

Why are College Students Dropping out in Online English Writing?

—A case study of Pigai.org

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Abstract—Online English writing has gained popularity in China's college English education. With pigai.org as a leading online platform, online English writing is affecting English teaching and learning in positive ways in China. However, when we celebrate its contribution, a high attrition rate in online writing can't be neglected. This paper first reviews literature to set theoretical frame for causes of high attrition rates in online classes and then surveys factors for Chinese college students online English writing low retention phenomenon, and finally it explores solutions to win back students to online writing.

Keywords—English writing; online; attrition; motivation

I. INTRODUCTION

Educational technology is a revolution. Since their advent, computer and the Internet have always had a strong influence on teaching and learning. From the early CAI classroom to the recent MOOC, the educational technology changed and benefited teachers and students as well, generating new reforms on ideology and practice in the arena of education and challenging students' learning and teachers' instruction. English education has always been a forerunner in this technology related reform. It has covered almost all aspects of the education. While some educators welcome and enjoy this new learning trend, others begin to notice a phenomenon that learners enrolled in online learning may later experience attrition and drop out. It has become a big concern to retain online students for language teachers who are engaged in online teaching.

A report in early 2014, however, found that four in ten academic leaders in higher education settings in the United States felt that it was more difficult to retain online learning students than F2F students[1]. Online learners, in fact, are reported to have higher noncompletion, withdrawal, or drop-out rates (i.e., attrition) compared to their counterparts taking F2F campus-based courses[2]. Drop-out rates for MOOCs often exceed 90 percent. In fact, MOOC completion rates of a mere 5 percent are not uncommon[3]. What about the situations in China's online writing practice? Pigai.org, the most widely used online writing website powered by Beijing Ciku Company and technologically supported by corpus and cloud computing, has offered convenience to college English-learners as well as English teachers to practice, analyze and

correct the mistakes existing in students' English writing. Teachers value pigai.org's auto grading and analysis of students common writing problems. Students welcome the immediate feedback of scores and comments from the system. The use of this new technology in writing course also brings forward a new teaching model –web-assisted and corpus-based, which may be the new trend of the new digital age, in which the teaching model must be propelled by the internet technology[4]. Many universities make it a rule that students use of this online writing system should be counted as part of their final scores for English class, which resulted in a high enrollment of pigai.org online writing program. However, without this rule, would students retain on the system? How much attrition would come? With investigation and analysis, it's hopeful that more attention should be paid to those students who are experiencing difficulty in online writing and we come up with ideas to contribute to the effectiveness of online writing.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The rapid rise in online course enrollment sees a growing concern for low retention rates in many online courses and programs. Online student retention (the number of students following through a course or program; also called “persisters”) is a highly distressing issue for institutions, administrators, and educators all over world. In fact, it has been cited as one of the greatest weaknesses in online education.

One of the biggest concerns in online education emanates from the excessively high attrition rates in fully online programs compared with traditional classes[5]. Online courses have a 10% to 20% higher failed retention rate than traditional classroom environments[6]. Review of existing literature indicates that online courses have several social, technological, and motivational issues existing from both the learners' and the faculty's perspectives. Studies on factors of learners online attrition began in the mid-1980s when television and correspondence courses thrived.

Chief among the factors contributing to attrition is lack of student motivation, conflicts of time, and lack of interaction or support from the instructor[7]. As a heavily self-directed and self-learned learning mode, motivation or lack thereof can be a deciding factor in online learning attrition because in many

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cases motivation and accountability are closely related to student retention in online programs. Motivation in online courses can be directly linked to the overall course design, as well as the students' own aptitude and attitude toward learning and technology. Studies reveal that several factors such as the time needed to complete modules, lack of real world issues and contexts in course materials, and problems with accessibility and availability of resources and support systems create motivational constraints [8].

According to Roblyer and Ekhaml, several studies indicate that students and faculty alike have huge doubts regarding the depth of interaction possible in an online environment[9]. This creates a serious discomfort in the minds of learners and educators when it comes to embracing online delivery systems. Literature reviews also support that enhancing the social culture of an online class goes a long way in allowing students to continue with their e-learning and complete their education.

In addition, the survey by Xu and Jaggars touched on reasons such as lack of both faculty and peer support and interaction, sense of isolation, time constraints, technical difficulties, and a general lack of structure as common reasons for dropping out of online courses[10].

Bonk & Khoo (2018) surveyed a wide body of literature with the intention to identify the varied reasons and explanations offered for learner attrition[11]. They concluded three categories of factors: (1) Individual, (2) Course-Related, and (3) Technological. The bulk of the factors affecting retention in online courses are related to individual factors involving learners' assumptions, motivation, skills, background experiences, and personal circumstances that impede their participation in online courses. Individual factors are about learner circumstances, learning skills and coping skills. Course-related factors focus on course design and communication factors, faculty responsiveness, peer interaction, learning preference. Technological factors include course-related technical issues, systems, and designs.

This category of factors work well for educators to understand the learner and the learning process in perspectives of students' motivation and internal drive, course design and teachers' belief of online learning, and students technical familiarity and expertise. It will be used as the theoretical framework for the research design of this paper.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

A. Research Questions

Attrition is an issue that can not be ignored in online education. Researchers have found high rate of attrition in distance education and MOOC. Online writing, a big part of school based online language education in current China, is seldom researched on the issue of attrition though researches on its linguistic and pedagogic implications are abundant. Composing text is a complex and difficult undertaking because it requires the mindful deployment and coordination of multiple affective, cognitive, linguistic, and physical operations to accomplish goals associated with genre-and task-specific conversations, audience needs, and an author's communicative purpose[12] (Barbara & Nell, 2012). Online

writing has its own unique features that may or may not relate to learners decision of quitting using it. Based on the above considerations, the research questions in this paper are as follows:

- 1) What is the general attrition rate of Chinese college students' online writing on pigai.org?
- 2) What are the factors leading to students' decision of dropping out of online writing?

B. Participants

The participants in the study are 1445 third-year non-English majors from China West Normal University. By the time the study was conducted, they had completed the two-year college English education and used pigai.org for online writing for two years. They had much personal experience of this online writing program and could decide objectively and independently whether they would like to continue using it or not. To gain data variety, we try to include participants from as many departments as possible. They are from 15 departments ranging from arts to science with 20 different teachers as their online writing instructors. Of the 1445 participants, female students take up 61.3%.

C. Tool

Questionnaire is the only tool in this research. Apart from the general background information like department and gender, the questionnaire, inspired by Bonk & Khoo's (2018) category of attrition factors, consists of five parts. The first part has just one question which says "Will you continue using pigai.org for your English writing practice in the future?". This question tells us the potential attrition rate in the researched online writing program. The second part is individual factors which include 6 questions about learners' cognition, strategy, attitude, beliefs. The third part is 5 questions of course-related factors involving instructors' engagement in the course, design of writing tasks. The fourth part is technological factors involving 4 questions about computer and internet related reasons for learners' implementation of online writing. The last part is an open question that asks participants to write down their biggest barrier in online writing.

D. Data Collection

The questionnaire is completed on www.wjx.cn, a professional platform for questionnaire design, evaluation and analysis. All the data for the first four parts are automatically collected online and presented in percentage. Since the research is focused on attrition, we filter those who choose to continue using pigai.org for their English writing practice in the future. We focus on the responses to attrition reasons. The answers to the last part are collected and typed into Excel to be analyzed by keywords.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Attrition Rate

Online writing on pigai.org is a required part of English education in China West Normal University. Students cannot

drop out even if some don't like it. The situation may change if online writing does not affect their final this subject. The participants in this research do not face the worry of failure in English course since they have all finished the language education before they enter third year of university study. The data collected for question "Will you continue using pigai.org for your English writing practice in the future?" can really reflect the general attrition rate of Chinese college students' online writing on pigai.org. 405 out of 1445 participants stated that they would not continue using pigai.org for your English writing practice in the future, which means the attrition rate is 28.02%. It is about 8% more than the rate in Herbert's research (2006). The attrition rate is so high that educators may be alerted though some of the drop outs can be explained by completion of English course so that they don't feel it necessary to continue learning English, let alone online learning.

B. Individual Factors

Individual factors are mainly related to cognition and motivation. From Table 1, we can see lack of motivation leads to drop outs. That 84.94% students revising their writing less than 10 times indicates they have no interest in improving their compositions. It can be explained by the difficulties brought by their poor vocabulary and grammar knowledge. With no motivation, they expect less from the online writing program since only 42.23% students believe online writing can improve their language proficiency. On the other hand, 75.06% students who decide to quit care about the results after they submit their writing. This contradicts to teachers' failure to review all papers submitted, which we will discuss later. Inwardly, they want to improve writing proficiency, but outwardly, they encounter linguistic difficulty and teachers' neglect.

TABLE I. INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

Questions	Y	P	N	P
Online writing improves my language proficiency	167	41.23%	238	58.77%
I identify with requirements set by pigai.org	292	72.09%	113	27.91%
I care about the results after I submit my writing	304	75.06%	101	24.94%
I identify with the scores given by pigai.org	286	70.61%	119	29.39%
Poor vocabulary and grammar knowledge hinder my writing	345	85.18%	60	14.82%
I revise my writing more than 10 times before submission	61	15.06%	344	84.94%

(Y: number of students who agree. P: percentage. N: number of students who disagree)

C. Course-related Factors

The most negative factor is teacher's untimely response to students' online questions. 86.92% of students reported dissatisfaction with teacher's delay or neglect of response. Teachers use pigai.org mostly because the system can give scores to the papers automatically which save them a lot of

time since English classes are always very big in China. Teachers also value the analysis given by the system to have a general understanding of students' common strengths and weaknesses in writing. So, they don't have to review all the papers submitted. Then comes peer review. 58.77% of students have never done it in online writing.

TABLE II. COURSE-RELATED FACTORS

Questions	Y	P	N	P
I understand the directions and prompts in online writing tasks	202	49.87%	203	50.13%
The teacher timely responds to my questions in online system	53	13.08%	352	86.92%
The teacher reviews my writing and gives feedback	191	47.16%	214	52.84%
I have done peer review in online writing	167	41.23%	238	58.77%
The teacher gives mini lessons about the task before we really do it online	243	60%	162	40%

D. Technological Factors

It is surprising that 74.81% of students prefer paper based writing to computer based writing though only 33.82% of students believe their computer knowledge and skills hinder their writing. It's just a matter of writing habit. Some say they cannot concentrate when writing on computer or mobile. Others say they write on paper and copy it to computer. Another factor worthy of our attention is students' unfamiliarity with some important functions of online writing website.

TABLE III. TECHNOLOGICAL FACTORS

Questions	Y	P	N	P
I prefer paper based writing to computer based writing	303	74.81%	102	25.19%
Computer knowledge and skills hinder my writing	137	33.82%	268	66.18%
I'm familiar with functions of online writing website	167	41.23%	238	58.77%
My computer and net meet the demands of online writing	280	69.13%	125	33.87%

E. Biggest Barriers

The answers to the question about students self reflection of their biggest barrier in online writing are in accordance with the survey discussed above. According to the keywords analysis, vocabulary and grammar rank first among the barriers. Then comes the difficulties brought by computer based writing, such as slow typing speed, being easily distracted by entertaining functions of computer and inconvenient or wrong input. Some also mention the rigid grading system, complaining that the score remains the same or even declines when they revise as suggested by the system.

V. CONCLUSION

Online writing program like pigai.org has been proved effective in easing teachers from heavy grading work, gaining data of students' writing problems on a whole and helping students self-correct their own writing. Still, some students lose interest and tend to leave this mode of writing. Teachers can really do things to win them back. Based on the results

and discussion above, implications are made as follows:

Teachers should help to build vocabulary and grammar foundation for students. Vocabulary and grammar are two biggest barriers that frustrate Chinese students' English learning especially when it comes to output skills like writing and speaking. Without this linguistic competence and confidence, they are unmotivated. This is particularly true for struggling students.

Teachers themselves should expand their use of online writing system, not just for grading and analysis of scores. They can use the system to have interaction with students by answering questions and making positive and encouraging comments, which helps to make students feel they are engaged and cared in the writing process.

Teachers should help students gain computer based writing familiarity. This can be achieved through practice. Students can first practice typing sample essays onto the computer and then have English written communication with peers and teachers to develop the habit of thinking and typing at the same time.

Teachers should have intensive design of mini lessons each time they give writing assignments online. The mini lessons can happen off line or online. Students enjoy the autonomy of the writing process, but they also need instruction especially when they have difficulty in themes. At the same time, teachers should guide students through the whole writing process online in the first class so that students don't feel uneasy when they write online.

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