

“The quality of learning depends on the quality of the Wi-Fi”: The views and experiences of EAP students during emergency remote teaching

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Prior to the pandemic, English for Academic Purposes pre-sessional programmes were exclusively conducted in person, requiring students to relocate for attendance. However, since 2020, these programmes have undergone a significant shift towards online delivery, fundamentally altering students' educational experiences. This study investigates the experiences of students enrolled in an online pre-sessional programme at a British university. It presents data on the access to electronic devices and internet connectivity of 570 learners, as well as their previous encounters with online learning and perspectives on emergency remote teaching. To explore these aspects, students from two cohorts completed a questionnaire in both 2020 and 2021. The findings reveal technological challenges and varied online learning experiences, and indicate that students highly value the convenience, flexibility, learner-centredness, and time and cost-saving advantages provided by online education. However, concerns arise regarding internet access, communication, pedagogical approaches, and the development of speaking skills in the online learning environment.

Keywords: online learning, pre-sessional programmes, English for Academic Purposes, emergency remote teaching, higher education

Introduction

Changes in education during the pandemic saw institutions worldwide adopting multiple online teaching modalities and instructional platforms, and students experiencing new ways of learning, communicating, and functioning in higher education (HE). These changes also impacted the

provision of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in universities, altering students' learning experiences. The COVID-19 outbreak caused U.K. EAP providers to quickly shift their delivery online as part of their emergency response. Some had only a few days or a weekend to make the transition, while others had more time to re-plan the course design, delivery, engagement, and assessment changes (Bruce & Stakounis, 2021).

The pandemic has impacted HE students in terms of learning and assessment experiences, accessing content, resources and educators, experiencing the university campus and social life, academic engagement and interactions, and student and mental health support (Hollister et al., 2022; Khan, 2021; Neves & Hewitt, 2020). Even though research has been advancing knowledge of university student experiences during and after lockdowns, very little progress has been achieved in understanding the experiences of international students despite them being a particularly vulnerable group in such circumstances (Office for Students, 2020). This study focused on understanding the learning experiences and views of a group of international students learning EAP remotely in a UKHE pre-session programme during emergency remote teaching (ERT). It also analysed the students' access to digital devices and the internet, as well as their previous online learning experiences.

ERT in U.K. higher education

The teaching and learning that happened during this transition period (and during this research data collection) became known as emergency remote teaching. According to Hodges et al. (2020), ERT was a short-term transition to an alternate mode of instruction due to unforeseen circumstances, and such swift changes could not make full use of the benefits of online education. However, the main goal of ERT was not to establish comprehensive remote educational environments, despite the best efforts of educators and institutions at the time. Instead, the main objective was to provide immediate access to education in a way that could be quickly established and available to most teachers and students during a crisis.

ERT has had a significant impact on HE. The rapid shift from traditional in-person instruction to fully remote teaching caused a significant and sudden change in the daily lives of students and educators. The pandemic created highly uneven learning experiences for HE students. During ERT, some students had difficulty regulating their motivation and attention, managing their study time, and adapting to the new mode of delivery (Biwer et al., 2021). Research on students' experiences during this period highlighted the digital divide and socioeconomic inequalities and that these had an impact on students' learning experiences and performance (Cullinan et al., 2021; Stewart, 2021). This happened as students from

disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to face barriers in accessing online learning devices, resources, and technologies. Others struggled with issues related to mental health and well-being, isolation, and financial difficulties (Almahasees et al., 2021; Chen & Lucock, 2022; Nurunnabi et al., 2021). Additionally, students who relied on or needed to use campus resources such as libraries, computer labs, and counselling services faced further obstacles. Understanding students' previous and current learning experiences, views, and attitudes towards online learning allows teachers, course designers, and institutions to best adapt their teaching, resources, course structure and delivery for a post-pandemic remote delivery.

Online second language education

Technology has had a long relationship with language education, but online second language (L2) education has only begun to attract serious attention in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) in the last two decades (Blake, 2011). This has happened, in particular, due to the widespread use of web technologies, increased internet accessibility, and the growing variety of online learning contexts and computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools (Kessler, 2018). Previously, online and in-person teaching were commonly perceived as distinct and separate areas of instruction. However, the landscape has evolved, with various iterations of both teaching formats now existing, leading to significant overlap between the two (Kessler, 2018). For instance, web applications, virtual learning environments (VLEs), video conferencing, augmented and virtual reality tools are increasingly used in and outside the classroom for hybrid and blended practices. Although CALL research has informed institutions and tutors on the use and impact of technology on language education for at least fifty years, not many L2 tutors had experience or training in online L2 pedagogy before the pandemic (Mavridi, 2022; Moser et al., 2021; Moser & Wei, 2021), particularly those teaching EAP (Bruce & Stakounis, 2021; De Lima Guedes, 2022).

English for Academic Purposes pre-sessional programmes

Nowadays, many UKHE institutions offer pre-sessional programmes, which attract thousands of international students every year, but their ERT experiences are yet to be reported in the literature. Pre-sessional programmes (PSPs) are EAP courses run by universities where international students study the language of instruction, which is usually English, as a preparation for study in HE. PSPs focus on supporting students to develop their linguistic and academic skills on areas specific to their field of study.

Pre-sessional students typically are international students who speak English as a L2 and have applied for admission to a degree programme at

a university that uses English as its medium of instruction (EMI) but have not met the programme's language entrance criteria. These students receive a conditional offer of admission, meaning that the university has accepted them onto one of its degree programmes, subject to them meeting the English language proficiency requirement before starting the course. Students are subsequently advised to enrol in one of the university's PSPs with the objective of achieving, at a minimum, the English language proficiency level established by the corresponding department upon completion of the programme. Before the pandemic, PSPs familiarize students with the university campuses, systems and practices, and the academic literacies relevant to their academic setting.

Students are usually evaluated based on the pre-sessional assessment criteria and banding, which provides an estimated equivalent to the required IELTS score for enrolling in their degree programme. The PSPs assessment outcomes serve as evidence of their English language proficiency for the Home Office and the student's department (Pearson, 2020). PSPs can vary in length but are often short and intensive, and usually occur over the summer months in the U.K. In addition, students usually start PSPs with IELTS scores of 5.0–6.0 as they cannot join these programmes on campus with scores lower than 4.0 (CEFR B1 level), which is the lowest level set by the Home Office for student visa applications (IELTS, 2023).

Considering the increasing number of international students in the UKHE who speak English as a L2, and the widespread adoption of pre-sessional courses, it is surprising that no study has investigated these students' views and experiences of learning EAP during the ERT. Since 2020, PSPs have been offered solely or mostly online to students worldwide who have been under different COVID-19 related circumstances and had different learning experiences and levels of digital access. The lack of research has resulted in a gap in the current literature concerning their experiences, how they were impacted by the pandemic, and what we can learn from them to aid current and future online pre-sessional course designers and practitioners. This paper is part of a larger project that studied this phenomenon but specifically addresses the following research questions (RQs) in the context of ERT:

- RQ1: What electronic devices did the students use when learning EAP in an online pre-sessional programme?
- RQ2: What were the students' views of their internet quality for online education purposes?
- RQ3: What were the students online learning experiences prior to joining the online pre-sessional programme?
- RQ4: What were the students views of and experiences with learning EAP in an online pre-sessional programme?

Method

Setting

The context chosen for this study was a pre-sessional programme offered by a U.K. university that lasted sixteen, eleven, or six weeks (Figure 1). In 2020, they were delivered fully online, and in 2021, mostly online with a few groups using a blended format. Pre-pandemic, PSPs had only been delivered in person and students had to relocate to the U.K. to take them. When lockdown first hit, the content delivery, engagement, and assessments for this PSP had to be redesigned in a limited amount of time to be delivered remotely for students located worldwide. The new course design used a Flipped Learning Model (FLM) (Adams & Gingras, 2017; Bauer-Ramazani et al., 2016) and a combination of synchronous and asynchronous activities. The students were in different time zones from the U.K., and their online learning experiences and internet capabilities were unknown.

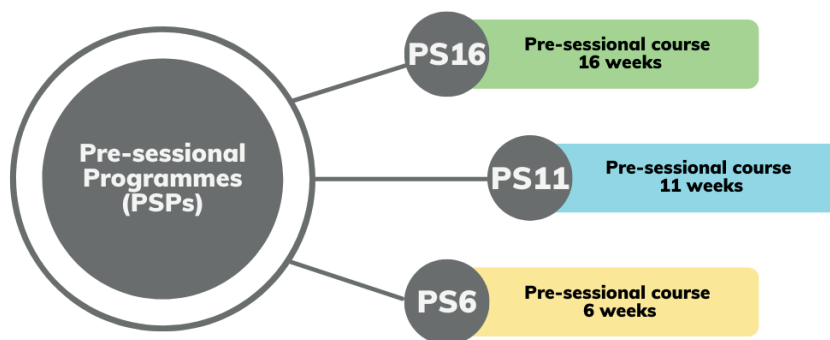


Figure 1 The pre-sessional programme

Participants

Participants consisted of EAP students ($n=570$) taking one of the online pre-sessional courses at this university either in 2020 ($n=109$) or 2021 ($n=461$). Most students identified themselves as female (70%), were between the ages of 19–25 (90%), spoke Mandarin as their first language (95%), and had completed an undergraduate degree prior to joining the PSP (86%) (see breakdown per year in Table 1).

Table 1 The students' profile

	2020	2021
Number of students		
Total number of students	1566	1971
Number of participants	109	461
Sex		
Female	79 (72%)	315 (69%)
Male	30 (28%)	141 (31%)
Age		
Under 18	–	4 (1%)
19 and 25	100 (92%)	403 (87%)
26 and 35	7 (6%)	50 (11%)
Other	2 (2%)	4 (1%)
First language		
Mandarin	104 (95%)	444 (96%)
Thai	2 (2%)	6 (1.4%)
Japanese	2 (2%)	4 (0.9%)
Other	1 (1%)	8 (1.7%)
Qualification		
Secondary school qualification	2 (2%)	23 (5%)
College diploma or certificate	9 (9%)	29 (6%)
Undergraduate degree	95 (86%)	392 (86%)
Postgraduate degree	3 (3%)	17 (3%)

Procedure and data analysis

Data for this research came from two self-administered online questionnaires and were collected in August–September 2020 and 2021 as part of a doctoral research project but only some of the questions were used for this paper. Students were invited to voluntarily complete the questionnaire that contained closed and open questions. The quantitative data were reported using descriptive statistics and the qualitative data were analysed using Thematic Analysis (TA) as per Braun & Clarke (2006; 2013). The questionnaire included demographic questions and the following open-ended questions:

- Do you have access to the internet at home? Do you have access to internet bandwidth you believe is appropriate for taking an online course (e.g., can you easily stream videos at home on your internet or participate in live lessons)?

- Which devices are you using to take the online pre-sessional course?
- Have you ever taken a course that was delivered mostly or fully online?
- How do you feel about learning academic English online?
- In your opinion, what are the advantages of learning academic English online?
- What concerns do you have with learning academic English online?

Participants were given information about the research and data confidentiality, the chance to ask questions, and asked to sign a consent form. They were provided with information on the study prior to agreeing to taking part in the data collection, including their right to withdraw. Data collected was anonymized, stored, and managed in a password protected device and in a cloud-based folder as per university's research data management policy. Research application was approved by the Ethics and Research Governance Online (No: 56658).

Results

Access to electronic devices

Students were asked what they were using as their main electronic device to take the online PSP, and results were the same in both years. Participants reported to be using their own computer (96%), sharing one (3%), or using a public computer (1%). Most used a laptop as their main learning device (97%), whilst others used an internet-enabled TV (1%), a smartphone (1%), or a desktop (1%) (Figure 2).

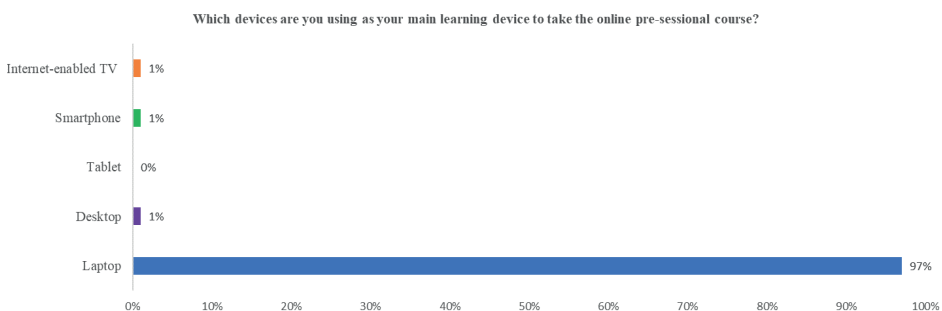


Figure 2 Electronic devices students used for online learning

Internet access

Students were also asked whether they had access to the internet at home and believed to have appropriate bandwidth to taking an online course. Most

participants had access to internet at home (98%), but a few were not always able to access it (2%) (Figure 3). In 2020, two-thirds of the students believed to have access to appropriate internet bandwidth, whilst nearly a third did not think it was always suitable. In 2021, a higher percentage of students reported their internet bandwidth to be appropriate for online courses (86%).

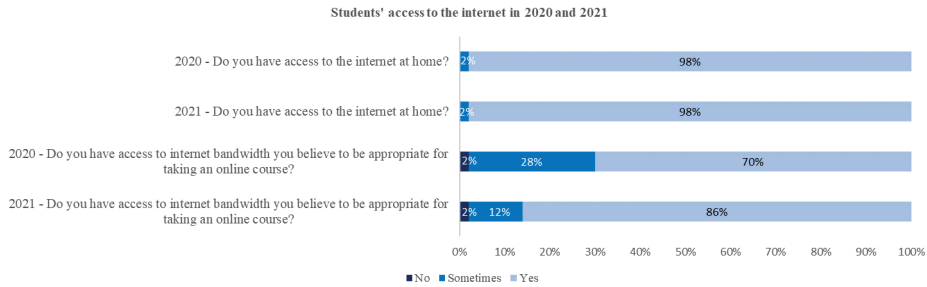


Figure 3 Students' internet access

Previous online learning experiences

Students were asked whether they had ever taken online courses and, even though the 2020 PSP took place approximately six months after the COVID-19 outbreak started in China, nearly half of the students (41%) stated to have never taken an online course (Figure 4). This was followed by 42% stating they had taken courses that were mostly delivered online, and a few students (17%) to have taken at least one fully online course prior to joining the PSP in 2020. In 2021, the number of students who had never taken an online course nearly halved (26%) compared to 2020 and was followed by 43% of the students stating they had taken one or more courses that were mostly delivered online, and a few students (31%) to have taken one or more fully online courses prior to joining the online PSP in 2021.

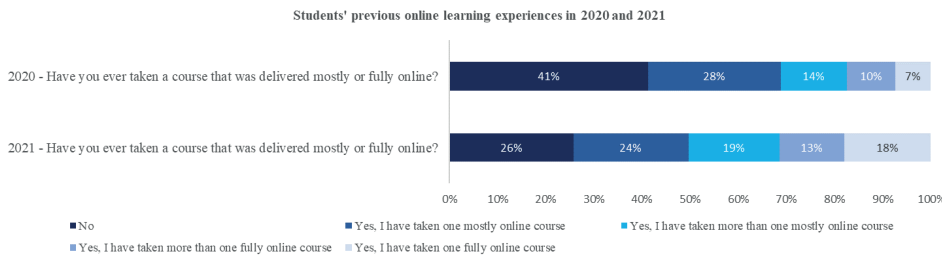


Figure 4 Students' previous online experiences

Students' online language learning experiences prior to the pre-sessional varied but most of them involved private one-to-one English language or IELTS classes, or language classes that were part of their degree at their home university.

I had [English] lessons on zoom, which is very convenient for me. The length of course is normally 60 minutes per lesson. (Student 97)

When students discussed the online classes they had as part of their university degree, most of these were asynchronous and involved them 'watching daily recorded lessons, doing homework and [handing them] in through the internet' (Student 24). The length of these experiences and activity types differed but most comments involved asynchronous learning or short synchronous sessions such as '10-minute live sessions and tutorials' (Student 14).

Most students were inexperienced with online learning before joining the PSP in 2020, in particular regarding synchronous video-based communication and learning.

[The pre-sessional is] different from the online courses I used to [take as it] includes large amount[s] of live [classes]. My online courses just [used] record[ings]. (Student 80)

Students' views of online EAP education

Students were asked about their views of online EAP education and answers were coded following a thematic approach. Themes were identified under advantages of (Table 2) and concerns with (Table 3) learning EAP online, and the most prevalent themes are discussed here. The most cited themes under advantages to online EAP education were *convenience* and *flexibility*. The convenience of studying from anywhere and flexibility of choosing when to study were highlighted as advantages by over half of the participants. This convenience and flexibility provides students with the opportunity of accessing and engaging with learning materials at any time and from any location, as long as they have an internet connection.

Online learning is more flexible than on-campus learning. I can choose my time to finish the work which makes learning less stressful. (Student 69)

Table 2 Advantages to online EAP education according to the students

Advantages	Description
Convenience	There is convenience to where students can study from.
Flexibility	There is flexibility to when students can study.
Learner-centredness	The online learning process is more learner oriented.
Time saving	Online learning is time saving for students.
Cost-effective	Online learning is cost saving for students.
Resources	Online learning provides more and richer learning resources.
Safety	It is safer to learn online.
Effectiveness	It is effective (or more effective) to learn online than in person.
Digital literacy	Online learning allows students to develop their digital skills.

Convenience means learners can study from anywhere, often at their own pace, allowing them to take breaks when needed and avoid feeling overwhelmed; whilst flexibility allows learners to choose how and when they want to learn. This location flexibility allowed students to familiarize themselves with a new educational system without having to move to the U.K. and deal with all the stressors that come with moving abroad for the first time, such as finding accommodation, learning to shop and get around in a new city, and making new friends.

I don't have to commute [and] can spend much more time [doing] what I want to do. (Student 03)

Over a quarter of the participants responded that remote education allows for a more *learner-centred* approach to learning. The concept of student-centred education emphasizes the importance of the students' role in creating knowledge within the classroom. In this approach, teachers serve as guides and supporters to the students, they respond to students' work, and encourage them to explore different perspectives and approaches (Almahasees et al., 2021). The benefits mentioned by the participants included the ability to choose a study time that works best for them, working at their own pace, pausing and replaying recordings, looking up information (e.g., vocabulary meaning), and having more one-to-one targeted time with tutors.

Students can replay the video again and again until they understand the content. (Student 09)

Some students reported feeling more comfortable, less anxious, and better prepared to engage in the target language (TL) in class due to the online pre-sessional being less face-threatening. This FLM used allowed students

to control the pace of their learning and explore a range of resources before class.

Students can learn at their own space, and they can control [the learning pace] themselves on the course. So, the time and place will be more flexible [which can] improve the efficiency of learning. Students can seek out a great number of resources available for the courses from the internet [and VLE]. Then we can study multiple aspects of knowledge about the course content. (Student 96)

Students found convenient and helpful that they could pace themselves when engaging with the VLE learning material, such as reading articles, listening to the lectures, or writing in discussion boards. They also appreciated being able to prepare in advance for the synchronous interactive lessons they had with tutors and peers.

It's very convenient to review course videos anytime and anywhere. I can control my time better. (Student 107)

One-tenth of the participants expressed that learning EAP online can be *time-saving* and *cost-effective*. Specifically, the added flexibility afforded by online learning allowed students to more effectively allocate their time, as they were not overloaded by logistical considerations, such as travel time or traffic congestion.

[Learning online allows me to] save money on travel to university and the time that spending on the journey [commuting] to campus. (Student 96)

When talking about finances, only one student talked about money-saving from the perspective of fees. Most mentioned they could 'learn for a lower cost' (Student 58) because they did not have to relocate, rent accommodation, and commute to campus. Many mentioned that they could live with family in their home country or choose somewhere cheaper to live whilst studying remotely instead of spending more by living in the U.K.

[Learning online] save[s] a lot of time and money [as] we don't need to spend money travel[ling] to the U.K. and rent[ing] accommodation. (Student 110)

Some of the less commonly reported benefits of online learning include the ability to access a wider range of resources for learning and to develop digital skills. Additionally, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students felt safer learning online, and some perceived online learning as more effective than traditional in-person learning.

Regarding students' concerns, the most cited themes were technology, online communication, online learning effectiveness, and the development of spoken skills (Table 3). Over a third of the participants mentioned

technology as their main apprehension when learning online in particular regarding internet bandwidth. Some students reported not to have access to internet bandwidth they felt was fast enough for engaging in synchronous classes or watching recordings – ‘Internet speed is really a big problem’ (Student 44); ‘The quality of learning depends on the quality of [the] Wi-Fi’ (Student 80).

Table 3 Concerns students had regarding online EAP education

Concerns	Description
Technology	There are problems with the technologies used in online learning.
Communication	Students are not able to easily interact/communicate with others.
Effectiveness	Online learning is not as effective as in-person learning.
Oral skills	There is less opportunity to develop spoken skills.
Environment	There is a preference for physically being in the U.K.
Distraction	Student feels they are more easily distracted when learning online.
Time difference	Time difference may negatively affect communication/ learning.
Socialization	Online learning is not as social as in-person learning.
Health	There are concerns over health issues when learning online.
Time management	Managing time and workload can be more challenging online.

Most students were in China and often had to use a virtual private network (VPN) to access the university resources, which they reported slowed their internet connection down. Some also reported internet issues when having to use their camera in the synchronous sessions, recording themselves, and watching videos on Blackboard.

One-fourth of the participants expressed concerns about *communication* when learning EAP online, both in terms of quality and quantity. They often compared online interactions unfavourably to in-person communication, noting that they did not feel as comfortable communicating online. Students reported infrequent communication with tutors and peers, and used terms such as ‘difficult’, ‘not easy’, or ‘delayed’ when describing these.

I prefer face-to-face communication than e-mail, so it is hard for me to exchange idea[s] with my tutor. (Student 69)

When students compared communicating with tutors and peers online and in person, there was a preference for the latter mode because online communication was seen as 'inefficient'.

Face-to-face is absolutely a better choice than learning online ... if we have questions, we can only communicate with tutor online which is an inefficient way. (Student 93)

Another reason why some students showed a preference for in-person communication was due to the limitations of online interactions in conveying facial expressions and body language, which negatively impacted their ability to communicate effectively with their tutors.

I cannot talk with tutors face-to-face, which [makes it] difficult to observe facial expressions or gestures. (Student 97)

Over a tenth of the participants expressed scepticism regarding the level of *effectiveness* of learning academic English online. Although a few students were uncertain about the effectiveness of learning EAP online, most of them only made comparisons with in-person learning without providing any further explanation, as exemplified below.

I [am] concern[ed] the effects of learning academic English would not as well as face-to-face academic English learning. (Student 81)

I am concerned that the efficiency and effectiveness of learning are not as good as face-to-face courses. (Student 16)

In terms of the development of the four linguistic skills, only speaking and writing were mentioned as skills students were concerned about when learning online, with the former, *oral skills*, mentioned by one-tenth of the students but the latter only by one student.

Little chance to speak in the class, no chance to give presentation to my classmates, speaking ability is still poor. (Student 77)

Most of these reports referred to learning online giving them less opportunities to use English. This could have been down to the reduced number of contact hours in the online PSP, students' expectations of speaking practice, or not being in the U.K. and their expectations of being immersed in the TL.

Less opportunities to practise my spoken English. (Student 75)

One of the benefits of taking a pre-sessional course is the opportunity to physically be in the country, city, and often the university where students will be pursuing their degrees. This allows students to familiarize themselves with the local environment and culture, and to practise the language that they will be using to communicate both on campus and beyond during

their time as students in the U.K. Therefore, it is not surprising that some students expressed concerns or disappointment related to how much they got to speak English and the *environment* they were not in.

We don't have opportunity to feel the native speaker environment in [the] local place, which [is] not good for our listening and speaking. (Student 25)

Some students reported feeling that they had less opportunities to develop their speaking skills in the TL due to not being in the U.K., and that studying from home does not create the 'language environment' (Student 86) they were keen to experience.

I am worried about the lack of offline language environment. Maybe living in the local area will adapt to the English environment more quickly. (Student 31)

Some of the less frequently reported concerns related to studying online include distractions, time zone differences, lack of socialization, health issues caused by extended screen time, and difficulties in time management.

Discussion

Nearly all participants in the online PSP used laptops for studying, while a few relied on smartphones as their primary learning device. For these students, engagement posed a greater challenge as the smartphone interface hindered their ability to fully participate online, especially during synchronous classes. Mobile learning can also lead to increased distractions and is limited by device technical constraints, such as small keyboards and limited memory size. Additionally, it may restrict students' access to digital interaction capabilities, such as seeing each other on screen or collaborating on written tasks (Alhumaid, 2019; Criollo-C et al., 2021; Kaliisa et al., 2019).

China is a global leader in ed-tech and the use of mobile devices is more common than laptops and desktops (Statista, 2020; Varghese, 2021). This data, however, show a higher percentage of students using laptops rather than smartphones for online learning than previous studies and projections in China (Statista, 2020; Yan et al., 2021). This might be attributed to a change in practices among Chinese students in HE or the requirement imposed on them to have access to a PC or laptop for participating in the online pre-sessional. Another reason could be the significant investment made by middle-class Chinese families in their children's education, which includes using a range of electronic devices and digital technologies that can enhance their children's learning (Feijóo et al., 2021; Lin, 2019).

Participants had more experience with learning online in 2021 but one-fourth of them were still new to it despite data collection taking place

a year and a half after the beginning of the pandemic. Additionally, almost all students were new to the online teaching format used in the PSP, which means that most went through the in-person to remote synchronous and asynchronous learning transition in this programme. Little was known about the in-person to online learning transition and how students experienced it before ERT (Brown et al., 2015; Owens et al., 2009). There are complexities when trying to understand the online experience of these students as they have different motivations for having chosen remote learning (Brown et al., 2015). Understanding students' online learning experiences can also assist EAP practitioners in supporting them to feel part of a community rather than isolated, fostering confident use of learning technologies, and designing appropriate and diverse learning experiences that ensure student success and satisfaction.

During ERT, students did not have a choice to make as the only option given to them was remote delivery. They had to go through this experience for the first time at the same time as most of their tutors, whilst also familiarizing themselves with a different educational system. Additionally, students had to go through this transition in a L2, while attending an intensive and high-stakes course taught by instructors located thousands of miles away from them. Nonetheless, despite having the option to apply for in-person learning in 2022, most students chose online and only 17% enrolled in the on-campus PSP (Table 4). These numbers highlight the significance of comprehending students' remote EAP learning experiences as enrolment in online PSPs is likely to remain robust.

Table 4 Number of pre-sessional students online vs. in-person

	2020	2021	2022
Total	1566	1971	2474
Online	1566	1832	2017
In person	–	139	430

Data show that students value the convenience and flexibility afforded by online learning, which can help reduce stress and increase motivation during the EAP learning experience. Undertaking remote learning during the pre-sessional period before commencing an in-person degree programme may be beneficial for international students as it can enhance their confidence in studying in a different country and educational system. Students engaging in remote PSPs can gain knowledge about university systems, platforms, and approaches, as well as make social connections with peers who are also enrolled in the same degree programme before moving abroad. HE students go through different phases of shock and adjustment when they transition to a new learning environment, such as

the cultural, language, academic, social, emotional, and digital shock and adjustment phases (Alsuhaibani, 2022; Risquez et al., 2007), and these can affect their well-being, learning experience, and identity. Consequently, this familiarity with the academic environment and social connections forged with like-minded peers online can mitigate the shock, stress, and anxiety that often accompany students' transition to a new and foreign learning environment.

Students also believed the online PSP to be more student-centred than traditional pre-sessionals. E-learning design is typically centred on the learner, and the combination of a constructivist approach to learning and advancements in computer technology has renewed enthusiasm for student-centred learning (Land & Hannafin, 2000). ERT has brought this student-centred learning interest to the forefront, as it has encouraged educators to re-evaluate their teaching methods and consider the online learning environment from a student-centred perspective by observing how students interact in and with it (Riggs, 2020). Consequently, students perceived the online learning experience as being more student-focused, as it offers greater flexibility in terms of learning pace and choices.

Quantitative findings showed that despite nearly all students having access to e-learning suitable devices, a significant number of them did not have access to internet bandwidth that was appropriate to learn online. Students reported similar issues in the qualitative data. This can have a negative impact on their use of time, motivation, learning, and consequently perceptions of remote learning, the online programme, and even other areas of the university.

Another prevalent theme was communication. Most comments made regarding communication in online EAP learning were made in comparison to in-person interactions, as many students were taking the PSP as their first online course outside their home country. It is plausible that the students had certain expectations regarding the frequency and mode of communication with tutors based on their previous educational experiences. Furthermore, the mode of communication in online learning is different from that of in-person learning. Multimodal and written communication are more heavily relied upon, while spoken language is less frequently used. This is exemplified by students using the Teams chat for questions rather than posing them orally at the end of a lesson. Another change is the use of pictograms, such as emoticons, as a replacement of paralinguistic elements of speech, which can be problematic as there are cultural differences in their use and meaning is not always the same across different cultures (Wang, 2004).

Furthermore, a student expressed concerns that after getting used to communicating online, she worries that when having to 'communicate with others in English offline, [she] will feel nervous and dare not speak' (Student

84). Although learning EAP online has enabled her to feel more comfortable using the L2, she may not feel prepared to use the language in person. Previous research demonstrated that online communication can have an impact on in-person interactions, including feelings of social connection, the perceived quality of the interaction, and social interaction patterns and rituals at local and global levels (Lieberman & Schroeder, 2020). However, there is no evidence to suggest that a short course such as a PSP can have such impact on one's communicative interactions.

Finally, participants expressed concerns regarding the development of their speaking skills in an online environment that did not involve them living in the U.K. However, these comments were similar to what many international students have reported while studying in person. Students often have the expectation that they will use English both on and off campus in the U.K., which would help them to develop their spoken fluency, accuracy, and confidence. However, anecdotal evidence from previous in-person PSPs indicates that many students primarily use their L1 outside of the classroom, since many of their classmates and flatmates speak the same L1, particularly the Chinese students. Another reason for this is the role social-cultural differences play in these students meeting and engaging with home or other international students (Jiang & Altinyelken, 2022; Spencer-Oatey et al., 2017).

International students do have a variety of opportunities to use English when in an anglophone country, including in transactional, social, casual, and academic encounters (Copland & Garton, 2011). However, these opportunities are often perceived as challenging and stressful as students are required to engage in complex communication from the outset of their arrival into the country. A previous study that looked at the psychological and sociocultural adjustments of Chinese students to British culture found that their social interactions with non-Chinese individuals were consistently identified as problematic, and this, as well as difficulties in adjustment to daily life, were highly correlated with psychological stress (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006).

Conclusions

Results revealed that despite almost all students having access to electronic devices, a significant percentage of them lacked appropriate internet bandwidth for online learning and had little to no experience as online learners. Additionally, even though the 2020 pre-session programme took place six months after the COVID-19 outbreak began, nearly half of the students had never taken an online course. While this number decreased in 2021, it remained significant. Data also indicated that most of the students' previous online experiences were asynchronous or one-to-one, suggesting that online PSPs need to prepare students for the synchronous-asynchronous

formats they use as these require active student learning, engagement, and autonomy.

Many of the comments made by students were in comparison to their in-person interactions and previous learning experiences. Consequently, there were expectations regarding the workings of online learning, what was expected of students, and the frequency and mode of interactions with tutors and peers. Listening to the voices of pre-sessional students and understanding their internet capabilities, access to appropriate digital devices, previous online learning experiences, and views on online language learning is essential to collect information about the teaching-learning process and to design better online EAP experiences for future students. Understanding and managing their expectations of the online class requirements early on in the course are key, and failing to determine these expectations may lead to student anxiety, confusion, and discontent (Luck & Rossi, 2015).

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Biography

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