Perceptions and Experiences of Chinese University Undergraduate Students in an International Program Studying English Online

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic brought sweeping and unplanned changes in education worldwide. This time of fully online instruction has revealed that there is much to understand and learn about the various stakeholders involved in the online learning experience. The purpose of this mixed-methods case study was to examine the perceptions and experiences of Chinese university students taking an English language development course entirely online using synchronous and asynchronous learning platforms. Quantitative data was collected using a pre-course survey (N=103) and a post-course survey (N=66). Quantitative data compared student pre-course and post-course perceptions and experiences of online learning. Qualitative data were collected in each survey via an open-ended question and further explored perceptions and experiences. Following the post-course survey, additional qualitative data were collected by an open-ended questionnaire completed by a small group of survey participants (N=5). Qualitative data showed that students found studying online convenient and helpful for developing English language skills but were concerned about self-regulation, communication, and wi-fi or Internet connectivity. Analyses of the quantitative data revealed statistically significant differences between the pre-course and post-course survey responses concerning language skill development. Additional survey findings were differences between before and after survey responses relating to instructor feedback and devices used to access online classes. Overall, the study found that 64.2% of participants would take another English language development course online.

Keywords

1 Introduction

Until the COVID-19 pandemic began, fully online classes in China were rare (Lin & Gao, 2020), and the spring semester of 2020 presented educational organizations in China with an enormous challenge. With the sudden shift to distance learning in the Chinese education system due to the pandemic, many education providers were unprepared for online education. While previous authors and researchers

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have discussed or investigated online learning in China, a sizeable portion of those focused on using a Learning Management System (LMS) to facilitate student online learning combined with on-campus learning (Baihong & Yu, 2014; Deng, 2019; Lin, 2017; Long, 2018). Overall, there have been very few studies devoted to examining student perceptions and experiences of fully online learning in Chinese universities. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions and experiences of Chinese university students taking an English language development course entirely online using synchronous (SYNC) and asynchronous (ASYNC) learning platforms. The researcher developed the following research questions.

(1) How will Chinese university students' perceptions of studying English online using both SYNC and ASYNC learning platforms change from the beginning to the end of an English language development course?

(2) What differences will there be between Chinese university student predictions on pre-course surveys and experiences reported on post-course surveys about taking an English language development course online?

2 Literature Review

2.1 Synchronous and asynchronous online learning

Synchronous (SYNC) online learning occurs in real-time. A SYNC class can also be considered a virtual, real-time, instructor-led (VIRI) class. A significant advantage of SYNC classes is that students can communicate with the instructor and receive immediate feedback, which increases student engagement (Lin & Gao, 2020). In their study of student perspectives of SYNC and ASYNC online courses at a university in Northeast China, Lin and Gao (2020) discovered three themes that reflected perceived advantages of SYNC learning for students: interaction, classroom environment, and course quality. Lin and Gao (2020) also discovered three themes that students perceived to be disadvantages of SYNC online study: learning progress, technology issues, and distraction.

Asynchronous (ASYNC) online learning does not occur in real-time. During ASYNC learning, the instructor is not providing real-time instruction. Instead, the students work to complete projects, tasks, or assignments at a time of their choosing and often submit them within a given amount of time. Lin and Gao (2020) discovered two themes that reflected advantages reported by students of ASYNC learning: self-control learning and self-directed learning. Lin and Gao (2020) also discovered four themes that students perceived as disadvantages of ASYNC online study: social isolation, interaction, course load, and technology issues.

Studying student achievement, sense of social community, and sense of learning community amongst university students in the midwestern part of the United States, Olson and McCracken (2015) found no differences between a fully SYNC online class and a blended ASYNC + SYNC class. Olson and McCracken (2015) concluded that SYNC learning might make for effective marketing; however, their study reflected no differences between the two forms of learning. Regardless, Koval, Kryskiv, and Koval (2020) advocated for the use of a blended ASYNC + SYNC class while using platforms such as Moodle and Zoom. According to Koval et al. (2020), the use of SYNC + ASYNC allows for optimizing the online education process by providing visual contact in combination with a convenient learning environment.

2.2 Online students

Students enter online courses with diverse backgrounds and expectations. According to Yamagata-Lynch (2014), "Participants come to online courses with varied participatory learning experiences and need time

to find a new identity as an online learner" (p. 203). Additionally, students often enter online classes with preconceived notions, misconceptions, past experiences that may have been good or bad, and unrealistic expectations. For example, Blake, Wilson, Cetto, and Pardo-Ballester (2008) revealed the observations made in their research of students studying Spanish at a university in the western part of the United States was that many students who had enrolled in a hybrid course were possibly seeking less class time and less work. With the recent necessity to use online education because of the pandemic, research is needed to understand online learning dynamics, especially in countries that traditionally focused only on on-campus learning.

A growing body of studies shows students view studying online favorably or have reported positive experiences with online study (Banditvilai, 2016; Dwaik, Jweiless, & Shrouf, 2016; Francescucci & Foster, 2013; McBrien, Cheng, & Jones, 2009; Pérez, 2003; Yamagata-Lynch, 2014). These positive experiences encompass multiple e-learning formats. In their study of a VIRI classroom in a Canadian university, Francescucci and Foster (2013) found that fewer than 20% of students were dissatisfied with the VIRI course in which they participated. Although Francescucci and Foster (2013) also found that over one-third of the participants in their study had dissenting feelings concerning the VIRI course, 80% of the participants were favorable or neutral about taking another VIRI course in the future. Studying synchronous versus asynchronous computer-mediated communication at a university in the central part of the United States, Pérez (2003) reported that students enjoyed studying Spanish as a foreign language using both SYNC and ASYNC formats. Pérez (2003) further reported that students found both formats beneficial in learning a foreign language.

Studies have reported that many students favored learning online using SYNC and ASYNC formats because of convenience. Studying the use of an ASYNC e-learning supplementary component to a traditional class with an undergraduate class of English majors in Thailand, Banditvilai (2016) identified seven favorable themes reported by participants that included convenience, improvement of language skills, and self-directed learning. Studying a SYNC + ASYNC graduate-level university course at a university in the southeastern part of the United States, Yamagata-Lynch (2014) found that some students favored the flexibility offered by online learning to optimize and customize their learning, and Francescucci and Foster (2013) found that 54% of the participants in their study reported that attending VIRI classes was more convenient than attending a conventional classroom on campus.

Student participation in online study is often a concern of multiple stakeholders in online learning. In their study of SYNC learning at a university in the southern part of the United States, McBrien et al. (2009) found that "students who participated less in face-to-face (F2F) classroom discussions participated more in synchronous online interactions" (p. 13). Further, Yamagata-Lynch (2014) reported that some students favored the asynchronous learning environment because their learning was not dependent on the other students.

Studying blended learning, Banditvilai (2016) found that most students reported that their English language development benefitted from their e-learning experiences. Upon examining multiple data sets, Banditvilai (2016) reported that students who engaged in the supplementary e-learning component of blended learning enhanced their English skills more than students who only attended traditional classes. Banditvilai (2016) concluded that those participants extended their study time through ASYNC learning since e-learning assignments were parallel and complemented in-class learning.

There is a concern held by many students and educators regarding whether or not students studying a second language will develop oral speaking skills in the target language. For example, Banditvilai (2016) reported that students believed the e-learning component of a blended learning environment did not provide enough speaking practice. While SYNC VIRI classes can provide students opportunities to engage in lessons orally, ASYNC classes provide limited opportunities for oral language development. Studying the development of L2 oral language proficiency through SYNC computer-mediated communication, Payne and Whitney (2002) found that L2 speaking can be indirectly developed when

students engage in chatroom interaction using the second language. According to Payne (2020), SYNC computer-mediated text chatting places a higher cognitive load on participants than ASYNC writing.

Multiple studies have shown that a significant obstacle that students experienced in online learning was Internet connectivity (Banditvilai, 2016; Jawad & Abboodi, 2018; Lin & Gao, 2020; McBrien et al., 2009). For example, Banditvilai (2016) identified slow computers and slow Internet as reasons for negative opinions or experiences. McBrien et al. (2009) found that some students experienced frustration in their ability to interact with the class during online instruction because of technology glitches, and as a result, some reported feelings of isolation or distance from the class. Technology-related problems have been discovered to be obstacles in both SYNC and ASYNC courses (Lin & Gao, 2020).

2.3 Easyclass

The Easyclass platform provides a free LMS for ASYNC learning. Easyclass allows teachers to post and receive assignments, create discussions and groups, share resources, initiate quizzes, manage grades, and provides an avenue for communication. Easyclass is available in multiple languages, including Chinese, and according to Lin (2017), Easyclass has been promoted in universities in China since its inception. To use Easyclass, teachers register using an email address and then create a class or course. Teachers then provide students with an access code that allows students to join a specific class. To use the access code, students will need to create an account using an email address.

In their study of grammar learning by tertiary students, Mayyas and Bataineh (2019) found that the students in their study viewed Easyclass favorably, reporting that participants in the study viewed Easyclass as "not only useful for improving their English but also instrumental in raising their awareness of the utility of technology for language learning and teaching" (p. 95). For example, discussion posts on Easyclass allow students to view other students' writing and content, thereby providing students opportunities to extend their language learning. Lin (2017) discussed how by using Easyclass, teachers could more easily engage students with contemporary topics, opportunities for discussion and the dissemination of ideas, and interaction with the teacher, thereby moving the class away from a pyramid class structure (Baihong & Yu, 2014) to being more student-centered. According to Long (2018), Easyclass is a high-quality online learning platform used in colleges and universities throughout China.

On a questionnaire completed by university students in China about the use of Easyclass, Lin (2017) reported that 70% of students perceived Easyclass to be a good platform for online course management, whereas 16% thought the platform was not adequate, and 14% did not possibly have enough knowledge to make a judgment. Through the questionnaire, Lin (2017) further discovered problems with the use of Easyclass by the students, which included criticisms of Easyclass being non-user friendly and restrictive in communications. As with most LMS platforms, training in using the Easyclass platform can be a key element in ensuring a positive experience (Jawad & Abboodi, 2018).

2.4 Zoom

Zoom is a video conferencing platform that is being used to facilitate online SYNC classes. Although Zoom had been in use in the practice of distance learning, it was not until the COVID-19 pandemic that it was catapulted to being a mainstream distance learning platform. To access Zoom, users can enter a meeting using a Zoom generated web link or register for an account on the Zoom website before entering a meeting. Communication is a critical element of the learning process, and Zoom allows for visual contact between the instructor and students and provides both audio/video communication and chatbox messaging (Koval et al., 2020).

Essential features of Zoom are the ability to screen share, annotate on the screen by both the instructor and the students, and share resources, such as files, audio and video recordings, pictures, and web links. Many educational organizations embraced the use of Zoom because it is user friendly. In their study of the use of online SYNC learning for the learning of a second language, Rizvi et al. (2017) found that students tended to adapt quickly to using the various functions of Zoom; however, some participants experienced trouble with the login process and issues associated with Internet connectivity. Lastly, while VIRI classes using Zoom can allow students to interact in L2 with the instructor orally, it can be challenging to have an interactive conversation with more than a handful of students, especially in the target language (Payne, 2020).

3 Methodology

3.1 Design

The researcher chose to use a mixed-methods case study design to examine the before and after perceptions and experiences of Chinese university students taking an English language development course entirely online. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) defined mixed methods research as combining quantitative and qualitative research techniques in a single study. For this study, the researcher was the course instructor and used convenience sampling to collect two cross-sectional data sets using two surveys that contained closed-ended questions and one open-ended question on each survey. The two surveys represented two data sets and examined before and after perceptions and experiences (Kumar, 2014). Because of the unexpected shift to studying entirely online, the researcher used a follow-up questionnaire that contained open-ended questions to obtain additional data (Creswell, 2012).

3.2 Instruments

The researcher used Survey Monkey to administer two instructor-developed surveys and one instructor-developed questionnaire. The surveys contained questions to obtain quantitative data and an open-ended question to acquire qualitative data. The questionnaire contained only open-ended questions. According to Creswell (2012), open-ended questions on questionnaires allow for gathering qualitative data, yielding more depth than quantitative data. The pre-course survey (N=103) was completed in December of 2019 (see Appendix 1). The post-course survey (N=66) was completed in early July of 2020 during the last week of the course (see Appendix 2). In general, the pre-course and post-course surveys consisted of near-identical questions. The questionnaire (N=5) was completed toward the end of July 2020 after the course had ended (see Appendix 3). The questionnaire asked different questions to explore the themes and issues that emerged after an initial investigation of the data obtained from the two surveys. All questions on the questionnaire and surveys were optional, and participants were allowed to answer only the questions they chose to answer. The participants were not rewarded for their participation. Participation was voluntary and encouraged without fear of reprisal. All survey responses were anonymous. Lastly, the researcher stored all survey and questionnaire data on a password-protected computer.

3.3 Participants

The participants in this study were first-year undergraduate Chinese university students studying accounting in an international program at Jiaotong University in Dalian, China. The English language development (ELD) course was a required course, and students would need to retake the course if they

failed. English was the medium of instruction, and some of the students were aiming to attend university abroad in a native-English speaking country. There were 119 students enrolled in four classes that met online three times a week from March 2 to July 5, 2020. During this time, students were not on campus. This course was the students' second English language development course at the university level. The first English course lasted from November 12, 2019, to January 10, 2020, and the students had the same instructor for both courses. Most of the students started the first course at the lower reaches of the CEFR B1 level. During the period of the research study, the students were studying a CEFR B2 level textbook and workbook.

3.4 Background of the class

In December of 2019 and before the end of the term in early January of 2020, the instructor began initiating the use of a blended format. The objective of this initiation was to prepare students to be ready for an in-class + ASYNC format at the beginning of the next term on March 2, 2020. However, with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the university mandated that English language development classes be conducted entirely online in real-time. For online instruction, the university required classes to be conducted using the Chaoxing Fanya Platform; however, the instructor could not access it and was not in China due to traveling outside of the country. After consulting with colleagues, researching on the Internet, and because the university provided no financial support for online classes, the researcher/ instructor chose to use the free Easyclass LMS for ASYNC learning and purchased a Pro account for the Zoom platform for SYNC VIRI learning.

Like Olson and McCracken (2015), the instructor chose to mute students' microphones during SYNC VIRI classes; however, students could unmute themselves whenever they chose to participate in class activities or discussions vocally. The reason for muting microphones, unless students purposefully unmuted, was similar to Olson and McCracken (2015), to minimize potential unnecessary technical difficulties and reduce distractions. Much of the SYNC VIRI classes were focused on a real-time lecture with both text-based chatting and speaking if students chose to speak. Additionally, classes focused on the application of lecture contents, which consisted of real-time activities while using a Cambridge English language development textbook and companion workbook, as specified by the university. SYNC VIRI classes were primarily focused on reading, listening, and writing. In addition to the SYNC VIRI classes conducted on Zoom, speaking, writing, and listening assignments and discussion board posts were assigned via Easyclass. Overall, the course was SYNC VIRI + ASYNC. When classes were on campus, the instructor was required to maintain five hours of office time to facilitate meetings and communication with students. During the online course, the instructor maintained five hours of virtual office time using Zoom to facilitate scheduled and drop-in SYNC meetings and communication with students.

4 Data Analyses

4.1 Qualitative survey data

Seventy-eight of the 103 participants who completed the pre-course survey responded to the open-ended question (survey question F), leaving 89 comments. Forty-nine of the 66 participants who completed the post-course survey responded to the open-ended question (survey question F), leaving 64 comments. The open-ended questions asked participants to share anything about their thoughts concerning online learning. After reading the responses to the open-ended survey question, the researcher started grouping sentences and phrases based on shared words and similar meanings; each grouping or meaning unit was assigned a code (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). While matching the data, the researcher began to

identify themes relevant to answering the first research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher also made connections for matching data into themes by using prior knowledge (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). After analyzing the responses to the open-ended survey question, the researcher discovered five themes from (see Table 1).

Table 1

Student Comments (Surveys)

Themes	Pre-course (n=103 students)	Post-course (n=66 students)
Concerns	17	17
Not as good as	2	4
Convenient	10	6
Can help/useful	29	26
Statements	31	11
Totals	89	64

Some participants expressed concerns that revealed apprehension or worry about studying English online. A small number of participants expressed their opinion that online study was not as good as studying face-to-face in a classroom. In their responses, some participants conveyed their opinion that online study could be convenient. A sizeable number of participants reported that online study could help develop their English language ability. Statements included responses from participants that revealed no particular concern or opinions that fell within the previous themes about taking an ELD course online. "Study is very important," "Nothing," "We should study hard," are examples of statements.

Amongst the theme of concerns, the researcher discovered seven sub themes (see Table 2).

Table 2

Student Concerns (Surveys)

Concern	Pre-course (n=17)	Post-course (n=17)
Personal	7	5
Communication	1	4
Students	3	3
Wi-fi	0	3
Class	2	1
Teacher	2	1
Expense	2	0
Total	17	17

Table 3 shows sample comments for each of the seven inner themes of concerns.

Table 3

Sample Comments of Student Pre-course Concerns

Concern	Sample Comments
Personal	• "I hope it can help me to study English better"
Communication	• "But sometimes it may show its shortage, such as the trouble of communicating with the tutor and so on"
Students	• "It takes a certain amount of self-control"
Wi-fi	• No pre-course concern given
Class	• "But it maybe do not fit for everyone."
Teacher	• "Will the teacher make the same effort as they're working on the real class"
Expense	• "I hope that online learning will be cheaper"

4.2 Questionnaire data

To gain a deeper understanding of some of the themes listed in Table 1 and to acquire additional data, a questionnaire with only open-ended questions was completed by five participants who volunteered at random to complete the questionnaire. There were ten questions on the questionnaire (see Table 4).

Table 4

Questionnaire Construct

Questionnaire Question (QQ)	Topic
1	Biggest concern
2	Convenience
3	Online vs. on campus
4	Most improved skill
5	Least improved skill
6	Wi-fi or Internet connection
7	Communication with instructor
8	Zoom
9	Easyclass
10	Take another online ELD class

First, the researcher asked the five participants to discuss the most significant concern they had about studying English online before the course started. The main concern expressed by four of the five respondents had to do with communication. For example, one participant responded with, "What will be the form of online teaching, live class or video conference, mainly about whether we can communicate with our teacher directly."

Second, the researcher asked the five participants if studying English online was convenient and why. Four of the five respondents responded yes, while one offered a neutral response. One of the four stated:

> Yes, it is. Because I can contact teacher directly by sending message in the chat frame. Next, I can have class everywhere as long as I have a laptop or mobile phone and good network. For example, I always visit my grandparents at weekends, so I often have the class in weekends in my grandparents' home.

Third, the researcher asked the participants which they preferred the most, online or on-campus study. Four of the five participants expressed their preference to be on campus, while the other participant replied, "I don't mind where to study [. . .] For me the two places are the same." One of the four who preferred on-campus study answered, "In my heart, I prefer to have classes in the classroom. In this way I can see my classmates and teachers and communicate with them better."

QQ 4 and QQ 5 sought additional data concerning perceptions and reasons for the most improved and least improved language skills. Two of the five participants perceived their listening had improved the most. For example, one participant stated, "I think my listening improved most. The teacher spoke English in class and the teacher played English audio that helped me improved my listening." Two participants replied that their writing had improved the most. For example, one of the two participants who believed their writing had improved the most stated, "The discussion part in Easyclass helps me a lot" while the other stated, "I have also written many articles in the discussion, and several articles in the homework. I corrected my mistakes with the software, so I think my writing has improved." The remaining participant replied that both speaking and writing improved equally.

Speaking was singled out by three of the participants as the skill that was least improved. One of the participants replied with the reason being, "I seldom open mic to discuss, usually typing." Another participant stated, "I don't have many opportunities to speak English in class." Of the other two participants, one perceived listening as having improved the least because listening was initially weak before the course began, and the remaining participant stated that all of the four skills had improved equally.

QQ 6 enquired whether the wi-fi or Internet connection was a problem during the online classes and what solution could be offered. Three of the five participants answered that the wi-fi or Internet connection was an issue, while two stated that they had no problems. The following was a participant's response and solution.

> Yes but not often. If my Internet break, I will type to my classmate in Wechat immediately, asking her if she would do me a favor to type to our teacher in Zoom about I will late for class because of the bad network. At the same time, I will restart my computer or use mobile phone.

Communication with the instructor was a concern that was reported more frequently in the post-course survey. In QQ 7, the researcher asked the five participants if communicating with the instructor was an issue during the online course. The following were the responses from each of the five participants.

(1) "No, I will type to teacher as long as I have questions and I can receive answer from teacher every time."

(2) "There will be a slight problem. Because I need to think about my language and a lot of other things."

(3) "Yes. The teacher is very patient and responsible."

(4) "Yes, it could be achieved by typing something."

(5) "We've discussed some of the issues, and it's been great to listen and talk about some of the issues."

For QQ 8 and QQ 9, the participants were asked if they liked using Zoom and Easyclass. Four of the five participants had a very positive experience using Zoom. The other participant had a neutral experience using Zoom. The following statement was made by one of the four participants with a positive view of Zoom, "Yes. Zoom is a user-friendly and convenient app." Two of the five participants had a positive experience using Easyclass. Two other participants had a negative experience, and the remaining participant responded with a neutral answer. The following is one of the responses about Easyclass, "Yes, I think Easyclass is a good website, I can complete and send my assignments more convenient. But sometimes I can't open Easyclass at night, maybe the Internet is not good at night."

Lastly, the researcher asked the participants if they would take another English language development course online if provided with the opportunity. Four of the five participants replied yes, while one participant replied no. One of the four stated, "Yes. I'd love to take an online English course if I have time." The participant that answered no stated, "No, I think studying in the classroom has many advantages, and face-to-face communication is more conducive to learning knowledge."

4.3 Quantitative survey data

The independent variables of the quantitative data in the study were the pre-course and post-course surveys. In the pre-course survey, questions were asked in the future tense, while post-course survey questions were asked in the past tense. The survey contained four nominal questions and one ordinal question (see Table 5).

The researcher used Pearson chi-square tests (χ^2) to analyze nominal data, and the Mann-Whitney test was used for the ordinal data (Creswell 2012; Salkind 2013). The researcher used SPSS software (v. 24) to perform all tests with an alpha level of .05. There were no violations of the assumptions for either the Pearson chi-square or the Mann Whitney tests (Creswell 2012; McHugh 2013; Salkind 2013),

and the assumption of equal distribution for the Mann-Whitney test was met via Levene's median-based homogeneity of variance test using SPSS software.

Table 5

Pre-course and Post-course Surveys

Survey Question (SQ)	Topic	Analyses
SQ A	Perceived improvements	Nominal
SQ B	Ranking the skills	Ordinal
SQ C	Device used	Nominal
SQ D	Instructor feedback	Nominal
SQ E	Take another online course*	Nominal

*SQ E was not on the pre-course survey.

SQ A asked students whether they thought they could/did make improvements to their English language skills by completing assignments online. The results of a Pearson chi-square test revealed that there was no statistically significant difference between the pre-course survey (Group 1: n = 103) and post-course survey (Group 2: n = 66), X2 (1, N = 169) = 0.071, p = 0.789. On the pre-course survey, 91.26% of the participants thought they could make improvements, and 93.21% of the participants on the post-course survey answered that they had made improvements to their English language skills.

SQ B asked students to rank the four skills in the order they thought online assignments could/did help them develop their English language skills. A Mann-Whitney test indicated that there was not a significant difference in the ranking of reading (U=2796.5, p = 0.842) and writing (U=2463.5, p = 0.226) between pre-course and post-course surveys. However, the Mann-Whitney test indicated that there were significant differences in listening (U=2159.5, p = 0.028) and speaking (U=1662.5, p = 0.000) between pre-course and post-course surveys (see Table 6).

Table 6

Mann-Whitney Test Results for Ranking the Four Skills

Skill	Pre-course		Post-course		U	p
Listening	n = 85	Mean Rank = 80.59	n = 63	Mean Rank = 66.28	U = 2159.5	p = 0.028
Reading	n = 89	Mean Rank = 76.42	n = 64	Mean Rank = 77.80	U = 2796.5	p = 0.842
Speaking	n = 85	Mean Rank = 62.56	n = 63	Mean Rank = 90.61	U = 1662.5	p = 0.000
Writing	n = 89	Mean Rank = 72.68	n = 62	Mean Rank = 80.77	U = 2463.5	p = 0.226

The Mann-Whitney test revealed statistically significant changes in the rankings of listening and speaking (see Table 7).

Table 7

Comparison of Most Improved Skill Rankings

Ranking	Pre-course	Post-course
1*	Listening	Speaking
2	Reading	Writing
3	Writing	Reading
4	Speaking	Listening

* Number one is the highest-ranking.

SQ C asked the students which device or devices they would/did use to access online learning. The survey specified the options of desktop, laptop, phone, tablet or iPad, or other. Participants were requested to choose all that apply. The choice of other was not chosen. Table 8 provides details of student responses on both the pre-course and post-course surveys and gives percentages for how many of the participants on each survey chose each device.

Table 8

Device Used to Access Class

Device	Pre-course (n=103)	Post-course (n=66)
Desktop	33.0%	47.0%
Laptop	26.2%	51.5%
Phone	85.4%	68.2%
Tablet or iPad	25.2%	24.2%

SQ D asked students whether they thought they would/did receive more or less feedback from the instructor for online assignments compared to assignments completed during on-campus classes. The results of a Pearson chi-square test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between the pre-course survey (Group 1: n = 103) and post-course survey (Group 2: n = 66), $X2$ (1, N = 169) = 8.07685, p = 0.003. On the pre-course survey, 68.0% of the participants thought they would receive more instructor feedback, and 87.9% of the participants on the post-course survey answered that they had received more instructor feedback.

SQ E asked students if they would take another English language development course online. This question was only asked on the post-course survey. Of the 66 students who completed the post-course survey, 64.2% responded yes, while 35.8% responded no.

5 Discussion

5.1 Discussion of qualitative data

The qualitative data from the surveys revealed that students had multiple concerns about studying English online. For example, there were increases in concerns about communication and Wi-fi between the pre-course and post-course surveys. Wi-fi or technology-related issues were problematic in previous studies about studying online (Banditvilai, 2016; Lin & Gao, 2020; McBrien et al., 2009; Rizvi et al., 2017). As can be seen from the questionnaire comments (QQ 7), communication issues during SYNC VIRI classes were addressed in real-time, allowing students to communicate with the instructor and receive immediate feedback, as discussed by Lin and Gao (2020). Wi-fi and Internet connectivity may have been a reason for communication issues when using the ASYNC platform (see QQ 9), which would entail students logging onto the platform and sending a message that would be received and read later by the instructor. Further, some communication issues may have occurred during SYNC VIRI classes in which students suffered frustration due to technology-related issues that caused them not to be able to communicate or participate in a manner befitting their desire (McBrien et al., 2009; Rizvi et al., 2017).

There was a considerable amount of concern expressed on the pre-course and post-course surveys focusing on the participants' personal ability to stay on task while studying online. In the pre-course survey, some participants expressed concern that they may not be able to concentrate during online classes, realizing that it might take some self-control to study independently away from the traditional class setting. The researcher attributed this concern to the need for students to find a new identity as online learners (Yamagata-Lynch, 2014) and learn to regulate their learning habits, possibly changing their approach to studying altogether.

Another area of concern in the pre-course survey was that the teacher would not be able to supervise the students; however, the researcher considered this concern connected to university students needing to exercise self-control and regulate their online study habits. Lastly, the researcher viewed the concern of expense to be irrelevant since the tuition fee would have been the same for studying online as studying on campus.

Convenience has been a well-documented element of studying online (Banditvilai, 2016; Francescucci & Foster, 2013; Lin & Gao, 2020; Yamagata-Lynch, 2014). The following participant comment provided for QQ 2 sums up the theme of convenience nicely.

> Yes, it is. Because I can contact teacher directly by sending message in the chat frame. Next, I can have class everywhere as long as I have a laptop or mobile phone and good network. For example, I always visit my grandparents at weekends, so I often have the class in weekends in my grandparents' home.

The researcher found it interesting that the participant associated the ability to communicate with the teacher and access to a good network as being matters related to convenience.

Another theme the researcher found in the survey qualitative data was that some students perceived that online classes were not as good as on-campus classes. For example, participants expressed various thoughts concerning studying online such as "I don't mind where to study [. . .] For me the two places are the same" and "In my heart, I prefer to have classes in the classroom. In this way I can see my classmates and teachers and communicate with them better." According to Lin and Gao (2020), before the pandemic began, fully online classes in China were rare, which would imply that most or all of the students had never experienced a fully online ELD course, especially at the university level. Change can be challenging, and as discussed by Yamagata-Lynch (2014), students beginning to study online will need to find a new identity.

The researcher understood that using the Zoom platform for SYNC VIRI learning and Easyclass as an LMS for ASYNC learning would impact responses in the post-course survey. Therefore, the researcher used the questionnaire to gather data concerning the online platforms used during the course. In QQ 8, participants responded favorably to the Zoom platform. For example, participants stated that they could communicate with the instructor during SYNC VIRI classes effectively, which reaffirms the suggestion by Koval et al. (2020) to use the Zoom platform. Additionally, according to a questionnaire respondent, "Zoom is a user-friendly and convenient app," which was similar to three other questionnaire respondents. Overall, student perceptions that Zoom was a user-friendly and convenient app fall in place with the findings by Rizvi et al. (2017). In contrast to the findings by Lin (2017) and Mayyas and Bataineh (2019), Easyclass as an LMS received mixed reviews by participants answering QQ 9.

5.2 Discussion of quantitative data

Although there was no statistically significant difference between SQ A on the pre-course and post-course surveys, the data obtained presents an overall optimistic projection held by the participants with 91.26% in the pre-survey predicting that they would make improvements and 93.21% in the post-survey revealing that they did make improvements in their English language skills while studying online.

SQ B data revealed statistically significant differences between pre-course predictions by participants and post-course answers as to the ranking of how studying online will and did help them develop each of the four skills. The results showed that the students, as a whole, reported that speaking was the skill they had improved most. The current study combined SYNC VIRI and ASYNC learning, and the results contrast with the students in the study by Banditvilai (2016), who believed the e-learning component of a blended learning environment did not provide enough speaking practice.

During the course, speaking assignments consisted of recordings, one of which was aligned to task two of the IELTS speaking exam. In addition to speaking assignments, the instructor showed a series of videos of examinees taking the two tasks of the speaking section of the IELTS exam. This was done to provide students with chances to see how other English learners their age responded during the speaking section of the IELTS exam. Additionally, portions of SYNC classes were devoted to identifying and discussing key components of the rubrics used for marking the IELTS speaking exam. With that said, the instructor placed, throughout the course, more emphasis on the improvement of reading, listening,

and grammar during SYNC study and emphasized writing development via discussion posts and writing assignments in ASYNC study. The researcher concluded that a combination of ASYNC and SYNC computer-mediated communication activities contributed to the high ranking of speaking and writing in the post-course survey; moreover, SYNC and ASYNC learning were often complementary (Banditvilai, 2016). The researcher further concluded that speaking was being indirectly developed as students were engaged in computer-mediated interaction as reported by Payne and Whitney (2002), and to a lesser extent, writing via the discussion posts.

Data from SQ C presented a view of how students accessed online classes. On the pre-course survey, 85.4% of the participants predicted they would use their phones to access online learning. However, the post-course data revealed a considerable decrease in the use of phones (68.2%) and significant increases in student use of desktops (47.0%) and laptops (51.5%). The researcher attributed the rise in the use of desktop and laptop computers to the likelihood that these devices provided more stable internet connections and processing ability than many of the participants' phones. Although there was a surge in the use of computers, the participants still preferred to use their phones to access online classes.

5.3 Discussion of overlapping qualitative and quantitative data

Some of the questionnaire data presented a contrast to the quantitative data; however, the five questionnaire participants were also participants of the survey. For instance, the questionnaire data showed two of the five participants reported their listening skills had improved the most while two others believed their writing increased the most; the remaining participant revealed that both speaking and writing had improved equally. Furthermore, three of the five participants who completed the questionnaire reported that their speaking was the skill that had made the least improvement. Although the quantitative data represented 66 participants and the questionnaire data represented five of the survey participants, the contrast between the two sets of data provides cause for concern, and further investigation is needed in this area.

Within the concerns found in the pre-course survey qualitative data, a participant stated, "Will the teacher make the same effort as they're working on the real class?" Just as Blake et al. (2008) reported that the students enrolling in a hybrid course were possibly looking for an easy class with reduced work, that participant was concerned that the instructor would have a similar attitude. Considering this issue, the researcher noted the findings revealed in the qualitative and quantitative data concerning communication and feedback from the instructor. For example, the data from SQ D showed a change from 68% on the pre-course survey to 87.9% on the post-course survey. This change revealed a significant difference between pre-course survey predictions and post-course survey experiences concerning feedback received from the instructor during the fully online classes compared to on-campus classes.

Lastly, 64.2% of the participants on the post-course survey (SQ E) revealed that they would take another English language development course online if given a choice. Additionally, four of the five participants completing the questionnaire (QQ 10) stated that they would take another English language development course online if provided the opportunity. Although not as high as the 80% of the participants who were favorable or neutral about taking another VIRI course in the future reported by Francescucci and Foster (2013), 64.2% of the post-course survey participants did answer yes on a yes or no question as to their willingness to take another SYNC VIRI + ASYNC English language development course online.

6 Conclusion

The purpose of this mixed-methods case study was to examine the perceptions and experiences of

Chinese university students taking an English language development course entirely online using synchronous and asynchronous learning platforms. Comparison of pre-course and post-course qualitative data revealed how Chinese university students' perceptions of studying English online using both SYNC and ASYNC learning platforms changed from the beginning to the end of an English language development course. First, the researcher found that the concerns that received the most comments in the post-course survey revealed how participants were more focused on issues pertaining to the realities of online study than what they thought might be the case. These primary concerns were communication and Wi-fi. Additionally, questionnaire responses yielded more comments that showed that participants viewed communication and Wi-fi or Internet connectivity as critical components of online study. The researcher further found that participants believed studying online was useful and helpful in developing their English language skills and favored the convenience of studying online; however, participants maintained an awareness of the need to regulate themselves while studying online.

Comparison of pre-course and post-course quantitative data provided insights into how the experiences of taking an English language development course online were different from what students had predicted before the course. A significant finding of the quantitative data was that students perceived their speaking and writing as having improved the most compared to the pre-course prediction that their listening and reading skills would develop the most. The researcher also discovered that most participants used their phones to access classes, but there was a significant increase in the use of computers to access online learning. Another finding of the quantitative data revealed a statistically significant difference between student predictions of instructor feedback on pre-course surveys and reported instructor feedback on post-course surveys. Lastly, a significant finding showed that a majority (64.2%) of participants would take another English language development course online if given the opportunity. Overall, the study revealed there is much to learn and understand about how and what Chinese university students perceive and experience during online instruction in an English language development course.

6.1 Assumptions and limitations

The researcher assumed that participants answered survey questions presented in English with understanding. Additionally, the researcher assumed that participants answered survey questions truthfully and without fear of reprisal. A limitation of this study was that the researcher was the instructor of the English language development course. An additional limitation of this study was the difference in the number of participants between the pre-course and post-course surveys. Further limitations of this study were the incalculable circumstances of the course, including assignments, texts, and the instructor-student relationships that existed before the class transitioned to being entirely online.

6.2 Recommendations and suggestions for practice

First, the researcher recommends that universities inform students of the realities, complexities, and potential barriers to online instruction, such as communication and wi-fi and Internet connectivity. Secondly, universities and instructors should provide students with training on how to use whatever LMS or online learning platform will be used during the course. Thirdly, the researcher recommends that universities and instructors encourage students to use a desktop or laptop to provide a more stable Internet connection when accessing online classes. The researcher further recommends that instructors conduct individual research based on their instructional practices while teaching using SYNC, ASYNC, or SYNC (VIRI) + ASYNC formats. Lastly, the researcher recommends that instructors seek ways to use ASYNC learning to enable students to practice speaking and develop oral language abilities; ASYNC speaking practice could include recorded speaking assignments and the use of websites with interactive speaking exercises.

6.3 Suggestions for further research

The researcher recommends more study of the perceptions and experiences of Chinese university students taking an English language development course using the SYNC (VIRI) + ASYNC format. Additionally, the researcher recommends future research of SYNC + ASYNC learning that compares student perceptions and experiences of SYNC learning and ASYNC learning and compares the two formats. Lastly, the researcher recommends research in oral language development through ASYNC learning.

Appendices

1 Pre-course survey

A. Do you think you can make improvements to your English language skills by completing assignments online?

- Yes
- No

B. Rank the following skills in the order you think online assignments can help you develop your English language skills.

- Listening
- Reading
- Speaking
- Writing

C. Which device or devices will you use to access the website for online study? (choose all that apply)

- Desktop computer
- Laptop
- Phone
- Tablet or iPad
- Other (please specify)

D. Do you think you will receive more or less feedback from the instructor for online assignments compared to assignments completed during class?

- More
- Less

E. Not asked on the pre-course survey

F. What are your thoughts concerning online learning? (feel free to type anything you wish to share)

2 Post-course survey

A. Did you make improvements to your English language skills by completing assignments online?

- Yes
- No

B. Rank the following skills in the order you think online assignments helped you to develop your English language skills.

- Listening
- Reading

- Speaking
- Writing

C. Which device or devices did you use to access the website for online study? (choose all that apply)

- Desktop computer
- Laptop
- Phone
- Tablet or iPad
- Other (please specify)

D. Did you receive more or less feedback from the instructor for online assignments compared to assignments completed during class?

- More
- less

E. If given a choice, would you take another English language development course online?

- Yes
- No

F. What are your thoughts concerning online learning? (feel free to type anything you wish to share). You could discuss things you liked about online study or things you didn't like. You could also make a suggestion(s) for ways to improve online study.

3 Questionnaire

1. What was your biggest concern before the semester started about having the English class online?

2. Is studying English online convenient? Why?

3. Which do you prefer the most, studying English online or in a classroom on campus? Why?

4. Which skill did you make the most improvement (reading, listening, speaking, and writing)? Why?

5. Which skill did you make the least improvement (reading, listening, speaking, and writing)? Why?

6. Was Wi-fi or the internet connection a problem for you during the online course? If yes, what solution can you suggest?

7. Was being able to communicate with the instructor an issue during the online course? Why or why not?

8. Did you like using Zoom for online English class study? Why or why not?

9. Did you like using EasyClass for online English class study? Why or why not?

10. If given the opportunity, would you take another English language development course online? Why?

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