# A Critical Study of Online English Listening and Speaking Teaching in Chinese Higher Education

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## Abstract

Driven by economic and political factors, online teaching has seen rapid development in the past 30 years, especially during the epidemic, when online teaching models have been adopted worldwide due to social distance restrictions. This paper firstly analyzes the setting of online teaching from the perspective of neoliberalism and the theoretical framework of Freirean critical pedagogy is explored then. Based on the teaching practice of the English Listening and Speaking course at Baoding University for the academic year 2019-2020, this paper expounds on how the proper use of EdTech can help construct a teaching resource repository, and at the same time, the integration of Production-Oriented Approach into online teaching can help promote students' autonomy, enhance their self-confidence and empower them to explore their potential in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) study. Although there are different perspectives on online teaching, it is undeniable that the impact of information and technology on the educational sector is irreversible and online teaching shows its great advantage in ensuring the overall continuity of education during COVID-19. This study finds out that Learning Management System (LMS) plays a great role in enhancing teacher-student collaboration and promoting students' language competence and critical and reflective awareness. Making full use of these advantages makes up for the deficiencies of traditional face-to-face teaching and promotes EFL teaching in the long run as well. Thus, educators got the responsibility to make proper use of EdTech and explore the online teaching pedagogy. The results will help in gaining insight into the present online teaching mode and the possible improvements in future situations also.

## Keywords

Online Teaching and Learning, Neoliberalism, and Critical Pedagogy

## 1. Introduction

Due to the rampant spread of Covid-19, "home-schooling" methods are adopted

in many countries, and with the support of internet connection and the facilitation of EdTech, online teaching and learning were carried out worldwide. Ever since then, experts and scholars from different fields have conducted pertinent research and their attitudes and perspectives vary sharply. Some scholars showed their concerns about online teaching, for example, Farhadi (2022) believes that online teaching has intensified education inequality due to unstable network connections, insufficient infrastructure, and the lack of support for auditory and kinaesthetic learners, etc. She argues that there is currently a lack of sufficient data to prove the effectiveness of online teaching and its impact on students remains to be tested over time. According to Zhong (2020), some learners encountered a similar predicament in China. He points out that in spite of the Chinese government's striving to eradicate extreme poverty, between 56 million and 80 million people in China reported a lack of internet connectivity or network equipment in 2018 and online teaching during the pandemic has brought problems to the surface. For example, the lack of digital devices for some students interferes with their education, and some have to hike for hours to get a decent cell signal, and some left-behind children lack supervision. In another interview-based study conducted by Moore et al. (2022), the teacher participants indicated that the functions set up by the teaching platform restricted and directed pedagogical practices and online teaching restricted relationships, dehumanized the learners and devalued teaching. Still, some other researchers find that online teaching and learning is beneficial to learners' EFL learning since it can integrate synchronous communication in a video conference with asynchronous such as the LMS making it popular in recent years (Michel & Cappellini, 2019; Rassaei, 2017). The effectiveness of online EFL teaching was evaluated by TAM, TPACK, and eight principles for using technology in language teaching, as stated by Hubbard (2019). According to Hubbard, technology can exert a positive influence on access which means the frequent interaction between teachers and students during this special period cannot be possible without technological support.

Despite the reported constraints of online teaching and the growing concern about the future teaching models, I argue that the role of online teaching in ensuring continuity of education during COVID-19 is undeniable and it improved the language proficiency of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learner, promoted teacher-student collaboration, and developed students' critical and reflective awareness. Apart from that, students in post-secondary institutes got a subtler perception of online learning compared with K-12 learners and they can notice and understand the different learning environments, quality, and choices in specific aspects of this remote learning model. So it is worthwhile to take a study and investigate their online learning experience. Making full use of the advantages of remote learning will make up for the deficiencies of traditional face-to-face teaching and promote EFL teaching in the long run.

Based on the online teaching practice of English Listening and Speaking Course for Chinese college students during the epidemic, this paper analyzes the potential of building online teaching and learning into a participatory and

emancipatory experience through the lens of several Freirean concepts, with a view to providing a reference for future online teaching practice. And the premise of this argument is that there are no physical factors that prevent learners from participating in online learning, and that they have access to a stable Internet connection and necessary learning equipment. The rationale for choosing the Listening and Speaking course for online study is due to its characteristics, that is, it is easy to operate and students can upload the output assignments in the form of videos or audios to LMS and this makes a similar in-person learning experience. They could incorporate all the necessary components into one presentation including language forms, pronunciation, overall structures and gestures in giving a speech, etc. and they are enthusiastic to present and receive feedback online.

## 2. Background and Theoretical Framework of Online Teaching

It is undeniable that in the past 30 years, network technology has pushed the continuous development and improvement of online teaching. In this part, the context of online teaching will be explored first, and then by analyzing Paulo Freire's theory, the possibility of online teaching in helping learners to improve learning engagement, achieve freedom, and increase agency will be explored.

### 2.1. Neoliberalism as the Context of Online Teaching

Neoliberal efforts to transform public education began long prior to the pandemic. Pushed by government and business interests, non-credit "mini-courses" and executive training programs came into being as the first totally online coursesin1981 (Harasim, 2000). Since then, more virtual universities have been set up, conveying the message that "the society was becoming more technology-based and therefore education had to change with this cultural shift or become irrelevant" (Boyd, 2016, p. 168). And MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), according to Boyd (2016), which "were initially developed by computer programmers and content experts with little attention paid to the unique challenges of teaching in the online environment" (p. 174) can be seen as another evidence of this trend. During this pandemic, with the seemingly necessary to invest in EdTech and networking infrastructures, neoliberal reformers have taken advantage of the chaos to advance their interests by following the formula of disaster capitalism (Klein, 2017). The instructors entrusted with the responsibility to create meaningful and transformative learning experiences are forced to adapt to the new paradigm of online teaching in cyberspace (Harasim, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 2007) though ill-prepared. Throughout the development of online teaching and learning, we can see that the moving to online learning has been political and economic rather than pedagogical, regardless of the various perspective of online study.

### 2.2. Paulo Freire and Online Teaching

Paulo Freire is a prominent figure in education, and his books, especially Peda-

gogy of the Oppressed (1996), have had a major impact on critical pedagogy, literacy studies, adult education, and transformative learning. The principles he presented in a specific time and context were met with great success, as were the teaching practices based on his ideas and methods in a similar context. In the following part, I will critically examine how to practice Freirean critical pedagogy in different online settings.

### 2.2.1. Technology and Technical Aids in Education

The prevalence of online learning in higher education has posed enormous challenges for educators committed critical teaching. However, if we look closely at the teaching philosophy of Paulo Freire, it will be found that the new technology and new teaching materials used in online teaching do not violate his teaching principles. While Paulo Freire's pedagogical concepts were developed in the pre-Internet era, he is not opposed to the use of technology in the teaching process (Freire, 2014) and he acknowledges that "…the use of technical aids and materials is indispensable" in teaching (p. 75). He also urges educators to think critically about the use of technology in teaching and to create new methods and new relationships between knowledge seeking disciplines and the most advanced technological innovations we acquired.

### 2.2.2. Banking System or Resource Repository

Some of the early online teaching forms, for example, MOOCs, largely patterned the traditional lecture style, with students exposed to short and pre-recorded video lectures combined with short quizzes, automated assessments, and optional peer discussions in forums, offering little opportunity for students to engage in critical reflection. Thus, they are questioned of the banking nature. According to Freire (1996), banking approach regarded students as empty vessels waiting to be filled other than as creative and exploratory participants and their prior knowledge and experience are not recognized or valued, teachers hold, transmit and impart knowledge to students in one direction. This pedagogical model in MOOCs emphasizes information retrieval and conceptual mastery, runs counter to Freire's critical pedagogy.

However, with the fast development and application of EdTech (learning management systems, applications, and platforms), the online teaching and learning nowadays see a great difference from the previous MOOCs in terms of the teaching styles, the teacher-students interactions, the forms of teaching presentation and process, the cultivation of learners' critical abilities, etc.. The synchronous and asynchronous instruction facilitated by EdTech enables the learners to explore the rich resources and build their autonomous learning. Therefore, it is imperative for the instructors to help learners break free from the banking system and build the LMS into a repository of resources where critical and reflective awareness are cultivated.

### 2.2.3. Building a Holistic and Praxis-Oriented Learning Process

The cultivation of a learning community and embodied learning are highly en-

couraged by Freire. According to Freire (1988), a key component of the teaching-learning process was the demonstration of love for students and it is very important to cultivate the learning community among the instructor and students. By embodied learning, students should not only engage in the cognitive dimension (thinking and reflection), but also take part in concrete action. So during this holistic learning process, students are empowered to learn about and transform the world by way of praxis where action and reflection are closely related and combined.

While in online teaching, limited body language and eye contact is involved in a much condensed virtuespace, which means that body as the essential element of learning is cut out and teachers have scarce chance to know their students. So some researchers (Escobar et al., 1994) claimed that online education is limited to information transmission and reception and the lack of further application or praxis undermines the entire learning process. Thus, it is quite crucial for educators to tackle this problem in order to enable the students to gain embodied learning experience and build a close connection and collaboration between learners within as well as beyond the cyberspace. Apart from that, the instructors need to ponder how to get the praxis component involved in the online teaching and help students gain a holistic learning experience.

### 2.2.4. Literacy as a Form of Cultural Politic

Freire and Macedo (1987) proposed that literacy cannot be viewed as a mechanical process which emphasizes the technical acquisition of reading and writing skills, but rather, they call for a view that literacy is a form of cultural politic in which "men and women assert their right and responsibility not only to read, understand, and transform their own experiences, but also to reconstitute their relationship with the wider society." (p. 5). According to UNESCO (n.d.), beyond its conventional concept as a set of reading, writing and counting skills, literacy is now understood as a means of identification, understanding, interpretation, creation, and communication in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world. Online teaching conforms to the trend of technology and digital development, and should also promote students' literacy skills.

However, in places where English is taught as a foreign language, take China for example, language skills training dominates the teaching process and people tend to equate literacy with language proficiency, some material are unquestionably transmitted and reinforced through printed materials, which is quite detrimental to their understanding of the society. Now with the help of the LMS platform, teachers see the possibility of more authentic resources for learners, which provides a broader opportunity for students to learn about the world and will certainly help develop more reflective and critical learners.

### 2.3. Incorporating Critical Pedagogy into EFL Teaching during the Pandemic

The spread of the pandemic has imposed strict restrictions on social distancing.

In order to ensure the continuity of education, the Chinese government has put forward a call for "classes suspended but learning continues". With the support of the Internet and information technology, online classes are widely carried out across the country. In this part, by integrating the Critical Pedagogy with EFL teaching in higher education, I will analyze the benefits and challenges brought by online teaching, hoping to provide reference for EFL education in the future.

## 2.4. English Listening and Speaking Course in Higher Education in China

In the context of exam-oriented EFL teaching in China, the cultivation of five basic skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation has been established as the teaching focus. Therefore, improving students' language proficiency has become the main teaching goal. However, the listening and speaking part are not included in English test in the College Entrance Exam, which is deemed as the most important test in China. This leads to the neglect of listening and speaking teaching in k-12 EFL education, which brings great pressure to Higher Education English listening and speaking teaching.

Baoding University has undergone a curriculum reform since the fall of 2019, integrating Listening Course with Speaking Course with the purpose to promote language output by way of providing sufficient and authentic language input as the stimulation. At the same time, Production-Oriented Approach (POA), an innovative foreign language teaching approach developed by Qiufang Wen (Wen, 2016) for university students in China, is applied in this course. From Figure 1, we can see the three components of POA: teaching principles; teaching hypotheses; and teacher-mediated teaching processes (Wen, 2018b). POA stresses three teaching principles, namely, learning-centered, learning-using integration and whole-person education. By way of the three-phrase teaching
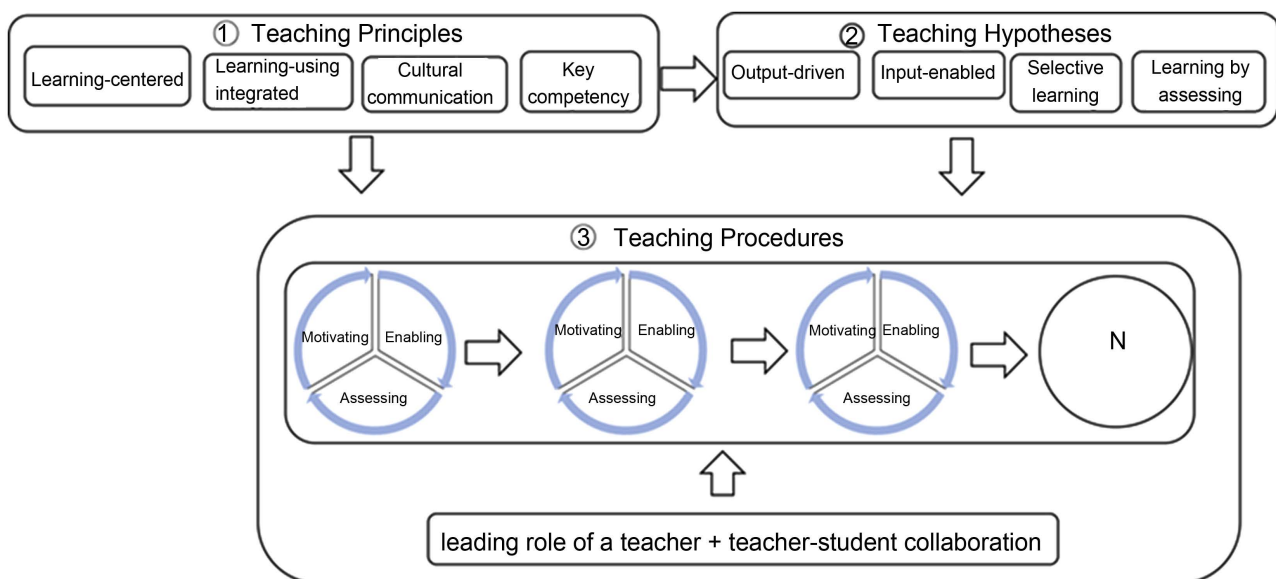


**Figure 1.** Re-revised POA (Wen, 2018a).

process, the three hypotheses are tested.

In English Listening and Speaking Course, a variety of theme-related audio and video materials are provided for the students to listen before they are asked to speak or present. Through the combination of intensive and extensive listening, the students are expected to expand their vocabulary, learn authentic language expressions, and improve their listening comprehension. In terms of knowledge and skills, students are expected to improve their cognitive ability, get a better knowledge of the world, and finally improve their ability to think dialectically and comprehensively through group discussion and reflection. Hybrid teaching was carried out in fall 2019 and online teaching began in spring 2020 due to the outbreak of Covid-19 with challenges and opportunities co-exist. The incorporation of EdTech is proved to be effective in boosting students' motivation and autonomy in English learning, promoting their language proficiency, and cultivating their critical thinking abilities.

In the following part, I will draw on the three teaching processes of POA, namely, motivating, enabling, assessing, to check how to incorporate Critical Pedagogy into online learning to help tackle the problems arising from the conventional teaching mode. At the same time, the benefits and opportunities that online teaching brings to English Listening and Speaking Course for the Chinese College students can be seen.

## 2.5. Motivating

During the 2019 school year, LMS played an important role in my teaching practice, be it hybrid teaching in fall term or online teaching in spring term. Although according to neoliberalism, the development of EdTech has been profit-driven, the investment of educational institutions in the construction of broadband communications, computer equipment and teaching platforms has promoted the development of multimedia teaching and helps to get rid of relying on blackboard and printed materials. The affluent and authentic English resource means that EFL teachers are no longer the only source of knowledge and information. This is conducive to combating the banking system, promoting learning-centred learning development and communication between teachers and students.

As can be seen from the flow chart (Figure 1), output-driven is one of the teaching hypothesis in POA. In the motivating part, which starts way before the class begins, theme-related teaching materials are posted on the LMS, where students can get access and do the selective asynchronous learning. Besides, taking in and learning from the MOOCs course model, LMS can set up targeted tests in order to help students to get the gist of the listening materials. Together with Oral output-driven tasks, students can take the initiative to complete pre-class tasks. The monitoring and analytic functions offered by the current technology, such as the number of times students have logged on, the duration, and the precise time they upload work and so forth, can provide valuable infor-

mation to the instructors. With the help of LMS' functions and data sources, teachers can remind students to do the task, predict the difficulties of teaching, and carry out targeted synchronous teaching.

## 2.6. Enabling

The enabling part is the second phase and also the essential part of the teaching in POA. It is implemented in two types of synchronous mode in my teaching practice: face-to face teaching in fall term, 2019 and DingTalk (a Chinese Synchronous Teaching Platform) in spring term, 2020. Teachers play the role of scaffolders in this teaching process and students will be led to do the selective study and draft a detailed outline of the presentation. With students' development in language proficiency in terms of language form and language structure, the instructor will reduce the scaffolding gradually and students are encouraged to output independently. Apart from that, the cultivation of students' critical thinking ability will also be stressed with the help of group discussions and teacher's theme-exploring analysis. Take the Olympic Game unit teaching practice for example. In addition to completing the listening comprehension exercises in the textbook, such as spot-dictation, multiple choices, students are challenged to answer the questions: 1) what is the Olympic spirit? 2) What comes first in the sports competition? In order to stimulate students' thinking, a news report, Marathon Accidents in Baiyin Gansu, was introduced and the video clip was uploaded to the LMS beforehand. During the synchronous teaching phase, students were asked to: a) listen and retell the news event, b) discuss in small groups and explore who is responsible for the entire accident. During this enabling process, scaffolding were provided and students are encouraged to practice their listening comprehension until they are comfortable to share their ideas, give a presentation or upload their output product later. LMS shows its great advantage in providing the space and room for students' critical ability development and Dingtalk offers another channel for the instructors to give support in a similar "face-to-face" way.

Although due to some technical restricts, teachers cannot guarantee students' learning status in online teaching, and it is also difficult to achieve the same face-to-face group-discussion effects, however, through the efforts of teachers, it is feasible to establish a holistic, praxis-oriented learning process.

## 2.7. Assessing

Compared with the so-called formative assessment which is usually composed of several tests or assignments during the term, a common practice among teachers in Baoding University, online teaching shows its obvious advantage especially in ESL Listening and Speaking Course because students are in the process of continuous communication and revision. Initially, students could obtain rich and authentic linguistic and cultural information by getting access to abundant extensive and intensive listening materials in the LMS which will contribute to

their L2 output and the cultivation of the panning-for-gold style of thinking (Browne & Keeley, 2007). Then, students' learning outcome, usually in the forms of speeches, talks, debates, etc., will be assessed by their group members and instructors. The use of digital tools makes it easier for learners to obtain and receive feedback (Yilmaz, 2017). The timely feedback from the instructors as well as their peers could promote learners' motivation in EFL learning and since it can be kept as a "portfolio" in the student's LMS account, learners can review it at any time for constant reflection and progress. That is to say, students are always in the process of improving. This can enhance students' English proficiency and the advantages of network teaching are given to a full play. All of these help build a teacher-student and student-student collaborative learning atmosphere. And besides, the asynchronous in online learning also enable students develop their autonomy in planning their study and help create an extra space for students' L2 learning.

However, as dataveillance increases, the collection and analysis of student data becomes routine (Lupton & Williamson, 2017), making the privacy protection more prominent. I argue that the uploaded videos should be properly preserved and students' privacy must be protected.

## 3. Conclusion

This study analyzed the great advantages of online teaching of English Listening and Speaking Course in Higher Education. It is conducted during the time when the epidemic was prevailing and face-to-face teaching was restrained due to the social distancing requirements. One thing worth noticing is that the success of online Listening and Speaking Course teaching may be attributed to many factors. Firstly, students are already familiar with LMS during the hybrid learning in fall 2019 before the course turned into online in spring 2020 which can predictably reduce students' anxiety and facilitate the transit. Secondly, trust and collaboration had already been established during the face-to-face phase prior to the virtual study making it another favorable factor. Thirdly, the nature of English speaking class as a very practical and operational class may also lead to the success of online teaching practice. The English oral presentation can be videotaped and uploaded to the teaching platforms since it is easy to incorporate all the necessary components of language, structure and body language into one and students are enthusiastic about this form of presentation and eager to do the self-evaluation and the peer review. Therefore, the findings of this study on the effectiveness of online teaching in English Listening and Speaking Course may not be broadly applicable to other subjects, but its benefits for EFL teaching cannot be ignored, and I argue that these successful teaching practices will provide a useful reference for future teaching. Future researchers can conduct large-scale studies to verify if the findings are valid for online ESL teaching in other universities or other courses.

With the rapid development and progress of science and technology, educa-

tion is inevitably integrated with more EdTech and it sees no possibility to retreat to the mere classroom with pen and paper or chalkboard. We educators need to take a critical view of the technologies and consider which components need to be included and which need to be abandoned in order to build a holistic and praxis-oriented learning process.

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