

## Flexibility, Effectiveness, and Collaboration: English Writing Center in Zhejiang University during the Pandemic

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**[Abstract]** The COVID-19 pandemic asked English Writing Centers (EWC) in Chinese universities to make effective decisions about how to implement routine lectures, appointments, and other activities on campuses. With the quick reaction and good facilities in Chinese universities, EWCs quickly adapted themselves to face challenges. This article examines the Zhejiang University EWC as an example to show the way it adapted to the new situation. Experiences for solutions to challenges in developing the flexibility of online lectures and workshops and the effectiveness of online tutoring are presented to highlight the potential collaboration with digital technology for future EWC.

**[Keywords]** pandemic, English writing center, flexibility, effectiveness, collaboration

### Introduction

In May 2018, Qinghua University announced the start of an undergraduate course, “Writing and Communication.” Two months later, the *Writing and Communication Teaching Center, Qinghua University* was established (Li, 2020). This immediately aroused great attention from scholars, teachers, administrators, and college students in Chinese Universities. Though the center is much more focused on logical and expository writing regardless of language itself, English writing centers in Chinese universities saw the light of more support from university administration. The first English writing center in China was formally started in Xi’an International Studies University in 2006 (Song, 2018). From then on, more and more English writing centers emerged in Chinese universities. Among them, the Zhejiang University English Writing Center (EWC) has been making contributions to the combination of writing classes, writing lectures, face-to-face writing instructions, international writing symposiums, and a national contest in writing, which establishes its special status in Chinese universities with its broad vision (Fang, 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, EWCs in Chinese universities faced sudden challenges for all routine classes and regular instructions. Some EWCs paused or reduced their services for some time; however, with quick reactions and good technological support, the Zhejiang University EWC quickly adapted itself to face challenges and take effective measures to help adapt itself to the new situation. Tutors are recommended to be trained “through the online medium with with (they) will ultimately interact whether that be email, synchronous chat, listserv discussions, or reference materials” (Hewett & Powers, 2008). In this article, we present our experience for solutions to challenges in developing flexible online lectures and online workshops, and especially effective online tutoring to highlight the potential collaborative prospects of digital technology for future EWC.

### Online Lectures and Workshops: More Flexible Interactions

Lectures and workshops are often made in classrooms or halls, expecting speakers to have more eye contact and other interactive activities with audiences. People usually prefer these shortdistance lectures and workshops. In universities, we often invite good speakers and organize small or large lectures or workshops. For audiences (usually those students inside universities) who receive knowledge and enjoy speakers’ presentations on the spot, classrooms or hall lectures and workshops provide great opportunity to learn and enjoy; for organizers and service providers who spend lots of time treating visiting speakers and making preparations for lectures or workshops, that means great efforts on time and energy. During the

pandemic year, we shifted the offline writing lectures and workshops online, and to our great surprise, we found the online writing lectures and workshops were so popular that we received more and more audiences of different backgrounds; we also found more flexible interactions among speakers, organizers, and audiences.

Zhejiang University adopted Ding talk as the key technological support for the online teaching, which proved to be a great success and ensured the whole teaching work in 2020. Ding talk followed the Chinese way of routine teaching and administration, making students and faculty and staff in the university adapt themselves to online routine quickly. Thus, when an online lecture or workshop is made through Ding talk, audiences may include students of different academic backgrounds. Those outside-university audiences may also join the Ding talk by attending lectures and workshops. Usually, the maximum number of a Ding group is 1,000, and we can imagine the number and variety of attendees when a lecture or workshop is given through Ding talk. In 2020, the Zhejiang University EWC has already given approximately 20 lectures, attracting more than 4,000 attendees both inside and outside of the university, including undergraduates, graduates, teachers, company employers and employees, administrators, journal editors, etc. Three full Ding groups have been set up, and 5 smaller Ding groups with different focuses have been established.

In the traditional classroom or hall lectures, PPT presentations are often applied to show audiences the speakers' key ideas. However, due to different positions or angles in the rooms or halls, audiences may not see the PPT information clearly when the lecture is given. Speakers are asked to leave their PPT materials on the computers for the audience to copy. When Ding group lectures or workshops start, the audiences find it clear and easy to have speakers' PPT information shared on the screen with speakers' voice and an image in the upper right screen. Thus, for every audience, it is very convenient for them to see every word on the PPT presentation. Besides, a Ding group can store the video of lectures automatically. Those students who didn't attend lectures or workshops can review the video anytime (Ding group organizers can delete the video when necessary).

In this way, Ding group lectures and workshops have become very popular among students, teachers, and others. The convenience and flexibility of Ding group lectures and workshops are the main factors in attracting more audiences and making the interaction between speakers and audiences flexible. Even after lectures and workshops, Ding groups become places for students to discuss topics related to writing, sharing information about writing, and seeking for help whenever they have difficulty writing. These flexible and sustainable interactions among audiences of different backgrounds are greatly appreciated both by speakers and audiences. In 2020's lectures and workshops, the Zhejiang University EWC become much more active and popular in the Ding group.

### **Online Tutoring: More Effective Appointments**

Face-to-face tutoring provides featured and helpful instruction for students in need of English writing help. Through appointments or drop-by visits, tutees may get writing instruction effectively and properly. As to writing, especially English writing, face-to-face tutoring is so popular that it attracts students and teachers to come and discuss with tutors. Usually, tutors are peer students and experienced teachers, mostly of academic English background. English writing centers need physical spaces to hold face-to-face tutoring. Sometimes, due to distance and time arrangement, students may have to wait for some time for appointments with experienced professors who have the academic background that students need. During the pandemic, Ding groups also play important and initiative roles in appointments and tutoring, surprisingly making long-distance instructors and various appointments successful. As Laura Feibush said, "synchronous online tutoring facilitated via video-conferencing software holds a distinctive appeal: it has the potential to retain elements of a "high-touch" educational experience, the intense, one-on-one

mentorship”(2021). From the Zhejiang University EWC experience, we would like to continue to adopt this online tutoring as a regular tutoring choice for students in the future.

Long-distance instructors may refer to those instructors who cannot come to the physical instruction room for various reasons, such as pandemic quarantine or lockdown, outside trips, being in different countries with time differences, or even just because of being late to the appointment room. In our experience, Ding talk is so easy to handle those situations that no matter where you are, once you have a mobile phone, you may have the Ding instruction immediately. As we used to have instructors in the appointed room, whenever students have questions or difficulties in their special academic fields, it is difficult to invite the proper instructors to come and give face-to-face instruction. Online consultation helps us practice “creating an inviting online persona” and “keeping the student involved” in online consultations (Carpenter, 2008, pp. 3-4).

With Ding talk, it’s much easier for us to find solutions to the difficulties like these. Those experienced professors or instructors would like to have a look at the related questions through Ding talk and then offer their suggestions over the questions. In our experience, those instructors prefer online tutoring much more than on-spot instruction. This attracts more students to make appointments and benefits those in need of help. What’s more, it makes English natives staying in their own countries able to join the tutoring process. In fact, in 2020, we succeeded in connecting instructors inside or outside of campus with students, inviting instructors in the USA, UK, and Hungary to make contact with our students.

Having face-to-face instruction features in interactive communication between tutors and tutees is the most popular role for EWCs. Usually, one student may have face-to-face instruction within 40 or 45 minutes. If tutees want to have more discussion, they have to make new appointments. However, during the pandemic, we found Ding talk tutoring makes it much easier for tutee to have further appointments. That is, when a tutee finishes the first appointment online, he may leave a message for the tutor about some continued minor points of the writing. This allows the tutor and tutee to have continuous discussion or contact after the 40 or 45 minutes of face-to-face instruction. The continued minor message discussion saves the appointment time for both tutors and tutees and makes tutors and tutees know each other. In fact, in our experience, some tutees developed very good relationships with tutors. With more message contact, some tutors came to know more about the tutees and modified their regular instruction.

In other words, it changed the former one-stop communication and makes the interaction more effective. In 2020, more and more students preferred online tutoring not just because of the pandemic inconvenience, but also because of the connection with tutors online afterward. On the other hand, tutors get to know more directly the difficulties students have in English writing. It’s also convenient for tutors to form groups for tutees who have similar questions or difficulties and offer them related information. The record of messages are very vivid examples for us to see the effective interactions between them.

### **International and Multidisciplinary Collaboration**

During the pandemic, in addition to the above-mentioned online lectures, workshops, and online tutoring, the Zhejiang University EWC also experienced online-offline symposiums. At first, we thought those online parts would not be very satisfactory; however, they proved to be so interesting and successful that both organizers and participants had wonderful experiences. Because of the pandemic, participants in the international symposium had to choose online participation through Zoom. The facilities for video-conference were so wonderful and the online parts so acceptable that the communication among online and offline participants were quite wonderful. The connection made participants so happy that they even suggested that those online conferences could be regularly made as a choice for future international symposiums. Though we do hope the pandemic will disappear soon, we find it really acceptable to have online parts for the symposium just for its convenience, especially for those who cannot travel due to distance. This shows the prospect for future development. Based on 2020 experience, we see the prospect

for a higher trend in English Writing Centers in Chinese universities, i.e., more international and multidisciplinary collaboration.

As discussed before, English Writing Centers in Chinese universities may have their Chinese featured difficulties, among which are the lack of proper instructors with various academic backgrounds being one of the most concerning. Though expectations from the administration and students always make English teachers or English natives the main instructors because of their better grasp of English language, practically, we can make English Writing Centers a university platform that coordinates inside and outside the campus for people of different academic backgrounds and focuses on writing in English itself. During the pandemic, we found a very good chance for international cooperation through Zoom, Ding talk, and other platforms. More and more English natives, especially those who excel in various English writing, English writing center directors, journal editors, etc., cooperated with us because of the online convenience. Online communication makes the physical distance disappear.

In fact, “it also creates an exciting opportunity for US writing centers for international collaboration” (Song, 2018). In 2020, we had cooperation with English writing center directors, scholars, professors, and editors from the US, UK, Hungary, and others. During our international symposium, we also established cooperation with writing centers from other non-English speaking countries. Actually, we believe more and more that online writing instruction and collaboration is “not a one-time event, and it should be treated as ongoing professional development for tutors and (writing centers)” (Martinez & Olson, 2015, p.200). The fast speed and convenience of Zoom and Ding Talk bring people all over the world together quickly and easily; it is clear that, in the future, international cooperation will be furthered and stimulated with more development of the digital technology.

Multidisciplinary collaboration is a long-discussed topic in English Writing Centers in Chinese universities. Recently, a few universities either require or encourage departments and schools to open courses of academic English writing, aiming at improving students’ English writing in their own academic fields. However, though those courses helped students to know more about academic English writing, students found it not enough to further their skills for practical English writing in academic logic or language style. Besides, proper teachers for those courses are not easy to find. In this context, the English Writing Center, as a writing platform for students of different academic backgrounds, is very helpful for students in need of help. Except those common English writing genres, such as CV, personal statement, and covering letters, English writing centers can provide lectures and workshops of different academic topics in scientific writing. When peer tutors and teachers consist of those of different academic backgrounds, it will be of great interest to those tutees. In 2020, with Zoom and Ding talk, we tried the multidisciplinary collaboration, which proved to be successful.

### Conclusion

Chinese education in the year of 2020 faced great challenges and started an unprecedented, large-scale online practice. Because of Covid-19, we had an unprecedented migration to online education, isolated from face-to-face teaching for months (Wang, 2020, p.16). As Wu Yan, the director general of higher education in the Ministry of Education in China, stated, “(large-scale online teaching) succeeded in promoting the reform of teaching and studying in Chinese universities. It changed ‘teaching’ by teachers, ‘studying’ by students, ‘administration’ by universities and ‘modes’ of education” (Wu, 2021). The pandemic of 2020 brought us both challenges and prospects for the English Writing Centers. Actually, online lectures and tutoring are not newly developed because of the pandemic, but they were greatly stimulated by the pandemic challenges.

When we are sticking to the traditional face-to-face instruction, we can definitely add online lectures and tutoring into its regular activities, making it more colorful and convenient. On the other hand, international and multidisciplinary collaboration can be fastened due to those technologies. Crisis breeds

opportunity. Actually, we have been adapting to meet needs of students and teachers, and in this adaption, we found the expansion of our roles in teaching and research programs. We found EWC is much more “spacious” and the distance between our EWC and those in other countries is much “shorter” than we expected. The pandemic forces us to reconsider the running and development of EWCs, which definitely is a chance to find out new ways in the new context and make full use of the technology.

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