

Chinese EFL Teachers' Reflections of Online English Teaching during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: To better understand English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' voices in online English teaching in China, a qualitative case study was carried out by analyzing semi-interviews, and in-depth data of six EFL teachers from a central Chinese university. With thematic analysis, seven themes emerged, including *the choices of teaching platforms or Apps, the negative attitude, the preparation for online teaching, teaching design, teaching assessment, advantages, and challenges*. Overall, the study contributed to the existing knowledge of online language teaching theoretically and practically by providing a Chinese contextual phenomenon of EFL teaching.

Keywords: EFL teachers, online English teaching, technology acceptance, China

1. Introduction

The Chinese government issued the national policy “Suspending Classes without Stopping Learning” to ensure the continuity of teaching and learning during the COVID-19 period. This led most Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers to use the Internet and online platforms as their only teaching medium (Tao & Gao, 2022). The national policy had assumed that teachers had sufficient knowledge in technology, pedagogy, and content (TPACK) to conduct a successful online teaching practice during this particular period (Moorhouse, Li, & Walsh, 2021) since Chinese EFL teachers have been encouraged to integrate information and communication technology (ICT) into EFL teaching to create an authentic language-rich environment for the students whose mother tongue is not English (College English Teaching Guide, 2017). However, the national policy cannot guarantee teachers' technology adoption in their real teaching practice. Moreover, recent evidence has shown that EFL teachers were not positive to integrate technology into their teaching due to concerns about their technological competence and insufficient teacher development training (Gao et al., 2021). Therefore, it matters to know how these EFL teachers perceived ICT-supported online teaching in a pandemic period where online teaching was a must rather than an alternative (Li, 2022). Given that the qualitative research method tends to seek in-depth and detailed information as well as explore how the information relates (Ary et al., 2010), a case study with semi-interviews was conducted in the current study to address the following question:

What are the EFL teachers' reflections about their experience of online English teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic time?

2. Research Methodology

A qualitative approach that can offer deeper insights into the topic was carried out for the study. Such a method was appropriate since factors that influence Chinese EFL teachers' views about online teaching are far more complicated than what general information suggests by quantitative methods (Huang, Teo, & Zhou, 2021). As part of a more extensive investigation, the current study just reported

the findings of a qualitative inquiry into Chinese EFL teachers' voices and reflections on online EFL teaching during COVID-19. Six participants were selected from a university in a central Chinese province by a purposeful sampling method. They were chosen mainly for the various demographic information of the interviewees, such as educational background and teaching experience, for maximum variation. To protect participants' information and convenience of data presentation, the participants were referred to as R1-R6. Their basic information is shown in Table 1.1. A face-to-face semi-structured interview on a one-to-one basis was conducted to collect the qualitative data. The ethical issues were informed to the respondents such as their willingness to withdraw whenever they wanted during the whole study session. All interviews were recorded with the participants' permission. The entire duration of interview data collection lasted 30 days because of the participants' tight schedules. The length of each interview ranged from 48 to 135 minutes, with an average of 90 minutes. After the data collection, the data analysis was done thematically. To reduce the potential disadvantages caused by language, interviews in Chinese were followed during interview sessions and only the final reporting was presented in English.

Table 1.1 *Basic Information of Interview Participants*

N	G	YT	ED	AR	CT	CS	OP
R1	M	20	PhD	Lecture	Public English	100+	Ding Talk; Cidaren; We Learn; WeChat
R2	F	14	MA	Lecture	Comprehensive English	40+	Ding Talk; Chaoxing; WeChat; Mooc
R3	M	17	MA	Associate Professor	Reading	100+	Ding Talk; Cidaren; We Learn; Cloud Class; WeChat
R4	F	35	MA	Professor	Western Culture	40+	Ding Talk; Cidaren; We Learn; WeChat; MOOC
R5	F	13	MA	Lecture	Business English	50+	Ding Talk; Chaoxing; WeChat; Mooc
R6	F	6	MA	Lecture	Listening & speaking	40+	Ding Talk; Cidaren; We Learn; Chaoxing

N=Name; G=Gender; YT=Year of Teaching; ED= Educational Degree; AC=Academic Rank; CT=Course of Teaching; CS=Class Size; OP=Online Platforms

3. Research Findings and Discussion

Based on the semi-interview data from six Chinese EFL respondents, the findings were divided into three stages: before, during, and after implementation. For each phase, different themes emerged. The detailed themes descriptions were presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *the Themes Summary from the Interview Data Collected*

Stages	Themes	Sub-themes
Before Implementation	1. The choice of online teaching platforms	a) Stable connection b) Easy operation c) Basic instruction functions
	2. Negative attitude toward online teaching	a) Worries and fears about unknown challenges b) Doubts about the quality of online teaching
	3. Preparation for the online teaching	a) Exploration by themselves b) Seeking external supports c) Conducting a mock teaching
During Implementation	1. Instructional design	a) Student-entered online instructional design b) Unchanged instructional design

After Implementation	2. Assessment	a) Assessment means b) Assessment results
	1. Advantages of Online Teaching	a) Rich resources b) Relaxing environment c) Strengthened management of students' learning process d) Improved teachers' self-efficacy
	2. Disadvantages of Online Teaching	a) Difficulties in conducting online group Activities b) Lack of emotional communication c) Time-consuming for teachers

The findings of the interview data highlighted the critical role of technology in an online context. The themes supported previous research on the technology acceptance model (Davis, 1989; Venkatesh & Davis, 2000), which indicated that the perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness were important factors affecting teachers' technology acceptance. It was suggested to the system developers that one of the basic principles for developing online teaching systems was easy to operate. As for the usefulness, online teaching strengthened the management of the student's learning process and provided rich resources in the study, which was in accordance with the study of Hwang and Wang (2016). Generally, most Chinese EFL teachers in the study experienced a transition from negative attitudes toward online teaching at the beginning to positive and to self-efficacious with cognition and experience increasing. The transition was due to the EFL teachers' commitment and great efforts to online teaching as well as external support such as technological support from peers and teachers' development training (Huang, Teo, & Zhou, 2021). In terms of the disadvantages of online teaching, the issues still existed such as conducting online group activities and lack of emotional interaction.

4. Conclusion

The research theoretically contributed to the existing knowledge of online language education by offering a deeper understanding of Chinese EFL teachers' reflections on their online teaching practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, practical implications especially focused on the continuing professional development in TAPCK to improve teachers' motivation and self-efficacy to integrate technology into online teaching.

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