Synchronous Online Learning During COVID-19: Chinese University EFL Students’ Perspectives

Kun Zhang and Haoxian Wu

Abstract
The outbreak of COVID-19 in late 2019 had soon become a pandemic, leading to the lockdown of schools all around the world. To mitigate the negative impacts brought by COVID-19, the educational institutions of all levels have inevitably shifted from face-to-face teaching to online teaching. For English language teaching, fully synchronous online learning has been implemented worldwide, posing a great challenge for both instructors and learners. This study reports on findings of Chinese university English as a foreign language students’ perspectives on synchronous online language learning during the pandemic, with a special focus on their encountered difficulties. Drawing on the qualitative interview method, the study investigated 14 EFL learners at a public comprehensive university in a coastal city in southern China. Using thematic analysis, there are four main difficulties identified in the interviews, namely the lack of learning climate, the cultivation of learner autonomy, changes of interaction patterns, and the adaptation to remote assessment. The paper ends with a discussion of findings and implications for English learning and teaching in the “new normal.”

Keywords
synchronous online learning, EFL students, Chinese higher education, COVID-19, post-pandemic

Introduction
The outbreak of COVID-19 has led to the closures of schools of all levels around the world. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2020), 69.3% of enrolled students from pre-primary to tertiary levels in 163 countries or regions have been affected. Against this background, it is urgent and necessary to provide a feasible learning environment for students to continue their studies within a short period of time.

Thanks to the development of information and communication technologies, many countries could radically shift from face-to-face (F2F) learning to fully online learning to ease COVID-19 impacts. Online learning during the pandemic is unique for both teachers and students because they are forced to shift to online teaching and learning without sufficient preparation. English Language Teaching (ELT) is no exception. In ELT, despite online learning being adopted for decades with a variety of forms (Shadiev & Yang, 2020; White, 2003), it has simply played a supplementary role since F2F learning is still the main teaching mode (Cheung, 2021). And yet, to prevent the spread of the virus amid COVID-19, preventative measures like social distancing along with the school lockdown are crucially required, and online language learning, especially synchronous online language learning, has surfaced as the most accessible and feasible means that substitutes F2F classroom learning in a state of emergency (e.g., Choi & Chung, 2021; Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020; Moser et al., 2021).

Following the COVID-19 lockdown, ELT researchers have begun to investigate synchronous online language learning from different perspectives with multiple foci (e.g., Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Choi & Chung, 2021; Hartshorn & McMurry, 2020; Teng & Wu, 2021). Nevertheless, what is still missing are studies on ELT students’ experiences of and perspectives on synchronous language learning. As Sun (2014) has argued, “Online learners are undoubtedly the most important participants in the online learning adventure and their perspectives and concerns need to be heard and investigated” (p. 19). Therefore, it is of great importance to investigate how the students perceived online language learning during the pandemic given that subjective perception has a

1Shenzhen University, China
2Jinlong Primary School, Shenzhen, China

Corresponding Author:
Kun Zhang, Department of English, Shenzhen University, 3688 Nanhai Avenue, Shenzhen, Guangdong 518060, China.
Email: zhangkunbnu@gmail.com

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direct impact on “student acceptance of and participation in online learning” (Zuo et al., 2021). It is hoped that the understanding of the learners’ experience of synchronous online language learning could shed light on the pedagogical innovation of English teaching and provide better empirical guidelines for language learners as well as instructional designers and instructors.

The paper begins with a review of relevant literature pertaining to key concepts in online learning, with a focus on synchronous online language learning in ELT, followed by the research design, including the context of the setting, participants, data collection, and analysis. Then, it presents and discusses the four challenges identified in the interviews. The paper ends with a summary and the implications for English language learning and teaching in the post-pandemic era.

**Literature Review**

**Online Learning**

Online learning combines the Internet and independent technological devices to develop materials for education purposes, instructional delivery, and management of programs via networked interactivity (Fry, 2001). It has been applied in higher education for decades and has long been accepted as an effective tool for learning (Middleton, 1997). Previous studies show that online learning is arguably one of the most powerful responses to the growing needs for education for its greater flexibility of time, shorter distance with experts and pioneers, higher quality of information, and lower financial cost (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

According to Hrastinski (2008), there are two types of online learning, asynchronous online learning and synchronous online learning. Asynchronous learning, supported by media such as emails, forums, blogs, and earlier recorded videos, involves obvious time lags between transmitters and receivers. Learners can review the learning materials at any time and spend more time thinking about the issues or refining their contributions. Synchronous learning, on the other hand, provides a live platform that allows more direct interaction and immediate response between instructors and students through popular audio-conferencing (e.g., online phone calls and web chats) or video-conferencing tools (e.g., Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, and Tencent Meeting). Among these two modes, synchronous learning is quite similar to traditional classroom learning and more acceptable among learners for its F2F platform and immediately and efficiently communicated environment (Giesbers et al., 2014).

**Synchronous Online Learning in ELT**

Synchronous online learning has been variously implemented in ELT for decades, ranging from text-based communication to audio-/video-conferencing. This is often termed Synchronous Computer-Mediated Communication (SCMC; O’Rourke & Stickler, 2017). Pre-COVID-19 studies mainly focused on how SCMC promoted second language acquisition and intercultural awareness in different age groups in both formal education and private tutoring (e.g., Kozar, 2015; Yamada, 2009; Yeh & Lai, 2019). For its supplementary role in ELT, SCMC was often regarded as “extended or enhanced educational opportunities” (C. Y. Wang & Reeves, 2007) in contrast to F2F language teaching and learning.

However, synchronous online language learning has replaced F2F delivery because of COVID-19. Many ELT practitioners and researchers, facing a sudden shift in a completely unprepared situation, have started to investigate how fully synchronous online language teaching can be implemented at different levels of education. Some researchers have focused on students’ synchronous English online learning in COVID-19. For instance, Cheung (2021) investigated Hong Kong EFL primary students’ interactions during online English lessons. Lian et al. (2021) modeled the relationship between Chinese university students’ authentic language learning and their English self-efficacy. Other researchers have studied EFL instructors’ teaching practices and strategies during the pandemic. Choi and Chung (2021) looked at the strategies that Korean EFL instructors used to create a “sustainable and authentic technology-mediated language learning environment” and how they motivated English language learners to “actively participat[e]d in sustainable language development and use” (p. 1). Kohinke and Moorhouse (2020), on the other hand, have introduced how to use video-conferencing software (VCS) such as Zoom to facilitate synchronous online language learning.

Those studies have indeed shed light on our understanding of synchronous language learning in the pandemic, but what is missing is an in-depth study of language learners’ perspectives on the challenges they faced when taking synchronous online language courses. Although some ELT researchers have identified the challenges that English language learners faced during the online learning in COVID-19, the results were mainly quantitative, which do not help us get a deep understanding of this group of learners (e.g., Hazaymeh, 2021; Lo & Chen, 2021). As mentioned above, language learners’ perceptions of synchronous online learning are of great importance because they are the main participants in the “online learning adventure” (Sun, 2014, p. 19), especially in this “emergency remote learning” (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). In particular, since China has the largest number of English learners (Li et al., 2018), it is believed that the whole country’s sudden shift to synchronous online learning at all levels of education in early 2020 had also produced the largest number of online English learners. Nevertheless, the English learners’ experiences and perceptions of distance learning have been little known. To fill this gap, this study investigated Chinese university English as a foreign language (EFL) students’ perceptions of synchronous online language learning during the early months of the
COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on the learning challenges they faced. It is hoped that this study not only deepens our understanding of synchronous online language learning in China, but also contributes to the ELT pedagogies of online learning and teaching. Toward that end, one central research question is put forward:

What are Chinese university EFL students’ perspectives of synchronous online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic?

**The Research Design**

The study adopted a qualitative approach to investigate Chinese EFL students’ perceptions of synchronous online learning during COVID-19 at a Chinese university.

**Context of the Setting**

This study was conducted at a public comprehensive university located in a coastal city in southern China. To respond to the “Suspending the class without stopping learning” emergence initiative launched by the Ministry of Education of China in early February 2020 (Ministry of Education People’s Republic of China, 2020), the university announced a detailed online teaching plan for the undergraduate programs in the spring semester in mid-February.

Since it was the first time that the university implemented the online teaching experiment campus-wide, a pilot was first conducted between March 2 to March 6, 2020, 1 week ahead of the spring semester. During the pilot phase, both the instructors and students tried out the teaching and learning platforms and tools to make sure that the online teaching could go smoothly. According to the university’s statistics, in the pilot week, 3,554 out of 3,993 courses were delivered online, taking up 89% of the course pool, and among the 3,554 online courses, 1,518 were taught synchronously, taking up 42.71%. The online teaching formally began on March 9 and ended on June 26.

**Participants**

In this study, the participants were selected using the purposeful sampling method, a non-probability sampling involving the samples drawn from the population based on the researcher’s criteria (Riazi, 2016). To better display a broad spectrum of student participants’ experiences and perspectives regarding online learning during the pandemic, we purposefully selected balanced participants according to social variables such as gender, the year of study, and the place of origin. Besides, we used the concept of “saturation” as an important criterion to decide the number of participants to be studied (Guest et al., 2006). That is, when no new information could be collected from the participants, we stopped data collection.

In total, 14 undergraduate English majors (7 males and 7 females) at the university participated in the study (Appendix A). The mean age was 19.2 years at the time of data collection. About 10 out of 14 participants were from the cities in Guangdong province, and the rest were from other provinces in China. In terms of their year of study, five participants were freshmen, five participants were sophomores, and four were juniors. This study excluded graduating students because most of them had already completed the coursework and did not take online courses during the pandemic.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

This research employed the semi-structured interview method to collect data. Semi-structured interviewing not only allows participants to talk about their individual experiences and perceptions, but also helps the researcher capture participants’ language and concepts concerning the determined topics (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Moreover, with the strengths of flexibility, accessibility, and rich data of small samples, semi-structured interviewing allows for deep exploration of what is meaningful to or valued by the participants (Kvale, 1996).

Due to the shutdown of the university, it was not feasible to conduct face-to-face interviews with the participants who were geographically dispersed. Therefore, we used the Tencent Meeting, a VCS with multi-functions including video/audio-recording, to conduct the synchronous online interviewing (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013). The interviews were carried out immediately after the spring semester ended, which meant that all the participants had participated in online learning for the whole semester. Before the interview, we obtained the participants’ oral consent as well as their opinions about using video or audio recording. It turned out that all participants agreed to be interviewed using audio. The first author conducted all the interviews in Putonghua, following the interview guide (Appendix B). The average length of each interview was between 30 and 40 minutes.

Data analysis is an iterative, recursive, and ongoing process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and is usually conducted concurrently with data collection. In this study, we began analyzing the data as early as we were transcribing the interviews. Following a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we analyzed the interviews from an inductive and interpretative perspective (Charmaz, 2014). First, we immersed ourselves in the interviews and noted down initial ideas. Once we were familiar with the data, we identified the key concepts or variables as coding categories, which could help focus on the research question, thus determining the coding scheme or relationships between codes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Lastly, we sorted the codes into different themes and discussed the discrepant codes and themes until we reached a consensus.

**Findings and Discussion**

The data analysis suggested that there were four challenges that the participants faced in synchronous online learning
during COVID-19. The challenges included the lack of learning climate, the cultivation of learner autonomy, changes of interaction patterns, and the adaptation to remote assessment. In what follows, selected extracts (which are translations from Putonghua to English by the authors of this paper) from the interviews are embedded to better illustrate those challenges.

The Lack of Learning Climate

One of the four challenges confronted by the students concerning synchronous online courses during the pandemic lies in the lack of a learning climate. The climate of learning, as defined in Seif et al. (2012), refers to “the social, emotional, and physical conditions under which one acquires knowledge” (p. 554), and it plays an essential role in the student’s academic life because it can “significantly influence learning processes” (p. 554). As shown in the interviews, the lack of learning climate during online learning was not due to the psychological burden or anxiety about the social condition triggered by COVID-19 (cf. C.-M. Wang et al., 2020), but was associated with the changing physical and emotional conditions, namely an unpleasant physical study environment and the lack of emotional support from fellow students.

Since the university was closed, the students had to study from home. As compared to the classroom, home did not seem to be a quiet and suitable place to study. The students found it hard to concentrate on the online courses with the continuous interruption of their family members. A few students even reported that preventing parents’ disturbance was so necessary that “you have to tell them your course schedule in advance, or they might ceaselessly interrupt you while you were learning,” as suggested in Extract 1.

Extract 1

Y3D: My study is easily disturbed by my parents, though they are not on purpose. Sometimes they ask me to do household chores while I’m having the online courses, or their voices are too loud that I cannot hear what my instructor is saying.

The participants’ experiences with a disturbing physical environment in online learning echo the findings of previous research (e.g., Hromalik & Koszalka, 2018). In most cases, they could avoid such distractions by moving to a quiet room or telling their family member not to disturb them during learning.

By contrast, the participants’ report of the lack of emotional support was hard to solve. Many participants believed that the atmosphere of learning in the university was so important that it could directly affect their learning quality. As shown in the interviews, they all missed the days when they attended classes with their classmates together because the companionship could make them more devoted and motivated to study. In Extract 2, the participant revealed that her motivation for the study was reinforced by “peer pressure,” which was regarded as a kind of emotional rapport she could not get during online learning.

Extract 2

Y3B: I think I don’t have a strong motivation to study at home. Why? Because I cannot get support from peers. Before the pandemic, I often studied with my roommates or studied in the library where many other students were studying too. But now I only sit at my desk alone. It was particularly difficult for me to adjust myself at the beginning because of the lack of peer pressure.

Another participant expressed that he was deprived of the opportunity to gauge the learning gaps between his classmates and him in online learning.

Extract 3

Y1C: So I feel lonely studying on my own this semester. That is, nobody accompanies you, and you don’t know whether you’ve made progress or not in your studies because it is only when you are in a group that you can know the gap between you and your classmates.

The students’ craving for emotional support in online learning may be attributed to the fact that Chinese university students have been socialized in schools structured around majors, which can be further classified into banji (“class”) and student dormitories (Hampel, 2017), and they are more dependent on the emotional support provided by same-structured students. Therefore, it is no surprise that the participants showed great demand for emotional support from their peers for online learning.

The Cultivation of Learner Autonomy

When fighting the unpleasant study environment at home and the loneliness of online learning during the pandemic, the students also needed to learn how to enhance their autonomous learning abilities in order to survive in difficult times when the supervision or intervention from their instructors was minimal. In other words, they were put in a position to take charge of their learning and take more responsibility for what they learned and how they learned it during the online learning (Lenkaitis, 2020).

The participants all agreed that they had more spare time during the pandemic not only because taking online courses saved their commuting time to the classroom, but also because the majority of course length, as required by the university, was reduced to three-quarters of the original. However, the fact that the students had more control over their spare time posed a challenge for the less self-disciplined ones, as some used “sluggish” referring to their states of
mind at the early stage of online learning. Having realized the importance of time management and to better self-regulate and improve online learning efficiency, the students began to find ways to better manage their time. As indicated in Extract 4, some used time management apps to help focus on their studies.

Extract 4

Y2E: I will turn on the time management app to help me focus on my work. In the next thirty minutes, if I haven’t played my phone, it will plant a tree in the app as a reward, or the tree will be dead. It can keep a record of the time each assignment takes and make me much more focused and enable me to work for a longer time.

The online learning experience also improved students’ independent learning skills such as the ability to search for online English resources and to digest them accordingly. Researchers have long found that technology, especially the Internet, provides EFL learners with important out-of-class learning sites and resources by which self-initiated, self-constructed, and self-monitored learning experiences have been enabled (Lai et al., 2016, 2018; D. Y. Zhang & Pérez-Paredes, 2021). It is also true in this study. The participants used to only receive in-class instructions without knowing how to explore other English learning resources from the Internet on their own. However, after experiencing online learning, most of them have become more proactive in searching for online English learning resources and materials by themselves and can make good use of resources such as the university’s e-library collection, highly-rated English learning apps, and so forth. More significantly, some realized that they could also study English on their own aside from taking online courses, as illustrated in Extract 5.

Extract 5

Y1C: Influenced by online learning, I have discovered more online channels and English learning resources to learn English, which opens up a new world for me. Before the pandemic, I just studied English through textbooks and acquired knowledge from instructors. After taking online courses, I have become an independent learner and I’m willing to learn English by myself without instructors’ guidance.

Here, the participant expressed that, having discovered the abundant online English learning resources, he was “willing to learn English by myself without instructors’ guidance.” It seems to suggest that the participant’s autonomous self-regulation was enhanced during the online learning, in which he initiated and chose the learning tasks that were interesting or personally important to him (Zimmerman, 2011).

Changes of Interaction Patterns

The shift from F2F teaching to synchronous instruction has also had an impact on the interaction patterns between students and instructors. Studies have suggested that interaction plays an essential role in students’ online learning achievements (Alqurashi, 2019; Zou et al., 2021). In particular, interaction is widely believed to be important in improving EFL students’ language proficiency (Sun, 2014). However, the participants revealed several challenges or problems when talking about the interaction in synchronous online learning. First, they reported that the synchronous online courses were still much teacher-centered, with most of the instructors delivering and explaining. Students observed some instructors’ efforts in encouraging students’ involvement and participation via resorting to the use of breakout room or texting in the chatbox, but due to the restriction of technology such as limited broadband Internet connectivity or students’ de-motivation for in-class participation, the interaction between the students and instructors was still limited.

Second, one of the advantages of VCS used in COVID-19 is that people from different geographical locations could meet in the virtual classroom. Nevertheless, while almost all the instructors chose to turn on the camera, the students chose rather not to do so for online learning. Although the participants believed that turning on the camera helped create a more authentic F2F context for both teachers and students, and it also helped the students focus more on the course, why did they choose not to do so? That might be related to the technology issue, as one student explains:

Extract 6

Y2D: Most of our instructors turn on the camera when teaching. We don’t do that because we tried to turn it on once when answering the questions, but the Internet connection went dysfunctional abruptly, so we subsequently answered the instructor’s questions via audio.

The bottleneck that the broadband network cannot accommodate all participants having their cameras on simultaneously has also been reported in other studies (e.g., Lian et al., 2021). Thus, the students usually used synchronous computer-mediated communication (CMS) text chat and synchronous computer-mediated voice chat to interact with instructors. However, these two modes of online communication are not without drawbacks. As regards audio communication, for example, it prevented students from having impromptu interactions with instructors due to technology restrictions. Texting into the chatbox, on the other hand, enabled the students to be more aware of their language accuracy, but it was not always noticed by the instructors immediately. Furthermore, both audio communication and text communication used in synchronous online learning failed to provide paralinguistic features such as gaze, facial expressions, gestures, and intonation, which are supposed to be of great importance in English language learning (Penneycook, 1985). In particular, the lack of F2F virtual communication posed serious challenges for EFL learners,
especially for junior students mainly taking skill-based courses, as explicated in Extract 7.

Extract 7

Y1C: For foreign language majors, face-to-face interaction is a must. However, because of the pandemic, students and instructors can only meet online. Due to the lack of F2F interaction, we sometimes cannot get what the instructors mean because we cannot see their facial expressions and body language.

Moreover, the lack of F2F virtual communication in synchronous online learning made it difficult for the students to receive prompt feedback on English learning, especially corrective feedback. In ELT, language learners have also been longing for corrective feedback because it “may constitute the most potent source of improvement in target language development” (Han, 2002, p. 7). This is reflected in the interviews with freshmen and sophomores who mainly took skill-based English courses. In Extract 8, a freshman expresses her desire for receiving corrective feedback from the instructor.

Extract 8

Y1B: Online learning has had a great impact on my English listening and speaking, which are taught online by foreign teachers. You know, sometimes I’m aware that I cannot pronounce some sounds accurately, but fail to correct them. In online learning, our instructor may not be able to identify my pronunciation mistakes because she could not see my mouth shape.

The Adaptation to Remote Assessment

Similar to other studies (Guangul et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020), remote assessment in the COVID-19 pandemic also radically challenged the EFL students. Given that it was the first time that the fully online learning was implemented, the university drew up detailed guidelines on course assessment for the instructors, while at the same time giving the instructors more flexibility with the hope that the remote assessment did not post a great challenge for both the instructors and students. Compared with the course assessment taken in the F2F classroom teaching, two significant changes on remote assessment were introduced, which were also confirmed by the participants.

First, as what language instructors did in other Chinese universities (C. Zhang et al., 2021), many ELT instructors raised the ratio of formative assessment from 30% to 70%, as mandated by the university’s policy. Before the pandemic, the student’s course grade was normally composed of 30% formative assessment, including class attendance and participation, and 70% summative assessment, such as a paper-and-pencil final exam. However, during online learning, the ratios of formative and summative assessments were just reversed to 70% and 30%, respectively. This meant more emphasis was put on the students’ learning process during the pandemic.

This reversion also gave rise to another change, that is, the assessment methods became more diversified and open-ended. The adaptation of diversified assessment methods was especially suitable for the English major program in which the skill-based courses took up the majority. For example, the junior students expressed that, except for some traditional language assessments like translation assignments, more creative assessment methods were adopted, such as recorded or live oral presentations, assigned reading tasks on the apps, English movie dubbing projects, and the like. As shown in Extract 9, the English movie dubbing project, a creative assessment method, appealed to the students’ interests.

Extract 9

Y1E: I have found the English movie dubbing project interesting, and would like to try something new. When doing the dubbing, you could practice your pronunciation and mimic the way the native speakers talk. Then you use the app to edit it, which made you feel fulfilled. It’s your masterpiece.

For the senior students, on the other hand, the assessment method changed from closed-book exams to term papers because the curriculum for the English major program at the advanced level mainly provided content-based courses, such as linguistics, literature, and language teaching methodology. Almost all the senior students investigated reported that writing term papers was beneficial for their development of comprehension, synthesis, and critical evaluation abilities. When working on the term papers, the students’ views could be broadened, and a solid understanding of the research topics could be developed, as shown in Extract 10.

Extract 10

Y3B: I have benefited a lot from writing papers. Before writing, I need to analyze each argument first and then classify them into a logical order. It develops my logical thinking ability and deepens my understanding of the topic under investigation.

While both the junior and senior EFL students affirmed that the high ratio of formative assessment led to the diversified and open-ended assessment methods, they also pointed out one common problem associated with this change. They saw little connection between what they had learned in online courses and the contents of the assessments. This was particularly true for advanced courses mainly assessed in the format of term papers, as displayed in Extract 11.

Extract 11

Y3A: For the Linguistics course, if taught F2F, it would test some key linguistic knowledge. But now it is delivered online, and the final assessment was a term paper. I think the written paper is not closely related to the in-class learning.
In Extract 11, the participant compares the different assessment methods for the same linguistics course before and during the pandemic. Before COVID-19, the paper-and-pencil exam was adopted in course like Introduction to Linguistics. In the exam, multiple choices, true or false questions, filling in blanks, and short essay questions were set. Key linguistic definitions from phonetics to pragmatics were tested, and the students were also required to conduct linguistic analyses. To prepare for the exam, the student needed to review the textbook and related materials carefully. Whereas during the pandemic, the closed-book test was replaced by the term paper, with the students choosing one topic out of two to three assigned by the instructor.

Another problem associated with remote assessment was the lack of feedback. As Gaytan and McEwen (2007) point out, providing detailed and timely feedback was an important component of online course assignments, because meaningful feedback can help students make an adjustment in the next learning progress and achieve more academic accomplishments. But a few participants complained that the grading rubrics were less clear to them and they would not have received any feedback if they had not asked for it, with a subsequent mark on their assignments.

Conclusions, Limitations, and Implications

This study investigated a sample of Chinese university EFL students’ perspectives on synchronous online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis of the qualitative data showed that the students underwent four major challenges: (1) the lack of learning climate, (2) the cultivation of learner autonomy, (3) changes of interaction patterns, and (4) the adaptation to remote assessment. More specifically, synchronous online language learning failed to provide the students with a good learning environment essential to the EFL students (Sun, 2014) and deprived the students, especially junior university EFL students of opportunities to practice English with instructors in classes, although technological remedies (e.g., breakout room function in Zoom) could lessen this unpredictable yet inevitable impact. On the positive side, the synchronous online learning opened up opportunities for the students to cultivate self-discipline and/or self-control over their studies and life and directed the students to make good use of online English learning resources and to study English on their own so that they were trained to be independent and autonomous English learners. In addition, synchronous online learning changed the assessment based on their levels of study. In this regard, the instructors of skill-based courses employed innovative methods to assess students’ English learning with a focus on their general English skills instead of textbook-oriented language tests; the instructors of content-based courses assigned term papers, encouraging the students to explore the issues in-depth.

This study is limited in its small sample size and in simply adopting a single qualitative method. We only used the semi-structured interview method to investigate the experiences and perceptions of chosen 14 university EFL students in a Chinese university. Therefore, the findings of the study may not be generalized to other contexts and should be interpreted with caution. For further studies, we suggest that a large-scale comparative study be conducted to probe into how blended learning in ELT can be implemented in China or other contexts in the post-pandemic era. Aside from the study of university students, future research can promisingly focus on the ELT instructors’ experiences and perspectives of synchronous online learning.

While much of the world is still struggling to cope with the coronavirus pandemic, life in China seems to be back to normal (Hernández, 2020). Concerning China’s education, the schools at all levels were re-opened in the fall semester of 2020 with F2F learning. However, the lessons about online teaching and learning we have learned from this case study can have wider implications for the ELT community, especially in the “new normal” where people of different countries need to prepare for living with COVID-19. Bearing these in mind, we propose four suggestions.

First, in the post-pandemic era, blended learning could be a feasible mode in ELT because it has the merits of both online learning and F2F learning. F2F learning equips the students with a good language learning environment in which they can interact with instructors and peers, whereas online learning may cultivate students’ self-regulation and self-control over their studies and life, and enables students to access many online language learning resources, which can help with individualized learning (Sun, 2014). Second, when adopting online learning, students’ emotional and academic needs should be taken into account. Although university students are adult learners, they still need learning support from instructors and fellow students through various interactions, as the value of university education lies not only in knowledge acquisition but also in social networking and social opportunities (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). It is advisable to establish virtual support groups under the instructor’s supervision to substantially support student group work. Third, for online learning, the students should regularly receive the instructor’s immediate feedback or comments on the assessment. Especially for the assessment of the students’ general English skills other than specific language knowledge, the instructors should spell out the detailed grading rubrics and give specific comments so that the students are clear about the directions for future improvement. Lastly, online learning, especially synchronous online learning in question, has highly technologically challenged both instructors and learners. It is important for instructors to strengthen the ability to integrate technology in language teaching and to innovate teaching or pedagogical methods. Also, language learners should be made aware of self-regulated learning strategies and skills. In so doing, ELT instructors and EFL
learners could proceed successfully in response to the future challenges of technology-mediated language teaching and learning.

Appendix A

| Participants | Gender | Age (years) | Place of origin | Year of study |
|--------------|--------|-------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Y1 A         | Male   | 19          | Liupanshui, Guizhou | 1            |
| Y1 B         | Female | 18          | Guangzhou, Guangdong | 1            |
| Y1 C         | Male   | 18          | Chaozhou, Guangdong | 1            |
| Y1 D         | Female | 18          | Huizhou, Guangdong | 1            |
| Y1 E         | Female | 19          | Guangzhou, Guangdong | 1            |
| Y2 A         | Male   | 19          | Jiangmen, Guangdong | 2            |
| Y2 B         | Female | 19          | Zhuhai, Guangdong | 2            |
| Y2 C         | Male   | 20          | Zhanjiang, Guangdong | 2            |
| Y2 D         | Female | 19          | Shantou, Guangdong | 2            |
| Y3 A         | Female | 20          | Xiangyang, Hubei | 3            |
| Y3 B         | Female | 20          | Hanzhong, Shaanxi | 3            |
| Y3 C         | Female | 21          | Shanwei, Guangdong | 3            |
| Y3 D         | Male   | 20          | Foshan, Guangdong | 3            |

Appendix B

Interview Guide

1. What’s your place of origin? What year are you in?
2. What were the major challenges you encountered during the online learning? How did you overcome them?
3. How was your experience with online learning before the pandemic? How did you perceive it then? How do you perceive it now?
4. What do you think of the interaction during online learning?
5. What do you think of the assessment methods adopted during online learning?
6. Has the online learning experience had an impact on you and your studies? In what way?
7. Has the online learning experience had a particular effect on your English learning? Why?

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ORCID iD

Kun Zhang https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1927-1826
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