Exploring the Difficulties and Challenges of the Local Macao English Language Learners towards the Online Synchronous One-on-one English Learning Class

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT

With the development of technology, the number of English learners who opt for online learning has been increasing. In the past, students had a tendency to download English materials and watch online videos for improving their English skills. Recently, thanks to a shift to online learning, students have been making more use of online synchronous one-on-one English classes to improve their English at leisure. Although this type of learning mode is becoming more and more popular, the study of the difficulties and challenges of English learners in such a field has been under-explored. This study attempts to use a qualitative approach to interview two English learners of different backgrounds to better understand the difficulties and challenges they encountered when using such a learning method. The two interviewees conclude points ranging from the learning aspect, distant feeling, signal delay, instability of the learning software and hardware that lead to technical problems. Certain measures to avoid the problems are also suggested in this paper.

1. Introduction

English is an international language used globally, as well as the second language in many countries. Being proficient in English aids in securing more opportunities in the future and in many sectors. English language is even considered as a must-learn ability. The heat of online learning is enhancing constantly and will go on in the future [1]. In the past, English learners tended to study English via tutorial school or studying abroad. Now, it is also the norm that many learners use online synchronous one-on-one English learning classes to improve their English at any time through this method. This mode of learning is beyond geographical limitation; online learning could be the most appropriate approach for learning and teaching oral skills for its versatility [2]. Online learning benefits students who otherwise may not be able to take part in the class physically; for example, if they have trouble finding childcare, fall ill during term time, or work full time so find it is difficult to travel to campus [3]. Also, the fees for this method of learning is much lower than those spent on a physical tutorial school or studying abroad, and the market for such a learning mode is ever increasing. However, with its gradual growth, the difficulties and challenges of online learners are still under-explored. This study attempts to further explore this topic and looks for possible solutions and suggestions to mitigate potential obstacles in order to have a better experience of online learning.

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2. Literature Review

With the accessible convenience, online learning has long received praise, being largely relied on for further English learning. Online courses have been beneficial to students who tend to have a self-regulated learning approach [4]. It was mentioned students' interests were piqued so they were motivated to try online learning activities despite there being no assessment on these tasks [5]. Furthermore, synchronous learning is also largely advocated between the teacher and the learner. Synchronous learning such as videoconferencing or audioconferencing enables "live" and instant exchange [6]. This particular method offers authentic interaction in real time; possibly collaborating with other learners and a teacher, to complete tasks online rather than in a classroom [7]. Several advantages are listed with synchronous class, ranging from instant feedback, motivating the interchange of different angles, strengthening social presence, and fostering the exchange of emotional supports and supplying verbal elements [8]. The parents of young learners are also able to keep tabs on their child's progress by viewing lessons and assignments, as well as grades and feedback, possibly improving their ability to further help their child's progress [9]. Despite the numerous advantages to help with learning, there are still potential obstacles for the usage of synchronous English classes.

Research questions

(1) In the online synchronous one-on-one English learning class, what difficulties do learners find to have as for English learning?
(2) Besides the teaching mode, does any software of hardware affect the learning process when using such a method?

3. Research Method

This study used a qualitative case study, employing the semi-structure interview. Two interviewees of different ages and backgrounds were selected. The reason for the difference between the two interviewees in selection is that it is interesting to know if the obstacles they encountered respectively would be similar with their varying backgrounds. One is a 29-year-old lady who works in a bank in Macao. She has a bachelor's degree in Chinese and English translation, and a master's degree in Business Administration. She wanted to improve her English listening and speaking as she felt these skills of hers to be weaker than preferred. She chose a Philippine online English teacher due to the cheaper fees for each online class. Another interviewee is a 9-year-old girl who studies in an English primary school in Macao. She is interested in learning English. Her mother helped her register on the English learning platform for furthering her English ability. She chose an American English teacher due to her mother's thinking that native speakers make better teachers. For protecting their privacy, their names are not shown in the following. I will address them as Interviewee 1 (the 29-year-old lady) and Interviewee 2 (the 9-year-old girl). Certain responses contributing to the addressed questions were selected in the following for analysis.

4. Analysis and Results

Learning aspect

Interviewee 1 (Excerpt): During the class, I found training tends to focus on listening and speaking rather than reading and writing. Although I could ask the online teacher to teach me reading and writing, it is boring to learn them online compared to learning listening and speaking. I have had better training from this online teacher for my oral skills.

For improving speaking skills, sometimes it was a bit difficult to listen to the pronunciation clearly as there was still a monitor between us. The sound produced via a laptop is different from that produced in a classroom where a teacher stands in the room with me. I would prefer it if the online teacher articulated exaggeratedly so I could follow along a little easier. For listening, since the teacher I chose is a Philippine teacher, it seems they tended to speak English at a slow pace, so the speaking speed was alright. The experience was okay overall.

Interviewee 2 (Excerpt): Speaking practice was given in the online class. Reading practice was rare. I think I learn a lot of speaking skill from the online lesson because my speaking skill gets better and better. When I am promoted to a higher level in my primary school, I may want some reading and writing practices for the English assignments from my school.

In the real classroom setting in school or tutorial centers, students already know what will be taught to them as the teaching material is shown on the syllabus. However, online, not many teachers will use a systemic syllabus because some the learners may have just purchased one or a few lessons. In this situation, it is recommended that learners let the teachers know beforehand which aspects of certain skills they want to learn so that the online teachers can better prepare for it in advance. A detailed communication between the learner and teacher for the course planning should have been created before class; otherwise, it would

disappoint the expectation of the learner. It was mentioned that accessibility can be a significant issue for online students, in comparison to physical classes. However, the drawback could also be that online teachers find it harder to adapt to a student's needs when only working online with them, rather than in a classroom setting [10]. Learners always have to be able to give feedback towards the teaching style, so the online teachers know whether there is possibility or necessity to change their online teaching approach. Furthermore, both interviewees show satisfaction with regards to learning outcomes for speaking skills gained from the online classes. Compared to a real classroom where a teacher is only able to take care a group of students, online synchronous one-on-one English learning classes has its advantages in targeting the improvement of pronunciation or speaking, the two of which are seldom modified and particularly trained in a big classroom.

Although the core of online synchronous one-on-one English learning class is said to be instant and spontaneous, it is still different from a real classroom setting as there are indeed some seconds or milliseconds delay due to the nature of virtual environment. For this reason, it has been suggested that online teachers must repeat important details in case it is missed. Also, as for teaching pronunciation, they should somehow exaggerate a little in order for the learners to better understand by looking at their lip movement. The technique that was listed, has been used and notable is listening and imitating to learn pronunciation [11]. This technique employs the Direct Method in which students learn the pronunciation from a teacher-provide model and repeat and imitate. Therefore, the clarity of pronunciation is essential, even if it is taught online. Learners can also make good use of the recording function to record the class upon the approval and agreement from the online teacher as they can play back for revision. Many platforms allow teachers to create an online archive of recorded sessions for this purpose [12].

Distant feeling

Interviewee 1 (Excerpt): Although the virtual class is so close to a real class, I still feel a certain sense of distance. The feeling is strange as I feel the teacher is close to me, but still seems distant.

A full interaction involves effort, and it is unavoidable that a virtual class requires a great deal more to recreate such a feeling. What the online teacher can do to compensate this potential flaw is they can share more about their own culture, which could potentially be one way to tackle the distant feeling. It was discovered that from students' angles, the absence of individual interaction between the online teacher and students could be one major drawback of learning distantly [13].

Signal Delay

Interviewee 1 (Excerpt): Even if it is always said that online synchronous one-on-one English learning class is instantaneous, actually it is not. It is not completely instant. Sometimes there is a delay or a pause during the class. The teacher couldn't hear me or vice versa. A 45-minute class has two or three stops or pauses in between and affected my learning experience. The teacher said maybe it's because of the instability of the Internet support in her country (Philippines). I suppose it could be caused by the Internet.

Interviewee 2 (Excerpt): I like the online English lessons. However, sometimes when it reached the most exciting or interesting part of the class or reached the key points in the content, there was a delay or pause or even delay of the sound or message delivery all of a sudden. This affected my attitude to the lesson. When there is a cut or stop in connection, the teachers couldn't hear what I said and vice versa.

Technical difficulties provide a major drawback for online students, causing significant frustration without the help of a technician available immediately [14]. For consideration and analysis, what leads to the above are reasons ranging from unstable Internet connection to malfunctions of software and hardware. In Macao, optical fiber and broadband are common and the speed for Internet connection is rather stable. However, in many countries, the Internet connection could be very unstable. Learners, before they buy an online one-on-one course, have to put this factor into consideration as well. Moreover, it is suggested that microphones and earphones instead of installed amplifiers of laptops should be used as they can have comparatively better function to ensure a higher quality of sound input and output. In addition to hardware, software needs to be taken in account. Some examples of applications with high praise are Zoom, Microsoft teams and Tencent video. The high quality of these applications ensures the smoothness of the class. Additionally, some learners prefer to use electronic cell phones for an online class; however, this could lower their experience as the monitor is so small that it is hard to read the screen sharing materials and even the text in the chat box. Still, it is recommended to use computer or laptop as the electronic device.

One current strategy for helping with sudden problems concerning hardware and software is typing in the chat box to let the online teacher know the occurrence is essential, which helps to relieve the awkward moments of

embarrassment of not hearing both or seeing both freezing on Internet. Jose and Abidin found that in their study some participants actually had this chat function itself disrupted by slow internet networks and system failures by their electronic device, interrupting the participants' posts [15]. This could, however, lead to a learner's occasional writing practice for necessary communication in the online lesson, which could be an advantage.

It is recommended that online teachers try a few more test sessions or even evaluate themselves by recording their own sample teaching demonstration and playing it back to improve before the real online class. Online teachers should also take note of their facial expressions, tone, and body language to see whether they are appropriately shown on screen. In a real classroom setting, as long as the preparation is done well, most of these factors are under control. However, online teaching has a lot of sudden intervention. Therefore, online teachers are also required to be able to quickly adapt to maintain the smoothness of the online class.

5. Conclusions

When learners chose online synchronous one-on-one English learning class, it is important for learners to ensure the learning points have been clearly communicated to the teachers so there is no misunderstanding with respect to the learning targets. Through the online classes, learners should regularly let the teachers know how they feel about the course. Repetition or particularly articulation of certain important aspects, such as pronunciation, in the class should be applied to make sure the message can be conveyed to students accurately. The sense of distant feeling does exist in some cases and teachers can improve it by sharing more about cultures to the learner to close the gap between the teacher and learner in the virtual environment. When it comes to speaking practices, learners, when necessary, can ask teachers to lower their speaking speed, which is more helpful for the message delivery. As for choosing software for the online classes, it is recommended to use known stable programs such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams or Tencent video to maintain the stability of the class and clarity of connection. With respect to hardware, it is better to use headphones and microphone instead of the amplifiers installed on electronic devices. It is also not recommended to use a mobile phone for lessons as the monitor is too small for the reading subject material. Finally, it is also important to choose stable cable or optical fiber for transmitting signals instead of dial-up connection. All these can contribute to a better learning experience online. It was found that student satisfaction was influenced by course quality and the perceived production value, seeing it as more effective [16]. Students were more likely to feel satisfied if they felt motivated to use such online technology on their own. Therefore, while the online teacher tries the best to maintain the course quality, technology is that part that should not be ignored.

There are limitations to this study: this research only involves two interviewees, which may not be a reliable or representative number. In the future studies, firstly, a qualitative approach can be employed first to collect learners' attitude towards the online classes with the use of Likert scale and open questions in a questionnaire. Then, it is suggested that names or identification numbers may be left at the end of the qualitative research questionnaire. The researchers can contact around 10-12 interviewees whose responses are in-depth enough to be explored further. The final results and figures would then be more reliable for a deeper understanding with regards to this issue.

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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.26549/jetm.v5i2.8344   5