A Study on Chinese Students' At-home Online Learning Practice at a UK University

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Abstract: This study explores Chinese university students' online learning practice during the at-home online learning period and the factors driving their learning practice. Based on the data collected from semi-structured interviews with eight postgraduate students at a UK university, I found that Chinese students prefer self-directed learning and collaborative learning through social media. Lack of metacognitive skills and deep roots in Chinese collective culture drive them to learn in these two ways. I advocate a) that students should learn and employ metacognitive learning strategies and b) that teachers should provide students with more flexible and appropriate learning materials from various platforms.

Keywords: Online learning practice; COVID-19; Chinese students

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has spread worldwide, causing the closure of schools and institutions in many countries. Students were thus forced to stay at home to study online. This has had a significant impact on the educational system and students' lives. On the "regular" school days, students and staff are permitted to enter the teaching building, including a library, study area, and computer. Furthermore, the openness of the school's public rooms gives students a sense of community and allows them to engage with colleagues throughout the day. Nevertheless, during the at-home online learning period, students sit in front of their tables and learn through computers, tablets or mobile phones.

Under this circumstance, different scholars have stated complementary viewpoints on the abrupt move from face-to-face to online learning. Online courses are frequently seen as "incomplete" or "complementary" in the past [1]. But COVID-19 has changed people's minds because online learning is widely regarded as the most effective means of ensuring secure teaching and learning [2]. However, some researchers express their concerns [3, 4], advocating that this is an emergency remote teaching (ERT), and its effectiveness has been questioned. However, Paul and Jefferson [5] found that the effectiveness of online learning can be considered the equivalent level of face-to-face learning. Therefore, it is critical to understand students' at-home online learning practices, which can add more meaningful perspectives to the current online learning research, help students better understand themselves and their peers, and assist teachers in improving teaching outcomes.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Online Learning

There is a significant increase in the use of the Internet and technology in education. Higher education institutes thus have been implementing Online learning into their curriculum design. The word "online learning" has been a hot spot, with numerous names and variations, including "E-Learning" and "computer-mediated learning" [6]. Its main goal is to employ information technology to improve educational quality [7].

Taking into account the main arguments about online learning as well as the context of COVID-19, this study believes that online learning can be defined as learning that has the following characteristics: a) Internet-based learning [8]; b) Online synchronous and asynchronous learning [9, 10]; C) enables students to attend courses, study materials, submit homework, and complete group projects (Paul and Jefferson,

2019); d) enables teachers to use ICT (such as the Internet, computer, telephone, radio, video, and others) to assist them in their teaching [11].

Education is more accessible than ever before because of online learning. This is because online learning is accessible [12], flexible [13], self-regulatory [14], and interactive [15]. It has several benefits, including enhanced comfort and the ability for students to access materials regardless of their location or time. Teachers can also generate content, assignments, and activities on the learning management system (LMS), which students can access via computers and mobile devices. Various online learning apps, such as YouTube and Zoom, have recently evolved into virtual classrooms to assist teaching and learning activities.

2.2. Online Learning in Higher Education during COVID-19

Online learning is considered an essential educational approach during the pandemic. To combat COVID-19, many countries have suspended traditional face-to-face instruction to protect teachers and pupils. Many experts, however, consider online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic to be ERT, because the technical transformation of higher education institutions takes time, whereas COVID-19 requires a shift in teaching methods in a relatively short time [1]. Because of this, the learning effectiveness is questioned as many teachers lack online teaching experience, and students are unable to swiftly adapt to changes in the learning environment in this circumstance. The government encourages professionals, politicians, citizens, educators, and learners to investigate new possibilities.

Students face numerous diversions when studying online at home. First, families can shield students against the COVID-19 virus, but they can also cause behavioural and cognitive alterations [8]. Similarly, Firmansyah et al. [16] have a deep-seated attitude that schoolwork should not be done at home. As a result, being compelled to stay at home causes "learning shock," and human and pet invasions may cause interference and distraction [17]. Second, the significant unpredictability of COVID-19 causes students in higher education to procrastinate [18].

Nonetheless, students benefit from the convenience of online study. They can study and learn anytime and anywhere in the online learning environment. Second, they are accessible to diverse and flexible learning resources. They can use online blogs or websites to expand their online resources. Another study indicated that 73.9 per cent of respondents said online learning was more convenient since they could attend classes from the comfort of their own homes and have complete control over course materials [19]. Third, there are more flexible communication methods for both learners and teachers. Teachers and students can communicate asynchronously or synchronously using various media, including audio, video, and text, through online learning tools like Lark, DingTalk, and Teams. Finally, because teachers can employ online group discussions and other formats for learners to communicate with each other, synchronous learning can provide many opportunities for social contact [20].

Most significantly, there are numerous online learning tools available to pupils. The first is the school-provided LMS. LMS are software applications or web-based technologies used to organise, implement, and evaluate specific learning activities. The most common LMS in educational institutions is Blackboard, Moodle, WebCT, and desire2learn. Server-based or cloud-based software applications can store information about users, courses and content and provide spaces for learning and teaching without time and space constraints [21].

Second, social media has evolved into a tool for learning. Students can communicate with their peers, professors, and subject specialists more easily on social media. In the classroom, Ansari and Khan [22] discovered that social media could foster creativity and make it easier for pupils to collaborate with their teachers. Furthermore, because people are in a crisis, they are more likely to spend time on social media to preserve social distance [23].

YouTube also plays a crucial role in providing multiple online learning approaches. Learners can access video content via YouTube, which offers many forms of learning resources, including lectures, tutorials, exercises, and vlogs [24]. YouTube is known for its "openness, non-threat, pleasant, and exploratory" nature as an informal learning environment [25].

2.3. Research Questions

Due to the convenience and flexibility of online learning, higher education institutes can deliver courses in a virtual learning environment. Nevertheless, researchers continue to doubt students' learning effectiveness [4]. In addition, students' learning practice in this complicated online environment has

piqued my curiosity. To better understand students' learning practice, I proposed the following research questions:

1) How do students learn during the at-home online learning period?

2) What are the factors driving them to learn in these ways?

3. Methodology

According to two research questions, I conducted a qualitative and empirical study. I am a proponent of social constructivism in this study, which focuses on students' online learning practice. In some ways, it is self-evident that different people have various experiences over the course of a year, and students can use a range of online learning methods and strategies to achieve this. Constructivist research aims to create the most sophisticated description or explanation of a particular environment by involving researchers and participants, many of whom may have opposing viewpoints on specific situations [26]. Qualitative research can also capture social constructivism's worldview. Using qualitative approaches helps us explore a world we are unfamiliar with, and allows us to see a cultural lifestyle that is different from my own [27].

3.1 Data Collection

In this study, I utilised the convenience sampling approach to select 8 Chinese students from a Master's programme at a British university as the data source. First, I sent an email to this Master's program's students, asking if any of them would be interested in participating in my online learning research from 2020 to 2021. After getting the response, I sent an invitation email, which included the participant information form (PIS) and the informed consent form I created for the project. After getting their responses, I finally arranged the data collection.

The semi-structured interview method was used to collect data. The semi-structured interview is a type of interview that has been shown to be helpful in investigating experience and practice [28]. Zoom was used to conduct the interviews. Because most of the participants have a Mandarin Chinese background, the language during the interviews was Mandarin Chinese, which can guarantee accuracy without losing its connotation, ensuring the authenticity of the research results.

3.2 Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's topic analysis (TA) [29]. First, I read and reread the data several times to comprehend the meaning. I transcribe the data in Chinese to prevent it from losing the connotation. Second, I encode with data, with the focus on "how students learn online" and "what drives them to choose such tactics" throughout the process. Finally, I categorise and group the code into potential themes. In addition, I attempt to comprehend the connections between various categories.

4. Findings

Findings from sections 4.1 and 4.2 answer research question 1: How do students learn during the at-home online learning period? Results from sections 4.1 and 4.2 answer research question 2: What are the factors driving them to learn in these ways?

4.1 Self-directed learning strategies

All students said that the LMS is a good tool because they can obtain learning materials anytime and anywhere. They can also review asynchronous classes. Participant C said: "Lecture recording and broadcasting courses are time-saving and efficient."

However, teachers' materials are often overloaded, making them unable to complete the reading task. In addition, students generally felt that the LMS is cumbersome, and some materials stored by teachers are difficult to find. They also complained that the LMS always meets technical problems, but they failed to contact the IT team to help solve them in time.

Participant E: Blackboard doesn't work from time to time. And we have to email the IT apartment,

but only got a reply after a few days, which is slowing the efficiency.

In this case, they chose not to follow the teacher's steps in the LMS. Instead, they turned to searching Google and Youtube to learn.

Participant G: I do not use BlackBoard so often, and I prefer Google or YouTube, where the learning materials, educational videos, and professors' blogs...help me understand the notions faster than reading papers.

The role of YouTube cannot be underestimated because it provides a variety of content for online learning. Earlier, Downes [30] also found that people can learn in a self-directed way on YouTube because it is both educational and enjoyable.

4.2 Strategies of cooperative learning through social media

In addition to self-directed learning, some participants also claimed that they enjoyed the collaborative learning on WeChat. In social media groups (a virtual community of social media), students can easily learn and communicate with each other.

Participant B: we have groups on WeChat... Specific groups are for particular course units... We share materials or solve problems together... Which helps reduce my stress.

Participant A: When we are being together...we solve problems faster. For example, when one person answers the questions in some online discussions, the other people can search for answers quickly.

Some people believe that peer pressure in a social group will motivate them to study. To some extent, peers' reminders make them feel stressed.

Participant F: in the WeChat group, we learned about each other's learning through sharing... If someone tells me that they have completed their homework... Then I immediately feel pressure... I also have to complete my task.

Khan et al. [23] added that social media provides a learning platform for students to communicate with their peers and teachers. Ansari and Khan [22] found that students become more creative and energetic on social media, so they can easily collaborate with teachers.

4.3 Lack of Metacognitive Learning Strategies

Although self-directed learning provides learning flexibility, it is still not perfect. Participant C added, "I feel exhausted... I always have to design tasks and perform them myself". Students were unable to self-discipline in this online learning process. Some students were also easily attracted by family items. Participant A said, "My pet likes to walk around in front of me... When I'm tired, I want to touch my cat, and then I can't control playing with it."

Therefore, it is concluded that students lack metacognitive learning strategies. Metacognition is a tool that can help students engage with their learning process, learn, or create knowledge, improve their creativity, and increase intrinsic motivation skills [31]. If students are not equipped with metacognitive strategies, they cannot deal with learning issues as they can reflect on their learning [32]. In such a case, students think they have experienced a decline in interest this year.

Participant B: At the beginning of each semester, I have a new feeling, so I can keep a relatively high motivation to learn… At the end of the semester, I can also keep a high level of learning because I need to finish the examination… But I am negative during the semester…

Participant H: I hope someone can urge me or encourage me...I feel like I am not motivated to learn at all.

At the same time, as technologies provide flexibility for learning, YouTube offers a variety of channels for informal learning, allowing learners to learn video content through lectures, tutorials, exercises, guides, video logs and information videos. YouTube can be seen as an informal learning environment with "open, non-threatening, pleasant and exploratory" characteristics [33]. However, because of this, YouTube is also easy to become a distraction tool.

Participant B: I think it's hard for you to read the literature with your heart...Going to YouTube for concepts and explanations is a great way to learn. I might be able to make sense of the knowledge in ten minutes.

Participant D: I think it is so easy to be attracted to all kinds of content on YouTube...I intended to use it to see videos related to the course, but I saw many films on YouTube this year, especially those short films.

Du Toit and Kotze [34] concluded that self-regulation is synonymous with metacognitive strategies, and self-regulation is a crucial element of learning well online. In such a case, students cannot study at ease, and their learning environment is full of distractions. As time went by, they were trapped in the lack of metacognitive learning strategies.

4.4 The Influence of Collectivism Culture

Some participants (A, C, G and H) emphasise the importance of collectives. They claimed that a learning collective is similar to a learning group for Chinese students. They believed that a person in the collective is not only studying for his/her own, but for the overall achievement and honour of the whole class.

Participant C: the relationship between my classmates and me is not just like passing by. We are a class and a whole collective. Then, we must all be responsible for each other's learning and how to build a better team… But if we learn online, especially on asynchronous courses, we will lose this sense of responsibility.

Participant E: When we choose optional courses, we will establish WeChat groups to simulate and create a collective atmosphere...What can we discuss and solve together...Some course teachers will also select Microsoft Teams, which makes me think this teacher is very nice.

Thus, people from a collective culture (including China) pay more attention to group norms and goals than self-driven individuals, and they are interdependent within the group [35]. But in the online learning environment, they cannot feel this collective atmosphere.

Participant D: I can't feel the warmth of the class. I seem to be separated from the collective... Most of the time, I fight alone. I study and do my homework alone for a year… I feel like I'm just self-taught.

A strong sense of loneliness has put much pressure on their study. Chinese students don't like to study alone. Islam et al. [36] found that during COVID-19, social media enhanced connectivity, played a more critical role in education, and created opportunities for people to carry out cooperative learning. Thus, "we prefer to build an online discussion group on WeChat to reach group members" (Participant E).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

According to my findings, Chinese students prefer to use it in a self-directed way. Learning becomes more autonomous as technology advances and the online learning environment becomes more flexible [37]. The most significant benefit of LMS tools is that teachers may upload educational materials to the system, which students can access. Another advantageous feature is that lecture recording, and broadcasting courses help save time and effort. However, even though students can benefit from LMS during online learning, they still complain that it is too difficult to use. "When you learn on an LMS, many files are stored like a maze…There are far too many documents... We don't have enough time to process all of the information" (Participant E). This exemplifies the difficulty of using an LMS as schools overemphasise LMS features while forgetting their clucky-to-use characteristic.

So, if students are fed up with LMS, where can they learn? Based on my studies, I found that pupils learn through social media. YouTube has shown to be an effective instructional tool for learners (Lange, 2019). Other social media platforms, such as Tencent's WeChat and Microsoft's Teams, aid in forming communities and facilitating group discussions.

In a time of crisis, Chinese students' new learning strategy departs from typical learning styles. There could be two explanations for this. To begin with, students lack metacognitive learning methods [34]. Students have excessive freedom because of the high level of flexibility in the online learning environment. There is no restraint or pressure from peers or teachers, and there is no pressure from social interaction. Some students believe that "the only source of stress is the course assignment deadline." They cannot concentrate on their schoolwork in an entirely self-directed setting. Furthermore, "There is a variety of distractions at home… I hope someone can supervise me" (Participant G).

As a result, Chinese students create virtual communities on social media under the influence of collectivism. Because "anything can be told in the group, and I can ask questions directly…This

community works efficiently… Compared with my colleagues, they prefer to use email, which is inefficient for me."

After gaining a thorough grasp of the students' experiences, I realised that this year's work was quite difficult. In the wake of the latest COVID-19 pandemic, online learning is not one of the most effective teaching options. My research indicates that, for Chinese students, social and cultural factors have a considerable impact on the integration, acceptance, and value of technology. Online learning can only improve students' efficiency to a limited extent, and it can also be a frustrating experience. As a result, I've made the following suggestions in this regard.

Students must self-monitor and use proper metacognitive methods to self-regulate. According to Uppal and Kumar [38], online teaching will fail if students are not metacognitive learners. There are delays, loss of interest, and ICT fatigue in the learning process because students are not metacognitive learners [31]. Second, I urge students to take advantage of online learning's flexibility by learning at their own pace and using their tactics.

The flexibility of online learning should also be the primary consideration for teachers. They can make more flexible use of online learning resources instead of putting all course materials on the LMS. Students may benefit from the shared fantastic blogs or YouTube channels since they believe information on social media can be comprehended more easily.

This research offers ways to understand online learning practice from the perspective of Chinese students at a UK university, which is critical in a crisis. Even if in the post-COVID-19 climate, will higher education turn entirely back to the traditional learning normal? There have been no answers. This paper aims to demonstrate Chinese students' online learning practice. Future studies may seek to learn more about the perspectives of key social groups, such as international students, teachers, principals, and teachers who do not utilise technology, to understand better how educational technology might support learning.

Acknowledgements

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