

The New Trend Of EFL E-Learning In The Post-Pandemic Period From The Perspective Of Ubiquitous Learning

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Abstract: Ubiquitous learning (U-learning) requires that learners have access to learning of any information at any time and any place, which especially promotes the development of education following the advancement of online learning and mobile learning technology. In 2020, following the pandemic COVID-19, almost all the students in colleges and universities took the form of online learning with various apps and learning platforms through the internet, which then pave the way for the advancement of e-learning in a new stage in the post-pandemic period. This paper, based on the theory of ubiquitous learning, probes in depth into the new trend of EFL online learning with college English teaching and learning in China, with the aim to provide references and insights for the promotion of online EFL learning.

1. Introduction

As the important signal of the world going into the information time, ubiquitous learning (briefly, U-learning), also known as seamless learning, or universal learning, refers to the kind of learning that can happen for anyone to obtain any information they need at any place and at any time. The word “ubiquitous” means ever-present, constant, and ongoing semantically. It is a new learning paradigm typically promotes students engage themselves in the learning process characterized by self-regulation [1]. Ubiquitous learning involves placing students in an environment that encourages constant stimulation through visualization and comprehension techniques. These environments are usually designed so that each student can learn at his or her own level and pace. Theoretically, U-learning helps each student to learn more quickly and retain information much more easily. Most U-learning environments contain very advanced interactive technology, but this type of learning can also be accomplished in a technology-free zone. Therefore, such kind of learning means freedom and is more beneficial for students. Teachers in ubiquitous learning centers usually play a very different role from that of a teacher in a traditional classroom [1]. Within the framework of U-learning, especially after 2000s, the internet and computer accesses have grown by leaps and bounds in the past several years in many countries like China, which pave the way for U-learning. In the profession of EFL teaching, it is no doubt that the concept of U-learning has brought about obvious changes in many aspects, especially in students’ learning habits and manners. With the development of bandwidth of the internet and the investment in developing various soft wares and apps, English learning has progressed drastically. It is possible to learn at anytime and anywhere with a sea of resources on the internet. In the year 2020, when COVID-19 broke out suddenly, almost all the students in China had to take online courses with the help of various platforms, apps, solving the problem of having class without contacting each other. However, the use of technology in teaching is not merely a temporary way in EFL teaching; it is in fact the trend in remolding EFL teaching model in the 2020s. The experiences of teaching and learning in 2020 undoubtedly shed some light on how to make use of mobile learning and E-learning in the future. This paper, based on the U-learning concept, aims to explore the new trend of college English (As EFL) teaching using E-learning facilities in the post-pandemic period with the hope to provide some references for EFL teaching in the tertiary domain internationally.

2. The General Situation Of Efl E-Learning Before The Pandemic In Colleges

An individual's learning ecology comprises his or her process and set of contexts and interactions that provides him/her with opportunities and resources for learning, development and achievement [2]; this is also true for the field of E-learning in foreign language teaching. In present China, educational technologies such as the internet, big data, cloud computing, and cloud storage are developing at a flying speed, which make U-learning a possibility and pave the way for the development of teaching English in with a renewed ecological system. In addition, many students possess both tablet computers and mobile phones and they can learn English in a much more convenient way [3]. Seeing from the literature, three features of college English teaching can be summarized. First of all, as some scholars like What Zhao [4] argues, for some teachers, the teaching mode of college English is outdated and the teaching method is unitary, which is still based on teaching itself. This is especially prominent following students' frequent contact of rich information through the use of mobile devices. The second feature is that in college English teaching in China, many practioners and publishing companies are now engaging in the reform of constructing E-learning platforms to establish the necessary developing room for college English teaching reform. For instance, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, Fudan University Press, etc. all developed their own unique systems and platforms which provide online learning and examination for learners. Students can thus learn at their own will or according to their own needs freely. Other resource provider like Xunfei Company develops online writing system for college students which enable learning and teaching writing in English to be in a big data framework, bringing English teachers a promising teaching reform. These services are also accessible through their own apps which can be easily installed on the mobile phones, providing a useful U-learning platform for college students. A third feature of college English teaching is that teachers in different colleges and universities demonstrate various capabilities and experiences guiding students' learning college English. Teachers in the key universities organize more effective learning activities with verified teaching models and the students show efficient learning abilities using mobile devices and other facilities, while students in local colleges still have some problems either in learning motivation, learning method or learning environment. In other words, it is per se a possibility that students learn English at any time and any place. Nevertheless, their own motivation, aspiration in fact could impede their actions of learning and thus U-learning is still a concept that needs to be emphasized for many college English teachers and students.

3. Features of E-learning in the anti-pandemic era

In 2020, due to the influence of COVID-19 pandemic, almost all students in China had to stay at home and have classes through online teaching. This is, as everyone knows, a kind of urgent way dealing with teaching and learning. However, this type of online learning is per se a special and unique way of E-learning for college students as it took a longer time than ever. In the past, learning with some apps or websites is just the make-up for the routine face-to-face classroom teaching in college and students learn English in the classroom with teachers or other fellow student through face-to-face communication and interaction. In such an environment, there is fluid of knowledge, information and exchange of emotions between the teacher and students. However, in this special term, students had to stay at home and learn on the internet. Through the literature and practice, it is found that there are generally four features in the learning of English during the war of fighting against COVID-19.

A. Large-scale online learning

In the year 2020, learning for all the students either in basic education or tertiary education is merely online, without face-to-face communication as people can do it in the past. For example, the whole class had to stay at home and they can only see each other through the internet. As a result, interaction can be carried out with the reducing emotional exchange. In addition, college students

had to take all the courses through the internet. Usually, the school will authorize the teacher to organize teaching on some E-learning platform together with the help of some social media. For example, some college English teachers choose E-learning platforms like Tencent Meeting, Dingding or Room to have the class while choose QQ or Wechat as the social media for learning communication. Since there are many courses for college students, usually, for one day, they would have online course for 4 to 8 periods on the average. In addition, because all the courses are taught on the internet and they must communicate with the teacher and other classmates, they would have a dozen of social media groups like QQ and Wechat. Sometimes, there could be confusion due to the sudden increase of QQ or Wechat groups. It is just because of the large-scale learning with various facilities that both the English teacher and students became more and more adaptable to the E-learning model subconsciously. Before the pandemic, as online learning is in a periphery position, online learning through apps or some platforms is not the mainstream daily form of language learning. In the process of fighting against the pandemic, all the college English teachers and students at least got more familiar with the manipulation of those facilities and apps. Preparation of lessons, class discussion, tasks and exercises all have to be accomplished through the internet. Therefore, it is safe to say that the teaching of college English during the anti-pandemic period greatly promoted the use of E-learning facilities.

B. Long-term online learning

E-learning of college English in 2020 is different from that in the past in that it is a long-term online learning while students stay at home for nearly a whole term. Before 2020, English learning on the internet is just a make-up means for most of the students and teachers. Usually, it is carried out after class, for instance, students may be required to finish some tasks of speaking, listening, reading and writing after class. However, in 2020, all the students had to have all their English class on some certain platform or have class through Tencent meeting, Dingding, Zoom, Chaoxing, etc. As a result, many English classes can be summarized as a “blended” class as the teaching could incorporate online teaching with QQ, Dingding, Zoom and Chaoxing as well as after-class activities on some platforms. Because of the lack of face-to-face communication, an obvious phenomenon (disadvantage) of the learning is that students’ psychology might be impaired in the long run. As some investigation has found out, many students showed fatigue, burnout and reluctance regarding online learning as they had to take many courses and were busying finishing many tasks as required by teachers of different courses. An agreed opinion is that the burden is heavier than it was before the pandemic period. Moreover, they would also feel isolated, lonely, or worried, as they could not have effective communication with their companions and classmates as they did before.

C. Changing of the ecological environment of online learning

In the past several months, most of students stay at home and learn college English and other courses through some certain apps and platforms. It is per se completely different from learning in the classroom since the entire ecological environment of learning turns to be totally different. First of all, students do not have either communication or cooperation with other students face-to face in the classroom. This will often lead to the feeling of isolation and loneliness in learning and life. Second, since students had to stay at home and have classes at home, and thus the environment of learning will be different from that in the colleges and universities. For one thing, they had to bear the noise cause by family members and others; for another, they themselves would also be interrupted or trapped by things other than study when learning at home. A natural fact is that people will be affected by other things and could not control themselves without the necessary restriction or limitation by the external forces. At school, students could have better autonomy in learning as they are restricted by the environment like the library or classroom. They must consider others’ feelings toward their behavior; while when at home, either in the living room or bedroom, students’ control of autonomy will apparently be reduced greatly as many students agreed in some investigations this year. In a word, the long-term learning at home without communicating with the teacher and other classmates impaired learning ecological environment in various aspects and consequently weakened English learning effectiveness.

4. Trend of EFL E-learning in the post-pandemic era within the U-learning framework

Although the period of anti-pandemic is approaching its end in China now, in the post-pandemic period, it is certain that teaching of foreign language would be quite different from that before the pandemic. However, as many researchers argued, the way of teaching in the post pandemic period should develop toward a more intelligent direction and students' agency must be stimulated to adapt to the changed environment of E-learning. As a matter of fact, if the concept of U-learning with 5As, namely, anyone, anytime, anywhere, any device and anything can be checked carefully, still English classes in many colleges are in the process to be improved, especially with the quick development of E-learning knowledge, apps and platforms. For college English learning, it should be more convenient, temporal, interactive, smart and coordinating in nature in the new era. Based on the current situation and features of EFL teaching and learning in colleges and universities in China, the new trends of teaching and learning will incorporate the following four directions:

A. More advanced E-learning Technology playing important roles in EFL learning

Within U-learning framework, language learning will be adopted more and more frequently and big data will be used to monitor the learning effectiveness in the post-pandemic era since many newly developed functions have already been utilized in the anti-pandemic period in teaching. Specifically, E-learning will develop mainly in the directions of M-learning and smart learning which emphasize the mobility of the learner, interacting with portable technologies, and learning that reflects a focus on how society and its institutions can accommodate and support an increasingly mobile population [5]. Before the pandemic, seldom do teachers and students use the apps like Tencent meeting, Zoom, Chaoxing and Dingding, etc. in daily teaching and learning process. However, these apps were used widely by many people which serve the function like teaching presentation with PPT, video, and the forth, students' answering, students' discussion, class interaction, and so on. Seen from the situation in the anti-pandemic era, some other functions will be developed to improve the free use and interaction functions of learning apps and platforms as online learning could not be the mainstream means of teaching; rather, online learning apps or platform will turn into more effective facilitating devices for college teaching. Students will be encouraged to carry out informal learning as appealed by the U-learning concept. In so doing, there could be two directions: one is that colleges and universities will try to develop more SPOOC or MOOC courses; and the other one is that some professional institutions and companies will invest in the development of more platforms to accommodate college and university courses. Obviously, those service providers will also be inspired to develop more commonly-used learning materials with effective and convenient organizational structuring and running mechanism for the educational market.

B. EFL Teaching reform being implemented from the perspective of U-learning

Although the anti-pandemic period in China has come to an end, in the post-pandemic era, both the English teacher and students must become more and more adaptable to the E-learning model. A simple expectation is that E-learning will continue to develop and will have some new forms in the post-pandemic epoch. In the wholesome teaching innovation in the process of anti-pandemic period, most of the colleges and universities have experienced the application of online learning and it is certain that the innovation will not be an end in the future. Although there were some limitations of the online learning model, it is found that teacher-students contact through the internet and learning of English through MOOC courses or SPOOC courses would bring about much convenience for students' language learning either formally or informally. For example, in our investigation, almost all the teachers interviewed made much useful online learning materials. This kind of facilitating system and mechanism surely can be maintained and reformed in the future. As we have found out, some colleges and universities have spent a lot constructing their online teaching platforms and online courses. What's more, they have already built some online platforms and which surely should have their roles in the future teaching and course reform. One point needs to be considered is that following the introduction of smart learning and big data, as well as the concept of 5As of

U-learning, what colleges or universities would care is how learning can be carried for the 5As access of anything, anytime, anywhere, etc. Another point is that the eco-environment of making use of online learning must be built according to the real status of the colleges or universities. This would involve both the construction of hard wares and soft wares at the same time. However, it still should be pointed out that teaching with the platforms like Tencent meeting, Dingding or Zoom could not be the mainstream teaching modes and they may only play the role of compensating learning in the routine time with their improved characteristics.

C. EFL teachers Carrying out English Teaching with a blended model

In the post-pandemic period, it is especially true for college English teachers that they must work to adapt to the new environment of online learning to make their teaching more effective and really smart using the digital devices and apps. In the new era of post-pandemic, teaching of English in colleges and universities will certainly be changed based on the traditional ones. Before the pandemic, the normal teaching model usually is that of teaching in the classroom. Within such a framework, the main teaching material is the textbook together with some facilitating materials that serves as the center of learning. In the period of fighting against the pandemic COVID-19, both the teacher and students cooperate to learn English through some apps and platform with rich resources provided by the college and some publishers. This type of teaching and learning is the progress of E-learning in the smart learning period, which will develop in the post-pandemic era even though they may not be in the mainstream teaching mode. How to make full use of these online E-learning will be the main task for language teacher in the future.

As required by the curriculum of college English, making use of modern intelligent devices will be the important teaching reform for college English teaching. New facilities like learning apps will be developed and installed and new teaching model will be adopted following the development of education reform and technology development. However, how to use it effectively? The institutions and teachers are expected to mobilize students and provide necessary guidance and help [6]. Besides, in reality, a more important issue is that blended learning which combines classroom learning and online learning will sweep into most of college English classes. As a result, the roles of the teacher and students will totally change. The teacher will have to change their modes of teaching, giving more freedom of learning to students. The teacher will be the learning guide, resource provider, activity organizer, and students' evaluators, and so forth [7]. In the new era, students should have more freedom and responsibility for their own learning. In other words, their autonomy will be a crucial factor determining the learning effectiveness. In doing so, the teacher is responsible for the monitoring of students' autonomy, ensuring that students could learn anytime, anywhere for whatever they need as required by U-learning. In this aspect, the most important thing is to build a suitable ecological environment for students' English learning from the perspective of ubiquitous learning, which is able to make students have the idea of the "5As".

D. Students being more adaptable to EFL E-learning Environment

For students, the future E-learning requires more of autonomous work and thus learners' autonomy accounts a lot. Frankly, many students, although experiencing English E-learning in the special period of anti-pandemic, still have not established an overall U-learning concept since college English is not their major course. What they care most may be their professional learning like law, management, medicine, etc. In the new era, as the curriculum of college English posits, E-learning will be the important means for college English teaching, which in fact paves the way of EFL U-learning as the 5As standard indicates. In the period of anti-pandemic, all the students have classes through the internet by the application of various means. It also should be pointed out that students have at least got accustomed to the special learning paradigm. However, the problem is that they are scheduled to learn by the teacher since online learning was the then mainstream teaching model. In such case, students do not have the power to schedule their own learning. From the perspective of U-learning empowered by the E-learning technology like smart learning, M-learning and big data, students would be entitled to determine their learning with more freedom and

autonomy [8]. On the one hand, college students will be given much more freedom in the future in language learning, especially outside their class. College English in the future needs to be taught with the advancement of new technology like 5G, big data and AI. On the other, Authorities and EFL teachers are responsible for the creation of an effective eco-environment of learning which can incorporate students to learn with the “5As” standard as required by the U-learning framework. For example, a college student should enable himself or herself to learn with mobile devices freely; besides, they should have the awareness to learn at anytime, anywhere when possible. In the class, students can participate in face-to-face discussion or teamwork, and after class, they can have self-regulated online learning anytime and anywhere if there is internet access.

In the post-pandemic period, following the tendency of strengthening E-learning in most of colleges and universities, students must be given more guidance and necessary direction about how to deal with language learning. For instance, they must be directed how to use the learning apps and platforms and be reminded to be self-responsible in their learning of English. With such learning ideology, students as the agent of the new eco-environment, are likely to have highly self-autonomous power and will to cooperate with the teacher and their partners, in order to self-regulate their daily study activities. All is considered, it is sure that the trend of future EFL E-learning will make an open and adaptable eco-system in which the U-learning conception guides all the parties involved. This can be best illustrated by the following figure:

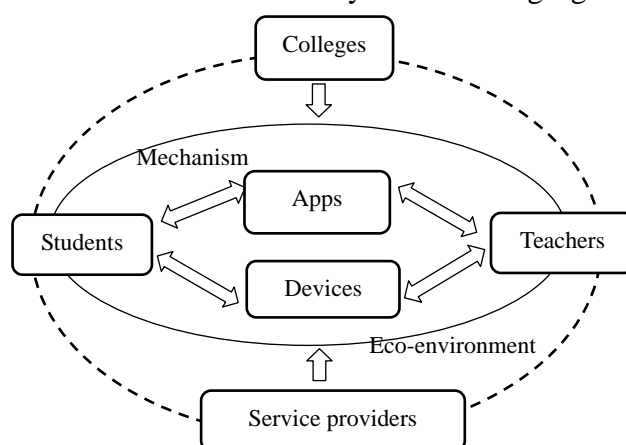


Fig 1. The eco-system of EFL E-learning trend

As indicated in the aforementioned discussion and the above figure, the future trend reflects different roles of stakeholders in EFL E-learning. Colleges, teachers, students and service providers together form the eco-system of EFL E-learning, in which cooperation is essential. However, in many cases computer-mediated communication is the only possibility for allowing locally distributed persons or groups to communicate both synchronously and asynchronously, leading to social situations, which deviate from familiar face-to-face situations [9]. Axiomatically, college or university departments of foreign languages would play the pivotal roles of organizers, guide and managers and are expected to harness the technology in a smart and supporting way. They are expected not only to guide students and teachers, reduce the impact due to the lack of face-to-face communication, but also to make a necessary bridge between colleges and service providers so that both the teacher and students can be mobilized and supported with rich affordances in the new trend of language learning.

5. Conclusion

Compared with the traditional models of EFL teaching in colleges and universities before the pandemic, E-learning surely has more advantages that enlarge the learning space and broaden the sphere of learning domain. The practices of online learning using various devices in the anti-pandemic COVID-19 era no doubt enrich EFL teachers' experiences in college EFL teaching and changed their vision of seeing language teaching and learning. Looking forward, there are great

potentials of improving EFL teaching quality using the E-learning resources with the U-learning concept. It is essential for the development of E-learning in the world in that many of the internet-based online learning forms were tried and utilized as the mainstream teaching channels. E-learning in 2020 not only makes both the teacher and students get more familiar with the smart devices and services, but also forms the ideology of teaching and learning using technologies in the post-pandemic era.

In the post-pandemic epoch, it is natural that the use of E-learning would be innovated and popularized to meet the intelligent era that is developing drastically, especially within the U-learning framework. In the new period, based on the educational experiences gained in the anti-pandemic period, EFL teaching in the future will incorporate more of the U-learning elements to server the requirement of learner centeredness. Besides, those service providers, universities, colleges will all have to work and cooperate to satisfy the need of EFL E-learning in the new epoch, building more user-friendly learning apps and platforms to engage more teacher and students in the learning eco-system. It is expected that More SPOOC and MOOC courses and related English learning resources will be developed as affordances for college students and teachers. What's more, in such an eco-environment of teaching and learning, learners' autonomy awareness and action will be crucial factors determining the effectiveness of learning, and both EFL teachers and students will have to adapt to the new trend purposefully, especially from the perspective of ubiquitous learning that ensures the increased advantages like high efficiency and the personalization of learning [5]. As a result, in the development of EFL E-learning in the post-pandemic era, a definite requirement to ensure learning success indicates that there must be the necessary managing and supporting mechanisms to promote, supervise and help students. In so doing, they will have better autonomy and adaptation in the new eco-system of E-learning which emphasizes learning of anything anytime and anywhere in a real smart manner.

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