

CHINESE HIGH SCHOOL ONLINE ENGLISH LEARNING STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND TEACHERS' CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES



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Abstract

The objectives of this study were 1) to investigate Chinese high school students' perceptions toward online English learning, and 2) to explore the challenges and opportunities facing Chinese high school teachers in online English teaching during the pandemic. This research employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. The research samples consisted of 404 students and 10 teachers from Anshun No.1 High School, Guizhou Province, China. The research instruments included a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Descriptive statistics were utilized to analyze data. The findings showed that, in terms of students' perceptions, the professionalism teachers displayed in online teaching left the deepest impression on the surveyed students. The biggest challenge teachers encountered was the lackluster efficiency of online learning compared with onsite learning, while the best opportunity was the possibility for teachers to use blended teaching methods to guide students. This study recommended that future researchers investigate students' perceptions toward online learning in a wider variety of subjects. Moreover, this research provided a practical reference for Chinese high schools to implement online teaching and learning activities during the epidemic.

Keywords: Online English Teaching; Online English Learning; Students' Perceptions; Teachers' Challenges; Teachers' Opportunities

Introduction

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) statistics, COVID-19 has caused 1.53 billion students, accounting for 87.6% of school students worldwide, to suspend classes (Li, 2020). In response to this situation, countries around the world have adopted education emergency policies. France, Italy, Japan, Mexico, South Korea and many other countries have expanded existing online education models or introduced online education models and provided online learning platforms can

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through the Internet (Mishra, Gupta & Shree, 2020). In countries such as Spain, Thailand and Vietnam, teachers and school administrators are encouraged to use APPs (such as Zoom, Classroom, Gmail and Meet) to support communication with students and parents and to provide online courses. Some also provide learning content through TV or other media (Dhawan, 2020). In addition, Saudi Arabia has also launched publicity campaigns and strategies on online education, using its official Twitter account to regularly publish online learning information to all stakeholder groups, including parents, students, teachers, and administrators (Daniel, 2020).

After the outbreak of COVID-19, schools and educational institutions across the China strictly implemented the policies of the Ministry of Education, including to stop the classroom teaching mode on the opposite side of the line and switch to online teaching. Online teaching breaks the limitations of time and place, giving teachers and students more freedom, and better reflects the initiative of students and the dominance of teachers (Hamid, Waycott, Kurnia & Chang, 2015). Unlike with traditional teaching, through online teaching, teachers could use the Internet resources and select novel course content to attract students' interest in learning. Moreover, the online teaching mode puts forward higher requirements for teachers compared with the traditional teaching model. On the one hand, when conducting online teaching, teachers must master the theoretical knowledge taught and be skilled in modern information technology. On the other hand, online teaching also allows teachers to use the Internet and big data to pinpoint obstacles to students' learning and improve the quality of education and teaching (Song, 2015). It can also realize the teaching mode of "the same classroom in different places", which increases the diversity and comprehensiveness of teaching methods.

As the online teaching model is widely used by schools of all levels and types during the epidemic, it has completely replaced the traditional classroom teaching model. However, teachers, students and parents have difficulties in fully adapting to the new model in the short run. In order to understand the actual application of the current online teaching model in English teaching of Anshun No.1 High School in Guizhou Province, as well as the real feelings of the students, this thesis will study the students' perceptions and acceptance of online English learning to conceptualize the real learning situation of the students based on actual data and information, including a comprehensive understanding of the English teaching phenomenon under the online teaching model. Furthermore, the findings of this study will also provide references for other schools to consider an alternative teaching practice when times become difficult for regular teaching.

Literature review

1. Online English teaching

Online teaching is a subset of distance education, including a wide range of technology applications and learning processes, including computer-based learning, network-based learning, virtual classrooms, and digital collaboration (Mathew & Ebelelloanya, 2016). With a virtual teaching platform on the Internet, teachers and students carry out learning activities in this virtual classroom (Ahmed, Shehata & Hassanien, 2020). Online teaching builds an ideal learning environment, making it convenient for students to learn and communicate anytime, anywhere. Compared with other teaching modes, online teaching has excellent advantages (Sun, 2016).

Dumont & Raggio (2018) believe that online teaching focuses on developing metacognition and reflective and collaborative learning in the higher education environment. Its purpose is to guide learners to use rationality to reflect on life and improve their ability in learning and living. In addition, online learning goes beyond planned topic learning. It

recognizes the value of unplanned and self-directed learning, thereby maximizing students learning efficiency and improving learning effects. The online learning environment includes various teaching practices and teaching plans, usually characterized by active learning and student-centered teaching concepts (Ma, Han, Yang & Cheng, 2015). Based on online teaching, the protagonist is the teacher and the audience student. The lecture process is mainly made of video content, and barrage and voice calls are the interactive methods between teachers and students. The purpose is to impart knowledge and learn online English course content.

2. Online English learning

The eight influence factors of online English learning were:

1) Courses Management. Online education should optimize online courses based on specific standards to ensure that online learning could meet the learning needs of learners (Dittmar & McCracken, 2012). They take student-centered learning as the core of curriculum design and courses management (Granger, Bevis, Sampson & Tate, 2012).

2) Network Facilities. Online education institutions and schools should increase hardware investment in network equipment construction (Ye, 2014) to fully improve learning quality and provide student learning and school teaching management services, which ensures the actual realization of mobile learning anywhere, and anytime (Mazana, Suero Montero & Olifage, 2019).

3) Teaching Methods. Among the teaching methods of online education, the most important and influential one is the “flipped classroom” (Sultan, 2018). The decision right to learn will be transferred from the teacher to the student, enabling students to be the leading learning body (Kuiper, Posner & Everson, 2015). This model allows teachers to have more time to communicate with learners.

4) Learning Motivation. Learning motivation is the driving force behind students’ learning (Tang & Chaw, 2019). When learning, learners must first clarify the purpose and meaning of their learning courses to have sufficient learning motivation. Using online learning, students usually have sufficient learning motivation when they have clear learning goals (Putra, 2021).

5) Learning Self-discipline. Compared with the traditional classroom learning model, online learning lacks conventional classroom teachers’ supervision and management of students; there is also a lack of homework, examinations, and other means of monitoring the quality of student learning (Yang, Qiao, Zhang & Nan, 2020). Online learning naturally puts forward higher requirements on learners’ self-discipline.

6) Teaching content is an integral part of education and teaching (Nind, 2020). Improving teaching quality calls for the optimization of teaching content in terms of its difficulty and scope, presentation order, the details and the overall quality, and the allocation and utilization of teaching time, etc. (Clary et al., 2017).

7) Teaching Professionalism. Online teaching requires teachers to devote more time and energy to improving their teaching level (Baran & Correia, 2014). In addition, online learners also need more communication and exchanges (Barton & Maness, 2017). Teachers should guide online learners in learning methods and enable them to carry out in-depth online learning.

8) Effective Interaction. In online learning, seeing, speaking, thinking, and doing are critical interactive elements of education. Teachers must be able to scientifically arrange student interaction during

Online teaching so that these elements form a suitable combination (Razali, Ahmad & Noor, 2020). The effective interaction between teachers and students is also an essential factor affecting the efficiency of online learning (Yang & Lin, 2020).

Research methodology

This study employed a mixed-method approach. Mixed method is the type of research methodology that combines quantitative and qualitative research (Parvaiz, Mufti & Wahab, 2016). The objectives of this study are to collect both types of data: 1) Quantitative data collected from questionnaires about students' perceptions toward online English learning, which came from the questionnaires. 2) Qualitative data derived from semi-structured interviews about the challenges and opportunities for teachers in online English teaching during the pandemic. Three experts were invited to validate each research instrument. The IOC scores for each research instrument were 0.957 and 0.934 respectively.

1. Research site, population and sample

The study was conducted at Anshun No. 1 High School in Guizhou Province, China. This mixed gender public high school has 65 teaching classes, and over 4,000 students aged between 16 and 18. Due to the large population base of the investigation, the researcher used Yamane Taro's (1967) sampling technique to calculate the proper sample size, which turned out to be 364, of the target population. The details were shown in follow.

2. Yamane's formula:

$$* n = \frac{4000}{1+4000 (5\%)^2} = 364$$

3. Research design

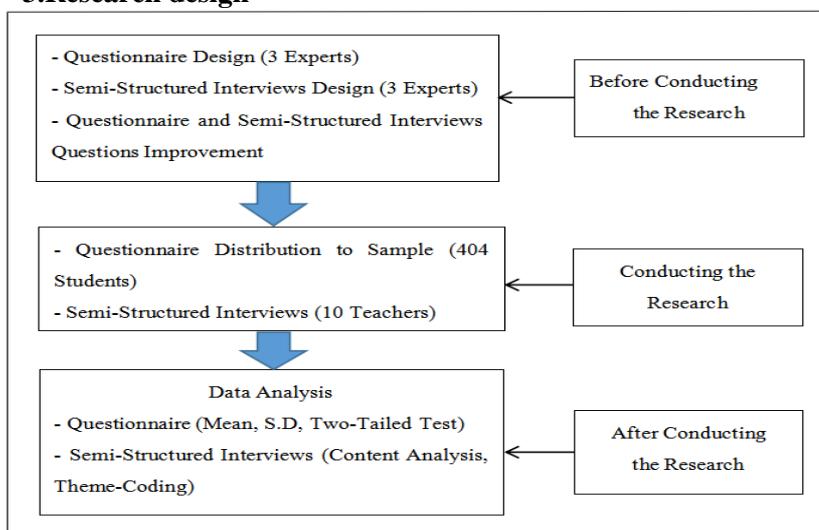


Figure 1 The research design

From the Figure 1, the researcher used a mixed-method design. Before conducting the research, the reliability and validity of the questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were tested using the index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) by three Chinese university experts to test the level and suitability of the questions. The improvement of questionnaire and semi-structured interviews questions was made. During the research, 404 students in the sample group of Anshun No.1 High School were asked to fill out a questionnaire and 10 English teachers attended semi-structured interviews. Then, the researcher collected the questionnaire data, and analyzed the results with Mean, S.D and Two-tailed test. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews data were examined by content analysis and theme-coding.

4. Research instruments

This research used two instruments namely questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data while semi-structured interviews were used to collect qualitative data.

5. Questionnaire

The questionnaire data consisted of three parts:

1) Multiple-choice questions. The researcher collected personal information of target group students through multiple-choice questions. In this study, the researcher mainly investigated the personal information and learning situation of students. The basic information of the investigation includes: students' grades, online learning frequency, online learning facilities, online learning duration, and students' satisfaction with online English courses.

2) Scoring questions. Based on the above literature review, the researcher designed and compiled a questionnaire for this study considering eight factors that influence online English learning. There were: 1) Courses management, 2) Network facilities, 3) Teaching methods, 4) Learning motivation, 5) Learning self-discipline, 6) Teaching contents, 7) Teaching professionalism, and 8) Effective interaction. The researcher used the Five Likert Scale (Likert, 1932) to investigate students' perceptions toward online English learning. The scale consisted of a set of statements. Each statement had five types of responses: "strongly disagree", "disagree", "medium", "agree", and "strongly agree", which were assigned a numerical score of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. The total score of each student's attitude was the sum of the scores for each question.

3) Open-ended questions. In this study, open-ended questions could encourage students to interact with the researcher to generate more information. On the other hand, open-ended questions could also avoid the limitations of given choices and help the researcher investigate students' suggestions and opinions of online English learning in greater depth.

6. Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted as a means of collecting qualitative data. The researcher designed five open-ended questions for the interview. 10 English teachers from Anshun No. 1 High School participated in this interview, and researcher recorded the interviews in writing. The questions for the semi-structured interviews were: 1) 'What do you think are the challenges of online English teaching in difficult times', 2) 'What do you think are the opportunities for online English teaching in difficult times', 3) 'Facing the challenges in difficult times, what attitude do you use to overcome them', 4) 'Facing the opportunities in difficult times, what actions do you take to seize them' and 5) 'Please provide some practical learning methods to help students improve the effectiveness of online English learning'.

Research findings

This section demonstrated the research findings. There were 4 findings based on 2 objectives from the 2 different instruments.

The first finding based on Objective 1 came from the multiple-choice questions data in the questionnaire. The researcher gathered personal information of target group through the multiple-choice questions, and the personal information covered five aspects. Furthermore, 404 students participated in this survey. The multiple-choice questions details were as follows.

Table 1 The findings of multiple-choice questions

Personal information	Data	Students	Percentage
Gender of students	Senior three	239	59.16%
	Senior one	85	21.04%
	Senior two	80	19.8%
Online learning frequency	Yes	312	77.23%
	No	92	22.77%
Online learning facilities	Computers	49	12.13%
	Mobile phones	156	38.61%
	Both	199	49.26%
Online learning duration	Less than 2 hours	177	43.81%
	2-3 hours	126	31.19%
	4-5 hours	62	15.35%
	More than 5 hours	39	9.65%
Students' satisfaction of online English courses	Yes	269	66.58%
	No	135	33.42%

From Table 1, in terms of grade, the largest number of students (239, 59.16%) who participated in the questionnaire came from senior three; followed by 85 (21.04%) students from the senior one; and 80 (19.8%) students from the senior two. In terms of online learning frequency, 312 (77.23%) students reported that they often used online teaching methods for learning. However, 92 (22.77%) students expressed that they did not have much online learning experience. Moreover, with respect to online learning facilities, 199 (49.26%) students chose to use both mobile phones and computers for online course learning; followed by 156 (38.61%) students who opted for mobile phones; at the same time, 49 (12.13%) students chose to use computers. In addition, with regards to online learning duration, 177 (43.81%) students learned online for less than 2 hours per day on average; 126 (31.19%) students studied online for an average of 2-3 hours per day; and 62 (15.35%) students spent 4-5 hours on average studying online per day; it was worth noticing that, only 39 (9.65%) students spent more than 5 hours per day on online learning. On the other hand, regarding students' satisfaction with online English courses, 269 (66.58%) students said that they liked online English courses. On the contrary, 135 (33.42%) students claimed that online English courses were not their preference.

The second finding based on Objective 1 was from the scoring questions data in the questionnaire. The researcher used the five-points Likert Scale to quantify the responses of the target group. In addition, this part focused on students' perceptions toward online English

learning, and their perceptions are ranked in the order from high to low. The Table 2 demonstrated the findings of the scoring questions.

Table 2 The findings of scoring questions

Ranking No.	Students' perceptions	Mean	S. D	Two-tailed
1	Teaching professionalism	3.67	0.847	0.05
2	Effective interaction	3.65	0.763	0.05
3	Network facilities	3.64	0.835	0.05
4	Teaching contents	3.61	0.728	0.05
5	Learning motivation	3.58	0.809	0.05
6	Learning self-discipline	3.54	0.855	0.05
7	Courses management	3.54	0.573	0.05
8	Teaching methods	3.51	0.636	0.05

The analysis showed the mean, SD and two-tailed of each statement. The students' strongest perception toward online English learning was 'Teaching professionalism', the mean of which was 3.67 (SD=0.847), and two-tailed 0.05. The reasons are that Anshun No. 1 High School teachers have solid professional knowledge. Teachers could use online classrooms to convey English knowledge to students and encourage students to set an effective learning target.

In addition, Teachers could also help students improve their online academic performance while increasing students' application of network technology. On the contrary, the students' weakest perception was 'Teaching methods', with a mean of 3.51 (SD=0.636), and two-tailed 0.05. The reasons are that Anshun No. 1 High School teachers lack innovative online teaching methods. Most online English classrooms are teacher-centered, and there is a lack of effective communication and interaction between teachers and students.

The third finding, which was also based on Objective 1, came from the open-ended question data in the questionnaire. The open-ended question is 'As a high school student, what other perceptions do you have about online English learning? Please explain'. There were a total of 404 answers, of which 165 were valid. The researcher coded and summarized the results of open-ended question and obtained additional perceptions of high school students about online English learning. The additional findings could be divided into 12 categories. Table 3 below shows the relevant details.

Table 3 The findings of open-ended question

No.	Items	Frequencies
1	Online learning is convenient	18
2	Need to communicate	17
3	Increase the interaction	16
4	Increase online teaching methods	15
5	Combine online and onsite	14
6	Improve learning efficiency	14
7	Improve online learning attention	13
8	Online courses design	13
9	Lack of online learning experience	13
10	Share learning experience	12
11	Influence students' eyesight	11
12	Online learning is convenient	9

From Table 3, 18 participants brought up the convenience of online English learning. Most participants believed that online English learning could enable students to carry out learning activities anytime and anywhere. A small number of participants felt that online English learning could help them practice oral English more conveniently. Secondly, 17 participants mentioned the need to communicate in online English learning. Most of the 17 participants believed that teachers and students should have more learning exchanges. At the same time, a small number of participants thought more communication could improve their oral English. Thirdly, 16 participants mentioned the increased interaction in online English learning. Most participants believed that teachers and students should have more learning interaction. While a few participants felt that teachers should engage students to join learning activities. Furthermore, 15 participants touched upon the increased teaching methods in online English learning. Most of the participants believed that teachers should adopt effective methods for online teaching. In contrast, a small number of participants thought online English teaching could add some attractive teaching methods. Then, 14 participants mentioned the combination of online and onsite English learning. Most of the participants believed that students can discuss online and interact in face-to-face class; however, a small number of participants felt that teachers could teach English online and supervise learning onsite. On the other hand, 14 participants stressed the importance of online English learning in improving learning efficiency. Most of the participants believed that online English learning can enhance their learning efficiency. Furthermore, a small number of participants thought students need review many times to improve their learning efficiency. 13 participants mentioned the issue of attention in online English learning. Most of the participants believed that students are easily distracted when online English learning and they need to find a way to solve it. A small number of participants pointed out that online English learning require students to improve their attention. 13 participants noted the diversity issue of courses designed for online English learning. Most of the participants believed that online English teaching could design some attractive courses; at the same time, a few participants thought teachers should avoid the singleness of online courses. In addition, 13 participants mentioned a lack of experience in online English learning. Most of the participants believed that some students could not adapt to online English learning, resulting in the decrease of their grades. In contrast, a small number of participants thought they did not know how to learn because they lacked online learning experience. Then, 12 participants expressed that their share experience in online English learning. Most of the participants believed that they could share their online English learning experience with other students; furthermore, a small number of participants thought teachers could let active students share their online English learning experience. On the other hand, the 11 participants described the influence of online English learning on students' eyesight. Most of the participants believed that students should pay attention to protect their eyesight when participating in online learning; while a small amount number of participants felt that long-term use of online learning devices would cause damage to their eyesight. Finally, 9 participants expressed that the influence of network facilities on online English learning. Most of the participants believed that students should be proficient in the operating network facilities for effective online learning; however, a small number of participants felt that if the network facilities were broken, students could not carry out online English learning.

The fourth finding based on Objective 2 came from the semi-structured interviews data. This section displayed the analysis of semi-structured interviews, which were divided into 5 questions. 10 English teachers of Anshun No.1 High School participated in semi-structured interviews.

Question one is 'What do you think are the challenges of online English teaching in difficult times?' Answers to the question showed 3 themes. The results are shown in the table below.

Research discussions

The first research question of this study was: What are the Chinese high school students' perceptions toward online English learning? The survey results showed that most students expressed that online English learning was boring and the teachers' teaching method was singular. This was in accordance with the statement of Albiansyah, Hidayat & Aringga (2021) that most students thought online English learning was boring, and the learning efficiency was lower than face-to-face learning, and students were easily distracted by the Internet. Surani & Hamidah (2020) also proposed that students were willing to participate in online learning. They believed that online learning was beneficial, but there was a lack of effective communication and interaction between teachers and students. Generally, rich teaching content on the Internet gives students access to high-quality knowledge, which can attract students' attention and mobilize students' enthusiasm. This finding is consistent with Hazaymeh (2021) that teachers expanded their teaching content by searching resources online and incorporated online technology in showing students the learning materials. At the same time, teachers should create an attractive online classroom. They increase the frequency of interaction with students through online questions and games (Lee & Huang, 2018). Portela (2020) believed that teachers used the flipped classrooms, gamification, software skills training and other teaching methods to increase communication and interaction between them and their students.

The second research question of this study was: What are the challenges and opportunities for Chinese high school teachers in online English teaching in difficult times? The survey results showed that the challenges of online English teaching are: 1) students are not independent in study English online; 2) A lack of effective interaction between teachers and students; 3) low learning efficiency of students. According to Songbatumis (2017), challenges in English teaching included low levels of motivation and learning efficiency on the part of students, and a lack of teaching experience and teaching methods on the part of teachers. On the other side, online English teaching also presents opportunities for teachers. They could switch their teaching methods, and use blended teaching methods to teach language online. This finding is consistent with Yajie (2021) who pointed out that the blended teaching method played a positive role in promoting students' participation in the classroom. At the same time, blended teaching methods could strengthen cooperation and communication with students. According to Wardoyo & Herdiani (2017), teachers should have a positive teaching attitude to face the challenges of online teaching. Meanwhile, they should actively complete school's teaching tasks and carry out online teaching activities, to prevent the decline of students' academic performance which may cause student to lose motivation. This is in accordance with the statement of Aghaalikhani & Maftoon (2018). The education plan during the Covid-19 pandemic reflects that it is difficult for students to learn independently when they attend online classes. Teachers should make timely assessment on students' learning state and academic performance, and implement solutions to helping students who lag behind and improving their learning behavior. This was in accordance with the discovery of Karacaoglu (2018) that both teachers and students found online evaluation beneficial and effective. Online evaluation was more popular because it could intuitively reflect the students' learning status and motivation to help teachers manage students effectively.

Conclusions

The purposes of this study were to investigate Chinese high school students' perceptions of online English learning, as well as to explore the challenges and opportunities for Chinese high school teachers in online English teaching. Descriptive statistics were utilized to analyze the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews data. Finally, the results showed that the strongest perception of students was 'teaching professionalism'. The reasons are that Anshun No. 1 High School teachers have strong professionalism and a positive teaching attitude. Teachers could effectively guide students in online English learning. On the other hand, the biggest challenge teachers encountered was a lower efficiency associated with online learning compared to onsite education, and the best opportunity was teachers' ability to use a greater variety of methods to guide students. The researcher suggested that Chinese high school teachers should use other innovative and constructive teaching methods for online English teaching in order to prevent students from feeling bored and losing their motivation to learn. In addition, effective implementation of online teaching requires high-quality syllabus. Therefore, teachers need to focus on professional curriculum planning and teaching activities design. Furthermore, researchers in this field could pay attention to large amount of students' perceptions of online learning, as well as focus on students' learning motivation and learning efficiency. Future studies could apply multiple instruments to understand students' perceptions and voices on various subjects.

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