

Existing Problems and Features of Distance Education in English

Lingxi Wang^{1, †}, Xinyi Zhao^{2, *, †}

¹English, Chongqing Institute of Foreign Studies, Chongqing, China

²Information Science and Engineering, Hunan First Normal University, Changsha, China

*Corresponding author email: 20152794@stu.nmu.edu.cn

[†]These authors contributed equally.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to discuss the advantages and existing problems of distance education in English. This article is based on the problem that students and teachers are unable to take offline courses during the COVID-19 pandemic, and focuses on the impact of distance education in English. According to statistics released by UNESCO, more than 290 million students around the world have had their schooling disrupted by school closures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. China, a country with a population of 48 million university students [1], also started the era of distance courses after the sudden outbreak of the virus, in order to cope with the problem that students and teachers cannot return to school for traditional face-to-face courses. How to improve the efficiency of Distance learning in English during the pandemic is a pressing issue, as English education is essential for Chinese students. In fact, improving the efficiency of Online English education needs to be promoted by students, teachers and policies. We need to be aware of the limitations and weaknesses of distance education participants and implementers. This article gives some practical solutions to improve the efficiency of Distance learning.

Keywords: Distance education, Online English learning, advantages and disadvantages of distance learning

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, more college students use online platforms such as MOOC to learn English, which has flourished since the early 1990s with the rise of the Internet. It ensures the flexibility [2], provides lifelong learning [3] and reduces education costs both for students and institutions [4]. Compared with traditional offline English courses, online English courses have obvious advantages. It breaks through the limitations of time and space, and provides students with more convenient and personalized learning.

As the sudden outbreak of the epidemic seriously disrupted the education order, the trend of online learning is accelerating [5] (OECD, 2020a). 113 Governments worldwide restricts the physical contact in educational institutions and consequently 849 million children from preschool through high school were unable to continue their education [6] (UNESCO, 2020). According to the Education for all Global Monitoring Report 2020, since the outbreak of COVID-19, the average length of school suspension around the world has reached 22 weeks,

accounting for two-thirds of the total school day, leaving nearly 24 million school-age children and adolescents at risk of being out of school.

In order to cope with this situation, many institutions and schools adopt advanced electronic delivery systems maintain the study. These include broadcast television, video and audio teleconferencing, asynchronous learning networks [7], with which students communicate with classmates and instructors and absorb knowledge. However, some people concerned that distance education would disrupt the quality of education. Carr shows that attrition rates range from 10 to 20 percent higher in online courses than in its traditional face-to-face courses counterpart [8]. He claims that less than half of the students completed their remote education programs. This situation could be explained by the quality of online courses delivery. Despite the increased investment in educational technology and the high returns of it, few teachers use technology regularly in their teaching and the impact of computers on existing curricula is still very limited [9].

Indeed distance education is not just about instructors

telling the lecture in front of the screen, but about the quality of online education. In particular, instructors should improve their understanding of educational technology, stimulate students' learning motivation, and establish a high-quality teaching mode. Besides, for students, learning online sometimes represents lack of interaction with other learners and instructors, high chance of distraction, and so on.

Most online education platforms fail to provide efficient online English teaching and rationalize educational resources. For example, online English education institutions have low standards for hiring foreign teachers, and their labor contracts and foreign teacher certificates are easy to obtain. Most of them are just trying to attract Chinese students with foreign faces. Moreover, the educational methods of foreign teachers are different from the needs of Chinese students because of the different examination modes and systems between China and foreign countries.

Hence, this article is going to take the current online English courses for college students as the main research object, take the actual learning effects of college students, summarize the advantages and existing problems of current online English courses for college students, and propose a feasible solution.

The article aims to explore the issues that college student face in online English course, and provide suggestions on the improvement of the efficiency of distance education in English.

2. CHINESE COLLEGE STUDENTS' ENGLISH LEARNING

Most foreign language learners in China have learned English and the English penetration rate of College students in China is very high. According to the Steering Group Office for Survey of Language Situation in China, 390.16 million people in mainland China choose to learn English, representing 93.8% [10]. 9.09 million college students will take cet-4 and CET-6. College English, as the most important part of college foreign language education, is a compulsory public basic course for most non-English majors in undergraduate education and plays an irreplaceable role in talent training [11].

Following the COVID-19 outbreak, It becomes common to learn English online as China's Ministry of Education has ordered universities to suspended class, ongoing learning.. The policy requires college English courses to shift from offline teaching to online teaching. MoE's data released that there are as many as 22 online platforms supporting online teaching services in colleges and universities, including 20 online open course platforms and 2 online open practice teaching platforms. College English online course is a new teaching mode based on modern educational technology, which combines student self-study and teacher guidance, and

takes distance interaction between teachers and students as the main form. Due to the outbreak of the epidemic, offline English teaching has suddenly changed to distance education, which has brought great challenges to college English teaching.

3. THE FEATURES OF ENGLISH LEARNING IN CHINA

3.1. Imitation

Second language acquisition researchers have found that many learners learn a language through imitation. Imitation is very important for language learners to master the pronunciation and intonation of a new language. For advanced learners who want to improve their pronunciation, listening and imitating in a language class can be very valuable [12]. Imitation is a very important learning strategy in the initial stage of language learning and also a significant aspect in the formation of early language system [13]. The differences between languages also show the importance of imitation.

3.1.1 Phonology

As a variant of English, Chinglish has obvious phonetic characteristics. Every language has its own pronunciation rules and systems, so native speakers of Chinese often pronounce English differently than standard English. In addition, the pronunciation of individuals is also different, so Chinglish has different characteristics among every individual. English is a intonation language, which can be divided into two basic sounds: rising and falling. The intonation of English plays a very important role in oral English, which can be used to express people's feelings, attitudes and intentions. As a tonal language, Chinese has the function of distinguishing meanings. The fifth scale in mandarin divides tones into level tone, rising tone, falling-rising tone, falling tone and light tone. A Chinese character with different tones has different meanings. Because of these factors, Most English learners in China have the pronunciation habit of Chinglish.

3.1.2 Lexis

Certain things or concepts are often found in one culture but not in another, which results in the asymmetry of vocabulary among different cultures. In addition, in different cultural backgrounds tend to have an understanding of common things and phenomena. However, it is in different cultural circles, so the seemingly similar words in fact often appear due to cultural differences and the formation of variations and non-equivalence phenomenon. (For example, Chinese people often introduce their spouts with the word "lover", which in English means "mistress".)

3.2. Dependence on multiculturalism

Language is a part of culture and the two are closely linked. Without the understanding of cultural background, it is difficult for language learners to improve their practical language application ability. It is necessary for English teachers and learners to understand the cultures of different English-speaking countries. Learners and teachers should accept and understand these foreign cultures. In teaching English, Chinese and foreign cultural differences often overlooked by some instructors, this has led to the situation that Chinese students communicate with English native speakers in Chinese way of thinking. Even with the correct pronunciation, accurate vocabulary and grammar, in actual communication, Chinese English learners also cannot accurately express their ideas, even be misunderstood by foreigners. How to solve this problem? It is to integrate foreign culture into English teaching.

4. THE FEATURES AND ADVANTAGES OF ONLINE ENGLISH EDUCATION

Online learning has become popular because of its potential for providing more flexible access to content and instruction at any time, from any place. [14](Mayleen Dorcas B. Castro & Gilbert M. Tumibay, 2019). This article tries to summarize the features of the online English courses for college students.

4.1 Richness

With the popularity of the Internet and smart phones, there are more and more online courses for college students' English learning, such as: vocabulary memory courses, practical writing courses, grammar explanation courses, and so on. The richness of the courses means that there are more opportunities for college students to choose, and they can study the lessons according to their interests or shortcomings. Online English teaching is based on the Internet to achieve teaching, so both instructors and students could complete teaching and learning in their own homes. Global English teachers are available to English learners all over the world. Online English training institutions in China could employ local teachers from European and American countries through the Internet, as well as professors of English majors in Chinese colleges.

4.2 Convenience

Another major feature of online English courses is its convenience. Undergraduates can study courses anytime and anywhere. They don't need to be limited to a certain classroom or have to study English courses in a certain period of time like traditional classrooms. This greatly gives them the freedom to control their own time.

4.3 Targeted

In China, due to the large number of students, traditional English classrooms cannot take into account the levels of students at all levels. However, the richness and convenience of online English courses give students great opportunities. They can use intelligent algorithms to find out the weaknesses of their current English level, so as to choose the right course and improve themselves.

4.4 Flexibility

Because online English teaching is relying on gradually mature Internet technology. So if instructors and learners have independent network and electronic equipment can participate in English online training, and they can learn English anytime and anywhere. Distance education provides a flexible and effective learning environment, making it easier for learners to develop self-study ability [15]. Distance education plays an important role in lifelong learning because it provides a flexible learning environment that enables learners to learn knowledge independently of place and time [16].

4.5 Low cost

For learners, they can find courses at different levels on the online platform. Compared with traditional education, the price of online education is much lower. Through distance learning, institutions can cater to a wider range of students' needs. For institutions, the educational resources that students need would be fewer than traditional ones, because online courses can accommodate many more students than offline courses, which ultimately leads to lower costs for institutions [17].

5. EXISTING PROBLEMS OF DISTANCE ENGLISH EDUCATION

Distance education is booming with the application of science and technology in distance education. The construction of distance education resources corresponding to this has become an urgent demand to educators and learners. Distance education resources play an extremely important role in distance education, which is the guarantee of distance education quality. There are many defects such as lack of effective resources and poor quality in the field of English distance education. The paragraphs below are going to discuss problems related to digitalization of teaching, distribution of educational resources, teaching ability of foreign teachers, classroom interaction.

First, most distance courses relies on basic technical knowledge of digital media that many teachers do not possess. During the pandemic, teachers are teaching through distance learning platforms. They are expected to be familiar with basic computer programs and associated operating procedures. If ones have not received any basic

information and communication technology training, quality of online classes will be affected. Besides, distance education resource implementers ignore the improvement of their own ability. Education is done by front-line teachers, only teachers can understand students and their teaching environment. If teachers still use traditional face-to-face teaching methods in online education, teaching efficiency would be low. The essence of distance education is a kind of educational behavior, which can not be produced without teachers. Educational resources need to generate value through the re-creation of front-line teachers. The teacher's creative ability comes from the teacher's professional ability, the ability to use science and technology, and the ability to integrate subjects and information. In general, teachers' knowledge of distance education is an indispensable part of distance education.

Second, educational resources are unequally distributed. For most urban families, home Internet and computers are not a problem. But for some rural families in remote mountainous areas, having access to the Internet is already a luxury. It is even more difficult to broadcast online courses smoothly. Data show that the Internet penetration rate in China's rural areas is 30.4% [18]. Online English teaching has high requirements for the network environment. If the teacher's or the students' operation is not skilled, or the network is not stable, will cause the stuck picture, the not synchronized sound. Compared with other subjects, such as science subjects which require experiments, Online English education is more dependent on theoretical teaching. For chemistry teaching, experiment is an essential part. However, the limitation of distance teaching makes chemistry students unable to do experiments by themselves, which leads to the decrease of learning efficiency. On the contrary, for English teaching, there are almost no experiments for students, but more attention is paid to students' control of the language.

Third, the qualification and teachers' continuous development are concerning. In recent years in order to strengthen English standardization, training institutions or organizations employ English-native speaker as teachers. Foreign teachers could better guide students to learn English. While a large proportion of the foreign teachers are excellent teachers who bring authentic English and advanced teaching methods, some are less qualified without professional training in education. Many organizations have obscure procedures and standard for recruiting foreign teachers. The recruitment and management standards of foreign teachers in education and training institutions are also lax, which undoubtedly promotes irresponsible foreign teachers to keep irresponsible attitude. As native English speakers, foreign teachers could surpass most Chinese teachers in terms of language mastery, but their mastery of grammar is even worse than that of Chinese English teachers. Generally speaking, foreigners speak grammatically, but

the only difference from non-native speakers is that native speakers' grasp of grammar is perceptual, innate and subconscious. Non-native speakers, on the other hand, must learn grammar systematically if they want to master a language well. As a result, the teaching methods of foreign teachers do not meet the needs of Chinese students.

Fourth, teachers and students lack of effective interaction. Learning involves the accumulation of experiences across a variety of formal and informal settings with unique strengths that complement each other [19] (Colley, Hodgkinson, & Malcolm, 2003; National Research Council, 2009). China is a populous country, according to the National Bureau of Statistics, the number of students in general undergraduate and junior colleges in 2020 reached 48 million [20] (National Bureau of Statistics of China). It is a huge problem for such a large group of students to actively participate in interactions in multiple situations when learning English online. In addition, [21] Darmawansah & Indartono's (2019) study who found out that there are four factors of engagement effects in online learning, including skills engagement, emotion engagement, participation engagement, and performance engagement. Among the four factors, emotional engagement and participation engagement should be focused most. For emotional engagement, students' activities may include sharing their daily activities, giving comments and feedback during the session, having a learning effort, and good intention and feeling in the session. The factor of participation engagement involves activities such as asking and initiating questions, engaging in the discussion, and knowing their teacher and other classmates [22](Shih et al., 2013). The huge number of students and learning data make effective interaction and feedback difficult to occur, which has led to the current students Online learning feels boring and difficult to persist.

6. CONCLUSION

In view of the above problems, here are suggestions from three aspects:

6.1. Government:

The government should increase the investment of education, and improve the infrastructures of countryside school. For poor but diligent college students, relevant departments should not only implement subsidy policies to provide life guarantees for them, but electronic equipment should be rewarded so that they have opportunities to learn online and broaden horizons.

The corresponding mechanism should pay attention to the recruitment and selection of teachers, especially the establishment of appropriate standards for foreign teachers' teaching qualifications. Besides, the mechanism should arrange further study for foreign teachers to

improve their teaching quality. Set performance standards, if they are unqualified, they will not be allowed to teach.

The government should be open to teaching methods that are different from domestic English online classrooms, and encourage foreign teachers to have a deep understanding of Chinese students, and creatively design teaching methods with Chinese and Western cultures. Educational organization: Online education courses are generally developed by teams. When developing and designing courses, each stage of online education should be organized efficiently: for example, how to set up the context before class to stimulate students' interest in learning; how to systematically set the content between each class hour to ensure efficient teaching in class; implement guidance for homework after class. Answering questions, guiding efficient cooperation among team members, etc., all require the development of design and technical personnel. Online teaching organization is even more complicated than offline classrooms.

6.2. Educational organization:

Online education courses are generally developed by teams. When developing and designing courses, each stage of online education should be organized efficiently: for example, how to set up the context before class to stimulate students' interest in learning, how to systematically set the content between each class to ensure integrated teaching, implement guidance for homework, answer each student's question, guide efficient cooperation among team members and so on, all require lots of work. Online teaching organization is even more complicated than offline classrooms.

6.3. Teachers:

Teachers should take the initiative to learn and master the theory of Distance Education and related technology application capabilities, break the deadlock of moving traditional classrooms to online, understand students' motivations for learning, and create innovative courses.

For the learning of language subjects, teachers should pay attention to interaction, communicate effectively with each student, set up interesting activities or group work for them, and encourage them to know each other and study together, so as to apply and practice master language learning.

Online courses for language subjects are different from other subjects, "it is important to help language learners understand the importance of diversifying their learning experiences by selecting and using out-of-class learning activities and venues in ways that compensate for what is lacking in their in-class learning [23](Chun Lai, Wei Min Zhu & Gang Gong, 2014) ", therefore,

online English courses bear with more important missions. I hope that the article could provide help to the reform of online English courses for college students, so that college students can learn English more easily and happily.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ministry of Education, National Base Situation-Number of Students of Formal Education by Type and Level, 2020, retrieved from: http://en.moe.gov.cn/documents/statistics/2019/national/202006/t20200611_464803.html.
- [2] M. Sadeghi, A Shift from Classroom to Distance Learning: Advantages and Limitations, *International Journal of Research in English Education*, 4:1, 2019, pp 80-88.
- [3] Alharthi. M, (2020). Students' attitudes toward the use of technology in online courses. *International Journal of Technology in Education (IJTE)*, 3(1), 14-23.
- [4] MMS de Oliveira, AST Penedo and VS Pereira, Distance education: advantages and disadvantages of the point of view of education and society, 2018, DOI: 10.5585/Dialogia.n29.7661.
- [5] OECD, OECD Secretary-General's Report to Ministers, 2020, retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1787/22223843>.
- [6] UNESCO, GLOBAL EDUCATION MONITORING REPORT 2020, 2020.
- [7] Alfred P. Rovai, *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning Building Sense of Community at a Distance*, Vol. 3, 2002, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v3i1.79>
- [8] Carr. S, As distance education comes of age, the challenge is keeping the students. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2000.
- [9] Yong Z, Gary A. Cziko, *Teacher Adoption of Technology: A Perceptual Control Theory Perspective*, vol. 9, 2001.
- [10] Steering Group Office for Survey of Language Situation in China, *Survey data on the use of Chinese language and characters*, 2006.
- [11] Steering Committee on College Foreign Language Teaching, *College English Curriculum Requirements*, 2020.
- [12] Nina, S., Patsy M. Lightbown, *Form-Focused Instruction: Isolated or Integrated*, 2021.

- [13] C. Fraser, U. Bellugi, R. Brown, Control of grammar in imitation, comprehension, and production, vol. 2, 1963, pp 121-135.
- [14] Castro, M.D.B., Tumibay, G.M. A literature review: efficacy of online learning courses for higher education institution using meta-analysis. *Educ Inf Technol* 26, 1367–1385 (2021).
- [15] A. Alper, The effect of cognitive flexibility on students' achievement and attitudes in web mediated problem based learning, *vol.33(148)*, 2008, pp 49.
- [16] Lou. Y, Learning to solve complex problems through between-group collaboration in project-based online courses. *Distance Education*, 2004, pp 49-66.
- [17] MMS de Oliveira, AST Penedo and VS Pereira, Distance education: advantages and disadvantages of the point of view of education and society, 2018, DOI: 10.5585/Dialogia.n29.7661.
- [18] CNNIC, The 46th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China, 2020, retrieved from: http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-09/29/content_5548175.htm.
- [19] Colley, H., Hodkinson, P., & Malcolm, J. (2003). Informality and formality in learning: A report for the learning and skills research centre. London, England: Learning and Skills Research Center.
- [20] Ministry of Educaiton, National Base Situation-Number of Students of Formal Education by Type and Level, 2020, retrieved from: http://en.moe.gov.cn/documents/statistics/2019/national/202006/t20200611_464803.html.
- [21] Darmawansah & Indartono, S. (2019). The Influence of Instructional Syntax to Engage EFL Students in Online Learning Environment. *Indonesian Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, 4(1), 121-132
- [22] Shih, H.-F., Chen, S.-H. E., Chen, S.-C., & Wey, S.-C. (2013). The Relationship among Tertiary Level EFL Students' Personality, Online Learning Motivation and Online Learning Satisfaction. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 103, 1152-1160.
- [23] Lai, C., Zhu, W. and Gong, G. (2015), Understanding the Quality of Out-of-Class English Learning. *TESOL Q*, 49: 278-308. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.171>