respect for the teacher or in a more political sense by students being brought up not to question authority. Obviously, questioning authority is not typical for educational systems in the world; however, the difference is the consequence if one does it. For example, in Germany, so-called constructive criticism is part of public secondary school education. However, this does not mean that the authority of the school as an institution, for

example, can be questioned. There are also private schools, which follow the educational concepts of Montessori (Feez, 2010), where the teacher takes the role of a partner rather than an authority figure. The Montessori principles are also accepted and widespread in German kindergartens, as early childhood education was the original field of Montessori's pedagogy.

However, Lucy reports another example from a different national aspect when she states: *"I had Somalian students who find other aspects of legal issues a challenge because they were brought up in a country with no law in order. They can't imagine how law in order works."* However, as a lawyer, where you can and often will disagree with what is given to you in a file, you need to be able to do critical analysis. Lucy adds that in order to teach these groups of students in the same virtual classroom session as their German peers, who according to Lucy, *"find it very difficult to put themselves in "non-gründlich" [non-efficient] shoes",* can be challenging.

Obviously, this problem would also exist in traditional face-to-face classrooms. However, in the virtual classroom, due to the aforementioned lack of visible non-verbal communication, it can be more difficult. However, courses taught in virtual classrooms are usually part of a distance learning programme and those attract students from all over the world, as there are no limitations regarding the location you join the session from. In a traditional classroom, for example in a typical English town, you would usually not have the same diversity of students. Therefore, the topics Lucy teaches in a virtual classroom are in her view:

> *much more sensible to cultural issues where indeed when we cover counter-terrorism if you are American it is very difficult not because the individual doesn't want to but*

because of the environment of which they have grown up and only heard one side of the
story. To get out of that position and see the world through another point of view.

Lucy sees teaching in a virtual classroom as an opportunity where students of diverse cultural backgrounds meet each other in an educational setting, in which they are primarily students and thus are open to hear and explore arguments from other students with a different cultural background. She explains:

I am hoping that, you know, to take it back to that simple example of the Pakistani
student and the American student sitting virtually in the same classroom because it was
online synchronous teaching and hearing from each other as you know as normal
citizens and not like in the news that you know one brain washed by America and one
being the victim in Pakistan but both being students.

Teaching such a sensitive subject in a virtual classroom can be more demanding for the teacher than teaching in a traditional face-to-face setting, as students often cannot see each other and thus the teacher and the students rely upon verbal communication.

You have to regularly, especially as you are not seeing each other, you have to
regularly remind everybody that this is an educational environment and that no opinion
is by default correct or incorrect but just enabling everybody in the room, because
sometimes it is you know, the non-Pakistani American ones will maybe learn the most
because they are least affected, so they kind of watch it from a distance so to speak. You
know, open them to the possibility that there might be other views and especially

obviously at postgrad level that is something that we aim to do, and some students find

that really challenging, some cultures more than others.

Another factor that is related specifically to the subject is that when shy behaviour occurs, there are multiple possible causes of it, which in the virtual classroom might be more difficult to explore. Whilst shyness in speaking up can be even more easily overcome in the virtual classroom, as students can write text messages and thus avoid public speaking, more sensitive political issues might be shared in a face-to-face classroom with the teacher during a break in a one-to-one conversation, which is more difficult in a virtual classroom. For example, Lucy explains:

Maybe they are not shy in general but maybe it is because they feel uncomfortable with

the politics of things. You know, because they come from a country where talking politics

gets your head chopped. You know, let's be honest, in some other countries we cover in

the modules that is not just theory, you do get your head chopped if you talk politics. So

being sensitive about that is really relevant.

Lucy points out that, most importantly, she needs to create a safe environment in the virtual classroom first to construct a basis for later discussions. This argument is shared by all participants, regardless of the subject, but seems to become even more important in Lucy's sensitive courses:

You know, I am not going to dress up like a Rasta you know, I am me, but at the same

time not completely think that you live in a vacuum and think that people are not going

to make judgements about who or what you are and also especially knowing the topics

I teach, I need to be quite consciously in the beginning ensure that there is a safe environment. You know, later on, when people know who you are, etcetera, you can be a bit more maybe relaxed or honest, while in the beginning it is more for people who are culturally obviously different be it colour, be it language, be it religion, I need to pay extra attention to such things, I think.

To summarise, the subjects taught in a virtual classroom make a difference to the experiences of the participants in this study report. The main variances occurred between teaching science, teaching subjects in the social science context and subjects including international law. Whereas teaching sciences was experienced as relatively straightforward, as *"1 plus 1 is 2 in every language and every culture" (Lucy),* a variety of issues are related to teaching more sensitive topics. Using a virtual classroom for teaching social science subjects and international law, for example, has the advantage of attracting a wider variety of students from different cultural backgrounds, as there is no limitation to the physical location of the students. However, due to the lack of visible non-verbal communication, it can be more difficult for the teacher to address difficult issues, such as pro and contra arguments that a lawyer needs to see in every case.

4.3.4 Pedagogy for the virtual classroom

All participants agreed that once the technological issues are understood, it is important to look at the pedagogy of teaching in a virtual classroom. Paul explains that he finds it most important that students are encouraged to work both on their own and collaboratively. In his experience with a class of Taiwanese students, both types of work had to be included into the virtual classroom sessions, as the students would not have time to study outside the actual synchronous

sessions. Therefore, in Paul's view, *"it is essential to set up things in a way that there is enough room for them to do things together and on their own"*. Furthermore, he suggests a bilingual approach to overcome problems with the foreign language and to break up long synchronous online sessions. Obviously, this is only possible when the students share their mother language, as for example in foreign language teaching.

In Ben's experience there is a difference between the faculties, e.g. *"the tools that business and management tutors are using and those in social sciences are very similar,... the examples... from math and science are completely different"*. However, in his view, the tools offered in a virtual classroom, such as video, polling, smileys, etc. *"have gone mainstream, more or less these days. Therefore, it is not important which tools the teacher is using in the classroom but how the tutor has pedagogically set it up to organize interaction in the classroom"*. This means that in reality, audio-conferences are in many cases simply lectures that are broadcast, which does not constitute a difference from traditional lectures in a face-to-face situation. It also strengthens the earlier argument that "online" and "offline" are simply different types of mediation, whereas the underlining pedagogical principles, for example using constructivist approaches to teaching (Rikers, Gog, & Paas, 2008) or Vygotsky's ideas of ZPD (1978), remain similar.

Norman also states that the pedagogy needs to be right for teaching in a virtual classroom, but he sees a dilemma:

> *If you are a teacher who does not believe in Vygotsky's social constructivism, doesn't believe in communitive language teaching, who doesn't believe that learning takes place through the process of doing an activity or a task. If you don't believe that then*

you are going to use Adobe Connect or a virtual learning classroom in a really traditional way.

However, the virtual classroom offers enough tools to foster interaction between students and teachers. In Ben's view teaching should be student-focused, but he states that often, whilst we think that we are already following this approach, in reality "*it means simply [that we] provide technology to the students thinking that they use all of it themselves*". Obviously, "*everybody uses some sort of audio tools these days*". However, it is important what teachers are doing with the tools, or in Ben's words: "*It is just down to how you match things, the affordances to what you are going to do pedagogically. That is important*". Norman agrees with Ben and adds:

Once you have got the pedagogy right, once they see the possibilities of using the technology for sharing etcetera, they have got the concept in their mind that they want to maximize the interaction between the students, vary the amount of the different media that they are going to use.

Another participant, Penny points out that students from Russia, for example, have to overcome a cultural shock when joining a course offered in an Anglo-Saxon educational system, which she explains as follows: "*In Russian education system (inherited from German's one) knowledge are considered to mainly go downwards, from academicians to practisers, in Anglo-Saxon tradition they are looking to go upwards and downwards simultaneously*".

Interestingly, this is the same argument as stated about the Asian system by other participants (Ben and Norman) and in the literature (Hwang et al., 2002). The difference with Penny's

argument is though, that she does not see her own (Russian) system as the one that provides opportunities for thinking and autonomy but criticises it, whilst the others state that their system is the one that offers most choices. The latter attitude also reflects a typical behaviour of people from "dominant" cultures, regardless of whether that behaviour is conscious or not. It also strengthens the results in Chapter 4.1.4 on stereotypes, which showed that the participants used stereotypes themselves quite frequently without consciously realising their action. Again, this behaviour falls into "white ignorance" as described by Mills (2007) and Sullivan and Tuana (2007) who write about a "lens with which white people (and others suffering from white ignorance) perceive the world which causes them to "miss-see" whites as civilized superiors" (2007, p. 1). In this case, it is the (unconscious) belief that one educational system might be superior to another one.

Another participant, Paul argues that *"it is very important but not that easy, but it is very important to make learners more autonomous in this environment. I have the feeling that it is very difficult to really get away from a teacher driven interaction".* In Paul's experience most students are waiting for the teacher to do something, and this passive behaviour is reinforced in the virtual classroom. The reasons are, for example, a lack of experience with the technological environment, and feeling comfortable with this kind of lecture situation.

Lucy offers a nice metaphor to argue that what we do and how we behave depends on the situation we are in at a specific moment in time, stating: *"You know, when you are in a restaurant and you ask people, what is it you want, you know you are going to focus on the food."* She then elaborates further on how we need to be aware of judgements we continuously make:

> *So, all of us, we have so many cultural identities and which bits are relevant depend on where and what you are doing. So, in the chit-chat in the beginning of the online lesson,*

you can focus on different things, when you are then focusing on the module concepts,

you can focus on other bits and in the end, maybe again something different.

This is an interesting point as it is in line with Salmon's (2003) approach in her Five-Stage-Model, where at Stage 2, a new community is formed, which provides a little cultural unit itself (combining all the cultures of the participants in the group). This relates to the expression "third culture" (Goodfellow, Lea, Gonzalez, & Mason, 2001). Forming a polycentric culture would help move learners beyond "nonparticipation and marginalization in online communities and globally delivered courses" (Goodfellow et al., p. 80). Murphy et al. suggest, that "the third culture is neither an oblong nor a square but includes attributes of each, indicating its difference from the original cultures and contributions from each" (Murphy, Gazi, & Cifuentes, 2009, p. 294).

Paul also points out that using a virtual classroom is still new for many teachers and students and thus, *"many of our observations and many of the observations you find in the literature are based on first-time experience and this goes for both, positive and negative feedback you get from teachers and learners"*.

Whilst the participants in this study separated the topics of technology and pedagogy with Norman, for example, stating that *"pedagogy must come first",* Guichon and Hauck (2011) combine these two and write about techno-pedagogical competence. In their view, this includes several criteria, from assessing "the potential and limits of technologies [in their case] for language and culture learning" to an appropriate time management and designing of interactions within and outside the classroom. They also refer to earlier work as reflected in Hampel and

Stickler (2005), who developed a ''pyramid of skills'' which contains skills of dealing with the technology, social skills, language teaching skills and the development of a personal style of teaching in an online environment.

Paul feels that it needs a lot of experience and *"background reading"* to find out *"whether a certain trait is influenced by the person's culture, or not."* This means that a certain behaviour, like in Paul's case the very direct and almost impolite behaviour of Turkish pupils in a blended-learning EU project, can be caused by the lack of language skills, politeness, gender-related behaviour or cultural issues. Paul also emphasises that teacher and learner preparation is necessary to be aware of the mixture that influences behaviour in online sessions, because in his view, *"including us with a certain amount of experience in online learning and teaching, we are still so deeply, deeply influenced by teaching being face-to-face and in the classroom"*.

Guichon (2016) asks teachers to adjust the potential of any online tool to their own pedagogical objective and the possible relationship with their students. This so-called ''critical semiotic awareness'' will help to transform pure pedagogical skills into semio-pedagogical ones. In 2011, Guichon and Hauck still saw the need for teachers to rethink their attitude towards their teaching practice and how technology can be integrated. It is clear that if such a demand is evident in teaching languages online, which is probably the most researched area of using synchronous tools for online teaching (Fuchs, Hauck, & Müller-Hartmann, 2012; Guichon & Hauck, 2011; Hampel & Stickler, 2005), it will be even more necessary to adopt it across other teaching areas.

4.4 Addressing the research questions

The results from this phenomenological research, in conjunction with the literature review in Chapter 2, helped me to understand the experiences and perceptions of university teachers who use a virtual classroom for synchronous online conferencing. This section returns to the research questions, as initially presented in Section 1.4, and answers them using the experience gained from the interviews of the participants and the continuous literature review.

4.4.1 How do teachers perceive the impact of cultural background on the way students interact with them and each other in the virtual classroom?

First of all, this research question brought up the need to identify the participants' own views about culture and cultural background. The research illustrated that the participants shared the opinion that culture is a blend of diverse elements. Those elements differed from person to person, including for instance ethnicity, religious beliefs, and choice of lifestyle.   However, the results of the study revealed controversial views on the extent to which culture is reproduced, as formulated by Bourdieu (1993), or consciously opposed by succeeding generations. Teachers in this study were aiming for the construction of a collaborative learning environment in the virtual classroom.

However, the results indicate that students whose cultural background has created a certain shy behaviour, which is known in the existing literature as "the silent Chinese" (Hodkinson & Poropat, 2014; Hwang et al., 2002), interact differently with their peers and their teacher in the virtual classroom. This confirms Bourdieu's view that "the social order is progressively inscribed in people's minds through cultural products including systems of education, language, judgements, values, methods of classification and activities of every life" and thus leads people to accept "one's place" (1984, p. 471). In this case, certain behaviour related to Asian culture

is accepted as such, and therefore the students and the teacher accept their place. However, this completely contradicts the approach of constructing knowledge and student-centred teaching for which the participants were initially claiming to aim. Nevertheless, in contradiction to Bourdieu's argument, two participants in this study consciously left "their place" inherited by their family and educational institution, one becoming an atheist whilst the other one converted to Islam. Interestingly though, as teachers, they both accepted the place of Asian students, which shows that they are both members of a dominant culture (Scott & Marshall, 2009), in this case White and European, and have certain power through their role as the teacher.

Although the participants were predominantly aware of existing stereotyping caused by first impressions (Asch, 1946), there was a second level of influence that the participants did not realise, which was the fact that they belong to a dominant culture (Scott & Marshall, 2009) since they were white, European and American, and some male, and as teachers have an additional position of power. Thus their behaviour can be interpreted as "white ignorance" (Mills, 2007; Sullivan & Tuana, 2007), although they certainly did not intend to act in that way. Nevertheless, the students who belong to an "inferior" group (Mills, 2007) will experience some degree of prejudice, even if unintended. This can also lead to a behaviour described by Du Bois's (1994) theory of "double-consciousness", which he explains as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (England & Warner, 2013, p. 966). As a consequence, the students need to find ways to adjust to the situation by either following the White mainstream (Lewis et al., 2000) by acting in a way the dominant group perceives as "normal"; or by behaving in the way their group is stereotyped, for example as "the silent Chinese" (Hwang et al., 2002).

Therefore, it can be concluded that both layers of perception of cultural background, namely the conscious awareness of some degree of own stereotyping and the unconscious white ignorance (Mills, 2007), have an impact on how the teachers interact with their students in the virtual classroom.

4.4.2. In which ways does their own cultural background shape the didactics of their teaching in virtual classrooms?

The study illustrated that the way teachers acted in the virtual classroom was influenced by a variety of elements, ranging from their upbringing in multiple countries to experiencing years of illness. The results were varied as regards to finding a definition of culture, and to which extent the aforementioned elements are a part of one's cultural background or a separate life experience. This confusion resembles the unmanageable number of attempts to define cultural background in the existing literature as presented in Chapter 2 (Boas, 1940; Bourdieu, 1993; Pincas, 2001; Tylor, 1924). A difference was evident between the participants' conscious acting from their cultural background and the contradictions presented in their answers. These showed that many of participants were not aware of the fact that they belonged to a "dominant" group of white people, who also have a certain power by virtue of their profession and status of being a teacher.

The existence of intersectionality was evident, as some participants did not report impacts of gender-related issues but did not recognise that this might be overlapped because of their dominant race and class affiliations. However, the teachers tried to adjust their didactic concepts to help students with the specific issues in the virtual classroom, like encouraging use of the

text chat if Asian students did not want to speak up. The teachers would also adjust their speed of talking and their word choice to help non-native speakers as, in the virtual classroom, audio is the main tool of communication, especially when a webcam is not used and thus the interpretation of facial expressions and body language is missing. Thus, they tried to shape their didactics to give credit to diverse cultural behaviour. However, there were quite a few underlying prejudicial issues, such as "white ignorance" (Mills, 2007) and double-consciousness (Du Bois, 1994), and these prohibited the existence of real multiculturalism, which "advocates considering, and sometimes emphasizing and celebrating, category membership" (Richeson & Nussbaum, 2004, p. 417) in their virtual classroom teaching.

The participant who was most aware of the possible effects of one part of her cultural background was Lucy, who is a female Muslim and thus in a less dominant group. She was intensively adjusting her didactics to her multi-national upbringing and her religious beliefs shown in her appearance, which resulted in a behaviour related to Foucault's theory of panopticism (1977). Furthermore, on the one hand she wanted to show her real self by wearing a headscarf and asserting that her religious beliefs would not influence her teaching; but on the other hand she was caught in double-consciousness (Adell, 1994; Du Bois, 1994) constantly thinking of how her appearance and upbringing would be judged by her students. This led to the extreme didactical choice of consciously not using a webcam, in order to avoid prejudice because of her religious beliefs.

Therefore the study also demonstrated that there is a political aspect to the impact of a teacher's cultural background, as Lucy was facing problems due to the current political situation, by which other participants were not affected.

4.4.3. Which strategies and tools do teachers use to develop interactive synchronous online sessions with diverse student groups?

The teachers in this study emphasised their wish to create collaborative, student-centred teaching sessions in the virtual classroom, as presented in the existing literature, e.g. by Vygotsky (1987). Furthermore, this study illustrated that in order to provide "emotional and social support" (Torun, 2013, p. 2493), teachers who use a virtual classroom need to find a time and a place in the synchronous session to act as a substitute for meeting students during breaks or after class in a traditional face-to-face teaching situation. The majority of teachers in this study were aiming for a multi-modal approach, and were trying to use the tools offered in the virtual classroom, e.g. the text-chat, microphone and webcam, to achieve that.

However, there were also reservations about using a webcam, as some teachers in this study felt that real-time video broadcast could foster prejudice. It can be argued, though, that prejudice will already exist and that the webcam would simply make it visible. Thus the participants are not addressing the problem of prejudice but are avoiding it, with the justification of not using the webcam for the greater good. However, the wish to teach in a mostly prejudice-free environment is understandable and justifiable to start building trust and a "third culture" (Goodfellow, 2009) in online teaching. Nevertheless, it is important not to stop there and avoid the underlying problem, but rather to reveal possible causes for prejudice once the students and teacher feel safe to trust each other in the learning environment. In that case, an additional layer of learning has been added by avoiding the webcam in the beginning, namely to understand that one might have misinterpreted the other culture if it had been obvious from the beginning. Notwithstanding, the existing literature also sees a controversy between researchers who

advocate the use of the webcam (Develotte et al., 2010; Guichon, 2010; Smyth, 2005; Wang, Thomson, Kern, Laufer, & Chun, 2004) and those who reject it.

All the same, not using a webcam and also using only written text-chat messages can lead to presenting a different identity in the virtual classroom. This may reduce prejudice on the one hand, but also allows for fake identities, in which case the actual diversity of different cultural backgrounds will suffer.

Unexpectedly, this research question also revealed existing design-based strategies that hinder interactivity in virtual classroom sessions, particularly the recording mandated by the universities. The teachers in this study agreed that recording sessions may provide an advantage for students who cannot attend sessions; but mostly it decreases spontaneity and minimises co-construction of knowledge due to low attendance rates.

4.4.4. In the teachers' perceptions, how can communication be enhanced in the virtual classroom with students from diverse cultural backgrounds?

This study revealed that communication in the virtual classroom suffers from the lack of non-verbal communication which exists in a traditional face-to-face setting. The teachers in the study tried to compensate for this in different ways. Some of them were using webcams, which can partly compensate for non-verbal communication as facial expressions can be interpreted. For reasons mentioned in earlier sections, some teachers consciously avoided the use of the webcam and tried to enhance communication by oral discussions triggered by interesting questions. All participants in this study agreed though, that a variation of tools is best suited for virtual classroom communication. The advantage of a combination of using written text-chat

messages and oral discussions is that students with diverse cultural backgrounds or personal preferences can choose the medium they wish to use, and thus are more likely to participate actively in the virtual classroom.

Nevertheless, if too many different media are used at the same time, students and their teacher need to divert their attention between auditory, visual and textual material and this can cause a cognitive overload (Kirschner, 2002).

This study has demonstrated that teachers are dissatisfied when student-student and student-instructor interaction (Moore, 1989) is missing in their virtual classroom teaching sessions. Existing research has already shown that interaction in virtual learning environments affects both the achievements of students (LaPointe & Gunawardena, 2004) and their satisfaction (Chang & Smith, 2008) with the course in a positive way. This study shows from my sample that in a virtual classroom, because of its nature, which is designed to simulate a traditional face-to-face classroom, it is of utmost importance to create an interactive, collaborative learning atmosphere. Martyn argues that "it is important to allow students in online classes to interact in a variety of ways by integrating both instructional and social interaction, to provide the best possible learning environment" (2005, p. 62). Otherwise, both teachers and learners will continue to miss traditional face-to-face classrooms and thus become demotivated.

4.5 Summary of chapter 4

This synthesis represents "the essence" of the experience (Husserl, 1931) the participants had of the phenomenon of teaching in a virtual classroom. However, the essence of an experience is at no time entirely exhausted, meaning that it does not present a universal truth but the essence at a specific place at a specific time, displayed in a specific collection of the participants' experiences and as seen from the perspective of an individual researcher (Moustakas, 1994).

The participants shared the experience that teaching in a virtual classroom needs specific knowledge of the tools, a working technological environment (e.g. broadband Internet access) and a different kind of pedagogy from teaching in a traditional classroom. However, as a summary, there are great chances of enhancing the learning experience for students, or in Paul's words:

> *I mean it is not only second best, there is also an element that if it is done right and if people feel comfortable in the environment you have this certain effect of augmented reality. I mean,… talking, discussing things with a friend in the States and then he mentions something and then I look it up in Google and go to the website while we continue talking. So, this is an element very strong and pedagogically very interesting of augmented reality, which you can't have like this in a face-to-face classroom.*

However, to offer a fully multicultural approach in online teaching, the teachers need to be aware of their own cultural background and their, mostly unconscious, racial blindness.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and reflections

In this chapter, I discuss the contribution of the work to the knowledge in the field of technology enhanced learning. Then I reflect on the implications this research has for practice, and propose potential areas for future research. The section ends with my final reflections on teaching in a virtual classroom.

5.1 Contribution of the research

This research has contributed to the field of technology enhanced learning, as it has added knowledge to the existing literature about the implications of cultural background for synchronous online sessions in virtual classrooms. Mason (2001) identified three characteristics of online courses that contribute to difficulties in teaching and learning: lack of face-to-face meetings, technical and bandwidth difficulties, and challenges presented to non-native speakers of English. However, her work did not include synchronous online teaching, which was the gap addressed in this research. The results showed that the lack of face-to-face meetings was mostly compensated for by the synchronous nature of and the tools (webcam, microphones) available in the virtual classroom. Technical and bandwidth problems can also occur when using virtual classrooms; however, the rapid development in technology and Internet distribution since 2001 has changed the relevance of this criterion. The third characteristic, the problems non-native speakers have, was also reported by participants in this study. However, due to the synchronous communication, these problems can be addressed faster than in asynchronous online environments. Therefore, this research provided an update on the characteristics used by Mason (2001), including the use of synchronous online sessions carried out in a virtual classroom.

Additionally, the focus of this research was how both the teachers' and their students' cultural backgrounds affect their behaviour in a virtual classroom. The study revealed that the term "culture" holds various meanings for different people, and that people in general differ from one another, even if they fit into normed categories by some criteria they share, such as place of birth or nationality. The results clearly contradict existing categories in the literature which were proposed by Hofstede (1986) and still are utilised by many other authors, such as Cronjé (2011). For example, Hofstede's category Uncertainty Avoidance is defined as "the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations and have created beliefs and institutions that try to avoid these" (2001, p. 161). In this category, Russia scores 95% and is listed at the seventh highest rank of 76 given (Hofstede, 2010, p.194).

Thus, it could be interpreted that most Russians feel the same, which with a population of approximately 144.2 million (Wikipedia, 2016b) is absurd. In contrast, participants in this study stated that people in Russia act differently depending on the sector they work for (Penny, 2016), and that personal traits were more influential on behaviour in the virtual classroom than the Russian nationality (Norman, 2016).

Another example relates to his category of Power Distance, defined as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 98). In his Power Distance Index (PDI), China scores 80 and thus sits in the higher rankings of 12 – 14 (Hofstede, 2010, p. 57). According to Hofstede, "people in these countries accept and appreciate inequality but feel that the use of power should be moderated by a sense of obligation" (Hofstede, 2010, p. 80). Again, this could be interpreted as if most Chinese people would be feeling and acting in the same way. As today China has a population of approximately 1.37 billion people (Wikipedia, 2016a), this

idea seems ridiculous per se. However, with reference to this study, the statement that "people accept and appreciate inequality" contradicts the fact that the participants' students included multiple Chinese students who were studying business management at UK universities, or English at a Hong Kong university in order to change their professional rank. Furthermore, many of them chose Western universities to experience studies in today's business management which does not follow formal authority or hierarchy.

Moreover, the study exposed that behaviour, which is related to such cultural categories, can change over time in the virtual classroom. For example, the confidence to speak up in a discussion can evolve, once students feel safe in the virtual learning environment. This result shows that culture is not static, and that behaviour in the virtual classroom, similarly to behaviour in traditional face-to-face classrooms, is a result of many factors, such as personality, life-style, conscious and unconscious choices and religious beliefs. The existing literature argues that in online environments, a third culture can be established over time (Goodfellow, 2009; Salmon, 2003). This third culture is then shared by the students and allows constructive learning. All of these criteria are shaped during a person's life-time and depend on familiar, professional and environmental aspects. The specialty of the virtual classroom is that the variety of tools embedded can help students to "overcome" certain traits more quickly than in asynchronous settings due to the immediate interaction and for the benefit of engaged and constructive learning (Chou, 2002).

However, this study also revealed that teachers who use virtual classrooms are often not aware of the importance of how they present themselves in creating an atmosphere, where students feel safe enough to present their own, real identity. Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013, p. 102) argue that "it has been proposed above that online environments provide their users with the

potential to perform and present different identities. The distance between performer and audience that physical detachment provides makes it easy to conceal aspects of the offline self and embellish the online". Online identity can also be seen as an "extension of the self" (Bechar-Israeli, 1995). The controversial experiences with using a webcam represent a lack of awareness that is not yet exhaustively addressed in the literature outside research into language learning, where several authors advocate the use of video in virtual classroom teaching (Develotte et al., 2010; Guichon, 2010; Guichon & Hauck, 2011; Hampel & Stickler, 2012).

It is also new to the existing literature that recording of virtual classroom sessions can have an immensely negative effect on the actual teaching, as it reduces spontaneity and tempts students to stay away from the live sessions, which again hinders a co-construction of knowledge in the virtual classroom due to the lack of actual participants. Thus, virtual classroom sessions are in danger of being held in a lecture style, which contradicts all efforts made in the past decades to change teacher-centred teaching in traditional face-to-face classrooms to a student-centred teaching style.

Although Conole reported as early as 2007 that the emphasis in technology-based learning had moved from passive, individual learning of content to student-centred and collaborative approaches to learning, today's teaching in virtual classrooms seems to shift backwards. However, existing literature proves that student-centred learning can nurture independent thinking, which was one of the skills the teachers in this study wanted to communicate. Many researchers previously saw a need for the shift to student-centred learning (Barrett, Bower, & Donovan, 2007; Mccombs & Vakili, 2005; Reeves et al., 2004). However, the results of this study revealed that in reality, teaching in a virtual classroom is still far from being student-

centred, e.g. the format is often still in lecture-style due to low student numbers, which make constructivist teaching impossible (Arnold, 2016).

5.2 Implications for practice

This research has shown that teacher awareness of their own cultural issues, combined with the awareness of those cultural aspects that may influence their students, is essential in virtual classroom teaching to bridge the gap between interactions of students with diverse cultural backgrounds.

To achieve student-centred, collaborative learning, consciousness has to be institutionalised that students in international settings will have different cultural backgrounds, which influence how they interact with their peers and their teachers. However, this does not mean that a "one size fits all" approach exists, which can be utilised for different "categories" of people. This study has demonstrated that earlier attempts to categorise people, for example by Hofstede (1986), have dramatically failed in acknowledging that even people who share the same place of birth will not act in exactly the same way over their lifetime.

The awareness that should follow from the results of this study, however, is that teaching in a virtual classroom can be more successful with regard to a constructivist learning approach if the diversity of groups is acknowledged. The virtual classroom offers a variety of tools that can be used to address behaviour resulting from various issues that arise from criteria which taken together shape the culture of one person at a specific moment in time - in this case the moment they take part in a virtual classroom session. If these issues are recognised, for example in the

case of a shy student, who has this characteristic due to their upbringing in an educational system which perceives shyness as politeness, the tools in the virtual classroom can be used to gradually help the student overcome the characteristic by using text chat at the beginning. Thus, student-student or student-instructor interaction (Moore, 1989) can be achieved, without being in the spotlight in the same way as speaking up, a webcam broadcast or a face-to-face situation would do. Taking part in discussions and collaborative working are known as success factors in Western cultures, and thus learning those skills gently is a benefit for students who are studying to work in Europe or the USA afterwards. Obviously, it does not make a difference whether shyness is caused by growing up in a system that favours this characteristic, or is a personal characteristic with other causes.

It is very important that universities, even when teaching in virtual classrooms has been implemented for several years, offer teacher training to ensure that the tools available in the virtual classroom are used to foster student-centred teaching. Furthermore, the possibility of reducing the number of recordings of virtual classroom sessions might help to overcome the disadvantages of losing spontaneity and low attendance of the live session, while retaining the advantage of providing a resource for students who could not attend the session.

The need for and the affordances of teacher training have been researched intensively in the field of CALL and it can be argued that the actual topic of foreign language teaching is one layer of mediation put on top of technology-mediated learning (see Hampel, 2005; Hauck, 2010; Hauck and Youngs, 2008). Therefore, once this layer is taken off, the actual affordances for learning and teaching are suitable for other subject areas as well. However, relating to the results of this study, the content regarding cultural aspects included in the "foreign language teaching layer" should also be added to any teacher education, as teachers need to be aware of

their own culture and what influence it has on their teaching in a virtual classroom. Obviously, it will always be beneficial to tailor teacher education to the needs of each faculty and the subjects taught; however, the foundational teacher training in technology-mediated learning can be used for all faculty using Hampel and Stickler's pyramid of skills (2005), for example. Hauck's findings that "the learner's multimodal communicative competence, awareness of the cultural characteristics of the learning environment, i.e. the cultural dependency of tools, communicative norms and personal styles (Thorne 2003), and gain in intercultural competence as understood by Byram (1997)" (2010, p. 8) are interrelated can be used to educate teachers about their students but also to reflect about their own teaching in virtual classrooms.

Gaining multimodal competence as suggested by Hauck and Hampel (2006) should therefore be implemented into teacher training, because only if teachers own these competences themselves, can they support their students appropriately with the aim of constructivist learning in virtual classrooms.

5.3 Suggestions for further research

The interviews with two participants from Russia led to the recognition that further research is needed into the cultural aspects in online teaching within that country, which by dint of its size and regions offers an enormous variation of cultures. Both participants showed interest in working together in future research projects. As both participants also have access to student data, this will be a great opportunity to research the student perspectives of learning in a virtual classroom, which due to my current employment situation was impossible in this study.

Additionally, the experiences of Lucy in this study, regarding the issues of wearing a headscarf while teaching in a virtual classroom, show that further research is needed into online teaching in countries where women are forced to wear a headscarf or burka, and national or religious laws state that women are not allowed to speak in public. Research could investigate how teaching and learning differ in virtual classrooms from traditional face-to-face settings in those countries.

Related to the above topic, it would be very interesting to carry out further research about the presentation of "self" in the virtual classroom. There is an exhaustive amount of research in the existing literature about online presentation, but the focus is more on the use of avatars or anonymity, whereas I am interested in how we present ourselves in the virtual classroom.

5.4. Final reflections

Virtual classrooms simply represent our normal world in all its variety, and cultural background is just one aspect that influences how we act and present ourselves. It seems that all cultural aspects which were initially influencing behaviour in the virtual classroom will become less important over time, once the culture set by the course takes over and participants feel safe in the virtual environment. That does not mean that the cultural impacts are disappearing, but that people find ways to deal with those effects to find a way to feel comfortable. This can happen through following the White mainstream (Lewis et al., 2000) and conform to acting as seen "normal" by the dominant group; or by finding individual solutions, like Lucy in this study. She protects herself to be able to participate with normalising the existing bias, through avoiding real-time transmission of herself showing the headscarf she is wearing; or she provides additional explanations of her view-point on sensitive topics to ensure that she is not

misunderstood. However, what she is experiencing is still prejudice (students having a preconceived opinion about her political opinion because she is wearing a headscarf), and would not happen to nor feel fine for someone who has not been objectified in this way, e.g. a White Catholic man. The process of creating a third culture (Goodfellow et al., 2001) is similar to taking courses in face-to-face settings, but due to the differences experienced in virtual classrooms, such as limited exposure to mimic and gesture and the need for getting used to technical issues (how to show emotions by clicking emoticons, for example), this process will take considerably longer.

However, the study revealed that the beauty of the virtual classroom is that it can serve participants (teachers and students) regardless of their cultural background, as it can be used to overcome initial boundaries. For instance, shy students can at first just listen, then start using the emoticons, and later once they feel safe, use the text chat or speak up. Students and teachers with experience of participating in virtual classroom sessions, as well as students from cultures where speaking up is part of their earlier education, can use a microphone and a webcam from the start. This does not mean that participants with different cultural backgrounds will share the same experiences, as clearly the experiences of teachers and students from a dominant culture (Scott & Marshall, 2009) will always be different from those of other cultures. However, the specific situation in a virtual classroom with the choice of using only audio (without showing the real self), or even only text chat (to minimise recognition of accents and thus regional bias), allows a greater choice in dealing with the effects of cultural impact than if students meet in a traditional face-to-face classroom.

Nevertheless, in my view the goal should be that over time all tools offered in the virtual classroom are used and thus the diversity of the students and teachers will be utilised to co-

construct knowledge. This does not mean becoming double-bind (Colman, 2015), for example, wanting cultural diversity amongst students but asking Asian students to speak up, which would provide no right or satisfactory choice for the students. It is also not appropriate to exercise a colour-blind approach (Apfelbaum, Norton, & Sommers, 2012) by denying the existence of race. The real goal is to exercise multiculturalism, as defined by Apfelbaum et al., namely "an approach to diversity in which group differences are openly discussed, considered, and even highlighted" (2012, p. 207). Thus, Lucy could present her real self online, and students and teachers would acknowledge and hopefully overcome the racial impacts of dominant versus inferior cultures. The virtual classroom can be used for this approach, as the initial steps are easier than in face-to-face settings because the participants will not see and/or hear the ethnicity, language or place of upbringing until a person is ready to share this information.

Furthermore, students of diverse cultural background who are taking part in synchronous online sessions will benefit from the approach of multiculturalism, which according to Apfelbaum et al. (2010) will foster appreciation of other people's perspectives, and through imagining their viewpoints, development of a better understanding. Thus the students would not be exposed to "white ignorance" (Mills, 2007) any more; and once they no longer felt part of an inferior culture, they would not fall into "double-conscious" behaviour (Adell, 1994; Du Bois, 1994). Then the advantage of having students and teachers with diverse cultural backgrounds could be utilised for constructivist learning acknowledging difference but also equality of all people.

And finally, in these two years of working on this thesis, the world-wide political situation has dramatically changed due to the refugee crisis in Europe. The fear of terrorism has created nationalistic outbursts of hatred in European countries, despite their centuries of philosophical and educational history. Accordingly, it is of utmost importance that every opportunity be used

to ensure that people all over the world have the chance to experience other cultures in a safe environment, and thereby see the benefits of living in a multi-cultural society. Virtual classrooms have the potential to provide such a safe environment, and it is my hope that this research will play a small but helpful role in proving it.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Participant Information and Consent Form

Participant Information Sheet

Title of Project: Teachers`views on the impact of cultural background on teaching and learning in virtual classroom

Research Student: Iris Wunder

     Geisfelder Str. 9, 96129 Roßdorf am Forst

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     Email: i.wunder@lancaster.ac.uk

Supervisor: **Dr Murat Oztok**

     Dr Murat Oztok

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     Room D. 61, County South

     Lancaster University

     Lancaster, LA1 4YD, UK

     Tel: +44 (0) 1524 594661

     email: m.oztok@lancaster.ac.uk

Date: 20.09.2015

Dear,

I would like to invite you to take part in my PhD thesis research with the Centre for Technology Enhanced Learning in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University.

Before you decide if you wish to take part you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Talk to others about the study if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

This document includes:

- Information about the purpose of the study (what I hope to find out).

- Information about what participation means and how to withdraw when and if you wish (what you will be doing).

- Details of what notes, recordings and other sources of information may be used as "data" in the study - for the group and with you as an individual.

- Information about how this data will be secured and stored.

- Information about how any quotes will be used and how you will be involved in checking, agreeing and consenting to their use.

- How the information will be used in the thesis and for other purposes such as conference presentations or publication.

The purpose of the study

This research is for my thesis with the PhD in Technology Enhanced Learning programme with the Centre for Technology Enhanced Learning in the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University.

My research aims to research the views of teachers on how they feel their cultural background and the cultural background of their students has an impact on their teaching in virtual classrooms. For this study, I focus on place of birth, place of upbringing, gender, race, ethnicity and language which in my view represent the cultural background of people.

What participation involves and how to withdraw if you no longer wish to participate

Why have I been invited?

You have been invited because you are/have been teaching online for several years and have experience in teaching students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Do I have to take part?

No, your participation is entirely voluntary. If you do not wish to take part, then please let me know. If you do not wish to be recorded, please indicate this. Every effort will then be taken to ensure that your data/voice is removed from recordings by editing out where possible or excluding such data from any transcription.

You can withdraw until two months after the end of the interviews. If you withdraw later than that, your data will remain in the study. There is absolutely no obligation on you to continue nor penalty for withdrawing. Your related data (recordings, notes) can be destroyed and all reference removed at any time.

What would taking part involve for me?

I would like to interview you once or twice, with each interview taking about 45 minutes of your time. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed (by myself and/or a third party).

What will I have to do?

You should answer the questions I have prepared and, as the interviews are semi-structured (this means I will have some questions prepared but will also use prompts along the way), those which might arise during the interview.

Protecting your data and identity

What will happen to the data?

"Data" here means the researcher's notes, audio recordings and any email exchanges we may have had.   The data will be kept for 10 years after the successful completion of the PhD *Viva* as per Lancaster University requirements. After that any personal data will be destroyed. Audio recordings will be transferred and stored on my personal laptop and deleted from portable media.

Identifiable data (including recordings of your and other participants' voices) on my personal laptop will be encrypted. With devices such as portable recorders where this is not possible identifiable data will be deleted as quickly as possible. In the mean time I will ensure the portable device will be kept safely until the data is deleted.

You can request to listen to the audio at the end of the interview and any parts you are unhappy with will be deleted, or disregarded from the data. Data may be used in the reporting of the research (in the thesis and then potentially in any papers or conference presentations). Please note that if your data is used, it will not identify you in any way or means, unless you otherwise indicate your express permission to do so.

You have the right to request this data is destroyed at any time during the study as well as having full protection via the UK Data Protection Act. The completion of this study is estimated to be by December 2016 although data collection will be complete by April 2016.

Data will only be accessed by members of the research team and support services, this includes my supervisor and secretarial services for transcription.

The research may be used for journal articles and conference presentations.

How will my identity be protected?

A pseudonym will be given to protect your identity in the research report and any identifying information about you will be removed from the report. All pseudonyms will be securely stored and kept by myself.

Who to contact for further information or with <u>*any*</u> concerns

If you would like further information on this project, the programme within which the research is being conducted or have any concerns about the project, participation or my conduct as a researcher please contact:
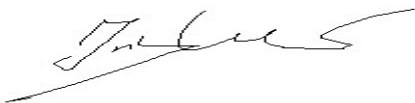
> Professor Paul Ashwin – Head of Department

> Tel: +44 (0)1524 594443
> Email: P.Ashwin@Lancaster.ac.uk

> Room: County South, D32, Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA1 4YD, UK.

Thank you for reading this information sheet.

Iris Wunder, M.A.

Consent Form

Title of Project: Teachers` views on the impact of cultural background on teaching and learning in

virtual classrooms

Name of Researcher: Iris Wunder

		Please Tick
1.	I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 12.05.2015 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
2.	I understand that my participation in this research study is voluntary. If for any reason I wish to withdraw during the period of this study, I can do this until two months after the interviews. After that, the data will remain in the study. I am free to do so without providing any reason.	
3.	I consent to the interviews being audio/video recorded.	
4.	I understand that the information I provide will be used for a PhD research project and the combined results of the project may be published. I understand that I have the right to review and comment on the information I have provided.	
5.	I agree to take part in the above study.	
Name of Participant: Signature		

Appendix 2: Profile of participants (self-declared data)

Category	Number of teachers	Percentage
Gender		
Female	**11**	**65**
Male	**6**	**35**
Nationality		
British	**8**	**47**
American	**2**	**11,8**
German	**4**	**23,5**
Dutch	**1**	**5,9**
Russian	**2**	**11,8**

Appendix 3: Initial Interview questions

Interview Questions

First of all, I would like to clarify that for the purpose of this interview and my thesis, when I talk about cultural background, I focus on place of birth, place of upbringing, gender, ethnicity and language – religion if you think it does have an influence.

- Could you please introduce yourself and explain your own cultural background?

- Could you please tell me something about your teaching, e.g. where you are teaching and what your student body is like?

- Could you please tell me how often you are using synchronous online sessions in a virtual classroom?

- In these sessions, how do you interact with your students, e.g. which tools or features available in the virtual classroom are you using and why is this the case?

- Could you let me know how your students interact with each other?

- Do you think you are interacting differently in the virtual classroom then in a face-to-face one and if so, could you please explain what you do differently?

- Do you think your students interact differently, too? What is different? Why do you think they act differently?

- In your view, what kind of influence does the language spoken in the virtual classroom have on interaction between you and the students and between the students themselves?

- How does your gender influence interaction in a virtual classroom? Is this different to a face-to-face setting?

- How do you think the students´ gender influences interaction in virtual classrooms?

- In your view, what kind of influence does your race have on interaction in the virtual classroom?

- Is this the same for your students?

- What about ethnicity? How does your own ethnicity influence interaction?

- How does the ethnicity of your students influence their behavior in the virtual classroom?

- I would like to summarize…this is what I understood…

- Would you like to add something?

Appendix 4: Excerpt from the transcript of the interview with Lucy

Iris: So, how do you think your own cultural background influences your teaching?

Lucy: Oh, significantly. Because indeed, you know, having been brought up in those different cultures myself, I don´t have as fixed a view, I hope, as some others. So, I am not nationalistically precious about something. I mean the explicit case of indeed in the morning being told that the Malvinas were Argentine and in the afternoon with exactly the same conviction being told that the Falklands were definitely British. This maybe one example but it really made me consolidate that idea that you can justify and present things with the same conviction and more so for the postgrad I guess than the level 1 or 2 students, it helps me to put myself in other´s shoes without saying "Oh, but you know this goes against my national Dutch tied...I don´t have that at all, I just feel like a global human and you know if people want to say something about the Dutch I don´t mind that. And you know, from a professional point of view, we shouldn´t ever mind, but obviously as humans we feel much more comfortable talking about Africa than about their own culture. We don´t mind talking about tribes here, tribes there and how they kill each other but when we say actually say the Dutch and the Germans in NATO are also not behaving totally nicely, then you know many will feel that it is too close for comfort.

Iris: I think that is actually interestingly what is scaring people right now because global comes close now, it is not over there anymore.

Lucy: Yes, you mention the Syrian refugees. That is not one of the case studies that is covered in one of the modules because it mainly happened after the module was written but it provides very nice brain gym and food for thought for the students in the sense of, you know, when it was in Syria, then it is alright but all of a sudden when they come to Europe than it´s a

different ballgame. And also how the media then try to twist our thoughts because when they are in the Middle East they are called refugees, when they come here they are called migrants. Where did they change their view? And it is important from a legal point of view because refugees have a right to seek asylum, migrants not. So, you know there is lot of challenges there and obviously when you have people in the group who come either from a Middle East country and I have had Palestinians in the group etcetera, versus recipient countries, you can clearly see how people´s vies are affected by that. I mean one the students in the current module, she had to withdraw because she is I think Chinese origin but living in America and I think the key thing she has learned from the module is that actually she was too American because she failed her assignment. One, because she wrote much more social science than law and obviously the transition from social science to law is different if when you are talking about borderline moral issues it feels safer to talk about social science issues. But the key aspect that she found very challenging is to see counter-terrorism from a non-US point of view and in that sense it was only having fellow students from for example Pakistan, who were saying, hey look, all these drones are coming down, how would you feel. That really challenged her views, so you know it is not about this individual student it´s a nice recent example clearly suggesting how a student´s culture is affecting their learning. But maybe it also depends because I don´t teach subjects like math. You know in math, 1 plus 1 is 2 in every language and every culture. Topics I teach I think are much more sensible to cultural issues where indeed when we cover counter-terrorism if you are American it is very difficult not because the individual doesn´t want to but because of the environment of which they have grown up and only heard one side of the story. To get out of that position and see the world through another point of view.

Appendix 5: Example of initial coding from the transcript of Lucy´s interview

Open   Initial Codes   10/04/2016
            Lucy

Language   being a student / person
                                  without nationality
foreign experience   nationality

Subject   webcam

age   Obvious feeders (Muslim)
confidence   students want to "see"
                                  teacher
subject taught
experience with technology   military

"closeness" to students (political)   pit in whole

Comfort zone   "audible silence"

teachers reaction   prejudice

Media   communicating

Trust of original thoughts   sharing picture after session

          equal level   group dependency

      Conscious of our   judgements
views / religious / ethnic
      content   justified or not

                                  consciously or not

Appendix 6: Example of initial colour and line by line coding of transcript from Lucy´s interview

201	And finally, the explicit cultural thing will come up with
202	some of the content stuff. For example, I mean I am
203	generalizing a little bit but for the sake of examples you know
204	Japanese students or students from that direction, Chinese
205	students too find it really difficult to do critical analysis. Not
206	because they are stupid but generally because they have been
207	brought up not to question authority. So when you tell them,
208	yes you read in a court case this is the situation but you are
209	allowed to completely disagree you can clearly notice that
210	you know they don´t know what to do. So, you have to adapt
211	for that, or similarly, say students, I had Somali students who
212	find other aspects of legal issues a challenge because they
213	were brought up in a country with no law in order. They can´t
214	imagine how law in order works, while Germans for
215	example, you know, they find it very difficult to put
216	themselves in "non-gründlich" shoes. So, in that sense it
217	makes for a very interesting conversation, especially for me
218	but I as the teacher I need to make sure that I manage that
219	consciously because it´s good for the Germans and the
220	Somali to see each other´s point of view but not in such a
221	fashion that they feel too much out of their comfort zone
222	because then they will retreat and put a focus on feeling safe
223	as supposed to feeling relaxed and enjoy the session

224	Iris: So, how do you think your own cultural background
225	influences your teaching?

226	[redacted] Oh, significantly. Because indeed, you know, having
227	been brought up in those different cultures myself, I don´t
228	have as fixed a view, I hope, as some others. So I am not
229	nationalistically precious about something. I mean the
230	explicit case of indeed in the morning being told that the
231	Malvinas were Argentine and in the afternoon with exactly
232	the same conviction being told that the Falklands were
233	definitely British. This maybe one example but it really made
234	me consolidate that idea that you can justify and present
235	things with the same conviction and more so for the postgrad
236	I guess than the level 1 or 2 students, it helps me to put
237	myself in other´s shoes

Appendix 7: Table of super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes from transcript of Lucy´s interview

Theme 1: Culture	Quotes Lucy	Lines in transcript
Stereotypes	For example, I mean I am generalizing a little bit but for the sake of examples you know Japanese students or students from that direction, Chinese students too find it really difficult to do critical analysis. Not because they are stupid but generally because they have been brought up not to question authority. So, when you tell them, yes you read in a court case this is the situation but you are allowed to completely disagree you can clearly notice that you know they don´t know what to do.	Line 202 - 210

Influence of one´s own culture	Oh, significantly. Because indeed, you know, having been brought up in those different cultures myself, I don´t have as fixed a view, I hope, as some others. So I am not nationalistically precious about something. I mean the explicit case of indeed in the morning being told that the Malvinas were Argentine and in the afternoon with exactly the same conviction being told that the Falklands were definitely British. This maybe one example but it really made me consolidate that idea that you can justify and present things with the same conviction and more so for the postgrad I guess than the level 1 or 2 students, it helps me to put myself in other´s shoes	Line 226 - 237

Appendix 8: Example of a Memo

Memos?

Interviews: Skype → direct contact was possible,
interpretations of smiles/blushing ect.

However / recording was only audio
which simulated the actual practice
in face-to-face when you would
use a tape-recorder and not a
video camera. Once I told the participants
they were much more related

Bracketing: It was more formal perhaps so they
"Spoke to me as if I was a four-year old" ... "you know"
my analogue

Limitations: Realisation might 2 years of
writing

Success has [been] Conformed?
Many / many things came up, especially
○ very personal statements about
sexual orientation, past illnesses,
ect. which I could not have foreseen.

Content to Creswell, too.

Not finding participants? Follow (Giorgi, 2000, 2009)

not Colaizzi (1978) ⟹ inconsistent with Husserl's (98)
method ! p. 8 / Merleau

Appendix 9: A brief history of phenomenology

Phenomenology has been practised in numerous facets for centuries, but became well-known in the early 20th century as an inductive qualitative research approach embedded in the philosophical traditions of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Later Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), and others interpreted and developed these approaches further. Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is often named the "father" of phenomenology as a philosophy. His interpretation of phenomenology is called *Transcendental or Descriptive Phenomenology* and developed from post-World War II positivism, which it rejects. Husserl (Husserl, 1931) tried to explain how we gain knowledge of the world by studying our experience of it. These experiences can be perceptions, thoughts, memory or imagination. In Husserl's view, our experience is shaped by the concepts, thoughts, ideas, etc. we have of the experience. His statement of "going back to the things themselves" means that one has to go back to the phenomenon itself, seeing things as they really are without any prejudice. This can be achieved through reduction and also *epoché,* in which the researcher states his own experience with the phenomenon before gathering data to ensure that he will gather the experience of the participants and not his own, which is very important in this study due to my own experience in the field of virtual classroom teaching.

Giorgi points out that the word "experience" has a specific meaning within phenomenology (Giorgi, 1997). This is based upon the German language, in which the most influential contributions of phenomenology were written. Two concepts of experience are differentiated: *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* (Cilesiz, 2010). According to Cilesiz, "the former corresponds to the everyday use of the term experience in English, referring to events one participates in. Husserl's phenomenology is concerned with the latter concept". This means ''the full-fledged experience or act of consciousness in which something real is given to consciousness as what it genuinely

is" (2010, p. 496). As my mother language is German, I could relate to the fine difference in the words and thus understand how to apply the methodology correctly.

Husserl (1931) also first mentioned the *Intentionality of Consciousness*, meaning that every conscious act has an intention behind it. Husserl believed that there are two different ways of experiencing the world: firstly, *noesis* as the intentional process of consciousness with phenomenology explaining the objects and *noema,* with phenomenology describing the consciousness itself. This approach tries to combine scientific and psychological descriptions of the world with objectivity and subjectivity in a correlation. Both object and subject do not exist without each other. An example is that the world does not exist without men and there are no men without the world. Another example is that the world is a human world and men are beings in this world. So, to provide a basis for knowledge, the structure of the experience has to be investigated. For Husserl, all consciousness belongs to something (we are always conscious of something) to which it is directed. In other words, if we want to gather knowledge about the object of the consciousness, we have to examine this consciousness first. For example, we all have an experience of what a chair is, which is the *noesis* of the object chair.

Nevertheless, we cannot get knowledge of *noema* or *of the thing in itself* because of our unawareness of the psychological and scientific presumptions upon which our experience or *noesis* is based. Husserl claims that with radical reduction we can bracket off these preconceptions and thus find knowledge of the thing (the chair in this example) as it is in itself. To do so, he describes the process of epoché, which means that the researcher starts her enquiry by looking at her own experience of the world from a first person point of view, which I am using in this thesis, too. However, phenomenological reduction goes further, by trying to take away the theoretical or scientific interpretation which might be covering the phenomenon we

want to study and thus preventing us from gaining the knowledge of the phenomenon itself. Thus, the epoché tries to set us free from our everyday experience of the world.

Husserl's student Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) overruled the theory of knowledge known as epistemology, and adopted ontology, the science of being. Heidegger (1962) developed Husserl´s approach further by extending hermeneutics, the philosophy of interpretation, and created the methodology known as *Interpretive Phenomenology*. The focus of his studies is the concept of being in the world rather than knowing the world. Hermeneutics moves beyond the description or core concepts of the experience, and seeks meanings that are rooted in everyday life experiences. Heidegger tries to answer the question: "What is being?".

 A crucial difference from Husserl's approach is that Heidegger, who also was interested in interpreting and describing human experience, thought that bracketing was unjustified because hermeneutics presumed previous understanding. He strongly believed that it was not possible to deny our experiences related to the phenomenon we study, as he believed personal awareness was essential for phenomenological research. It is argued that Heidegger believed that human existence is a more important concept than human consciousness and human knowledge. In his philosophy, our understanding of the everyday world results from our interpretation of it. Therefore, interpretivist phenomenology claims that interpretations are all we have as describing a phenomenon is an interpretive process itself. *Descriptive (or transcendental) Phenomenology* following Husserl (1931) and *Interpretive (or hermeneutic) Phenomenology* are two major approaches in the field.

A third one, *Existential Phenomenology,* can be seen as the French development, since it was primarily established by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-

1980). Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre's co-worker and lover, said that Sartre became very passionate when hearing of Husserl's new method of phenomenological inquiry for the first time, as it presented him with the exact tool he had been searching for to articulate and communicate his considerations (Desan, 1965). This happened one night in Paris, when Raymond Aron, a French sociologist and philosopher, was drinking with the couple. Famously he mentioned phenomenology and used a beer mug to illustrate it by discussing the mug's properties and essence (Pillay, 2001). According to van Manen (2011), Husserl's phenomenology is concerned with transcendental essences, whilst Merleau-Ponty`s phenomenology is focused on lived experience. He states (van Manen, 2011, para. 3) that "the purpose of phenomenological analysis for Merleau-Ponty is not the intuition of essences" but rather it is "concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world". Merleau-Ponty thought that phenomenological inquiry can never produce unquestionable knowledge. In his words, "the most important lesson that the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction" (as cited in Langan, 1962, p. xvi).

Later, the Dutch Utrecht School of phenomenology combined characteristics of both Husserl's descriptive and Heidegger's interpretive approach. Nevertheless, the works of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre remain the most influential ones in the early 20th century and form the basis of present-day interpretation of phenomenological inquiry. More recent influential advocates of the two major approaches to phenomenology are van Manen (1990), who follows hermeneutic (interpretive) and Moustakas (1994) with his version of transcendental (descriptive) phenomenology. In addition, Giorgi (1997), Colaizzi (1978), Creswell (1998) and many others provided interpretations of and advice on how to analyse data in phenomenological research.