Study on the Learning Experiences and Academic Performance of Chinese EFL Students: The Need for Flexible and Adaptive Educational Strategies

Dianping Liu¹, Meiling Jin¹, Yang-Hee Kim^{2*}

1 Yanbian University
2 Baekseok University

중국 EFL 학생들의 학습 경험과 학업 성취도에 대한 연구: 유연하고 적응력 있는 교육 전략의 필요성

류댄핑¹, 진미령¹, 김양희^{2*}

Abstract This study aimed to analyze the learning experiences and academic performances of Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students with consideration of changes in the educational environment in the post-COVID-19 era. A survey was conducted from March to June 2022, targeting 331 non-English major undergraduate students at a university in Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, Jilin Province, China. Relationships between academic performance and English proficiency, ethnicity, views, and satisfaction with instructional formats were collected and analyzed. The analysis revealed that students had positive views about online and blended instructional formats but that this did not significantly predict academic performance. Prior English proficiency and ethnicity significantly predicted academic performance, indicating that foundational language skills and cultural background critically influenced learning outcomes. In conclusion, this study emphasizes that educators should create inclusive and effective learning environments by adopting flexible and adaptive educational strategies and technological integration. In addition, teacher-student relationships should be strengthened to facilitate the development of sustainable educational models in the post-COVID-19 era.

요 약 본 연구는 포스트 코로나 시대의 교육 환경 변화를 고려하여 중국 EFL 학생들의 학습 경험과 학업 성취도를 분석하고자 하였다. 이를 위해 2022년 3월부터 6월까지 중국 연변조선족자치주 소재 종합대학교의 영어 비전공 학부생 331명을 대상으로 설문 조사를 실시하였다. 설문 조사를 통해 사전 영어 능력, 민족성, 수업 방식에 대한 견해 및 만족도 데이터를 수집하였고, 이를 학업 성취도와 연계하여 분석하였다. 분석 결과, 학생들이 온라인 및 혼합 수업 형식에 대해 긍정적인 견해를 가지고 있었음에도 불구하고, 이러한 만족도가 실제 학업 성과를 예측하는 데 유의미하지 않은 것으로 나타났다. 또한, 사전 영어 능력과 민족성이 학업 성취도의 주요 예측 변수로 나타나 학생들의 기초 언어 능력과 문화적 배경이 학습 결과에 중요한 영향을 미친다는 것을 시사하였다. 결론적으로, 본 연구는 교육자들이 학생들의 다양한 요구를 충족시키기 위해 탄력적이고 적응력 있는 교육 전략과 기술 통합 및 교사-학생 간 관계 강화를 통해 포용적이고 효과적인 교육 환경을 조성할 필요가 있음을 강조하며, 이는 포스트 코로나 시대의 지속 가능한 교육 모델 개발에 기여할 것으로 여겨진다.

Keywords: Learning Experiences, Academic Performance, Chinese EFL Students, Post-COVID-19 Era, Educational Strategies

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*Corresponding Author: Yang-Hee Kim(Baekseok Univ.)

email: 214julie@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has drastically transformed educational landscapes worldwide, necessitating a rapid shift from traditional face-to-face learning to online education[1]. The Chinese government's "Suspending Classes without Stopping Learning" policy[2] introduced online components, posing challenges such as limited preparation time, weakened teacher-student connections, and technical issues[1,3]. As we transition into the post-pandemic era, it is crucial to develop sustainable educational models that address these impacts and leverage lessons learned.

Given this context, two critical research questions arise. The first question examines how students' satisfaction with online and blended instructional formats affects their academic performance. While online learning can be effective, it often does not fully replace face-to-face instruction, and student satisfaction and engagement are crucial factors[1,4,5]. This study reveals that positive views on online and blended learning do not necessarily predict higher academic performance, suggesting a more complex relationship between satisfaction and outcomes.

The second question investigates the impact of students' prior English proficiency and ethnicity on their academic performance. Prior research indicates that initial language skills and cultural backgrounds significantly influence academic outcomes, highlighting the need for tailored strategies[1,4]. This study shows that higher prior English proficiency and Han Chinese ethnicity correlate with better academic performance, emphasizing the role of foundational language skills and cultural factors.

This research aims to bridge gaps by examining Chinese EFL students' learning experiences and outcomes within China's unique context. Specifically, it focuses on: (1) the influence of satisfaction with instructional formats on learning outcomes, and (2) the impact of prior English proficiency

and ethnicity on academic performance. By addressing these questions, the study provides insights into effective strategies that enhance resilience and adaptability in the post-pandemic era.

The findings underscore the need for individualized approaches considering students' prior language proficiency and cultural backgrounds. Highlighting that satisfaction with instructional formats alone does not predict academic performance, and identifying prior English proficiency and ethnicity as significant predictors, suggests reevaluating current practices. Educational strategies should prioritize enhancing English proficiency and addressing ethnic minority students' needs to create a more inclusive and effective learning environment.

2. Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated the widespread adoption of various instructional formats in higher education, including synchronous online, asynchronous online, blended learning, and flipped classrooms. Understanding the long-term implications and effectiveness of these digital learning approaches compared to traditional classroom instruction is essential. Research findings have been mixed: some studies report no significant differences in academic achievement between online and face-to-face modalities[6], while others highlight the benefits of blended and flipped classrooms on students' knowledge, skills, and engagement[6-8].

In the context of EFL education, the shift to online instruction during the pandemic has shown inconsistent results[9]. While some students prefer offline learning and find online education less effective[10], others face challenges related to engagement, distractions, and technical issues in virtual environments[11]. These variations suggest that the effectiveness of online learning

depends on contextual factors such as convenience, flexibility, technological integration, pedagogical choices, and communication[4,7,12].

In Chinese higher education, complex relationships exist between students' satisfaction, learning outcomes, and various factors[3,13], which underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of how different instructional formats impact student learning and engagement, particularly in culturally specific contexts.

Given the inevitability of future disruptions, exploring online formats as additional instructional options is crucial. The pandemic has accelerated digital learning adoption and highlighted associated challenges, making it imperative to understand the factors influencing student performance in these settings. This study addresses these gaps by investigating students' views and satisfaction with purely online and mixed instructional formats, and examining how prior English proficiency, ethnicity, and satisfaction with instructional formats predict academic performance. The findings aim to inform the development of effective and resilient educational strategies, enhancing adaptability and sustainability in educational practices for future crises.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Participants and Data Collection

This study involved 331 sophomore students majoring in non-English disciplines from a comprehensive university in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, Jilin Province, China. Data were collected during the 2022-2023 academic year through voluntary surveys. Approximately 35% of participants attended classes exclusively online due to severe pandemic conditions in their hometowns, while the remaining 65% experienced a combination of online and offline instruction, providing a varied perspective on instructional formats.

The sample was predominantly female (78%), with 258 female students and 73 male students (22%). This reflects typical gender distributions in Chinese university-level English courses. Ethnic minority students, including Korean Chinese and others, constituted 20% of the sample, significantly lower than the university-wide representation of 45%. This discrepancy may result from lower self-confidence in English proficiency, impacts of linguistic assimilation policies, and challenges inherent in the English curriculum, suggesting that Han Chinese students generally exhibit higher English competence compared to their ethnic minority peers.

To capture the nuanced experiences of a diverse cohort of Chinese EFL learners, particularly in the context of instructional format changes necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, this study included both online-only and blended learning participants. This approach facilitated a comprehensive examination of factors influencing academic performance during this period of educational disruption, thereby enhancing the generalizability of the findings and providing deeper insights into how different instructional formats impact learning outcomes.

By analyzing variables such as prior English proficiency, ethnicity, and students' views and satisfaction with instructional formats, this study sought to elucidate the complex interplay of these factors in shaping academic performance. These insights are intended to inform and optimize educational practices and policies, ensuring resilience and adaptability to diverse student needs in future crises.

3.2 Measures

Data on prior English proficiency, including college entrance exam scores, CET 4 scores, and previous year's grades, as well as information on ethnicity, views, and satisfaction with instructional formats, were collected via a self-report survey on the Chaoxing app. The survey utilized Likert

scales, open-ended questions, and multiple-choice questions to capture a comprehensive range of responses. Academic performance data were derived from final exam results, which were graded on a 100-point scale.

The use of the Chaoxing app facilitated broad and efficient data collection, enabling the capture of diverse student perspectives. This approach was crucial for correlating these factors with academic performance, thereby uncovering interactions that affect student outcomes. Such insights are invaluable for optimizing instructional methods and developing sustainable educational practices tailored to the post-pandemic era.

By examining how variables such as prior English proficiency, ethnicity, and students' views and satisfaction with instructional formats correlate with academic performance, this study sought to elucidate the complex interplay of these factors. This understanding aims to inform and refine educational practices and policies, ensuring that they are resilient and adaptable to the diverse needs of students in future crises.

3.3 Data Analysis

Participants' responses to survey questions were categorized into two groups: mostly or somewhat agree versus uncertain, somewhat disagree, or mostly disagree. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS, with Pearson correlations employed to examine relationships between various predictors and students' final performance. Multiple regression analysis was performed, using grades as the dependent variable and several predictors, including prior competence, ethnicity (Han vs. ethnic minority), instructional format (online only vs. mixed), and satisfaction with the instructional formats.

The analysis comprised two main parts. First, it explored how six factors influenced final academic performance, specifically focusing on prior English proficiency (college entrance examination scores, CET 4 scores, and last

semester's final year examination scores), ethnicity and its impact on academic outcomes, and views on and satisfaction with instructional formats. Second, it investigated students' satisfaction and engagement with purely online and mixed instructional formats to uncover the complex interplay of these factors in shaping academic performance.

This comprehensive approach provided nuanced insights into how these variables interact, thereby informing and optimizing educational practices and policies, especially during periods of disruption. By understanding these dynamics, the study aims to develop more resilient and adaptable educational strategies that can better support student success in the post-pandemic era.

4. Results & Discussion

4.1 Students' Views on and Satisfaction with the Instructional Formats

China's "Ensuring learning undisrupted when classes are disrupted" policy provided a unique opportunity to examine undergraduates' experiences with frequently changing instructional formats mid-semester. During the semester in which the survey was conducted, the instructional format at our university underwent several shifts: initially, all participants engaged in a purely synchronous online format from home; subsequently, the format transition to having major students stay offline at school while the rest continued online at home; and finally, the format adjusted to major students staying online in the dormitories while the rest remained at home. Notably, 28% of the students remained online at home throughout the entire semester, while 72% experienced transitions from online to offline and back to online again.

This dynamic and fluid instructional environment allowed for a comprehensive comparison of

student experiences and satisfaction with both purely online and mixed instructional formats. By analyzing these transitions, the study aimed to uncover how such frequent shifts impact student engagement and satisfaction, thus providing valuable insights into the effectiveness of various instructional strategies during periods of educational disruption.

Table 1 shows that 76% of students felt negatively impacted by the pandemic, 74% viewed online teaching positively, and 96% were satisfied. However, 57% preferred offline teaching, 31% favored online, and 12% saw similar effects. Students who preferred offline formats cited benefits such as increased attentiveness, better interaction with instructors and peers, and a more conducive learning environment. Conversely, proponents of online formats emphasized the convenience, flexibility, and enhanced access to resources that online classes provide. Those perceiving similar effects from both formats highlighted the importance of autonomous learning and self-control, noting that online

classes facilitated easier participation and reduced anxiety levels.

When comparing online classes taken at home versus at school, 60% of students agreed that home was a better environment, 34% disagreed, and 6% reported no difference. The primary disadvantages of online classes at home included difficulties in concentration, poor autonomous learning skills, issues with internet speed, and potential distractions. Interestingly, students attending online classes in dormitories expressed a preference for more interaction and supervision, regardless of the instructional format.

These findings underscore the diverse preferences and experiences of students with different instructional formats during the pandemic, emphasizing the need for adaptable and flexible teaching strategies that cater to varying student needs and preferences. By understanding these nuanced perspectives, educational institutions can better design and implement instructional formats that maximize student engagement and learning outcomes, even in times of disruption.

Table 1. Students Views on and Satisfaction with the Instructional Formats

Response Option	Percentage of Each Likert-scaled Response (N = 331)				
Item	Strongly disagree	Basically disagree	Uncertain	Basically agree	Strongly agree
I think the pandemic has affected my learning performance.	6	16	2	41	35
I think taking online classes at home is better than at school.	16	18	6 (the same)	29	31
3. My view on online instruction is positive.	3	23	0	35	39
I am satisfied with the effect of online instruction.	1	2	1	38	58
5. I think the effect of online teaching is better than that of offline teaching.	14	43	12 (the same)	21	10

Note. *For Items 2 & 5, when "the effect of the formats is the same" are the students' options, the results are presented as "uncertain" for convenience in the column.

4.2 The Impact of Prior English Proficiency and Ethnicity on Academic Performance

In addition to examining students' views on instructional formats, this study also investigated the impact of prior English proficiency and ethnicity on academic performance. Data analysis revealed that higher prior English proficiency and Han Chinese ethnicity were significant predictors of better academic performance. Specifically, students with higher scores in college entrance examinations, CET 4, and previous year's grades performed better academically, regardless of the instructional format.

Regression analysis indicated that prior English proficiency levels (R = .450, R² = .202) alone explained 20.2% of the variance in academic performance. When both prior English proficiency levels and ethnic backgrounds were included (R = .463, R² = .215), the model explained 21.5% of the variance. This demonstrates that while English proficiency was the strongest predictor (β = 5.285, p \langle 0.001), ethnicity also had a significant impact (β = 1.8, p = 0.025).

Further details are provided in the standardized

coefficient results. Prior English proficiency levels had a beta value of .438 (t = 8.909, p \langle 0.001) and ethnic backgrounds had a beta value of .111 (t = 2.256, p = 0.025). These findings indicate that while both factors are significant, prior English proficiency has a more pronounced effect on academic performance compared to ethnic background. The collinearity statistics (Tolerance = .989, VIF = 1.011) suggest that multicollinearity is not a concern in this model.

The regression analysis provided the following equation for predicting students' final English scores:

Students' English academic performance=61.52 6+5.285×prior English proficiency levels+1.8×et hnic backgrounds

This equation indicates that prior English proficiency is a stronger predictor of final scores (β = 0.438, p < 0.001) than ethnic background (β = 0.111, p = 0.025). The collinearity statistics showed no multicollinearity issues (tolerance close to 1, VIF = 1.011).

For every unit increase in prior English proficiency, the final English score increases by

Table 2.	Regression	Models	on	Factors	Predicting	Students'	Academic Performance
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Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error
Prior English proficiency levels	.450ª	.202	.200	7.074
Prior English proficiency levels & ethnic backgrounds	.463 ^b	.215	.210	7.030

Note. Calculated p-values considered significant at the 0.05 level (p \langle .05).

Table 3. Standardized Coefficient Results on Factors Predicted Students' Performance

26.11.0	Unstandardize	d Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	Т	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
Model 2	В	B Std. Error	Beta	1		Tolerance	VIF
1. Prior English Proficiency Levels	5.285	.593	.438	8.909	.000	.989	1.011
2. Ethnic Backgrounds	1.800	.798	.111	2.256	.025	.989	1.011

5.285 points, holding ethnic background constant. Similarly, Han Chinese students are expected to score 1.8 points higher than their ethnic minority counterparts with the same proficiency level. This highlights the disparity between ethnic groups and suggests the need for more tailored support.

These findings emphasize the importance of enhancing English proficiency and providing targeted support to ethnic minority students to improve academic performance. While instructional format preferences and satisfaction are important for engagement, they do not significantly impact final grades. Therefore, educational strategies should focus on foundational language skills and inclusivity to foster a more effective learning environment. Additionally, schools should consider implementing mentorship programs and additional resources to support minority students, ensuring equitable opportunities for academic success.

4.2.1 Results for Participants' Prior English Proficiency Levels

The dependent variable, students' final academic performance, is based on grades from the final year examination during the survey semester. Prior English competence was assessed through three examinations: the college entrance examination, the CET 4, and the previous semester's final year examination.

Table 4 shows that the college entrance examination scores are normally distributed,

with 72% scoring between 70 and 89, a 15% pass rate, and a 13% excellent rate. The students' performance in the CET 4 was unsatisfactory due to the pandemic's impact on test timing and preparation, as well as the test's emphasis on listening skills. Despite this, the participants' 52% pass rate is still much higher than the university's average, reflecting their generally good prior English competence.

The findings suggest that the college entrance examination and the previous semester's final year examination provide a more accurate representation of students' prior competence compared to the CET 4, as they are less affected by the pandemic and more closely aligned with normal English instruction. This highlights the need for a more comprehensive approach assessing students' English to proficiency by incorporating a broader range of language skills and adapting assessment methods to better reflect actual learning outcomes.

In summary, while all three factors are significantly associated with final performance, the college entrance examination and the previous semester's final year examination are more reliable indicators of students' actual prior competence compared to the CET 4. This underscores the necessity for diverse assessment strategies that better capture students' overall language abilities and academic preparedness, which are crucial for developing targeted educational interventions.

Table 4. Participants' Prior English Proficiency Levels & Final Academic Performance

Response Option	Percentage of Responses (N = 331)						
Item	Below 60	60-69	70-79	80-89	90-100		
1. My score in the college entrance examination	3%	12%	29%	43%	13%		
2. My score in CET 4	48%	31%	18%	2%	1%		
3. My score in last semester's final year exam	2%	2%	20%	50%	26%		
4. My score in this semester's final year exam	2%	5%	24%	53%	16%		

Note. Scores are on a conventional 100-point scale.

	M. Diff	0.1.0	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval		
Ethnic Backgrounds	Mean Difference	ean Difference Std. Error		Lower Bound	Upper Bound	
1 vs. 2	4.083*	1.556	.009	1.02	7.14	
1 vs. 3	2.290	1.328	.086	32	4.90	
2 vs. 1	-4.083*	1.556	.009	-7.14	-1.02	
2 vs. 3	-1.793	1.928	.353	-5.59	2.00	
3 vs. 1	-2.290	1.328	.086	-4.90	.32	
3 vs. 2	1.793	1.928	.353	-2.00	5.59	

Table 5. Multiple Comparisons on Participants' Ethnic Backgrounds & Final Academic Performance

Note.* Calculated p-values considered significant at the 0.05 level (p < .05).

4.2.2 Results for Students' Ethnic Backgrounds

The analysis of students' ethnic backgrounds revealed that Han Chinese students consistently outperformed their minority peers, with non-Korean minority students showing a slight advantage over their Korean counterparts. This observation is consistent with the overall underrepresentation of ethnic minority students in the English course compared to their broader university population.

Table 5 provides a detailed comparison of academic performance across different ethnic groups, indicating significant disparities that suggest unique challenges faced by minority students in their English language learning journey. These challenges may include weaker proficiency, lower self-confidence, and reduced classroom engagement.

The findings highlight the need for targeted interventions and support systems to address these disparities and promote linguistic equity. Educators should consider developing customized educational strategies that focus on enhancing English proficiency and boosting self-confidence among ethnic minority students. Such strategies may include additional language support programs, mentorship opportunities, and culturally responsive teaching practices that acknowledge and value the diverse backgrounds of all students.

In summary, while Han Chinese students demonstrate higher academic performance in English courses, it is imperative to understand and mitigate the specific challenges faced by ethnic minority students. By doing so, educational institutions can foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment that enables all students to succeed.

4.2.3 Results for Students' Experiences with Various Instructional Formats

Table 6 offers insights into the relationship between students' prior English proficiency and their perceptions of various instructional formats. The data suggest that prior English proficiency levels significantly influenced students' experiences and outcomes, more so than the instructional formats themselves. Students with higher levels of confidence in their English skills were more likely to adapt to and benefit from a range of whether traditional teaching methods, innovative in nature. Conversely, students who perceived themselves as having lower English proficiency tended to struggle with certain instructional formats, even if those formats were designed to be more engaging or interactive.

These findings highlight the importance of considering students' language backgrounds when designing instructional formats. Educators need to develop more inclusive and adaptive teaching strategies that can cater to the diverse needs of students, ensuring that all students, regardless of their prior proficiency, can effectively engage with and benefit from the instructional methods employed. Moreover, the study underscores the

^{*} Ethnic Backgrounds included: 1. Han Chinese 2. Korean Chinese 3. Others

Response Option	Percentage of Each Likert-scaled Response (N = 331)					
Item	Strongly disagree	Basically disagree	Uncertain	Basically agree	Strongly agree	
My English level determines my performance in offline classes.	0	3	1	36	60	
My English level determines my performance in online classes.	1	5	1	35	58	
3. My performance in offline class determines my online performance.	1	10	1	40	48	

Table 6. Students Views on Their Prior English Proficiency and Various Instructional Formats

necessity of providing additional support to students with lower English proficiency to help them navigate various instructional formats successfully. This might include targeted interventions such as supplementary language support programs, tailored feedback, and more interactive and supportive learning environments.

By understanding the nuanced relationship between prior English proficiency and instructional format experiences, educators can better design and implement instructional strategies that maximize student engagement and learning outcomes. This approach not only fosters a more inclusive learning environment but also enhances the overall effectiveness of the educational process in the post-pandemic era.

Conclusion & Implications for EFL Instruction

This study provides significant insights into the learning experiences and academic performance of Chinese EFL students in the post-COVID-19 era. The results indicate that students' satisfaction with instructional formats (online and blended learning) does not significantly predict academic performance. Instead, prior English proficiency and ethnicity are major predictors of academic success. This finding suggests that educators need to

develop educational strategies that take into account students' foundational language skills and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, there is a need for flexible and adaptive teaching methods to meet the diverse needs of learners. Integrating technology and strengthening teacher-student relationships are crucial for creating an effective learning environment. Such an approach will contribute to the development of sustainable and effective educational models in the post-COVID-19 era.

By addressing these factors, educators can better support student success in a rapidly changing educational landscape, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to thrive regardless of their background or proficiency level. This study emphasizes the importance of flexibility, inclusivity, and technological integration in EFL education, providing valuable guidance for future educational practices.

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Dianping Liu

[Regular member]



- Jul. 1999: Yanbian University,
 Foreign Linguistics and
 Contrastive Linguistics (M.A)
- Sep. 1999 ~ Present : Yanbian University, College of Foreign Languages (Professor)

⟨Research Interests⟩
EFL methodology, Intercultural communication

Meiling Jin

[Associate member]



- Sep. 2017 : Shandong University,
 English Language and
 Literature (Bachelor of Arts)
- Sep. 2022 ~ Present : Yanbian University, English Education (Postgraduate)

⟨Research Interests⟩
EFL methodology, English speaking and writing

Yang-Hee Kim

[Regular member]



- Feb. 2005: Soongsil University, Department of English Education (Master of Education in English Education)
- Feb. 2011: Soongsil University, Department of English Language and Literature (Doctor of Philosophy in Literature)
- March 2015 ~ present : Baekseok University, Department of English, School of Linguistics, Associate Professor)

(Research Interests)

English Education, Music Utilization in English, Business Management, Administration