

# *From Emergency Remote English Teaching to Online Courses: Challenges and Remedies under the Concept of Constructivism*

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**Abstract:** At present, closure of campus has been a norm and implemented intermittently since the outbreak of covid 19 in 2020. Over two years, the majority of universities are going through the transition stage from ERT to taking online classes routinely. This is an opportunity to develop online teaching substantially. College English course is compulsory for all university students in China and learning online can pose threats to both instructors and students. The main problems of ERT includes instability of network platforms, lack of teacher-students interaction. Constructivism is of great significance in the field of pedagogy. It is student-centered and allows ambiguity and flexibility and enables learners to establish a connection between old and new knowledge. This paper aims to clarify the difficulties in online foreign language teaching in universities in China from the perspective of students and teachers under the guidance of constructivist theory. Ten tertiary students were interviewed to find out the dilemma they experienced, and six remedies are put forward from the perspective of constructivism, so as to provide suggestions for dealing with the problems of ERT to develop it into well-designed online courses.

## **1. Introduction**

Chinese university have undergone massive transition from offline class to teaching online since the spring of 2020. Emergency Remote Teaching has been adopted as an alternative to face-to-face classroom, following government requirement of continuity of teaching and learning. However, ERT is not identical to online teaching.<sup>[1]</sup> In a short time, millions of university teachers started to give lectures or tutorials in front of the screens, which can be a disruptive migration and lead to some problems. With 2 years' development, although have improve a lot, ERT still exists some problems, such as instability of network platforms, lack of teacher-students interaction. Thus, it is worth to explore how to solve these issues to make online course more sustainable to benefit university students.

The number of English learners rank top in China, and students study this subject from primary school to first two years of university as a compulsory course. For non-English majors, their extrinsic motivation of engaging Comprehensive English Course (CEC) is to pass CET 4 for graduation. Researchers have found that both virtual and conventional English classroom fail to motivate students

intrinsically. Transition to online course is not the sole contributor to the comparatively low level of performance. Lack of motivation has been an issue due to that fact that materials teachers use cannot solve real-life problems and this is worsened by distance learning which reduce the opportunities of instant communication or feedback. To light of this, the concept of constructivism, which regard teaching as students-centered, has been used as a theoretical support to improve the situation. However, there is no getting around the fact that lots of Chinese university still adopt conventional and passive ways to impart English to learners considering the size and norms of the foreign language classroom.

Although constructivism and ERT have triggered interests of scholars to explore separately, only few researchers analyze the challenges and remedies of ERT in a sustainable way. So, this paper aims to: 1 identify challenges of ERT on university English for both students and teachers 2 put forward remedies which can tackle problems that hinder ERT migrating to high quality online courses.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 ERT and Online English Learning

Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) has been a common practice which is widely used since the outbreak of covid 19, having profound effects on quality of language acquisition, interaction with others and classroom atmospheres ect. 84% of university teachers in China highly accept teaching online and 80% tertiary students are satisfied with this new form.<sup>[2]</sup> In general, online courses require well-designed curriculum and technological support from professionals.<sup>[3]</sup> To be more specific, Six mouths are needed to prepare and plan an online course.<sup>[4]</sup> Although ERT have been a well-accepted alternative to traditional class, and students provided with technological aid can deliver better results when learning compared with other counterparts.<sup>[5]</sup> This does not mean that the problems brought by this transition are all solved. ERT is not sustainable as online learning,<sup>[6]</sup> and some researchers proposed that the contents of ERT went through only minor adaptations when applying to online courses; the network was not stable enough in some areas.<sup>[7]</sup> For students, they are divided over the effects of English online learning.<sup>[8]</sup> On the one hand, they enjoy the flexibility and convenience brought by ERT. On the other hand, difficult teacher-student interaction, and more stimulus they have to overcome studying at home which can take tolls on learning results.

### 2.2 Constructivism in the Field of Education

Constructivism in education originate from concepts of cognitive and social constructivism. The work of Piaget shed the light on how knowledge is acquired individually and how it construct,<sup>[9]</sup> the learning process including schema, assimilation, accommodation, and equilibration. Vygotsky, however, advocated that social circumstances play a vital role.<sup>[10]</sup> The debate over two methods of constructivism still exists, and some scholars further proved that they are not exclusive,<sup>[11]</sup> because Piaget is misunderstood as a viewing education of students apart from social backgrounds.<sup>[12]</sup> Instead, they are entwined with each other.<sup>[13]</sup> Thus, it is noteworthy that the similarities of two methods exist. Indeed, the two influential scientists both considered social factors in education, and focus is to make connection to old and new knowledge, and this view has been proved.<sup>[14]</sup>

Founded by Piaget, and developed by other educationalists, constructivism has been a pivotal paradigm in terms of language teaching.<sup>[15]</sup> To be more specific, scholars have reached consensus that English learners can master the language better by doing constructivist activities compared with conventional teaching method.<sup>[16]</sup> Constructivism, moreover, is one of the most supported methods to language learning, and learner-centered pedagogy which focus on autonomy of learners has a vital role to play in the process of language learning. Many English teachers in Chinese university has used

this theoretical frame in teaching process. <sup>[17]</sup>

### 3. Method

Qualitative method is adopted in this paper, and ten subjects, including 6 girls and 4 boys were interviewed to figure out the thorny issues they confront during English lessons, ranged from their academic performance to a sense of loneliness. All of them are sophomores from a prestigious university in Beijing with different majors, including computer science, electrical engineering, and applied chemistry. The interview is semi-closed, lasting at least 20 minutes for each participant, so they are allowed to express their feelings and point out the problems that bother them and have deep communication with the interviewer.

To find remedies and challenges in a clearer way, the author compares the Piaget’s theory of stages of cognitive development, paralleling to the cognitive process from students’ perspective as theoretical framework (as shown in Figure 1).

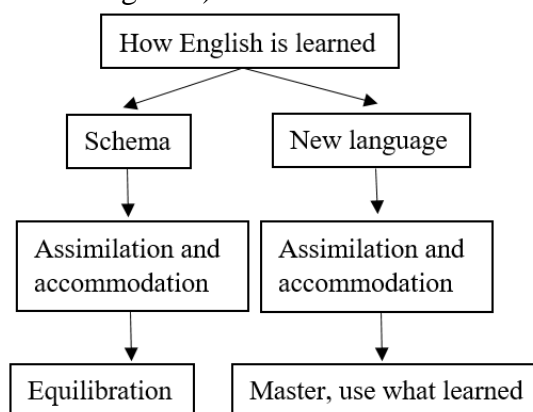


Figure 1: Learning stages paralleling to stages of cognitive process.

## 4. ERT Challenges

### 4.1 Challenges for Teachers

The main challenges for teachers are: 1) dealing with technological problems of teaching platforms 2) how to design class activities online 3) how to provide useful aid for students within limited time.

According to Piaget’s theory of stages of cognitive development, the first step is schema, which means that teachers should enable students to what they will teach, including the patterns, application of certain theory or grammars. However, sometimes the platform, including Tencent class, of teaching is not very reliable with overload. Some teachers are not able to give instruction remotely. <sup>[1]</sup> A subject reported that to avoid network lags, teachers use text only without visual aid, such as slide or clips to triggers students’ interest, and thus make the classrooms duller places. So, teachers should take the mantle on presenting knowledge in an attractive way. Next step is assimilation, which only lead to quantitatively change, students need more time to accommodate new words or writing patterns during this period, especially learning complicated definitions. However, in general, a university English lesson merely last 90 minutes divided into two sessions. Considering the size of class and high-stake exam that students have to pass, it is extremely difficult for teachers to make sure every student having enough time to activate their cognition, let along connecting new point to what they have mastered to trigger qualitative change which occur in accommodation. Although some teachers allocate time for assimilate and accommodate new contents, the activities are tedious. “Our teacher gave us 30 minutes to study on our own, but we don’t see the meaning of this arrangement”, a subject said. So, how to

help students to understand and use what they acquire during a lesson should be reconsidered.

Finally, there are few opportunities for teachers to Assimilation and accommodation help learners to reach equilibration, using is one of the best ways to cement in information.<sup>[18]</sup> Some constructivist activities, such as role play can be carried out with more convenience that affect teaching result in a negative way. Thus, English teachers in universities is facing considerable challenges during post covid era.

On the whole, constructivism is more open-minded, allowing for ambiguity, flexibility, which contradict to traditional way of teaching, teachers should design activities that are not test-oriented to fulfill students' needs.

## 4.2 Challenges for Students

By analyzing transcription of interviews and carding literature, Students are challenged by: 1) native moods during closure of campus; 2) not mastering of self-regulation strategies; 3) lacking practice to fully assimilate/accommodate what they've learned; 4) lacking motivation of involving in CEC.

Given the fact that some teachers start English in an unattractive way, it is hard for students to be laser-focus on the CEC lessons. Unlike sitting in a classroom, students are susceptible to stimulus, which have detrimental effects on their English study. Without supervision from teachers offline, this trend is more obvious than before. Due to their maturity level, staying focus without suitable pedagogical methods is extremely demanding. If the step of schema fails to succeed, the following steps of cognition cannot be activated. Thus, the goal of learning new connects cannot be achieved.

Moreover, respondents of a survey in China admit they suffer from anxiety and other negative moods during pandemic.<sup>[18]</sup> ERT, worse still, force English learners to study without peers, thus giving rise to higher level of anxiety and a sense of isolation. Young learners are more likely to depend their self-worth on how others judge them, and an interviewee said that "without a sense of teamwork and praise from students, I couldn't be laser-focused." Thus, without as much emotional support as before, students experience insomnia, anxiety etc., and harbor a pessimistic attitude towards language learning. What is noteworthy is that the students are not willing to attending CEC with enough intrinsic motivation. This course is compulsory for the first two years in university, and they have to pass high-stake exams, and their way of learning is test oriented. "I didn't care about what I learn during the lesson, and I just want to pass CET6 with higher score", five subjects reported. Learning English with this aim, English learners even don't realize that they need to assimilate or accommodate new words or grammars. It is a paradox that the more they want to gain high scores, the less motivation they show to attend CEC. When students only experience the stage of scheme, it is almost impossible for them to construct knowledge network. This situation makes it harder for them to deliver better results, curbing motivation to acquire new contents.

Additionally, using points they learn in real-life seances i.e., providing more chances to practice can create a conducive environment for learners. Conversely, the majority of lessons are still teacher-centered in China, although some instructors have been conscious of this issue, more opportunities to practice should be involved in CEC. So, university students are confronting lack of practice. If tests are the only scenario to use English, students cannot gain instant feedback to equilibrate knowledge and have deeper understanding of this subject. Thus, activities with more interactions are recommended to develop learners into good users.

## 5. Remedies: from ERT to Online Courses

Six remedies to improve the current situation are proposed in this paper.

### **5.1 Speed of Teaching Voice Should be Reconsidered**

Since teachers cannot use body languages and facial expressions as effective as class off-line, voice plays an unprecedentedly pivotal role in teaching. Thus, instructors should slow down their voice, which can help students capture key knowledge points with more time to understand what teacher impart, especially at stage of schema that learners are exposed to new points. Additionally, unlike Chinese which is pictorial based, pronunciation has a vital role to play when it comes to memorizing words and using them afterwards. Thus, slow speed can help learners to hear pronunciation of English. Otherwise, if students feel lost at beginning of a lesson, it is almost impossible for them to follow the remaining contents. Also, only remember words by rote memorization can be tedious and ineffective, which can affect learning negatively.

### **5.2 Utilizing Teaching Assistant Fully**

ERT requires teachers meet higher technological requirements, and to tackle this, the teaching assistants can provide effective aid. In light of this, they should have communication with faculty members to know the activities during lessons, theoretical framework. By doing so, teaching assistants can help teachers deliver high-quality teaching and remove hurdles brought by technology. Moreover, students can gain academic support, such as consultations, from teaching assistants by using We chat, email etc. after class. By doing so, ERT can develop into online courses with better study experience.

### **5.3 Time Rearrangement of Each Session**

Some interviewees reported that they are of weak persistence in learning remotely, so the session should be divided into smaller units, which can reduce amount of information students have to understand, and this change can help students to assimilate and accommodate key points better. 20-25minutes for each unit is suitable.<sup>[19]</sup> To be more specific, teachers should design curriculum for online courses to ensure students have fully understood.

### **5.4 Combination of Online Learning and Self-Study outside Class**

Unlike traditional class, teachers exert less control over students when teaching online, so students may skip English classes without enough supervision. Additionally, in traditional class, passive engagement and limited pre-class preparation are not uncommon, and this phenomenon still exist in online classrooms. CEC teachers should require students to submit short papers based on reading key materials prior to lessons.<sup>[20]</sup> By doing so, teachers can have a better understanding of the level of cognition of learners, thus adjusting teaching content to ensure teaching quality. Besides, preparation for some teamwork's, like presentations, can activate their motivation to involve in the class actively. Then discussion section should be valued to exchange ideas with students, helping them construct knowledge network, instead of learning ambiguous, fragmented content.

### **5.5 Diversifying Aspects of Assessment and Attitude Alteration**

Assessment of English level is still highly test- oriented, and this would drastically mitigate enthusiasm of attending class actively and triggering students' interest intrinsically. Indeed, a subject said that "My classmates and I only care about what will be tested, and the way of learning has more to do with rote memorization".<sup>[21]</sup> Also, evaluating students' English proficiency based on scores only poses threat to teachers' delivery. To improve the score of high-stake exams, such as CET4, they

have to arrange duller and tedious drills to practice testing tips, rather than imparting key knowledge which students can use afterwards. If criteria can include more practical skills, i.e. oral speaking, finding research gaps by reading literature and submitting papers or imitating real life sciences, students are more likely to alter negative attitudes towards attending CEC. Although CET4/6 have launched oral English test, to large extents, the contents should be more practical to meet students' needs to increase the number of students taking part in the test. On the whole, more reasonable ways of assessment can substantially motivate learners to study actively.

## 5.6 Sharing Strategies to Reduce Negative Moods

Given the fact that ERT is a temporary solution, researchers have proved that Chinese university learners experienced higher level of anxiety by investigating 3,800 students from prestigious university in northern China during pandemic.<sup>[22]</sup> Although facilitating anxiety does exist, the reverse relationship between learning results and anxiety has been reinforced by researchers, ranged from primary students to undergraduates.<sup>[23]</sup> This situation is worsened by studying alone, so teachers should also have discussion section (the author mentioned before) to get to know the state of mind of students and provide help they need and cultivate their mental toughness. Additionally, university should enable students to know that they can gain emotional support from university-based mental health center, and visiting psychologists is norm.

## 6. Conclusion

Researchers should not equate ERT with online learning, which is an important implement to ensure the continuity of English instruction. According to the concept of constructivism, remedies are proposed in line with the process of cognition. Besides, recently, some natural disasters lead to closure of campus.<sup>[24]</sup> By exploring the challenges and proposing six remedies, ERT may serve as a solution to dealing with future accidents to ensure quality of instruction, because teachers have gain skills which they need to deliver courses online whether they are well-prepared or not.

## 7. Limitations and Implications

### 7.1 Limitations

Firstly, the number of subjects interviewed is limited, only 10 of them, and subsequent researchers can find problems from the perspective of English teachers in university. More participants from different majors can be included. Also, most of articles focus on the focus on the ERT effects on intermediate learners i.e. freshman or sophomores who study English to pass CET 4, and more advanced learners, such as those who have passed CET 6 or get a good score in IELTS/ TOFLE, are also worth to explore.

### 7.2 Implications

University and other institutions shoulder the responsibility of exploring new mode of teaching and learning. Although ERT is different from online learning, if drawbacks of ERT can be made up by remedies, it would serve students and instructors as competent study aid to improve learners' English proficiency remotely. Online learning enables educational institution to make most of teaching resources and provide more options of courses. Thus, both instructors and universities should seize on opportunities to enhance stability of network and design more constructivist activities. The precious teaching experience gained from ERT can improve prevalence of distance learning, giving



students more ways to acquire knowledge, rather than being forgotten eventually.

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