Reflections on the Effectiveness of Online Writing Classes

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Abstract

Online learning has become widespread in many countries around the world, but before the Covid-19 pandemic, most Japanese universities did not offer fully online classes. When it was decided to move classes online and engage in emergency remote teaching (ERT) early in the pandemic, many educators worried that the quality of English language classes would suffer. English writing classes can easily transition to the online format, though. In fact, some second and third year writing class students at Bunkyo Gakuin University indicated that they enjoyed their online English writing classes during the first year of ERT because they had more time to complete assignments, felt they could communicate easily with their instructor, receive comprehensible feedback, and could make connections with classmates.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic caused a sudden and major shift in the delivery of courses at Japanese universities beginning in the 2020 academic year. Previously, course content was primarily delivered in classrooms. Many universities had online systems such as Moodle, Manaba, Google, or TEAMS, but they tended to be underused for delivering course content. The reluctance to use online platforms in tertiary education does not mean that distance learning was new to Japan though. In fact, Japan has a long history with distance learning, but until the 2020 academic year, it was not widespread. For example, a few prominent Japanese universities began offering "dual mode" learning during the Meiji era (1856-1912). In this type of education, lecture transcripts were provided to off-campus students by mail (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2012).

More recently, there has been a three-layer model of distance education in Japan. According to Miyazoe and Anderson (2012), the most formal layer was distance education made official under the School Education Law and the Distance Education Law, which encompassed junior high schools, high schools, colleges, and universities. The next layer, called social distance education, was approved by the Japan Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) in 1949, and includes distance learning in which schools and private companies provide education

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for skills considered useful for job training. The final layer of distance learning in Japan is related to courses developed outside of the school system. Distance learning for formal education has typically been offered for students at the junior high or high school level, who for various reasons, could not study in person at school (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2012) and before the Covid pandemic very few Japanese universities were authorized to include fully distance learning programs. University level courses offered solely online were almost non-existent, and the programs that did exist were typically asynchronous or "on demand" style courses where students accessed pre-recorded lectures (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2012).

Online Learning Outside Japan

Education has benefited from the ever-improving online technology with universities around the world offering online courses, degree programs, and other educational services including programs for language learners. For language learners, computer assisted language learning (CALL) has emerged as an ever-changing trend. CALL refers to the process in which learners use computers or computer-related technology to improve their language ability (Beatty, 2013). The technology used in CALL can be designed specifically for education or it can be technology that has been adapted for educational uses (Beatty, 2013). When CALL has been incorporated into Japanese university language courses, it has typically taken the form of blended learning, which combines traditional face-to-face classroom instruction with technological elements. These elements include word processing, computer or mobile applications, online components of the textbooks, and using computer labs for various kinds of class activities.

Benefits of online learning

Online learning has been shown to be effective from a variety of standpoints. According to Flores (2011), traditional online learning gives learners access to a broader population as it allows them to learn with students and instructors in other countries or contexts. Exposure to a wider range of classmates and instructors broadens learners' worldviews by giving them access to different instructional and learning styles. The pace of online learning can also be beneficial for many students. Stodel, Thompson, and MacDonald (2006) found that students they surveyed in online classes felt there was more time to read, process, and reflect on information presented in text discussions in an online course before making their own contributions. Another benefit is that with instructional materials, assignments, and other information stored online, students can review information any time. They are also held more accountable for understanding due dates, teacher expectations, and other important course information since everything related to the course is stored in the online platform (Howard, 2009). More time to process input in the online format helps students, especially those studying in a second or foreign language, express their thoughts and gives shy students more confidence to respond than in traditional classroom

situations where they must respond more quickly to questions or discussions (Flores, 2011).

These positive elements of online learning are key for language learners. It takes time to absorb and process input before preparing output when studying a new language. As a result, in a live, face-to-face environment, students might not catch all the information presented by the teacher or feel the pace of the class is too fast to actively participate. On the other hand, with materials stored in a learning management system (LMS) for an online course, students can work at their own pace and review or ask questions about things that are unclear to them. Students receive more comprehensible input, which is a key element to language learning as well since they can read, listen, and respond at a pace that is suitable for them and at a language level that suits their ability. Although students do not meet face-to-face in a purely online class, group members can exchange ideas and receive feedback in the LMS through bulletin boards, text chat, email, or video chat (Koh & Hill, 2009). They can also access files and upload their coursework to the LMS, creating a well-rounded learning environment when courses are carefully planned and thoughtfully implemented.

Some might argue that there is a lack of effective communication and engagement among instructors and learners in an online language course. Yet, a well designed course can provide students with more opportunities to collaborate. Blakelock and Smith (2006) found that students felt they had more in-depth conversations with their peers in online conversations than in face-to-face situations because it was easier to keep the conversation on-topic. Activities such as blogs, discussion boards, peer-reviewing, and group projects that promote autonomy and learner-to-learner interaction help build a sense of community in the online environment as well (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Learner-to-instructor interaction is another key element for effective language learning. When instructors create an interactive environment where students can contact them with questions, receive feedback on coursework, or get information about grades, students feel engaged. Compared to a traditional learning environment, both students and instructors can build stronger rapport online because their interaction is often personalized.

CALL in Writing Classes

Before the pandemic, the author of this paper found that creating hybrid writing classes helped students become more interested in learning writing (Gough, 2007). For many years, she combined face-to-face instruction with class pages on an LMS called the Colorado State University *Writing Studio* where she promoted peer-interaction through discussion forms, reading and reviewing classmates' writing, and webquests. She also managed assignments, grades, and learning materials on the platform. Students liked that everything they needed for their writing class could be found in the class pages and felt it easy to engage with others who they might not feel comfortable working with inside a classroom due to differences in language ability, age, or

gender. They also found the resources archived in the *Writing Studio* helpful to learn about the kinds of writing that might be necessary in their future, and enjoyed participating in writing blogs with students outside of Japan who they found connections with through common interests and issues with learning writing (Gough, 2007). Similarly, Ambrose and Palpanthan (2017) found that a majority of students in their university level English writing class in Malaysia enjoyed using online documents, spent more time studying English when engaging in online learning, would like to use online documents more, and wanted to spend more time using the computer to learn English.

Before the pandemic the author's hybrid classes generally began with a session held in the computer lab where she would teach the students how to use the technology. The class would also meet in a classroom where the author gave face-to-face instruction on principles or English writing and could troubleshoot problems students had in the online learning environment. Being able to meet face-to-face helped students feel more comfortable using technology to learn English because the author could personally help them in the computer lab if needed.

With fully online classes before the pandemic, students usually chose to take their classes in the online format. This might have colored their reactions to the courses since they may have already been familiar with using technology. The convenience of studying online might also have played a role in their motivation. With the Covid-19 pandemic, students and teachers were suddenly forced to hold classes online and instructors had very little time to plan and prepare for their online courses, which proved quite stressful. Also, many instructors had little or no previous training in online teaching and often most of their teaching materials and assignments were in the form of paper documents. Hence, the teaching situation became known as emergency remote teaching (ERT) rather than online teaching/learning.

Setting up ERT Witting Classes at Bunkyo Gakuin University

When Bunkyo Gakuin University set up the Microsoft TEAMS system in instructor Microsoft Outlook accounts in mid-March 2020, it became clear that spring semester classes would be held at least partially online. Though not initially designed for educational purposes, Microsoft TEAMS proved a good platform for writing classes since it came with the entire Office suite of programs such as Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and OneNote as well as features such as Microsoft Forms, live video, Class Notebook, Assignments, text chat, and many other useful applications. Instructors could use TEAMS to deliver course content in a variety of manners including asynchronous "on demand," synchronous "live," or hybrid styles. The author has been interested in revisiting her research on writing instruction, including the use of online learning platforms for writing classes since coming to work at Bunkyo Gakuin University in 2019. Thus, she decided this would be an opportune time to investigate her students' perceptions of completely

online writing classes compared to typical face-to-face writing classes taught before the pandemic.

The author's writing classes in 2020 were designed so that students could participate in a semi-live fashion during the designated class times. The writing class TEAMS were designed with several types of channels that were accessible to all students in the class TEAM. There were personal channels for each student, rotating group channels, show and tell channels, homework channels, and weekly channels with class plans, videos, and other information needed to complete the class activities. Handouts, supplementary videos, and other class supplements that students could access whenever they wished were archived in the General channel of each class.

The instructor and students met in a TEAMS video chat in the weekly channel where the day's activities and homework were discussed. During the video time, writing techniques, textbook activities, and other class information were explained and students could ask questions. The video chats were recorded so students could review them any time if they wanted to. Students then went to their group channels to complete textbook activities together in video chat or participated in peer-to-peer activities in a semi-live manner via reading partners' brainstorming, outlines, or essays then answering questions using text chat that guided them in giving feedback to their partners. With the writing assignments uploaded to the personal channels, students could easily access their own or their partners' work at any time. They could do the peer-to-peer feedback activities at their own pace as long as the activities were completed by the due date. The semi-live nature of the activities allowed students to take their time to read and thoughtfully respond to their partners or ask questions via text chat about things they did not understand. For students who had unstable Internet connections, these semi-live activities allowed them to participate in class activities more easily than in live video chats that take up more bandwidth.

One concern the author had with ERT was that students would not have the opportunity to get to know their classmates. Activities such as show and tell and peer-reviewing were designed to provide a social outlet, promote a sense of community, and motivate students. For show and tell, the students uploaded photos and wrote explanations or opinions of them. Then they read and responded to classmates' show and tell topics. Show and tell gave the students a creative outlet and developed their personal writing styles as they chose topics of interest and explained their photos in their own unique ways. Peer-reviewing activities took place at each stage of the writing process. Students would check group members brainstorming, outlines, or essay drafts and then answer questions directed at analyzing and giving advice about the contents. The show and tell and peer-reviewing activities helped students create connections with each other in the online environment through reading and responding to each other's work.

Student Feedback About the ERT Writing Classes

Lower-intermediate level students (n =36) in the author's second and third grade writing

classes were surveyed at the end of the first year of ERT using online surveys. Second and third grade students were chosen because the author wanted to learn about their perceptions of ERT writing classes compared to face-to-face writing classes taken the previous year. The survey, which was written in English and Japanese to aid comprehension, consisted of three sections with seventeen items in total. Two sections had rank-choice questions and the third was an open-ended text question where students could explain their opinion about the online writing classes in English or Japanese. The students were asked to rate their interaction with their classmates and instructor, ability to understand class content, and overall improvement in writing skills through taking the ERT writing class. They were also asked to compare their experience in face-to-face writing class the previous year with the ERT writing class. Finally, the students were asked whether they would be interested in taking an online writing class in the future if given the choice to do so.

Results and Discussion

Overall, the students had a positive experience in the online writing class. Eighty-three percent of the students found the online platform easy to use. More importantly, slightly more than half of the students (52.8%) said they liked the online writing class better than the face-to-face writing class they had taken the previous year and an overwhelming majority (75%) said they would choose to take an online writing class in the future if the option was made available. Furthermore, 66.7% of the students felt the teacher's advice in the online writing class was easier to understand than when studying in a face-to-face class; 69.5% felt they knew what they should do during class time better than in the face-to-face class; and 73.3% felt more comfortable asking the teacher questions in the online platform.

The students' responses to the rank-choice items were supported by their responses to the open-ended question at the end of the survey. Many students indicated that since the explanations of class activities, advice, and other forms of feedback were written, the class was easy to understand. Written responses from the students included, "All the homework was written, and it was easier to understand than other online classes," "Her written coments and advices were very easy to understand," or "I thought I was able to keep up with the lessons because I could look up words that I didn't understand in the online lessons. I also had group discussions and thought that online lessons were better than face-to-face lessons" (translated from Japanese). These and other similar comments from the students indicate that they perceived the slower pace and the written nature of the activities in the online platform enabled them to engage with the class and understand the contents more fully than in previous face-to-face writing classes. Since most of the activities were completed in text chat or Word documents, students engaged in more reading and writing activities than in a face-to-face writing class. Reading classmates' and the instructor's writing gave the students vast amounts of input, which is vital for successful language learning.

Reading and responding to classmates' writing also motivates students because they can compare their English level to their classmates', thereby boosting confidence in their own language ability (Gough, 2014).

Because the author did not teach these same students in face-to-face writing classes the previous year, it is difficult to measure year-on-year improvement in the students' writing skills. Students tended to make similar sentence-level mistakes as they would in a face-to-face writing class. They also initially had similar issues understanding basic concepts of essay writing such as thesis sentences or organizational styles as in previous years. Over time, it seemed that the students needed less focused instruction than in her previous writing classes though. The students also showed more confidence in the various stages of the writing process as the year progressed and asked focused questions in text chats when they needed help. Perhaps this is due to the fact that they could always return to explanations, comments, advice, and drafts to review what they had learned. Also, when writing questions, students had more time to process, check words in their dictionaries, and check the meaning of what they are asking. Thus, the teacher was able to understand specifically what the students needed help with and respond more accurately than when speaking to them in the classroom.

Conclusion

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit in early spring 2020, Japanese universities were suddenly faced with the need to provide a safe learning environment for students by shifting class delivery to an online environment. For many instructors and students, this method of teaching and learning proved stressful and cumbersome at the beginning due to a lack of familiarity with using technology for educational purposes, Internet issues, and short notice to plan and transition class materials and activities to the online environment. However, once students and teachers settled into ERT, several benefits emerged for students, including a chance to develop their computer skills and being able to learn at a pace suitable for their English level. Though only two writing classes are described in this paper, it is evident that well-planned online writing classes can have several benefits for students. The ability to engage more deeply in reading and writing activities proved motivating to students and with more time to process input and then plan their output, students could engage more deeply with class material. Of course, each teacher at Bunkyo Gakuin University organized their English writing classes according to their own preferences, and perhaps found differing degrees of success when trying to create engaging lessons for their students. Nonetheless, the online environment seems quite useful for developing confidence in writing and overall writing skills when the class is well designed and materials and activities are carefully modified for the online environment. We do not know what the future holds related to the current pandemic or when we will be able to go back to regular face-to-face classes, but continuing

to provide support and activities through using an LMS such as Microsoft TEAMS would be beneficial to motivate students, promote autonomy in writing classes, and help build confidence in both their English ability and writing skills.

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