

Study on Building a New Online Education Model for College English in the Post-Pandemic Era

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ABSTRACT

College English teaching all over China was conducted online at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Online teaching will not completely replace or be replaced by offline teaching after the resumption of school, so, to obtain a better teaching effect in the post-pandemic era, a new online education model for College English teaching should be constructed. For this purpose, this paper first analyzes the pros and cons of online education, then gets an insight into students' perspectives on online education by conducting an online questionnaire. The results indicate that most of the students have detected the advantages and limitations of online education and they expect to combine online with offline education. At last, based on the above analysis and findings, this paper proposes an online-plus-offline education model with a hub-and-spokes teaching content with language proficiency as the hub and autonomous learning ability, digital literacy, critical thinking ability and cultural confidence as the spokes.

Keywords: College English teaching, online education, offline education

1. INTRODUCTION

People have been experiencing great suffering in their daily life, work and study since the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. Students all over China could not return to schools at all levels during the peak of the pandemic. However, China found its way to overcome the physical barriers to doing school education by building home-based online classrooms around the country. Online teaching posed a great challenge to both teachers and students at the first beginning for it was quite different from offline teaching, but it has played a significant role during the pandemic and even replaced offline education, becoming the main channel for college education. But here is the question: When students return to college with the COVID-19 being under great control, how will colleges balance online education and offline education to yield great benefits in College education? It is a pressing problem facing College English in the post-pandemic era.

2. PROS AND CONS OF ONLINE EDUCATION

Teaching has been developing in a dynamic process with its aims, modes and methods changing with the development of time and technology. The development of information technology has accelerated the wide application of the idea of "Internet plus education" and promoted educational modernization. At the peak of the pandemic, teachers and students all over the country have got access to online education in a totally different way

and got a chance to have great insights into the pros and cons of online education.

2.1. Pros of Online Education

Compared with offline education, online education has many advantages. First of all, online education has less dependence on time and space than offline education. With the wide application of mobile Internet, students have anytime-anywhere Internet access, thus being able to go beyond the limitation of space and make full use of time online. Second, online communication makes students feel more at ease. Students, especially those shy ones, feel under pressure in the offline classroom when they are required to answer questions or voice their opinions in English, because most of them are not confident enough to speak out loud in English or they are afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at. Therefore, online education may help those shy students to open up and engage in in-class interaction. Third, online education provides teachers and students with abundant resources and boundless information for reference with the help of various online education platforms and apps including online education platforms like China University MOOC, IMOOC, NetEase Open Class, online class management platforms like Ketangpai, Xuexitong and Dingding, various learning apps and their WeChat accounts like Keke English, Hujiang English. Fourth, online education provides an opportunity to cultivate students' awareness and ability of autonomous learning which is indispensable for encouraging sophisticated thinking, making reasonable plans and fostering ability of solving problems. It is

convenient for teachers to record their online lectures by some screen recording apps and post them online for students to watch and learn at their own pace. Meanwhile, students always have a way of networking online with teachers and classmates in class and out of class, which also promotes self-study.

2.2. Cons of Online Education

Compared with offline education, online education also has quite a few deficiencies. First of all, online education relies too much on Internet access and electronics. Without powerful support of Internet technology, it has a low possibility to guarantee nationwide-scale online teaching especially by the means of live broadcasting. Second, too much time online takes students away from the real world, which may pose threats to their health physically and mentally. Physically speaking, staring too long on the electronic screen may cause illness like eyes problem and neck problems. Mentally speaking, students may feel at a loss in the virtual world created by online education. It is more natural for people to live in a real-world doing real-life learning, exercising and socializing. Third, online classes are not strictly organized and controlled as offline classes due to a lack of face-to-face supervision by the teacher and a distraction of all kinds of Internet information popping out on students' screens during class time.

3. STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON ONLINE EDUCATION

To gain a better insight into students' understanding and viewpoints on online education, a questionnaire investigation was made to provide a reference for designing a new online education model for College English after the resumption of school.

3.1. Participants

The participants were first-year students in Xiamen University Tan Kah Kee College, who have experienced two semesters of college education with one semester offline and one semester online. These students may view online education and offline education more objectively for they haven't formed a fixed image of college education and are still fresh about new ways of college education. Their majors range from liberal arts to science and engineering, including International Trade, Accounting, Business Administration, Chinese, Internet of Things Engineering, Mechanical Design and Manufacturing and Automation, Electronic Information Engineering, and Civil Engineering.

3.2. Design

The questionnaire was conducted on Sojump, a platform for online questionnaire survey. QR code for the questionnaire was randomly sent to 300 students through WeChat or QQ, with 210 valid responses were received. Six questions were designed in simple words for the participants to easily understand. The participants could choose the provided items or write down their own opinions.

The following questions were presented in the questionnaire:

- (1) Have you ever had some online courses before the college carried out online teaching during the pandemic?
- (2) What is an ideal model for online education?
- (3) What is the greatest challenge for online education?
- (4) What is the greatest advantage for online education?
- (5) What is supposed to do with online education after the resumption of school?
- (6) Term paper was required as an evaluation of online class for students' final examination, which is quite different from the traditional model of the final examination for offline education. Which one do you prefer to adopt as an evaluation mode after the resumption of school?

3.3. Analysis

As to the first question, 10.48% of the participants show that they often had online courses while 69.52% seldom and 20% never. The statistic shows that 80% of the participants have exposed themselves to online courses at different levels before the pandemic. Online education is not totally brand new. It is an inevitable outcome of the development of information technology rather than the result of the pandemic. Therefore, it is a trend for College English teachers to apply advanced information technology to College English teaching and create "Internet plus" education environment.

As to the second question, 31.34% of the participants think that live broadcasting is the best and 54.76% think that a blended online teaching mode is a better option, combining forms of live broadcasting, recorded broadcasting and platform-based learning. The data indicates that most of the participants expect that they can interact directly with teachers in the online class. Live broadcasting is a good way to meet their expectation of in-class interaction, but live broadcasting alone is not appealing enough. Therefore, to blend live broadcasting with other forms makes online education more interesting and attractive.

As to the third question, the participants have different points of view about the disadvantages of online education, which can be classified into two groups including the objective factors and the subjective factors. Online education has obvious limitations such as Internet connectivity problem, health problem, and a lack of sense

of real life. These disadvantages are objective factors for students. 44.28% of the participants think that these factors post the greatest challenge to online education. However, 54.26% of the participants view subjective factors as the greatest challenge for their online education. They think they are easily distracted online or they are confused about how to study online. The result shows that more than half of the participants lack an ability of autonomous learning, which is one of the most important goal for college education. In traditional offline teaching, most students are over dependent on teachers. They follow the instructions of teachers step by step, going into a kind of comfortable bubble where they don't bother themselves to challenge or to make learning plans by themselves. Online teaching breaks the bubble suddenly. So, students feel at a loss facing a new learning model that demands the ability of autonomous learning. Therefore, online education is not only a challenge but also a chance to raise students' awareness and ability of autonomous learning.

The fourth question is designed to see how much students understand the role of online education. Only one in 210 participants thinks that online education has no any advantage, with the rest of the participants reaping different benefits from online education. 43.8% of the participants recognize the advantages of online education in the efficiency of time utilization and the lower limitation of space. 20.48% of the participants prefer the comfortable and relaxed in-class online context. Teachers may make the most of online education to encourage more students to practice oral English and voice their opinions.

The fifth question is designed to know how much online education is acceptable to students after the resumption of school. According to the data in Table 1, 4.76% of the participants expect online education to replace offline education, but it is not realistic to completely conceal offline education. 13.33% of the participants wish to return to traditional offline education without any online education. In fact, online education has become part of modern education and will continue to play a significant role in the future. In the fourth question, it is known that most students have discovered the advantages of online education, so it is reasonable for 80% of the participants to think that the best education model in the future will be composed of online and offline education.

Table 1. Students' choices about online education and offline education

No offline education	No online education	Combination of both	Others
4.76%	13.33%	80%	1.9%

The last question is designed to get to know to which evaluation do students prefer. It is hard to organize students to take their final examination online without proper supervision in the traditional way, that is a closed-book written examination mainly testing students' language proficiency based on listening, reading, translating and writing. Therefore, an open-book

examination was adopted, which was based on the form of term paper writing, is used to examine students' over-all ability including English language proficiency, the ability of critical thinking, writing and digital literacy. 30% of the participants prefer the traditional examination of the term paper writing. 66.9% of the participants think that term paper writing is better for it gives students a chance to do sophisticated thinking and express opinions systematically based on comprehensive research.

4. BUILDING A NEW ONLINE EDUCATION MODEL

4.1. Teaching Model: A Combination of Online and Offline Teaching

After the resumption of school, it is an urgent problem to be solved about how to effectively combine online and offline teaching so as to exert their respective advantages to optimize teaching effects. The overall design is presented in Fig. 1.

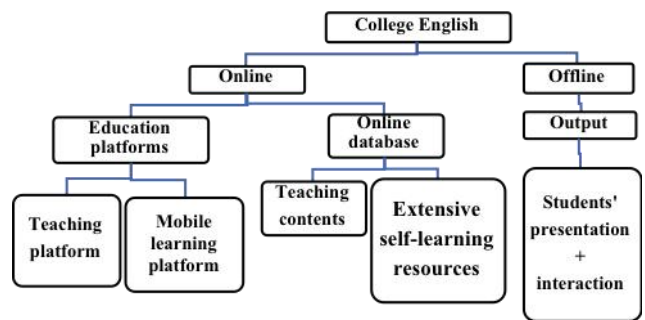


Figure 1. Overall design of the teaching model

4.1.1. Online teaching

The integration of network technology into teaching is a developmental trend of College English course and meets the expectations of most of the students. To take full advantage of online education, its pros and cons should be both taken into account. The first step is to set up two education platforms, a teaching platform and a mobile learning platform. The teaching platform is used as an online classroom for teachers to impart professional knowledge and answer students' questions. Teachers are supposed to adopt live broadcasting online, for webcasting is highly interactive and attractive to young people today. According to research, webcasting helps to improve the teacher-student interaction level and learning performance of online courses [1].

“The flexibility, convenience, and sometimes the necessity of using a mobile device to access learning content have become drivers in higher education” [2]. Thus, a learning platform based on mobile Internet should be set up for students to practice English. The mobile platform is

convenient for students to utilize fragmented time to practice English, especially listening and speaking. For example, teachers can build WeChat or QQ groups for students to practice oral English with any topics to talk about by using the voice function. WeChat or QQ is a good option as the mobile learning platform, because they are easy to operate, practical to use and powerful to offer Internet support.

The second step is to build an online database to provide teaching content and self-learning resources for students. First of all, teachers can upload their recorded online lectures and teaching materials to the database. When students master what they have learnt in the class, they are supposed to go into more extracurricular knowledge. To deal with this, the database providing extensive resources for students to do self-learning out of the class is essential. However, the teachers should carefully select the suitable resources rather than randomly get some materials somewhere on the Internet and then cram them into the database.

4.1.2. Offline teaching

Although the pandemic prevented the operation of offline teaching in the first semester of 2020, offline teaching cannot be replaced shortly. The advantage of offline teaching to achieve face-to-face, warm and humane communication is not available in online teaching. What's more, in the above questionnaire survey conducted, only 4.76% of the participants chose to cancel offline teaching, and 93.33% in total including 13.33% asking to cancel online education and 80% expecting to combine both, hoped that offline teaching would continue to play its role in the post-pandemic era.

However, In the new teaching mode, there is an obvious change to the role of offline class, which should become a place for students to make an output of their learning. For example, students can make personal or group presentations, play English dramas, have English debates or discussions with teachers and classmates in the offline class.

4.1.3. Assessment

For College English course, paper-based tests are a common way to evaluate students' performance, which are mainly used to assess students' mastery of in-class knowledge and English proficiency in the forms of objective questions and subjective questions. Although the grades of traditional paper-based tests cannot reflect students' overall competence, they are a significant index of students' proficiency of English language. The data from the questionnaire shows that 66.9% of the participants hope that term paper writing would replace the traditional paper-based test. However, the best assessment mode will be composed of the traditional and new styles, changing from a single paper-based test to a

diversified evaluation system, which contains teacher's evaluation of students' performance, teacher's self-evaluation, students' self-evaluation and students' evaluation of teaching.

4.2. Teaching Contents: Hub-and-Spokes Mode

As an English course, the teaching contents of College English should take language teaching and learning as its hub and the cultivation of other abilities as its spokes, no matter when it is online or offline. The whole structure is presented in Fig. 2.

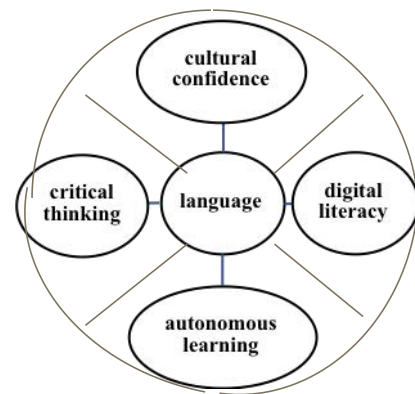


Figure 2. Hub-and-Spokes Mode

4.2.1. Language as the hub

The features of flexibility and openness of College English course make it possible to absorb new methods, new ideas and new demands into its teaching goals and process. For recent years, teachers have been focusing on the cultivation of students' various abilities required by the school or society. Gradually, its basic goal of improving students' English language proficiency has been neglected. It seems that things have got out of perspective. In 2007, *The Requirements for College English Course* by Department of Higher Education stressed the importance of cultivating students' English proficiency, especially listening and speaking ability [3]. In 2017, *Guidelines on College English Teaching* by the National Foreign Language Teaching Advisory Board made some amendments to teaching objectives of College English teaching without mentioning the cultivation of students' listening and speaking ability. According to Profession Wang Shouren [4], the listening and speaking ability was not mentioned in the file because objectively speaking, there has been an improvement on students' listening and speaking ability, and college teachers and students around the country have had a high awareness of improving listening and speaking ability and have turned the idea into conscious actions. However, as a College English teacher for more than eight years, I have

discovered that non-English majors as a whole haven't had a significant improvement in their language proficiency, especially in listening, speaking and writing. Ma Shuang [5] made an investigation into non-English majors ranging from undergraduates to doctoral students on their English language proficiency in 2018. The investigation showed that the English language proficiency of non-English majors was not good enough and the abilities of speaking, writing and translating were even poor.

I have followed my students over time to assess their language performance and critical thinking ability based on their in-class performance and writing. I detected that students' language proficiency limited their thinking ability. As to the in-class performance, if they were allowed to voice ideas in Chinese in class, most of them were capable of expressing themselves clearly and logically. When they were required to answer questions or

air opinions in English, most of them failed to deliver their ideas in a logical and systematic way. Gradually, their thinking was confined for they were accustomed to think within the limited zone where they knew how to translate some simple ideas into English. It is a vicious circle in which English language proficiency limits students' thinking which in turn limits their improvement of English language proficiency. Therefore, it turns out to be that non-English majors fail to perform well enough both in their English language proficiency and the ability of critical thinking.

Meanwhile, I found that most students didn't bother themselves to think deeply about a subject and made quite a few language mistakes in their writing assignments. As presented in Table 2, I simply classified the errors into four groups as basic grammatical problems, the usage of words, sentence structures and run-on sentences.

Table 2. Language errors

Categories	Examples
Grammatical problems	They try to get <u>a</u> grades. If <u>them</u> exchange, <u>them</u> will best know <u>themselves</u> . Everyone <u>are have</u> his ability. They <u>like do something</u> others. For example, you <u>can watching</u> TV and <u>cooking</u> dinner with your parents.
Lexical problems	For me, <u>successful</u> is the ability. You will <u>success</u> . Some think the grades can <u>react</u> the ability. I think the marks don't <u>respond</u> ability.
Sentence structure	Even have a nice work in the future. Communication and believe each other is most important. I think ability than grades important. Because the good grades, then I can get into a great college. The reason why they have many unhappy memories is that the generation gap.
Run-on sentences	Chinese culture is more conservative, we value patriotism, we seek collective ideas. So we spend more on our family, we take care our children, we put ourselves in the group. If I compete for this job, I will spare no effort to work hard, you will all my energy to the work and improve myself, I will try to learn from colleagues, work experience, learning to learn professional knowledge, learn how to become an excellent employees, at the same time, my ambition is not confined to this, I hope that through my efforts, get further development in the company, the career success.

The above table shows that many students have an English language deficiency. Even though non-English majors have learned English for more than ten years before going to college, most of them fail to have a good command of vocabulary, grammatical rules and the English way of thinking. Grammar and good vocabulary are two essential tools for students to master English, but it seems that most of the students fail to be well equipped with both of them. Most of the students have been reciting English words since they studied English. However, they recite English words mainly to handle all kinds of English tests and examinations, not to communicate, read and write. As a result, they build up vocabulary simply from the text books. Here is another problem. Most of the students simply recite the words by remembering their Chinese meanings without really understanding their meanings and

usage in a context. For example, some students used "react" or "respond" to translate "反映" in "成绩反映能力" when they expressed their idea that grade was an index of one's ability. Here is another example. "subsequent" is a new word in an article in the text book. Some students only know that it means "后来的, 之后的" In Chinese without learning how to use this word in the sentence, thus creating such sentence as "Subsequent they came to college, they spent much time on computer games". As to grammar, most of the students make kinds of basic mistakes in their oral or written tasks. Most of the students are allergic to grammar and consider grammatical rules as some sort of boring formulas. Therefore, grammar should be taught dedicatedly from the beginning. The fact that most students get used to think in a Chinese way when

writing an English article is also an alarming problem. Run-on sentences are not uncommon in their writings. Besides, they may also create some English sentences that are not understandable to native speakers but easily comprehensible to the Chinese. For example, they may use “I think ability than grades important” to mean “I think ability is more important than grades”.

Therefore, College English teaching online should first focus on language teaching and practicing. To build a knowledge system of English course is like to construct a mansion, of which language should be viewed as the foundation. Without a strong foundation, the mansion may collapse at any time.

4.2.2. Other abilities as the spokes

As a bicycle wheel cannot go without spokes, a student is unlikely to become a qualified talent required by the country without developing other skills and capabilities. The teaching goal of College English is not only to cultivate students' English proficiency, but also to foster their critical thinking ability, develop autonomous learning ability, enhance digital literacy and improve cultural confidence. These abilities meet the needs required by the country, society, school and personal development.

4.2.2.1. Autonomous learning ability

Autonomous learning mainly refers to the learning with the individual students as the main body using kinds of resources including teaching contents and the teachers as a guide doing remote tutoring and answering questions [6]. Although teaching reforms are constantly deepening, traditional teaching concepts are deeply rooted. Teachers are still the master of classroom teaching. Teachers often pay more attention to the transfer of knowledge and neglect to help students establish metacognitive awareness and learning strategies. Students are often just listeners of teaching content and bystanders of teaching behavior, and the awareness of autonomous learning is not strengthened [7]. According to the data on the third question in the questionnaire analyzed in the third part of this paper, many students lack the autonomous learning ability. An existing investigation made by Wu Fuying [8] also found that college students have a weak awareness of autonomous learning and unclear learning goals, and lack good autonomous learning habits and effective self-monitoring. The essential role of the teacher is neither to impart knowledge nor teach students how to learn knowledge or skills, but to help students learn how to find a way to learn. Online education provides a chance for both teachers and students to re-think their roles in the class.

4.2.2.2. Digital literacy

Digital literacy requires students not only to know how to use the latest technology, but also to improve the ability to search, select, evaluate and process information [9]. Providing abundant learning resources is one of the advantages of the Internet, but it also poses a great challenge. For example, with the development of the Internet, students are easy to obtain a lot of information and learning resources through the Internet, but, when faced with the vast learning resources within reach, some students are confused and do not know how to use these learning resources. Some students linger on various learning platforms in the hope of getting access to all kinds of learning resources, but the result is that they, instead of going into the resources deeply, stay only on the surface, like a dragonfly skimming the surface of the water. That is because there is a lack of systematic, in-depth, and solid learning. As a result, online English teaching should take as one of its objectives equipping students for a new age of Internet by cultivating their digital literacy.

4.2.2.3. Critical thinking ability

Critical thinking ability is an important feature of international talents. Since Professor Huang Yuanshen [10] indicated that English majors in China generally suffered an absence of critical thinking ability, English teachers have been making efforts to cultivate students' critical thinking. We all know that extensive reading can increase students' knowledge and broaden their horizons, but, if they read books without reflecting, they will become slaves of knowledge without independent perspectives. Only with the ability to reflect and evaluate can they gain considerable insight and build their own knowledge system. College English teaching is a powerful way to cultivate students' critical thinking by learning, comparing and evaluating Chinese culture and English culture, because language is not only a tool for communication, but also an organ of thought. Chinese and English, having different language systems, tell the stories of Chinese nation and English nation, reflecting different ways of thinking and cultural customs.

4.2.2.4. Cultural confidence

Cultivating and enhancing college students' confidence In Chinese culture has been an urgent concern in the national education strategy in recent years. Cultural confidence is proposed based on the reality of China's development and the dream of realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. It is not a fad or a formal slogan, but a nation's deeper and more lasting power [11]. As an important window for showing Chinese and Western culture and values, College English course can explore ideological and political elements in the teaching, guide students to critically understand their own culture and

Western culture, and essentially strengthen Chinese cultural identity and cultural confidence. Chinese cultural confidence is a great force to win the overall battle against the COVID-19 pandemic and a great power for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Therefore, cultivating students' Chinese cultural confidence is one of the urgent needs of online English teaching in the post-pandemic era.

5. CONCLUSION

Online education has its advantages in time efficiency, space flexibility and resource access, but it cannot take place of offline education due to its major disadvantages of over-dependence on the Internet connectivity, virtual world and electronics. Based on the statistics collected from the questionnaire, we know that most students have discovered the pros and cons of online education and expect to make the best use of the advantages of online education in the future by combing online and online teaching as a new College English teaching mode. Taking language teaching as the center of the mode, College English teachers are supposed to cultivate students autonomous learning ability, digital literacy, critical thinking ability and Chinese cultural confidence so as to cultivate a generation of patriots, problem-solvers, independent learners, and wise thinkers. However, the effectiveness and practicability of the new model have to be further tested in practice.

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