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Student Preferences of Student-Teacher Communication during Synchronous Online Classes

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Abstract

When students study in synchronous online classes, they decide on a preferred mode(s) of communicating with the teacher. This small-scale qualitative research study aimed to explore student preferred modes of communicating with the teacher during synchronous online classes. The researchers used an online questionnaire to acquire data from three different groups of students, each containing three participants. Two groups were university students in China and South Korea, and one group consisted of adult learners in Somalia. All participants were studying English language development courses in synchronous online classes with the researchers. The study found that while most participants were willing to use their cameras, they preferred using the chat box and microphone without using the camera to communicate with the teacher. Additional findings revealed that most participants opposed having a mandatory camera usage policy and for camera usage to affect their grades or marks in the course.

Keywords: camera policy, student-teacher communication, synchronous online classes

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1. Introduction

When taking synchronous online classes, students will decide and form preferences for modes of communicating with the teacher during class. Student motivation (Eyitayo, 2013), ease of platform use (Lännström, 2020; Lehman, 2020; Li et al., 2022; Monterde, Ramos, Francisco, & Lim, 2022), rules and policy or the lack thereof concerning camera usage (Finders & Muñoz, 2021; Reed, 2020; Seeley, 2022; Sullivan, Raman, Zolbanin, Nittala, & Hvalshagen, 2021), teacher feedback (Haga & Rappeneker, 2021), and personal device and internet connection (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021; Lännström, 2020; Lehman, 2020; Lin & Gao, 2020; Olt, 2018; Sartika & Wahyudi, 2021) are all variables that affect student-teacher communication and the preferred mode(s) of communicating with the teacher. Each of these variables can play a significant role in how students decide to communicate with their teacher during synchronous online classes. Therefore, educational organizations and teachers must take heed, consider these variables, and seek to develop transparent expectations detailing student camera use and engagement during synchronous online classes.

1.1 Background and Statement of the Problem

The researchers were synchronous online lecturers in academic English teaching first-year university students at a university in Dalian, China. In the latter part of the fall term of 2021, the university went into lockdown due to COVID-19, and the students were required to attend synchronous online classes. The primary researcher was also a part-time synchronous online teacher teaching intensive English language development classes for a language center in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, that enrolled adult students living in Somalia. During the winter session, the primary researcher taught a synchronous online winter session course in Business English language development as part of a partnership program between a university in Seoul, South Korea, and a college in Washington State, United States.

In each educational setting, observations revealed considerable confusion and inconsistencies concerning the implementation of synchronous online learning. The researchers noted how the leadership often struggled to set expectations for synchronous online learning. During faculty meetings and informal discussions, the researchers listened to other teachers share frustrating experiences about their synchronous online classes, which often centered around students not using their cameras, not communicating with the teacher, and not being engaged. The researchers discussed these observations privately and collaboratively reflected on these and each other's synchronous online teaching experiences. The researchers concluded that the problems experienced by the teachers and students were primarily caused by a lack of transparent expectations, inconsistent implementation of synchronous online learning across the department or program, and a lack of support structures for synchronous online learning within the organization. These support structures included a camera use policy, professional development focused on synchronous online teaching, and an organization-developed culture that accepted synchronous online learning as a viable medium of learning.

The researchers also considered the student experiences and preferences with synchronous online learning. When students use their cameras, microphones, or the chat box, they communicate with the teacher, and the synchronous online teacher considers the students are engaged. Unfortunately, the teachers and programs using synchronous online classes failed to consider student communication preferences during synchronous online classes. Because teachers had complained about students not using cameras, not communicating with the teacher, and not being engaged, the researchers decided to hone in on investigating student preferences for using their cameras, microphones, and chat box during synchronous online classes.

1.2 Research Question

This study aimed to explore student preferred modes of communicating with the teacher during synchronous online classes. Of particular interest was why students chose a particular mode of communication. The researchers developed the following question to guide the study.

- What preferences do students studying online English language development courses have in communicating with the teacher?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Student Motivation to Study Online

Student motivation for online study varies for numerous reasons, and different types of students are motivated for various reasons. University students take for-credit courses to complete a degree plan for eligibility to graduate with

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a diploma. While online learners can be considered to be self-directed learners (Eyitayo, 2013), university students studying English online for lack of choice often struggle with being self-directed learners (Lehman, 2020), especially when they have a preference for face-to-face study on campus (Lehman, 2020; Serhan, 2020; Sullivan et al., 2021). However, university students studying courses online outside their university degree plan may share many of the same characteristics as adult learners (Eyitayo, 2013), one of which is motivation. Some university students take non-credit courses to acquire specialized knowledge or skills to prepare for their future employment. Adult learners are pragmatic learners and often seek to gain knowledge and skills to apply in the workplace (Wlodkowski, 2008). Overall, adult learners become motivated to learn based on their perceived relevance of class content and its applicability to their personal or professional aspirations (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 2015; Wlodkowski, 2008).

2.2 The Zoom Platform

The Zoom platform provides participants with several ways to communicate with the teacher and other students. Students can use their camera with the microphone unmuted, microphone only, or the chat box function for text messaging. When attending synchronous online classes using Zoom, students find Zoom to be user-friendly (Lehman, 2020); however, some students experience high levels of discomfort due to their fear or hesitancy to use their camera, microphone, or the chat box function in order to communicate with the teacher and other students. This fear or hesitancy can be a barrier to using the various modes of communication available to interact with the teacher and other students, especially the camera (Lännström, 2020; Li et al., 2022).

2.3 Internet, Equipment, and Student Comfort Level

Sometimes students have equipment that is not functioning correctly (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021). Further, the Internet connection and bandwidth demands may be problematic for some students (Lin & Gao, 2020; Olt, 2018; Sartika & Wahyudi, 2021). The device students use for online study may not meet the technical requirements for video conferencing (Lännström, 2020). While many students initially opt to use their phones, desktop and laptop computers may be better devices for synchronous online study due to their processing ability compared to a phone (Lehman, 2020). When the device and internet connection function correctly, synchronous classes provide multiple options for students to communicate with their teachers and classmates instantly. While some teachers and students may disagree, teacher-led synchronous classes "may offer a learning environment that closely mimics an F2F [face-to-face] classroom format" (Francescucci & Rohani, 2019, p. 69). However, communicating with the teacher during synchronous classes via private message could boost student engagement, including those students who are usually not active participants when attending classes in a traditional format in a building (Seeley, 2022).

2.4 Camera Use

Many organizations and teachers equate student camera usage during synchronous online classes as a significant criterion for measuring student participation. Additionally, some organizations and teachers reason that face-to-face participation occurs in classroom and should therefore also occur in the synchronous online class (Reed, 2020). As such, the debate of camera usage, voluntary or compulsory, has been the focus of much debate (Finders & Muñoz, 2021; Reed, 2020), especially since many organizations found it necessary to transition to synchronous online instruction while not being adequately prepared.

Several years into the COVID-19 pandemic, many assume that all students have adapted to online study and are familiar with its features. However, that assumption is a fallacy. Although online classes in some parts of the world have evolved past being a trend (Kentnor, 2015), there are still many parts of the world and numerous students with little experience with synchronous online learning. One aspect of online learning that students often struggle with is using their webcam. Often students are reluctant to turn their cameras on because they may not feel comfortable using cameras when attending online classes (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021; Haga & Rappeneker, 2021; Sullivan et al., 2021) or fail to use their cameras consistently (Wang, Huang, & Quek, 2018). At other times, a poor internet connection may be the culprit for noncamera usage (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021; Sullivan et al., 2021).

Many teachers and organizations have policies that require student usage of cameras, and some go so far as to penalize students for not using their cameras during class. However, some believe mandatory camera usage can invade privacy (Finders & Muñoz, 2021; Reed, 2020) and infringe on cultural practices (Nydell, 2018). Additionally, mandatory camera usage can lead to some students experiencing discomfort due to their surroundings while attending online classes and having feelings of being gendered (Finders & Muñoz, 2021; Lännström, 2020; Li et al., 2022) or closely

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scrutinized (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021; Murphy, 2020; Reed, 2020). Teachers often create camera usage policies when an organization does not have a clearly defined camera usage policy. The reasons for teachers creating camera policies stem from multiple reasons, one of which may be because they struggle with teaching online and desire or need to see student faces during instruction (Mills, Yanes, & Casebeer, 2009; Reed, 2020; Saleh & Meccawy, 2022).

Teachers are not the only ones who experience uneasiness or frustration when students do not use their cameras. Sometimes, students using their cameras, when others do not, succumb to feelings of uneasiness or frustration (Schwenck & Pryor, 2021). When students do not use their cameras, they and others may feel isolated (Schwenck & Pryor, 2021). This feeling of isolation is true not only in the main meeting but also in breakout rooms. Contrarily, students who use their cameras may overshadow other students since the teacher's focus will be directed toward students using their cameras (Seeley, 2022). To help alleviate feelings of uneasiness and frustration experienced by teachers and students, educational organizations should develop transparent policies detailing camera usage expectations that accommodate all organizational stakeholders (Olt, 2018).

When a camera usage policy developed by the educational organization is not in place, the teacher will be faced with creating a policy, whether it be a formal or implied policy. The teacher may create a policy that makes camera usage compulsory and possibly grade-based or may choose to make it optional. While many teachers may prefer compulsory camera usage by the students, there have been calls by some authors and researchers encouraging the development of camera usage policies that promote the optional use of cameras by students during synchronous online classes (Seeley, 2022; Sullivan et al., 2021).

While camera use by the teacher can be critical for students to see non-verbal cues, student camera use can be equally helpful for the teachers. If camera usage is optional, teachers can encourage students to use their cameras by pointing out some benefits of using them during online classes (Haga & Rappeneker, 2021). One of the significant benefits of using cameras in an online class is the feeling of being connected (Haga & Rappeneker, 2021; Han, 2013). Therefore, teachers should encourage student camera usage and impress upon their students how their camera usage allows teachers to see non-verbal cues, thereby enabling them to understand students better, which can be critical for helping students develop English language skills.

2.5 Microphone and Chat Box

When students are not using cameras, many teachers prefer that students use the microphone instead of sending text messages in the chat box. When students are not on camera, the microphone allows the teacher and other students to hear the inflection of the speaker's voice, providing additional audible cues for understanding. However, using microphones in the virtual classroom can be troubling for teachers and students. While some teachers request that all students mute themselves, others choose to mute everyone automatically. Although muting all students can prevent unwanted background noise from being a distraction, it also can present a barrier to spontaneous communication in an online classroom. For example, some students in online classes may be hesitant to unmute their microphones for fear of disturbing the teacher or the class (Olt, 2018). However, allowing students to maintain an open microphone throughout the class can be problematic as background noises can easily be transmitted to the rest of the class and can present a distraction for the teacher and other students (Wang et al., 2018).

Most platforms educational organizations use for synchronous online classes, including Zoom, have a chat box function that allows students to communicate with the teacher and other students (Serhan, 2020). Additionally, students using the chat box function have the potential to communicate in private via direct message or private message. On the whole, the chat box can be a powerful tool of communication during online classes allowing students to participate in open dialogue, send answers privately to the teacher, or ask questions privately, which can be particularly important for students who do not wish to ask a question(s) publicly. While the chat box function may not appear to be a preferred mode of communication by the teacher, some students will use it, especially those who are hesitant to use their camera or microphone (Li et al., 2022). Also, text chat during language development classes places a higher cognitive load on students than other forms of communication in online classes (Payne, 2020).

Individual ability to communicate with the teacher is vital for many students, and using the chat box can bring solace to students not using their camera or microphone when they send a message and receive a response from the teacher (Lehman, 2020). Further, there are ways for teachers to use the chat box to provide non-verbal communication, such as using emoticons to convey feelings (Seeley, 2022). If students are not willing to use their cameras or microphones, teachers can encourage them to use the chat box to participate and ask questions (Finders & Muñoz, 2021). However,

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students relying only on the chat box to communicate with the teacher can be at a disadvantage if the teacher does not regularly check the chat box for questions or comments (Wang et al., 2018).

3. Methodology

3.1 Design

After deciding on the aim of the study and developing the research question, the researchers created an exploratory questionnaire to gather qualitative data to explore student-teacher communication preferences held by three small groups of students studying English synchronously online using Zoom. Although interviews can yield spontaneous responses through probing questions, the researchers used a questionnaire with open-ended questions because the participants were at different levels of English language learning ability. Open-ended questions and the responses received can produce qualitative data that are rich in detail and may provide depth that goes beyond ordinary quantitative data (Creswell, 2012). Further, the researchers believed that a set questionnaire would allow students to answer questions at their chosen pace and have the opportunity to use external resources such as a dictionary or translator. After the questionnaires were returned, the researchers read through the responses and used prior experience and knowledge in the field to organize data based on shared meanings between the participant responses (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). After analysing the data separately, the researchers worked together to combine the individual data analyses. The researchers tallied responses and extracted relevant texts to represent student responses to the questions asked on the questionnaire.

3.2 Instrument

The researchers used Survey Monkey to gather data using three separate questionnaires containing the same questions. Each of the three questionnaires was dedicated to a particular group of participants. The questionnaire contained twelve questions (see Appendix), nine of which sought a yes or no answer and included prompts for open-ended responses. The questionnaire contained questions that explored student motivation, internet, equipment, and level of student comfort, use of the camera, use of a microphone, and the use of the chat box function on Zoom. Five synchronous online teachers served as experts in the field of synchronous online education and reviewed the questionnaire. According to Creswell (2012), experts in the field can serve to establish content validity for questionnaires. Each question in the survey had an acceptable universal agreement of .80 or above (Polit & Beck, 2006).

Participants were notified at the beginning and end of the questionnaire that they could stop participating at any time until they chose to submit the questionnaire. The questionnaire did not contain questions that required answers; therefore, participants could skip questions if desired. Participants were notified that submitting the questionnaire gave consent for their responses to be included in the data set for the research study. All participants were adults and were informed that their participation was voluntary and that their responses were anonymous. The university students in China completed the questionnaire after their final marks were released for the fall term. The participants from Somalia and South Korea were enrolled in short-term courses and completed the questionnaires after the courses were completed.

3.3 Participants and Background

The research study had nine participants. The participants volunteered to participate after receiving an open call seeking participants for a research study given by the teacher of their class. Because two classes contained 12 or fewer students, the number of participants from each group was limited to three. In the end, three participants were from China, three were from Somalia, and three were from South Korea. All participants used Zoom to attend online classes.

The participants in China were first-year university students enrolled in an international program at a university in Dalian, China. These students were between the B1 and B2 levels on the CEFR scale. They were majoring in international business and were studying academic English. Due to COVID-19, these students attended online classes while staying in their dorms using their device(s) for several weeks in November of 2021. These participants in China attended classes taught by the secondary researcher. The university did not have an official camera usage policy. However, later in the period of online learning, the university made statements that students used their cameras during online classes. However, the educational organizations did not provide guidance to the teachers concerning students not using their cameras.

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The participants in Somalia were adult learners enrolled in an intensive English language program with a language center located in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. These students were between the A2 and B1+ levels on the CEFR scale. They were enrolled in a four-week course that taught general English with the option to continue additional four-week courses. These participants were under thirty years old and were studying English for personal and professional reasons. They attended classes with the primary researcher and used their device(s) while studying in their homes. On the language center's website, there was a statement mandating students to use their cameras during online classes. However, there was no guidance given to teachers concerning students who did not use their cameras.

The participants in South Korea were university students in different years of study at universities in Seoul, South Korea. These participants had enrolled in a short-term intensive four-week international program in January and February 2022 with a college in Washington State, United States. The short-term program focused on developing English for business purposes. These students were between the B1 and B2 levels on the CEFR scale. They attended classes from their homes while using their device(s) to study with the primary researcher. The joint leadership of the international program did not establish an official camera usage policy. However, after the course began, the leadership of the educational organizations made statements that students should use their cameras during online classes. However, the educational organizations did not provide guidance to the teachers concerning students not using their cameras.

4. Results

The first question on the questionnaire (see Appendix) asked the participants to identify which device or devices they used to access the online classes. In the second question, participants were prompted to state why they were studying English classes online. Table 1 shows the responses for the first two questions and assigns each participant a code.

Table 1. The purpose of studying English online and the device used.

Participant Country	Participant Code	Reason for studying online	Device
China	C1	Because I don't want to stop learning it during the pandemic.	Phone Laptop
China	C2	Covid-19	All devices
China	C3	Convenient	Tablet/iPad
Somalia	S1	Because I want improve my English language	Phone
Somalia	S2	English is international language that spoken all over the world. I learning to go abroad and I want to speak like a fluent and I wish to have IELTS certificate. I want to get better jobs in future and I will get higher salary if I can know how to speak and I would like to participate other fluent people and simply they would understand me clearly.	Phone Laptop
Somalia	S3	I live in a country where its people are 100% talk one national language, there are even no other local languages. In the other hand, English is my working language for humanitarian agencies. Online classes may be the only professional language schools I could find.	Laptop Desktop
South Korea	SK1	Just encourage	Phone
South Korea	SK2	I wanted to get rid of my fear of English conversation.	Phone Laptop
South Korea	SK3	To improve my English skill	Laptop Desktop

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4.1 Internet, Equipment, and Student Comfort Level

The researchers asked the participants if the internet connection, wi-fi signal, or device(s) used prevented them from using their cameras during classes. Four (S2, SK1, SK2, & SK3) of the nine participants replied, stating that the internet wi-fi signal prevented them from using their cameras. For example, Participant S2 stated, "Yes, it needs high speed of internet," and Participant SK3 stated, "Sometimes the camera doesn't work properly when there is no internet connection." However, participant SK1 revealed that the wi-fi signal "rarely" prevented camera usage.

Participants were asked if they felt comfortable communicating with the teacher during online classes, and all participants reported being comfortable. Participant S3 added that "it depends on the teacher." Additionally, Participant C1 stated, "Yes, why not? I don't think there's difference between online and offline classes. You can turn on or off microphone just do as your wishes."

4.2 Camera Use

The participants were asked if they used their cameras during class. Five participants (C1, C2, C3, S3, & SK3) reported using their cameras during classes. However, those five participants did not use their cameras consistently. Participant C1 provided several reasons for using the webcam.

> If the teacher ask it strictly I will but if not I won't. Because I'm shy and more importantly when we have the class beginning at eight o'clock am online Maybe I just began to prepare for the class at seven o'clock fifty fifth And I don't have time to make up, Or made myself look beautiful awesome, So I not like to use my webcam during class Because I think it would do harm to my personal image, If I look a little sloppy.

Participant C2 stated that "it depends on teacher's demand," and Participant C3 answered, "not always, I'll be same with others." However, Participant C3 further revealed that they would not use their camera unless the teacher asked strictly.

Four participants (S1, S2, SK1, & SK2) reported not using their cameras. Participant SK2 stated, "No. I was sorry to the professor because I didn't camera on. But, the program kept closing when I was turning camera for a long time. So, I took the class without turning camera on." Participant SK3 reported, "My laptop camera was at the bottom, so it was inconvenient to turn on the cam." Participant S2 answered that it depended on the teacher, and although the participant did not want to use the camera, they were afraid of being removed from the class – "[some teachers] said you must turn on your webcam and if you didn't do what they want then [you] were removed from the class. So I can say it depends on the teacher hopes and rules."

When asked if there were something the teacher could do so the participant would turn on the camera, only one participant (S1) replied no. However, Participant S3 stated, "It is so easy to open the webcam if the teacher wants to see us. He/she only needs to say please open your webcam!" Participant SK2 stated, "I don't know the answer because some students have computer performance problems." Additionally, Participant C1 gave the following lengthy response.

> "In my humble opinion the teacher should let the student know that no one will laugh at you whatever you where or you look sloppy. We just use webcam for the study reason, anything not fair if the teacher use webcam and student not. If the teacher want all the students use webcam it should set the rule at the beginning of the class the whole semester. Then everybody will obey this because at the first day of the class we just all use webcam so it's normal and all we need is to follow this."

Further, Participant C2 answered, "Maybe just ask me to do it. Chinese students always need some "pressure." Lastly, participant C3 declared, "Others turn on I will," and "Just tell me or say he wants to see us."

The researchers asked the participants if there should be a rule that students must have their cameras turned on during classes. Two (C2 & SK2) of the nine participants answered yes, two participants (C3 & S3) did not respond with a yes or no answer, and the remaining participants answered no (C1, S1, S2, SK1, & SK3). Several participants gave comments concerning mandatory camera usage. Participant S2 replied with the following.

> "I don't think so. But I do think it is good to have turn on while I am doing the exam, it's very good because the teacher must know the student who might cheat the exam and some of them they should use the google. Therefore it is good to turn on that specific point of time."

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Participant C3 stated, "Maybe, so the teachers will know what are they doing." Lastly, Participant C1 replied, "No, please not. At the student perspective I absolutely not happy with this rule and maybe I will not obey this."

When asked if camera usage should affect their grade or mark in the class, eight participants (C1, C2, C3, S1, S2, SK1, SK2, & SK3) answered no, while one of the participants (S3) answered with the following, "Maybe affected because webcam is useful for focusing on studies." Participant (C1) who answered no stated, "The usual grades should depend on the attendance and the students' enthusiasm for answering questions and the quality and attitude of answering questions (C1)."

4.3 Microphone and Chat Box

Eight of the nine participants (C1, C2, C3, S2, S3, SK1, SK2, & SK3) reported using their microphones to ask the teacher questions when attending online classes. Participant S1 was the only participant who answered no. In response, Participant C1 stated, "If the teacher call my name I will. But I usually don't use it actively because I am shy." There were multiple reasons why participants voluntarily used their microphones during class. For example, participant SK2 stated, "Yes. It is better than chat box." Participant C2 stated, "Yes, as the face to face class, when I have a question I will ask." Participant C3 responded with the following, "Yes sometimes, textbox more often."

Five participants (C1, C2, C3, S3, & SK1) reported that they preferred the chat box for various reasons. Participant SK1 preferred the chat box because "I do not speak English well." Participant C1 gave the following response.

> "I prefer chat box because I am shy and chat box can send the message individually to the teacher. That mean the other one cannot see my answer. And I can feel free whenever I want to talk about something or share my thoughts."

Participant C2 stated, "Chatbox, it is more polite and wont interrupt the teacher." While Participant S1 did not provide a reason, participants S2, SK2, and SK3 preferred using their microphone for different reasons. Participant S2 responded, "I always use microphone because of the teacher understand well rather than writing or text." Participant SK2 replied, "I prefer microphone because it was convenient than chat box," and SK3 stated, "I prefer the microphone. It can communicate right away."

Only one participant (S1) answered that they did not use the chat box. The remaining participants answered that they did use the chat box. Participants SK1 and SK2 used the chat box when they did not have a microphone. Participant S2 used the chat box when there was a poor internet connection. Participant S3 used the chat box "for asking questions or commenting on the main room discussions." Participant C2 provided the following response.

> "I do. Some answers can be sent to teachers individually through chat box because they are not sure whether they are right or not. Because if it's wrong, it's embarrassing to say it in public. Some of the more personalized problems can also be solved by using chat Box."

Lastly, participant C3 stated, "Yes, I'm shy to talk, chat box can help me communicate with the teacher."

5. Discussion

5.1 Motivation

The university students in China had to study online because the university underwent lockdown due to COVID-19. Although Participant C1 revealed a desire to keep learning and Participant C3 stated that it was convenient to study online, there was no personal choice involved. Participant C2 revealed that the Chinese students were studying online due to COVID-19. While university students are adults and may share some likeliness with adult learners (Eyitayo, 2013), their lack of personal choice to study online could be a significant factor in their motivation while attending online classes. The students in Somalia were studying English online for personal and professional reasons. Responses by the participants in Somalia revealed personal and work-related motivations for their study. These students are pragmatic learners (Wlodkowski, 2008) and learners striving to attain personal and professional aspirations (Knowles et al., 2015; Wlodkowski, 2008). The university students in South Korea can be considered to be self-directed learners (Eyitayo, 2013). Their motivation for studying online was by choice, and they had aspirations of making improvements in their English language ability for reasons that could be considered personal and professional and could fit the profile of adult learners as specified by Knowles et al. (2015) and Wlodkowski (2008).

5.2 Internet, Equipment, and Student Comfort Level

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Having a reliable internet connection can be problematic for many students who are attending classes online (Lin & Gao, 2020; Olt, 2018; Sartika & Wahyudi, 2021). Although there were no comments aimed at the platform used for online classes, some participants commented about how the internet or wi-fi connection or equipment issues prevented them from using their cameras during classes. Four of the nine participants (S2, SK1, SK2, & SK3) reported not using their cameras due to internet or wi-fi connectivity or equipment issues.

Participants SK2 and SK3 were the only participants that revealed an equipment-related problem, which aligns with previously documented findings by Castelli and Sarvary (2021) and Sullivan et al. (2021). Participant SK3 reported using a laptop and desktop, and the laptop did not have a camera that functioned as desired. Participants S2, SK1, and SK2 reported using a phone to access online classes. Findings reported by Lehman (2020) detailed a shift in student device usage from a phone to a laptop or a desktop, which was attributed to the possible limitations in processing ability. This may explain why some of the participants in the current study who used phones reported having problems with internet or wi-fi connectivity.

All of the participants reported being comfortable communicating with the teacher. This level of comfort implies that all participants of the current study were also comfortable using the Zoom platform to attend synchronous online classes, which aligns with previous findings by Lehman (2020), showing that students find Zoom user-friendly. One participant (S3) did reveal that their level of comfort communicating with teachers online depended on the individual teacher. Therefore, teachers are responsible for creating an online classroom environment that fosters student-teacher communication. While there is a contentious ongoing debate on the effectiveness of synchronous online instruction versus in-class instruction, according to Francescucci and Rohani (2019, p. 69), teacher-led synchronous classes "may offer a learning environment that closely mimics an F2F [face-to-face] classroom format" (p. 69). Responding to the question about the participant's level of comfort when communicating with the teacher, Participant C1 replied, "Yes, why not? I don't think there's difference between online and offline classes. You can turn on or off microphone just do as your wishes." If using a user-friendly platform and situated within a welcoming environment, some students will have no problem adjusting to synchronous online instruction.

5.3 Camera Use

As revealed earlier, five participants reported using their cameras but not consistently, and four did not use their cameras. Of the four participants who did not use their cameras, one (S1) did not provide a reason. However, due to the participant's location, it could be attributed to concern with an invasion of privacy, as discussed by Finders and Muñoz (2021) and Reed (2020), or cultural practice, as discussed by Nydell (2018). Two participants (SK2 & SK3) who did not use their cameras cited equipment issues, and the remaining participant only used the camera if the teacher wanted or insisted students use their cameras. Castelli and Sarvary (2021), Haga and Rappeneker (2021), and Sullivan et al. (2021) reported how students often are reluctant to use their cameras because they may feel uncomfortable and some of the participants in the current study reported feeling uncomfortable being on camera. One participant (C1) gave a detailed response concerning camera usage and was concerned with personal appearance and being closely scrutinized by other classmates, as discussed by Castelli and Sarvary (2021), Murphy (2020), and Reed (2020). Due to the language used in the response, the researchers assumed the participant was a female, which would have entailed feelings of being gendered, as discussed by Finders and Muñoz (2021), Lännström (2020) and Li et al. (2022).

According to the participant responses, all but one were willing to use their cameras during classes. Several participants expressed willingness to use their cameras if the teacher told or asked them or if other students used their cameras. While some participants expressed willingness to use cameras, there was considerable opposition to requiring student camera usage during online synchronous classes. Student willingness to use their cameras and the notion of equality in camera use, as expressed by Participant C1, reinforces the need for educational organizations and teachers to establish expectations at the beginning of the course.

Two of the three groups began the period of online study without having an established camera usage policy, and the third group was enrolled in a course in which the organization had a camera usage rule posted on the website; however, there was no follow-through in the implementation of the policy. While some people have raised concerns or opposed mandatory camera usage for various reasons (Castelli & Sarvary, 2021; Finders & Muñoz, 2021; Lännström, 2020; Li et al., 2022; Murphy, 2020; Reed, 2020), there are times in which camera usage can be beneficial for the students. Camera usage can help students avoid feelings of isolation (Schwenck & Pryor, 2021) and enable them to feel more connected with the class (Haga & Rappeneker, 2021; Han, 2013). Lastly, camera usage can provide opportunities for

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interaction with the teacher (Seeley, 2022) and promote understanding through the visibility of non-verbal cues during student-teacher communication.

While many online teachers struggle from not being able to see the faces of students (Mills et al., 2009; Reed, 2020; Saleh & Meccawy, 2022), the researchers of the study were not hampered during periods of instruction by the lack of camera usage during class. Overall, two of the educational organizations were unprepared for online instruction and did not have a clear and transparent camera usage policy, and the remaining organization failed to provide any support for implementing a publicized camera usage policy. While the researchers did not create camera usage policies for their classes, many teachers lacking structured support from their organizations' leadership may attempt to create a camera usage policy. Without organizational support, it may be challenging for teachers to enforce camera usage policies. One of the study participants revealed that they might not obey the rule for camera usage, and eight of the nine participants of the study opposed camera usage affecting their grades or mark in the class. Overall, when a decision is made to create a camera usage policy, previous researchers have suggested that the camera usage policy should accommodate all stakeholders (Olt, 2018), be transparent, and allow for student choice (Seeley, 2022; Sullivan et al., 2021).

5.4 Microphone and Chat Box

Although five participants reported using their cameras sometimes, eight of the nine participants reported using their microphones to ask the teacher questions when attending synchronous online classes. This shows that the participants were more at ease communicating with the teacher using only their microphone instead of their camera and microphone. For example, Participant C2 stated, "… as the face to face class, when I have a question I will ask." However, according to some of the participants, they may be willing to use their microphones but refrain from using them because they are shy or do not want to interrupt the teacher, which aligns with the findings of Li et al. (2022).

Eight of the nine participants reported using the chat box to communicate with the teacher. While three participants (S2, SK2, & SK3) preferred to use their microphones to communicate with the class teacher, five (C1, C2, C3, S3, & SK1) preferred the chat box for various reasons. These reasons included not speaking English very well, being polite and not interrupting the teacher, and the ability to use private messaging so classmates were unable to see. Although the chat box function may not be a preferred mode of communication by the teacher, when students use the chat box and receive a reply from the teacher, students feel more at ease and connected to the teacher (Lehman, 2020). There are a number of benefits to using the chat box function for student-teacher communication. In addition to placing a higher cognitive load on students (Payne, 2020), chat box usage could enable teachers to boost student engagement (Finders & Muñoz, 2021; Seeley, 2022).

6. Conclusion

There were some differences and similarities between the groups in the motivation for studying English online. In general, the participants in Somalia and South Korea chose to study English online to reach their personal or professional goals, while the participants in China had no choice but to study online due to a COVID-19-caused lockdown. Although some participants had internet connectivity and equipment issues, all of them reported being comfortable communicating with their class teacher. While the three groups had different reasons for studying English online, the participants shared preferences and reasons for choosing specific modes to communicate with the teacher. Most participants were willing to use their cameras during online classes, but none used them consistently. Some of the participants were willing to use their cameras if the teachers told them or asked them to use their cameras. Almost all participants used their microphones during online classes to communicate with the teacher. Additionally, almost all participants used the chat box to communicate with the teacher.

Overall, the participants were not keen on having a mandatory camera usage policy, and one participant expressed the idea of maybe not complying. Additionally, most participants opposed camera usage affecting their grades or marks in the course. If a camera usage rule or policy was adopted, it should be established at the beginning of the course. However, there should be some flexibility with expectations expressed by the rule or policy that made concessions for students who were unable to use their cameras or had valid personal reasons for not using their cameras. The leadership of educational organizations that use synchronous online instruction should establish clear expectations that are transparent so that stakeholders are informed. Additionally, the leadership of educational organizations with a camera usage rule or policy should provide support structures for implementing the rule or policy.

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The researchers assumed the participants would answer questions based on their experience with the courses the researchers were teaching. Therefore, a limitation of the study was that participant answers included responses based on experiences studying online outside the short term of study with the researchers. The study was also limited by the number of participants within each group. Additionally, the study was limited to short-term courses or short periods of online study. Although the pool of participants was chosen for convenience by the researchers, the differences in motivation and culture between the groups may not have allowed for further in-depth analyses that could have occurred with more participants within a single group.

The researchers recommend that educational organizations using synchronous online study develop a transparent camera usage policy before starting classes using online study. Additionally, the researchers recommend that educational organizations implement the camera usage policy and provide structures of support that ensure the policy is consistent throughout the organization. The researchers recommend that synchronous online teachers in organizations with a camera usage policy strive to follow the policy to provide consistency throughout the organization. Lastly, the researchers recommend that teachers of synchronous online classes be flexible and willing to use the chat box function during their classes to increase student engagement. The researchers suggest additional research on student-teacher communication during synchronous online classes. Additionally, the researchers suggest future research investigating the contents of camera usage policies to discover standards and best practices, especially concerning the flexibility of camera use.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

1. Which device or devices did you use to access the online class? (Choose all that apply)
2. Why are you studying English online?
3. Does a weak wi-fi signal prevent you from using your webcam? Why or why not?
4. Do you feel comfortable communicating with the teacher when attending classes online?
5. If you do not use your webcam, is there something the teacher can do so you would turn on your webcam?
6. Do you use your webcam during class with the teacher? Why or why not?
7. If you do not use your webcam, what can the teacher do to encourage you to turn on your webcam?
8. Should there be a rule that students must have their webcam on?
9. Should your grade be affected if you do or do not use your webcam? Why or why not?
10. Do you ask the teacher questions using your microphone when attending online classes? Why or why not?
11. When you ask the teacher a question, do you use the microphone or chat box? Which do you prefer? Why?
12. Do you use the chat box? Why or why not?

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