

Business English Proficiency Acquisition Facilitated by Technology: Evaluations and Implications

Xiaoer Zhou¹

¹School of Foreign Languages, Guangzhou City University of Technology, Guangdong, China

Correspondence: Xiaoer Zhou, School of Foreign Languages, Guangzhou City University of Technology, Guangdong, China.

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Abstract

Online learning prospered in recent years, so did the research in this area. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it the default option of education. The design, implementation and evaluation of a completely online education model are of universal urgency. The learning purposes of Business English encompass the mastery of business knowledge and language abilities. This paper reviews the online teaching and learning of this course and tries to assess its effectiveness in equipping students with business related language competence. Students' performances were measured in score comparisons; their levels of participation and activeness were captured in statistics across learning platforms; their perceptions on the advantages and disadvantages of this teaching model were collected in a survey and in-depth interviews. Research results show significant progresses have been achieved in students' reading proficiency; language production in terms of speaking and writing was perceived to have been improved; the level of engagement was high. Challenges of this model have also been summarized and corresponding modifications would be proposed, to facilitate proficiency acquisition more efficiently.

Keywords: business English, online higher education, proficiency acquisition

1. Introduction

As the concept of higher education evolves, the focus of language proficiency acquisition has shifted from teacher-centered to student-centered, from lecturing to autonomous learning. According to Holec (1981) autonomous learning is the ability that learners should manage their learning, which includes the determination of learning objectives and learning content, the selection of learning methods, the monitoring of learning process, and the evaluation of learning results. It has become well established that students should take charge of their own studies, accumulate knowledge, develop their skills and ultimately be equipped with competence under the guidance, supervision and assistance of teachers. Due to the global spread of COVID-19, all students had no other choices but to stay at home and take online courses for the whole semester. It is of fundamental significance to establish a completely online education model, test its viability and evaluate its positive and negative aspects, to ultimately formulate an optimal way of pedagogy to achieve satisfying learning outcomes.

Business English, as one of the Englishes for Special Purposes (ESP), is a main subject for junior students of the School of Foreign Languages and the School of Business Management, especially in application-oriented colleges like GCU in China. In the third year of their college life, these students are totally capable of autonomous learning. Du (2020) asserts that self-regulated learners have the ability to choose suitable methods to fulfill the learning tasks set by teachers or learners themselves, so as to achieve the established learning goals. The emphasis of this course is to develop students' abilities in listening, reading, speaking and writing related to business topics, along with the objective of passing the Cambridge Business English exam (Vantage). Whether this model is beneficial to the cultivation of these skills is worthy of study.

This paper presents a completely online education model of a Business English course for the junior students of English major, whose performances are being traced throughout the whole semester, to evaluate the effectiveness of this model and obtain insights and implications for future education. Statistics of students' online activities have been collected and analyzed to objectively examine their learning behaviors. Their scores before and after taking this course have been compared to measure the level of proficiency acquisition. A survey and follow-up interviews have been conducted to receive students' feedback to identify the advantages and disadvantages of online learning. The results of this research show students' competence in reading, writing and

speaking has been significantly developed. Three positive characteristics of online education have been summarized, namely, accessibility, retrievability and immediacy. Challenges like students' mid-low concentration level during teacher's livestream lecture and technical issues during the final exam emerge, urge educators to thoroughly consider the pros and cons of online education, design appropriately and eventually come up with an optimized pedagogical model.

The Completely Online Learning Model

The model in question places autonomous learning at the center of its design philosophy: The knowledge structure of the course is carefully divided based on the teacher's experience and understanding of students' learning characteristics before the course begins. Students were encouraged to search and browse relevant information of the allocated topics and were required to work on exercises before participating the teacher's livestream lecture each week. The emphasis of lecturing was based on students' mastery of specific area of knowledge and skills; real-time interactions happened during these online sessions to enhance comprehension. Each week's tasks have been assigned to consolidate the construction and development of certain skills, the performance of which were selectively commented during next week's online lecturing. The design principle of this pedagogical model is to foster benign and organic learning pattern.

The enrollment number of students in this course is 77, constituting a large class both in virtual and physical contexts. It is believed by Nagel and Kotzé (2010, p. 50) that "innovative use of ICT [information and communication technologies] enabled the lecturer to provide better quality online teaching despite the large size of the class". Therefore, digital means have been fully utilized to create an immersive learning experience for the students: a WeChat group was set up to gather all the students, send out course requirements and instructions, and enable instant communications between the teacher and students; a course framework on the Superstar Learning Platform (SLP) has been constructed for the teacher to assign homework and for students to complete tasks like uploading audios of their speaking exercises on business related topics; relevant learning materials have also been shared via this platform; Dingtalk was used for livestream lecturing and video conferencing to facilitate real-time teaching and collaborative work among team members. Pigai.org was used for students to submit business writings and receive automatic grading.

Table 1. Technological means used to facilitate the Completely Online Learning Model

Digital Platform/Tool Used	Function	Way(s) of Access
WeChat group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Notice release and weekly reminder Instant communications between the teacher and students 	Smartphone
Dingtalk app	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Livestream lecturing initiated by the teacher every week according to schedule, approx. 45 mins/session, 2 sessions/week. Video conferencing (with a recording function) between students to complete group tasks Video conferencing initiated by the teacher during the final exam for surveillance purpose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal computer (including laptops, desktops and tablets) Smartphone
Superstar Learning Platform (SLP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attendance check Learning materials sharing Task completion (audios of the one-minute speech each week) 	Smartphone
Pigai.org	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Writing submission throughout the semester and for the writing part of the final exam 	Personal computer

Speaking and writing are categorized as the production of learning, the quality of which is perceived as essential indicators of students' practical use of language. In this online course, students' skills are trained in a progressive manner. For speaking, they are required to post a one-minute speech each week on the SLP during the first eight weeks. In the rest of the semester, two group activities have been arranged respectively in Week 12 and Week 16, to simulate the BEC speaking test. In this way, students had the opportunities to practice on their own first, then engage in interactions with their partners, to develop the oral English skills step by step. For writing, students started by drafting internal business communications like emails and memo in the first half of the semester, then move on to formulating formal business correspondence in the second half.

The final exam took place in an unconventional way. Instead of taking the pen and paper exam in a classroom together with fellow students under the monitoring of teachers, students used their own laptops at home to work independently on the questions uploaded to the exam system in SLP. Their smart phone cameras were turned on to join the videoconferencing initiated by the teacher, the visible angle of which should show their computer

screens clearly with no other relevant paper materials on their desktops. Whether such a mode affects students' performances is also worth exploring.

2. Methodology

To evaluate the effectiveness of this completely online course of business English, a three-dimensional perspective has been adopted: students' **Perception**, **Participation**, and **Performance** are the key aspects to be measured in this study. Multiple tools and platforms have been used to serve this purpose:

1) **Perception**: A questionnaire of 15 questions was drawn up and sent out to collect understanding of the skills students have improved; in what way the course has helped them achieve this, and their feedbacks and perceptions on the completely online model. Follow-up interviews have been conducted to elaborate the reasons for the survey results.

2) **Participation**: Statistics on Dingtalk like the numbers of viewers in each session and their comments show how active students were during the teacher's livestream lecturing. The name lists of students using the "Re-watch" feature and the time length of re-watching uncover individual learning needs. These online activities have been collected and analyzed to objectively observe students' learning behaviors. The percentages of task completion and homework submission on the SLP and Pigai.org illustrate students' level of diligence.

3) **Performance**: Right at the beginning of the course, students were advised to take a preliminary test on the official website of the Cambridge Test Centre to have a rough idea of their proficiency levels. These scores were used to compare with the corresponding parts of the final exam, to measure the progress they've made after the whole semester.

3. Results

According to the findings across multiple platforms (livestream statistics, task completion, survey results, and score comparisons), students participated actively in the livestream lectures and task completion. This course is perceived as quite effective in developing their business English proficiency in speaking and writing. Significant progresses have been made among most students in terms of reading proficiency. However, a considerable percentage of students think the online exam mode has "affected their performance to some extent". Some other frustrations like disruptive learning, mid-low level of concentration and efficiency have also been experienced.

3.1 Perception

The findings of this part are based on the survey results. There were totally 77 students who have taken this online course, 65 of whom filled out the questionnaire. The completion rate is 84.42%, making the survey results representative. Six students have been individually interviewed, among whom two students belong to the high score range, the mid-level range, and the low score range respectively. Equal numbers of male and female interviewees have been chosen to obtain unbiased opinions and achieve gender balance.

3.1.1 Course Effectiveness Regarding Proficiency Acquisition

Course effectiveness: 55.93% (n=36) students choose a score higher than 7 (full score=10) in the question "How effective do you think this course is in helping you develop business-related English skills". This percentage shows more than half of the student finds this course "quite effective" or "very effective" (19% of them choose the scores of 9 and 10). Students think this course was "quite beneficial" in increasing their business knowledge, aiming specifically to "empowering them to enhance test-taking abilities".

Of all the teaching activities they participated in, students perceive the 4 most helpful ones to develop proficiency are:

1) Teacher's livestream lecturing (65.08%, n=41): This is particularly useful for mid-low-level students working on reading and listening exercises. Since students were asked to finish these exercises before listening to the lecturing, regarding which they had some questions even after checking the keys. The teacher's thorough and structured explanations cleared up the confusion and helped them develop the right pattern to solve problems. "Gradually I begin to have a hunch for the correct answers." One student said in the interview.

2) Recording and posting the one-minute speech every week (35.38%, n=23): Students find the process of constructing discourse around specific business-related topics helped them develop their speaking ability. Before recording, students would organize their thoughts and practice for several times. In this way, their oral English could be improved. An innovative application is that they would listen to other students' recordings to learn alternative ways of expressions. The collection of audio recordings on the platform enables the interactive learning among students, which can hardly be achieved in a traditional classroom.

3) Submission of business writings online (35.38%, n=23): Business writing has its specific format and register. The writing part of the BEC exam has its own grading criteria. Students find the writing assignments gave them opportunities to practice business writing according to such a framework. By imitating the sample articles, students can form their own writing patterns of business correspondence. The five writing tasks throughout the semester supported them to form a structure and improve writing skills step by step.

4) Simulated speaking test by teams of four (33.85%, n=22): Students find the activities especially useful because they got to know and go through the whole process of the speaking test in the BEC exam. The online simulation enabled them to immerse in authentic atmosphere. Collaboration with their partners could be practiced, thus interaction could be enhanced.

The data mentioned above manifest students find activities regarding language production (writing & speaking) most beneficial in helping them develop business English proficiency.

3.1.2 Online vs. Offline: Advantages & Challenges

Another important objective of the survey and in-depth interviews is to identify the positive and negative aspects of this online model. During the whole semester's study, students experienced the advantageous side and the challenging side of online learning

1) **Advantages:** Compared with the traditional learning model, the advantages of this completely online model can be summarized as: Accessibility, Retrievability and Immediacy.

- **Accessibility:** since most students (92.3%, n=60) learn this course mainly using personal computers, including laptops, desktops and tablets, the majority of them (73.85%, n=48) hold the view that the biggest advantage of the online model is the convenience to have access to the learning materials. As for this course, it is quite convenient for them to look up new words in the software in the laptop, and sometimes search for sample sentences of the new words to learn the usage.

- **Retrievability:** to answer the open-ended question "What aspect of the teaching of this course are you satisfied with?" some students wrote "Re-watching the livestream videos can help me understand better"; "When I was distracted or disrupted by unstable Internet connection, I feel reassured to know I can re-watch the video". Statistics on Dingtalk show an average of 19% of students have used the "re-watching" feature for each of the two sessions during the 16 weeks of learning. Whereas for traditional classroom learning, it's almost impossible to listen to what the teacher said again.

- **Immediacy:** during the livestream lecturing, students can ask questions by posting words on the message board whenever they want without interrupting the teacher while speaking. On the other hand, in a traditional classroom setting, sometimes it's not easy for students to ask questions due to politeness or shyness. The online setting gives all students equal opportunities to have direct contact with the teacher without embarrassing themselves.

2) **Challenges:** Due to lack of face-to-face communication and varied qualities of internet connections at students' homes, students more or less experienced some frustrations during online learning.

① The top three challenges of online learning for students are:

- **Unstable internet connections (56.92%, n=37):** It has been perplexing for students to stay connected while watching the livestream. Sometimes they had to log in and out for several times, which resulted in disruptive learning of the course. Students lacking motivation would not re-watch the part they missed, which would lead to dropping grades.

- **Difficulty to focus/concentrate (46.15%, n=30):** various reasons can account for distraction, which would be explained in the part about mid-low level of concentration. One of the consequences is hard-working students would have to spend more time reviewing the content being taught, while underachievers would gradually lose their patience and lag behind.

- **Lower learning efficiency (35.38%, n=23).** If students have questions in a traditional classroom, they'll consult fellow students sitting right next to them first, then inquire the teacher if the problem is not solved. But learning at home, they have to make an effort to contact other students, thus result in lower learning efficiency.

② **Mid-low level of concentration during livestream lecturing:** For the question "What is your level of concentration while the teacher is giving a livestream lecture?", 12.32% (n=8) chose 0-4, meaning they could hardly focus; 40% only had mid-level of concentration (5-6; n=26); 36.92% had mid-high level of concentration (7-8; n=24); only 10.77% are highly concentrated (9-10; n=7) Several reasons can account for the situation: Firstly, the lectures were held between 2:15-3:50p.m. according to the schedule, some students felt sleepy at this

time of the day. Secondly, the time length of 45 minutes in each session is too long for students to focus all the time; the ideal time length would be within half an hour. Plus, students were all by themselves at home, without the learning atmosphere around. There'd be mutual influence among students if they studied in a classroom. Sometimes their family members would interrupt them. Some claimed they are not used to staring at the computer screen for a long time, it's hard for them to focus. What's more, lack of interactions between the lecturer and the students might also lead to absent-mindedness.

③ Influences on final exam performance: 41.54% (n=27) think their performance was partly impaired by the online model. The reasons of influences include: "Not used to browsing or reading on the electronic screen, or typing"; "Can't make notes, not as convenient as pen and paper"; "Distracted by technical issues like unstable internet connection or the battery level of the smart phone"; "Interruption by family members". On the other hand, 50.77% (n=33) of the students think their performance is almost the same as traditional classroom exams, the reasons are: "as long as you are well prepared, the form doesn't matter"; "performance is mostly related to preparation/hard work during the semester"; "mobile camera surveillance is like actual exam".

3.2 Participation

The findings of this part come from three sources: statistics on the livestream platform Dingtalk, homework and task completion rates on platforms like SLP and Pigai.org. The figures show the majority of students actively engaged in the online study, task completion and homework submission.

Lecturing: According to the statistics over the 16 weeks of livestream lecturing on Dingtalk, the average number of students joining each session is 75.71. The total number of the whole class is 77, so the average participation rate is 98.32%. Among them, 19.2% of the students would re-watch part of the lecture videos each time.

Speaking: On SLP, 8 weeks of one-minute speech practices on business-related topics were released, 80% of students have completed more than 5 times. Among them, 27% have uploaded 7 audios, 38% have done it 6 times, 12% 5 times.

Table 2. Completion rates of speaking tasks

Number of speaking tasks finished	Number of students submitted	Completion rate (%)
8	2	3
7	21	27
6	29	38
5	9	12
4	3	4
3	1	1
2	4	5
1	2	3
0	6	8

Writing: On Pigai.org, 5 writing tasks regarding formal business correspondence have been assigned throughout the semester, 94% of students have completed all 5 tasks.

These numbers represent students are highly involved in lecturing and their homework, which result in the positive feedback on the effectiveness of this course in terms of language production, especially in writing. According to the students' comments, they are intensely engaged because of the teacher's weekly reminders of the lectures and assignments posted in the WeChat group. "If it hadn't been for your notice posted each week, I would have forgotten to complete the tasks."

3.3 Performance

One dimension to measure whether the students have made progress after a semester's learning is the comparison of scores before and after taking the course. The results of this part focus on students' reading proficiency, since the grading of this part is entirely objective, consisting of multiple-choice questions.

At the beginning of the course, students were encouraged take a preliminary test on the official website of Cambridge test center (<https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/test-your-english/>), to determine their business English level. The test is a simplified version of the reading part of the BEC exam, the full score of which is 25. On the other hand, the reading part of the final exam has a full score of 78. In order to make the data comparable, the two sets of scores were multiplied with coefficients to adjust to a scale of 100 points.

69 students have submitted valid scores of the preliminary test, whom are divided into three groups based on their final exam scores. There are 24 students in the High Score Range (higher than 80 points), 23 in the Mid-Level Range (70–79 points), and 22 in the Low Score Range (lower than 70 points). The differences between each student’s scores in the two tests have been calculated. In this way, 80% of students have gained a higher score than the preliminary test, which indicate significant progress have been made. Among them, students in the High Score Range have achieved the biggest progress, 87.5% of them have obtained a score at least 10 points higher than the preliminary test, 58.33% of which have a score at least 20 points higher. In the Mid-Level Range, 65.22% of students have obtained a score at least 10 points higher than the preliminary test, 30.44% of which have a score at least 20 points higher. What’s worth noticing is 21.74% of the students in this group have made progress of less than 10 points. However, a substantial portion of students in the Low Score Range have fallen behind, the final exam scores of 36.36% them are lower than the preliminary test. 45.45% of students have only made progress within 10 points.

Table 3. Comparisons of students’ reading proficiency before and after taking the course

A	N	High Score Range (total # of students: n1=24)	A/n1 %	Mid-Level Range (total # of students: n2=23)	A/n2 %	Low Score Range (total # of students: n3=22)	A/n3 %
# of students with regression (a1):	2		8.3	2	8.70	8	36.36
# of students with no progress (a2):				1	4.35	1	4.55
# of students with a progress within 10 points (a3):	1		4.17	5	21.74	10	45.45
# of students with a progress of 10–19 points (a4):	7		29.17	8	34.78	1	4.55
# of students with a progress of 20–29 points (a5):	4		16.67	3	13.04	2	9.09
# of students with a progress of 30–39 points (a6):	3		12.50	2	8.70		
# of students with a progress of 40–49 points (a7):	4		16.67	2	8.70		
# of students with a progress of 50–59 points (a8):	2		8.33				
# of students with a progress of 60+ points (a9):	1		4.17				

These figures reveal most students in the High Score Range have made remarkable progress; a considerable percentage of students in the Mid-Level Range have accomplished moderate progress; the majority of the Low Score Range have made little progress, while a significant portion in this group even have regression. The reasons can be explained by **motivation**. Along with time management and capacity to learn with limited support, self-motivation was identified by Beaudoin, Kurtz and Eden (2009) as one of the attributes of successful online students. The in-depth interviews with learners in the High Score Range find out they have clear study goals, adapt to new types of questions, focus on the answers they’ve got wrong and try to find the right answer. They would summarize strategies dealing with these questions under the guidance of the teacher, prepare and review the lesson content more frequently. In other words, they have formed a benign learning pattern. When dealing with technical difficulties in online learning, they usually present better emotional intelligence to cope with the situation due to high motivation. One of the students could only learn all the online lessons the whole semester using no computers but only two smart phones, got number three in the final exam score ranking. On the other hand, students in the Low Score Range demonstrated lower motivation which resulted in the lack of the formation of good study habits and more negative attitude towards frustrations and adversity.

4. Discussion

The previous parts focus on the participation, perception and performance on the students’ side. It is essential to reflect on the whole teaching and learning process from the teacher’s perspective, to analyze and summarize the pros and cons of this model, thus come up with an optimized formula that enhance participation and performance.

Perception: Throughout the semester, the benefits of this online model perceived by the teacher are as follows:

- 1) **Accessibility:** When learning online, students can have access to the content of the lecture within relatively

equal distance, which means they can listen and watch clearly from the screens of their own electronic devices. While in a traditional classroom setting, esp. in a large classroom accommodating almost 80 students, the ones in the back experience lower audio and visual quality of the lecture, which would lead to absentmindedness and annoyance. Maringe and Sing (2014, p. 763) defines a large class as “any class where the numbers of students pose both perceived and real challenges in the delivery of quality and equal learning opportunities to all students”. Online lecturing can reduce the negative effects of a large classroom where distance affects learning efficiency.

2) **Traceability:** With the availability of data showing student activities across the various platforms, from the numbers of students attending lectures, posting comments, and re-watching the video, the scores of reading proficiency before and after taking the course, to the speaking and writing tasks they submit, it’s easier to track each student’s level of diligence, compare the range of progress, and analyze the quality of their work using relevant software as well as the teacher’s professional judgement.

3) **Efficiency:** Digital means have liberated teachers from frivolous work like attendance check and completion rate check. With one click of the mouse, teachers can obtain the name lists of students who haven’t attended the lecture or who haven’t finish assignment on time. What’s more, the automated grading of objective tests can save plenty of time and improve accuracy. The score report generated automatically provide information like the highest and the lowest score, the average score and which question that most students got wrong. The teacher can easily have a general understanding of how well students are doing and discover their problems in an efficient way.

The challenge of online teaching mainly lies in the lack of presentation of immediate reactions esp. facial expressions from students. Due to the limitations of Internet bandwidth, hardware and software, it’s unrealistic to have videoconferencing with students every time the online lecture was conducted. Not being able to see how the students react instantly has imposed great difficulty for the lecturer to have a holistic look of the students’ comprehension level of what’s being said. The lecturer could only rely on instant messaging to receive feedback and adjust teaching strategy.

Participation: According to the survey and interviews, one of the major challenges of online learning is the relatively low concentration level while listening to the teacher’s livestream broadcast. Strategies to deal with absent-mindedness can be adopted by teachers and students.

From the teacher’s side, it is recommended to adjust the time length of livestream broadcast to less than 30 minutes. During the time, there should be more interactions with students, like randomly connecting with certain students for discussion, to get them involved more. Pop-up questions during the lectures should also be designed for students to think and work on. In other words, engaging students with various activities in the online session would effectively increase concentration level.

Students’ behaviors differ when they were less concentrated: some student in the High Score Range claimed he would stand up to listen to the lecture once he realized he’s about to go absent-minded; while students in the Low Score Range would play with their smart phones (esp. when commercial or personal messages come up) or the objects on the desk. Such disparity might contribute to the differing learning outcomes.

Performance: As it’s shown in the research results, the assessment of students’ performances was about their reading proficiency in business English due to the objectivity of multiple choice and blank-filling questions. Most students in the high score range have made substantial progress throughout the semester, whereas more than 40% of the students in the low score range had regression or no progress. In this way, students’ progresses are measured in terms of summative assessment, in which students’ mastery of knowledge being assessed by referring to the results of final exams. One of the course’s objectives is for students to pass the BEC Vantage exam, so summative assessment is necessary to check “if the requirements are fulfilled to an accreditation or certification to be granted” (Llamas Nistal, Fernández-Iglesias, González-Tato, & Mikic-Fonte, 2013).

However, to comprehensively measure students’ proficiency acquisition and development, formative assessment should be employed, which includes students’ self-assessment, peer reviews and teachers’ feedback on their language production outcome. In the survey, students recognized the top 3 competences built up during the course are: 1) business knowledge (58.46%, n=38); 2) business English writing (50.77%, n=33); 3) business English vocabulary (43.08%, n=28). This can be seen as a form of self-assessment of the students, which shows significant progresses.

In order to train students’ abilities to pass the BEC Vantage exam, the speaking tasks assigned and the instruction contents were designed according to the same rating criteria of the exam system. The assessment

scales include: grammar and vocabulary; discourse management; pronunciation; and interactive communication. Among others, the three aspects of speaking abilities students perceive benefited most from all the tasks are: 1) Interaction with the partner (70.31%, n=45); 2) Discourse organization (59.38%, n=38); 3) Diversified ways of expressions (45.31%, n=29). These figures indicate the speaking exercises including the one-minute speech and test simulation have been quite conducive to the speaking proficiency acquisition.

It is constructive for the teacher to provide procedural feedback throughout the whole learning process since the interaction between teacher and students or student with student in formative assessment mediates learning through scaffolding and assistance (Bennett, 2009) and learners give and receive feedbacks that fine tune their current level of language ability as it taps the process of learning rather than its product (Tarighat & Khodabakhsh, 2016). Especially for the cultivation of speaking and writing abilities, scores obtained from objective tests might not be the most effective. Individual evaluation of students' language production is needed for them to improve. What's more, formative feedback gets learners to be engaged with self- and peer-assessment. They will establish critical awareness and close the gap between their current performance and the desired performance (zone of proximal development) (Vygotsky, 1980). Therefore, it is recommended for the teacher to establish a well-organized structure for assessment not only at the end of a semester but also during the whole process of learning to get students more involved, enabling them to know how they have been doing and adjust learning methods accordingly. Assessment among students should also be encouraged and facilitated, to promote mutual learning and healthy competition.

5. Conclusions

Based on the three-dimensional evaluations, it can be inferred that this completely online model of the Business English course can basically fulfill the pedagogical goals of language proficiency acquisition in terms of reading, speaking and writing skills. During the whole process, technology has played a fundamental role in the "delivery, support, administration and assessment of learning" (Kirshner & Paas, 2001). Students participated actively in most of the course activities, they perceive the course is quite helpful for them to construct business-related knowledge framework and develop practical language skills, and their performances have been improved.

However, this model cannot entirely replace the traditional classroom approach because: 1) disruptive livestream and compromised lecturing quality resulted from poor internet connection and less-advanced hardware is particularly unfriendly to underprivileged students; 2) unaccustomedness to taking the final exam in a digital way would undercut the performance of a significant proportion of students; 3) the lack of mutual influence in the learning atmosphere and face-to-face communication among students puts them in an isolated environment which is not good to promote benign competition. Such difficulties can be overcome by students with stronger self-discipline and motivation, who are usually in the high score range, but they become more discouraging for students in the mid and low score ranges, which would eventually lead to further polarization.

Therefore, a combined model of online and offline measures should be adopted, where the strengths of both ways can be employed, to maximize the advantage of technology, meanwhile minimizing the negative effects. It is recommended to assign pre-lecture tasks online that require students to upload preparatory work for teachers to check in advance their status quo. Then the lecture should be conducted in physical classrooms for better communication and more effective learning. The focus of lecturing should be based on how well the students have accomplished the goals, aiming at tackling their weaknesses. The post-lecture activities can be organized in both ways, depending on the nature of the tasks and the corresponding learning objectives. Technology is better at keeping records for future reference, analysis and comparison, as well as efficiently spotting less hard-working students, and automatically obtaining parts of the performance results. Thus, exercises for individual should be encouraged to finish online, whereas team work should be done in physical settings to foster interaction.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire of the Teaching and Learning Effects of the Completely Online Business English Course

- In this past semester, which electronic devices have you used to study this online course? [Multiple choice question with more than one answer]
 - Smart phone
 - Laptop
 - Desktop PC
 - Tablet
- How frequently do you use the device(s) you just chose? [Multiple choice questions with only one answer] *
 - I mainly use my smart phone.
 - I mainly use my laptop/ desktop PC.
 - I mainly use my tablet.
 - The frequencies of using my smart phone and computer are almost the same.
 - I choose which device to use according to the features of the tasks. (Please elaborate)
- What is your level of concentration while the teacher is giving a livestream lecture? Please choose a score that best describes your concentration level. [Multiple choice question with only one answer] *
 - 0 I could hardly focus.
 - 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5
 - 6
 - 7
 - 8
 - 9
 - 10 I've always been concentrated.
- How effective do you think this course is in helping you develop business-related English skills? Please choose a score that best describes the effectiveness of this course. [Multiple choice question with only one answer] *
 - 0
 - 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - 5
 - 6
 - 7
 - 8
 - 9
 - 10
- Of all the teaching activities they participated in, which ones do you think are the most helpful to develop your business-related proficiency? [Multiple-choice question with more than one—three answers]
 - Teacher's livestream lecturing
 - Providing e-versions of references, supplementing the textbook and guiding the plan of vocabulary memorization
 - Submission of the one-minute speaking exercise on SLP
 - Grading the speaking test videos on SLP
 - Submission of writing assignments on Pigai.org
 - Speaking test simulation practice in groups of four

- Working on the exercises on the textbook
6. Of all the teaching activities they participated in, which ones do you think are NOT helpful to develop your business-related proficiency? [Multiple choice question with more than one answer] *
- Teacher's livestream lecturing
- Providing e-versions of references, supplementing the textbook and guiding the plan of vocabulary memorization
- Submission of the one-minute speaking exercise on SLP
- Grading the speaking test videos on SLP
- Submission of writing assignments on Pigai.org
- Speaking test simulation practice in groups of four
- Working on the exercises on the textbook
7. Among all the activities you've participated, like the weekly one-minute speech, grading oral exam videos, Speaking test simulation practice in groups of four etc., which are the three aspects of speaking abilities you perceive benefited most? [Multiple choice question with more than one answer] *
- I did not benefit anything from these activities.
- Various lexical expressions
- Diversified ways of expressions
- Discourse organization
- Pronunciation
- Oral interaction
- others _____*
8. What are the top 3 competences built up during this completely online course? [Multiple choice question with more than one answer] *
- Business knowledge
- Speaking competence of business English
- Listening competence of business English
- Business English writing
- Reading competence of business English
- Intercultural communication
- Business English vocabulary
9. What are the competences that haven't been improved during this completely online course? [Multiple choice question with more than one answer] *
- Business knowledge
- Speaking competence of business English
- Listening competence of business English
- Business English writing
- Reading competence of business English
- Intercultural communication
- Business English vocabulary
10. Compared with traditional classroom teaching and learning, what are the benefits that you've got from this completely online model? [Multiple choice question with more than one answer] *
- I can concentrate better.
- Better learning efficiency.
- I have a deeper understanding of the knowledge in this course.

- More convenient to communicate with the teacher
- More convenient to communicate and collaborate with other students
- More convenient to use and look up various materials.
- More motivated to finish the tasks assigned
- Others (Please specify) _____ *

11. Compared with traditional classroom teaching and learning, what are the challenges that you've experienced in this completely online model? [Multiple choice question with more than one answer] *

- Unstable internet connections
- Less advanced hardware
- User-unfriendly software
- Difficulty to concentrate
- Lower learning efficiency
- More difficult to absorb course knowledge
- More difficult to communicate with the teacher
- More difficult to communicate and collaborate with other students
- Inconvenient to use and look up various materials.
- Less motivated to finish the tasks assigned
- Others (Please specify) _____ *

12. Compared with the traditional pen & paper exam in the classroom, what do you think of your performance in the completely online final exam of this course? Please choose the sentence that best describes your perception and explain why. [Multiple choice question with only one answer] *

- I've done much better than I usually did. (Please explain why) _____ *
- I've done a little better than I usually did. (Please explain why) _____ *
- It's basically consistent with my usual performance. (Please explain why) _____ *
- My performance was partly impaired. (Please explain why) _____ *
- My performance was greatly affected. (Please explain why) _____ *

13. What aspects of this course are you satisfied with? [Open-ended question]

14. What aspects of this course are you dissatisfied with? [Open-ended question]

15. Any other opinions and suggestions? [Open-ended question] *

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