

A survey on Chinese students' online English language learning experience through synchronous web conferencing classrooms

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Abstract. The online education industry has had a rapid economic development in China since 2013, but this area received little attention in research. This study investigates Chinese undergraduate students' online English learning experiences and online teacher-learner interaction in synchronous web conferencing classes. This article reports the findings from a pilot questionnaire survey in December 2015. It is found that synchronous online English classes are often oversized (more than 50 students). However, students report a high level of online teacher-learner interaction. Further investigation is necessary to reveal what actual online learning and teaching activities are going on in synchronous web conferencing English classrooms in China.

Keywords: synchronous web conferencing, SCMC, English language teaching, online interactions, China.

1. Introduction and literature review

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has become increasingly popular in China since 2013. According to the 2014 China Online Language Education Industry Report (iResearch, 2015), the market value of online language education in China is around 3 billion USD and the amount of online language learners reached 14.8 million in 2014 (iResearch, 2015). However, little is known about the recent developments and current problems of the Chinese CALL community. Behind the massive economic development, what are the real online teaching and learning activities going on? This study aims to investigate Chinese undergraduate

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students' online English language learning experience and online teacher-learner interactions in synchronous web conferencing English classes in the private sector in China using a questionnaire survey, interviews and a content analysis of the video recordings of synchronous web conferencing English classes.

To explore the online learning and teaching activities in synchronous web conferencing English classes, the author focuses on online teacher-learner interaction. Moore (1989) defines learner-teacher interaction as the “dialogue between learners and the subject expert, which is regarded [essentially by] many educators and highly desired by distance learners” (p. 2). Synchronous web conferencing technology can afford synchronous interaction between online teachers and learners. Consequently, it is possible to look into how English is taught and learned online through studying the teacher-learner interactions in synchronous web conferencing English classes. Therefore, the research questions are:

- What are Chinese undergraduate students' online language learning experiences through synchronous web conferencing classes?
- To what extent and about what content do online English language teachers and learners interact with each other in synchronous web conferencing classes?

The first question aims to explore some basic information about students' synchronous online learning experiences including the reasons for learning languages online, the types of technology used for language learning, the length, size and content of online language classes, etc. The second question mainly focuses on online teacher-learner interaction, the amount and the content of online interactions in synchronous web conferencing English classes.

2. Research methods

The questions in the survey are developed based on the relevant literature (e.g. iResearch, 2014; Li et al., 2014; Murphy, 2015; Tan, 2013; Zhang & Rong, 2013). The questionnaire is designed in English and translated into Chinese to avoid misunderstandings and attract more replies. The questionnaire was distributed through popular social networks in China (e.g. WeChat and QQ). The data collection follows a chain referral sampling method (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) because one student who had taken synchronous web conferencing English classes can answer the questionnaire and share its link to more people with such experiences.

In total, there are 221 replies on general online language learning experiences and 42 replies on synchronous web conferencing language learning experience. This paper reports key findings on synchronous web conferencing English language learning experience because synchronous web conferencing classes can support online interaction, which is key to language learning (Ellis, 1991).

3. Findings

At the beginning of the survey, students are asked about their online English language learning experience through different types of technology. There are 42 participants (42 out of 221, $p=19\%$) who have taken synchronous English language classes through web conferencing classrooms. The following reports on participants' online English language learning experiences and on online teacher-learner interaction through synchronous web conferencing English classes. The findings presented below are all results from multiple choice questions.

3.1. Online learners' experiences

Regarding content of synchronous web conferencing English classes, 57% of participants have taken English test preparation classes (e.g. IELTS/TOEFL). Almost half (48%) of the respondents have taken English language proficiency courses to improve their speaking and listening skills, and one third of participants have learned grammar, vocabulary, reading and writing skills in synchronous online classes.

In terms of how many hours of online classes participants have taken, while some (29%) have taken more than 30 hours of synchronous web conferencing English classes, almost half of them have taken less than ten hours of online classes.

As for the size of synchronous web conferencing English classrooms, 60% of respondents report to have more than 50 in the online classes. However, there are also some smaller classes with less than ten students ($p=22\%$) or even only one student ($p=12\%$).

Most participants (88%) choose to take synchronous web conferencing English classes instead of learning in face-to-face classrooms because they do not have to travel, which is very convenient and efficient. There are also many respondents who choose online classes because of their lower prices. A few (24%) participants believe they study English more effectively in synchronous web conferencing

classes while those (24%) who take one-to-one online classes through synchronous web conferencing tools highlight the personalized learning opportunities.

3.2. Online teacher-learner interactions

This section reports findings on questions regarding online teacher-learner interaction through synchronous web conferencing English classes.

Participants take online English courses from different online teaching platforms with different technological affordances. In this survey, it is found that 79% of participants can post text chat messages in the synchronous web conferencing classroom so that they can have synchronous and ongoing conversations with their online teachers. Moreover, almost half (45%) of respondents are allowed to use audio channels to practice speaking skills with their online teachers and 19% can even use video cameras in their synchronous English classes.

When an online teacher presents content knowledge, very often (83%) there are students who raise questions about the course content, and sometimes (57%) some students report technical issues. Furthermore, sometimes (45%) there are interactions among students themselves about the course content being presented by the teacher.

When an online teacher asks questions, very often (79%) students answer the questions through text chat messages. However, some students complain that occasionally (21%) the teacher moves on before they finish typing their answers. And a few students (17%) report having little or no ‘Questions and Answers’ interaction between online teachers and learners in their synchronous web conferencing English classes.

4. Discussions and conclusions

4.1. What are Chinese undergraduate students’ online language learning experiences through synchronous web conferencing classes?

Generally speaking, students’ online English language learning experience vary among individuals, but there are some general trends. First, in terms of the course content, synchronous web conferencing English courses on exam preparation and

communicative skills (e.g. speaking and listening skills) are most popular among students. Second, the size of synchronous web conferencing English classes is usually large (more than 50 students). Third, convenience and good price are two main reasons for students to choose synchronous online classes over face-to-face classes.

4.2. To what extent and about what content do online English language teachers and learners interact with each other in synchronous web conferencing classes?

In terms of technological availability/affordances, most respondents are able to participate in synchronous interaction with their online English teachers in synchronous web conferencing classrooms; some can even use audio and video channels for more multimodal teacher-student interaction. Participants also report a relatively high level of online learner-teacher interaction in both cases when an online teacher presents content knowledge and also when the teacher asks students questions.

However, some findings from the questionnaire are still not clear and can even be potentially contradictory. For example, most students (60%) report having an online class of more than 50 students. Meanwhile, they report to have a good amount of online teacher-learner interactions. So, the question is how can online English teachers take care of so many students in one synchronous web conferencing classroom and yet still be able to have sufficient teacher-learner interactions. Clearly, more investigation is needed to further reveal what online teaching and learning activities are actually going on in synchronous web conferencing English classes in China. The author intends to interview online English teachers and learners, and conduct a content analysis of video recordings of synchronous web conferencing English classes to find more answers to this question.

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