

Problems and Difficulties Faced by Chinese Students in Online English Classes

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Abstract. Online English class breaks through time and space constraints, provides a personalized learning experience, and has the typical characteristics of convenience, flexibility, and efficiency. Despite its advantages, the problems Chinese students face in online English learning hinder the smooth operation of online teaching. This study examines Chinese students' issues and difficulties in online English education during the pandemic. This research uses descriptive qualitative methods, interviewing 19 undergraduates and making teaching observations from 108 students. Based on the comments of online teachers and the results of online interviews with students, we found that a good teaching and learning experience in online classes could be affected by many factors other than teaching methods, such as the lack of visual feedback and technological help, network stability, private study space, self-discipline are mostly frequently reported. From the feedback from students in light of the author's teaching, this paper shows that inadequate internet facilities and ineffective visual classroom supervision have a crucial impact on the quality of online education. By analyzing students' responses from online surveys, this paper offers implications for teaching colleagues and university administrations who want to support improving the quality of online teaching and learning and gives an overall insight for the Ministry of Higher Education to overcome the common difficulties students face.

Keywords: Problems and difficulties; Online English class; Chinese students

1. Introduction

Distance learning is a familiar idea; however, its importance was reinvigorated during the pandemic. The lockdown forced the universities to reevaluate their teaching methodologies and testing methods. There is ample research available arguing that there is little difference between online teaching and face-to-face (F2F) teaching [13]. The work by Russel overviews 355 different papers, summaries, and reports and provides a comparative summary. Similarly, the work by Clark shows similar results. [2]. Work by Kamal demonstrated that F2F classes might improve the student's academic performance in English language classes [9] (Kamal et al. surveyed 103 students and cross-checked their performance with students' feedback), which is an essential finding concerning the author's work as this paper also focuses on teaching English language to university level Chinese students. Work from Heppen et al. [5] demonstrate that (at least in the context of Algebra students) online education is less convenient as compared to F2F education, and the students in the F2F environment were more likely to recover their credit as compared to online or distance education.

The highly detailed work by Muilenburg et al. [12] outlines the issues faced by students in online classes, and our work agrees with Muilenburg's work. The main issues identified by Muilenburg were Lack of social interaction, administrative/instructor issues, motivation and self-discipline, and lack of access to the internet and devices for distance learning. Work by Maria and Elena [11] shows one exciting insight into the effects of distance learning on the genders of students where they notice that the female students faced more technical issues as compared to their male counterparts; they also note that the students prefer teaching tools which they are already familiar to like PowerPoint. Research shows that when obstacles and difficulties are removed, both the students and teachers rate the online teaching experience very highly in the context of foreign languages. [8]. Jansem [8] and Bali [1] agree that self-discipline is vital for students learning foreign languages online. They also point out how important it is for the teachers to have mastered the online teaching tools beforehand to focus on the

lecture instead of having a tussle with the tools during class time. Based on prior research on online learning, this paper aims to identify Chinese student's problems and difficulties with online English learning and make inferences about improving the quality of online English classes.

2. Methodology

2.1 Context of Study

The main objectives of the class were to enhance their English language skills, which would help the students later in their professional and personal lives. For a typical Chinese high student seeking entry into the university, the English vocabulary count is in the range of 3000-4000 words; if the students have passed CET-4, they should have a vocabulary of about 4200 words [6]. However, not all students can pass CET-4, and usually, the passing average is around 52 percent [7]; for classes in this study, the passing percentages were around 33-46 percent. In our experience, the classes at the higher spectrum of CET performed better than the students who hovered at the lower spectrum, which is self-evident from the fact that students with higher base knowledge would perform better in the class.

Our class consisted of students in the second semester of their first university year. Their vocabulary may be at par (if not above) with the above levels as they have already spent a semester at the university level. Each class consisted of 36 students (on-campus classes had up to 50 students, but due to the pandemic, the online classes were limited to 36 students each), with a single teacher in charge. The students are taught English listening, speaking, writing, and teaching. The teaching time distribution is shown below.

Table 1. Teaching arrangement

Class type	Total units	Units taught	Self learning units	Periods per unit
Listening and Speaking	8	4	4	8
Reading and Writing	8	4	4	8

Before the pandemic, the reading and writing classes consisted of face-to-face classes where students would do some in-class reading and writing accompanied by homework. Similarly, the speaking and listening class was held in a language lab where students were provided listening material in a technology-assisted environment. They would listen to the media and then provide summary or important points of the listening media, which would cover both the listening and speaking parts of the class.

However, due to pandemic the face to face classes had to be abolished and access to the language lab was not possible as students were not allowed on campus and were confined to their homes. This meant that teachers had to improvise and move the class online. As neither the teachers nor the students had any prior online learning experience this led to some very interesting findings that this paper will share, where the author will summarize the problems as faced by the students and the teachers.

2.2 The Survey. This study adopted the survey interview method and the case study method by investigating the problems and difficulties encountered by students in learning English courses online, combined with observations found by teachers teaching online, and attempted to categorize and analyze the common issues and challenges reflected by students, to make inferences for peers and educational policymakers to improve the quality of students' online learning. The 19 student interviewees were randomly selected from 108 students in the author's three teaching classes after one semester of study to investigate their satisfaction with their online learning experience and whether they had any learning difficulties, technical problems, or obstacles. To discover more factors that adversely affect students' online learning effect and experience, we selected six students with the most difficulties to conduct in-depth interviews and case studies with them. The survey questions are shown below.

Table 2. The survey questions

Questions:	Responses
Q1:Are you satisfied with the learning effectiveness of the online English class?	Closed(yes/no)
Q2:Do you have any problems and difficulties in using online learning technology?	Closed(yes/no)
Q3:Are you satisfied with your lecturer of online learning ?	Closed(yes/no)
Q4: Please mention a few problems (2-3)that possibly affect your experiences of online class.	Open

3. Research findings

Following is the list issues faced by both the students and the teacher during the online English class. The students' names are withheld and only their initials are used for privacy reasons

3.1 Visual Cues. There are no visual cues from students; a large part of communication comes from body language, and if you remove the body language from the equation, the learning may diminish. Work from Tai [14] suggests that teachers must incorporate effective body language into their English language teaching to Chinese students. (We are sure this applies to students from other countries learning different courses. However, Tai's work is specifically cited here because it is very close to the authors teaching research). Tai argues that proper visual feedback can help students and teachers. Our experiences were similar, where the lack of visual feedback from the students hampered the teacher's ability to gauge the student's understanding level during the class. Combined with the fact that some students muted mics, it also resulted in reduced audio feedback. Combined with other issues (introverted students, lack of motivation, students zoning out), this caused complex problems, which we will return to later. WRY of first semester Civil Engineering mentioned that sometimes the students did not understand the teacher's point. The visual confusion was hidden from the teacher because the camera was only sometimes on for all the students. Had it been a face-to-face class, the teacher could judge whether the students understood as the teacher can only have cameras for some of the active students as the teacher herself is using her home network for the online class, which might not be able to support 50-65 students. In our assessment, this issue lies in the spectrum of Visual Cues and the need for digital infrastructure.

3.2 Lack of Technical Help. During on campus classes if there were any technical difficulties faced (for example projector/computer/presentation not working) there was always technical staff available who would fix the issue on the spot and the class could continue albeit with a minor hiccup. However, in the online teaching environment the technical issues would be associated with student's or teacher's home network or computer. This is not something that the technical staff can help with, and a technical issue with a single student meant that the class can not be stopped and the student was bound to miss out on the class. Although the lecture may be recorded which the student can have access to later on, however, the student misses out on the collective learning experience and a reduced ability to ask questions if he does not understand anything. Even if the students was able to fix the technical glitch and rejoin the class, they have already missed out on part of the lecture and felt a disconnect during the rest of the class.

3.3 Student-Specific Issues. Although student- specific issues in the online environment may appear different, they all signify the inability of the student to effectively learn during class due to reasons beyond the student's control. For example, LYG mentioned that once, during an online mathematics class, the teacher had to go for a compulsory COVID test, and they had to postpone the class.

3.4 No High-Speed Internet. Some of the students did not have access to high- speed internet, especially in the countryside, which meant they were receiving a lecture with deteriorated video and audio quality. LM a female student majoring in English language said that her on-campus internet wasn't fast enough, especially during the peak hours as all the students on the campus were online at the same time (as all of them had classes at the same time). The teachers themselves would notice a student disconnect and reconnect to the class again and again but would be unable to help the student, as pausing the class to wait for the student would mean wasting the time of other students.

3.5 Power Cuts. Similarly, some of the students also faced electric power cuts during the online class, which left them unable to attend the class. Sometimes the students would be notified that their community is running electrical maintenance and would not have access to the internet for a whole day. Sometimes this could be abrupt and the students wouldn't have time to find an alternative or even inform the teacher.

3.6 Private Study Space. Not all the students had access to a secluded study area where they could attend the online lecture without any outside interference. This was more common in students from the countryside and students from less affluent households. Students would sometimes excuse themselves from the class because their families had guests over, or because the current environment was not suitable for learning. There is one more dimension to this particular issue: sometimes the parents are not very supportive and would not provide their children with the best conditions suitable for studying and, the education of the children would be no way near the top of their priority list, this can be either purely due to the negligence from the parents or that the parents simply do not have enough resources. Such students would have access to a better learning environment on-campus but were failed by their circumstances during distance learning. The class divides and its effects on a student's chances to succeed in China [10] are well studied, and the effects of the class divide are not limited to online classes. However, the chasm is definitely widened and its effects are more pronounced in the online classes [3]. LYG, a male student from the mathematics department, mentioned that it is not easy for the students to communicate with the teacher as sometimes the ambiance may not be permit the students to provide audio feedback. For example, during the lockdown in Xi'an six students could be staying in the same dormitory room and every one of those students could be having a class simultaneously, which means that there is a lot of cross- talk, so the students would avoid turning on their mics. Even if it mends, they had to forego the opportunity to ask an important question.

3.7 Lack of Digital Infrastructure. Sometimes, the students simply wouldn't have access to good quality microphones/headphones or proper laptops/mobile phones for the online classes. This is also one of the dimensions of the class divide. This would effect the students ability to learn any subject .However, the effects will be more prominent in a linguistic class given English is not any student's first language. WJY, a female student majoring in English mentioned that she had a really bad online experience due to voice cut- offs and stutters caused by slow internet speed. This resulted in backlog of problems that the student would otherwise not have or would have easily solved in a face- to- face class. In the authors teaching experience, the student would sometimes have bad internet for an extended period of time which would result in absolutely no feedback from the students and the teacher would assume that the student understood everything ,whereas, in reality, the student had lost the communication link.

3.8 Self- Discipline. The online teaching environment is very kind to students with self- discipline and is one of the key factors in success in such an environment [4][15]. The authors teaching experience was also similar in that the self- motivated and disciplined students had higher class participation and were more attentive during the class. LYG mentioned that sometimes the students would just wake up in the morning and would not even bother to wash their faces or have breakfast and go straight to online classes. This meant that the students were not fully awake or mentally present in the class. The students would have their laptop screens facing them and the teacher could not see what the students were doing. They could be watching a movie or playing a game. SHY, majoring in English Literature mentioned that it was easy for them to forget about deadlines and assignments as they would be stuck in their rooms and would often lose track of time and day.

3.9 Stage Fright. There were two dimensions to the issue of stage fright in online environment .For some students, the online class environment provided a way to speak up in class because of the lack of visual feedback, which resulted in them overcoming their stage fright. Some students became over-conscious of how they would be perceived online. Therefore, their online performance would be influenced by excessive worries about their answers.

4. Conclusion

In summary, based on students' online learning feedback, this paper discusses some common difficulties and problems they face in online learning environments, such as the lack of digital facilities and technological help, network stability, private study space, self-discipline, and other dimensions that analyze the reasons affecting students' online learning experience. Online English teaching, unlike the traditional English classroom, relies entirely on information technology and online platforms. Therefore, teachers need to improve information technology continuously, innovative teaching methods and content, focusing on classroom interactivity to ensure student participation and teaching management. At the same time, the relevant education departments also need to consider the problems and difficulties of students' online learning, provide students with a better online learning environment and technical assistance, and jointly improve the quality of online teaching.

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