

# Part-time English Teachers' Stress and Resilience Early in the Covid-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

In early 2020, the Covid pandemic caused dramatic changes throughout society and in Japanese institutions of higher education. This included universities being forced to provide lessons online as a means to mitigate the spread of Covid infections. Unfortunately, many universities throughout Japan were not prepared for the sudden move to emergency remote teaching (ERT). Instructors who work part-time at the university level were particularly affected because they often work at more than one institution, receive less support from their institutions than full-time instructors, and had not had previous training or experience teaching online. This paper reports on a survey of part-time university instructors throughout Japan that was conducted at the start of the 2020 academic year. The data shows the unpreparedness of instructors and institutions for ERT and also the need to develop better methods of support for part-time language instructors.

## Introduction

With 795 colleges and universities and an enrollment of 2.92 million students in 2021, Japan has a robust system of higher education (Statista.com, 2022). In fact, currently over half of young Japanese people enter a college or university after graduating from high school (Wadden & Hale, 2019). The Japanese government has long desired to internationalize for economic reasons and develop globally minded citizens. More recently, the government also aims to maintain the country's position in the international marketplace and stimulate the stagnant local economy (Taguchi, 2014; MEXT, 2003). As a result, most colleges and universities require students to study English in at least the first year, and according to Butler (2019), the majority of these English courses are taught by part-time teachers.

The number of Japanese universities and the percentage of students enrolling in them have increased in the past twenty years (Wadden & Hale, 2019), yet non-regular positions, including part-time workers have been increasing across the higher education sector (Rolloff-Rothman, 2020). The reason the number of part-time instructors has increased at universities is most-likely related

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to funding cuts and lower enrollment at individual institutions due to the shrinking population (Butler, 2019). Unfortunately, the exact number of university instructors working solely part-time is difficult to determine though. Japanese universities self-report the number of full-time and part-time instructors to the government. Instructors who hold full-time contracts also often work part-time at one or more institutions as a means to supplement their income (Macyowsky, 2017). Thus, they are counted more than one time, and included in the data both as full-time and part-time university staff. Similarly, part-time instructors often work at multiple universities, and would also be counted multiple times (Macyowsky, 2017).

### **Who are Part-time Teachers**

Three common terms are used for referring to part-time university instructors: lecturer, adjunct professor, and the Japanese *hijoukin kyoyuu / koushi*. These titles are seemingly random and an instructor doing similar teaching responsibilities might have different titles depending on the institution. Aside from the various titles assigned to part-time instructors by universities, instructors also fall into categories based on their reason for teaching part-time. As mentioned above, some instructors have full-time positions at a university and use additional part-time positions as a way to supplement their income. There are also instructors who only teach part-time. These instructors represent a variety of perspectives (Gappa & Leslie, 1993). Some, called *aspiring academics*, are searching for full-time positions. Others, considered *career enders*, have reached mandatory retirement age and are limited to part-time work. Another group, often women, work part-time to supplement family income (Gappa & Leslie, 1993). People supplementing the family income in Japan must fall below government income limits to receive tax benefits (National tax Agency, n.d.). As a result, even if they would prefer to work full-time, they are limited to teaching part-time due to their personal circumstances. Butler (2019) also identifies another group of teachers, described as freelancers, who prefer to work only part-time because they can put together sufficient income from teaching classes at various universities and avoid administrative responsibilities that come with full-time positions.

Despite the various reasons for choosing to teach part-time, the part-time university instructor is sometimes seen by the institutions they work for as one who simply comes, teaches, and leaves. Duties such as conducting research and presenting at conferences might be required for initially gaining employment at the university level, but not as a means to continue working at an institution. Many part-time instructors do participate in these activities though, yet how such activities are integrated into the job of teaching is unclear due to a lack of research specifically related to part-time university instructors in Japan.

One issue affecting part-time university English teachers is their position within their

institutions is often unclear. Whitsed and Wright (2011) report that part-time English language instructors often feel the programs they work in have a lack of clear coordination or training programs. The degree of shared understanding among university staff, full-time, and part-time instructors about program aims tends to be low as well (Whitsed & Wright, 2011). As a result, there seems to be an image that the part-time English language instructor's role has more to do with the maintenance of appearances than of providing authentic learning opportunities for students. The lack of shared understanding might also make part-time English instructors feel they are positioned on the outside rather than as contributing members of the institutions where they work. They often do not feel completely accepted in the university setting and can feel like tokens rather than academics who should be taken seriously (Whitsed & Volet, 2011; Brown, 2019). Perhaps because of this tokenism, part-time English language instructors have reported having fewer opportunities for training and faculty development from their universities, and thus sometimes feel unsupported by the universities where they work (Whitsed & Volet, 2011).

This paper reports on survey data collected by the author and her research partners at the beginning of the 2020 academic year. It focuses on part-time university English instructors because they are underrepresented in the literature about university language instruction in Japan. The research group collected data on part-time university English teacher wellbeing through weekly surveys conducted over the full 2020 academic year. This paper focuses on the results of the initial survey, which took place at the beginning of the Covid pandemic because it proved to be a time of extreme and unexpected change for instructors working in higher education in Japan. Part-time university instructors were chosen because while there is a fair amount of research on faculty development and the working conditions of full-time English teaching faculty (Roloff-Rothman, 2020), there is very little literature specifically directed at the conditions of part-time instructors. Part-time instructors were particularly affected by the changes brought about by the pandemic because they often work at multiple institutions, and therefore possibly would be asked to deal with a wide variety of policies, class delivery methods, and institutional support at the onset of the Covid pandemic. This research is important because it shines a light on integral members of university teaching staff who often get overlooked.

### **The Covid-19 Pandemic and Course Guidelines**

On February 13, 2020, the Japanese government's Novel Coronavirus Response Headquarters held a meeting to discuss inbound travel restrictions, strengthening response measures to virus outbreaks, how to support industries negatively affected by travel bans, and strengthening international ties by distributing medical devices and equipment to other countries in the region that were affected by Coronavirus outbreaks (The Prime Minister in Action, February

13, 2020). Then on February 28, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) suddenly announced that elementary schools, junior and senior high schools, schools for special needs education, and upper secondary specialized training schools would be requested to close from March 2<sup>nd</sup> until the school year ended later that month (MEXT, n.d.). In the following weeks, MEXT began releasing expanded guidelines for education at all levels in Japan (MEXT, n.d.). As a result of these early MEXT announcements, Japanese universities began preparing plans for the 2020 academic year. These plans included shifting to online classes in some form at universities, especially those in more populated areas. Recommended online class delivery tended to fall into two categories: synchronous instruction known as “live” classes and asynchronous, or “on demand” instruction in what became known throughout Japan as emergency remote teaching (ERT).

### **Methodology**

In March, 2020, sudden decisions to shift from face-to-face to online instruction seemed to prompt strong feelings of distress among instructors, staff members, and students at Japanese universities. Around this time, an incredible up-surge of posts from Japan-based university English instructors on social media occurred. Their posts included expressions of frustration at the situation, cries for help, online workshops to introduce applications and online teaching methods, and new social media groups such as Online Teaching Japan (OTJ) that sprung up for teachers to provide support for each other. Seeing these pleas for help prompted the author and her co-researchers to investigate how the situation was affecting part-time university English instructors.

The research group met online throughout April, 2020 and developed the initial online survey asking part-time university instructors about their teaching experience in Japan, their familiarity with educational technology, and ERT training and support from their institutions. The survey included the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule Short Form (IPANAS-SF) (Thompson, 2007) as a means to learn about the participants’ moods going into ERT. After the initial survey, a weekly survey containing the IPANAS-SF and an open-ended questions continued throughout the 2020 academic year as a means to track how participants coped with the situation over time. The I-PANAS-SF consists of two scales of five items each, measuring aspects of positive and negative affect. The five positive affect items are: Alert, Inspired, Determined, Attentive, and Active. The five negative affect items are: Upset, Hostile, Ashamed, Nervous, and Afraid (Thompson, 2007). Using the IPANAS-SF allowed the researchers to measure how instructors were feeling as they began teaching early in the pandemic. Finally, an open-ended question encouraged the participants to comment further on their feelings or the situation in general.

The call for participants was shared mainly on Facebook through groups and pages

associated with Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT), other Japan-based teaching groups, and personal pages and the initial survey was open from May 4-16, 2020. The timing was chosen partially due to the hasty nature of planning the project, and partly because many universities around Japan had postponed the start of the academic year in order to monitor the situation and prepare for ERT. The research group chose to institute the search for participants on local social media groups and personal pages because they were interested in focusing on a group that was familiar with the cultural context, located within the same geographical area (Japan), and knowledgeable about issues regarding working within the Japanese university context (Andres, 2012). In 2020, Facebook remained the primary social media platform used by Japan-based English instructors. Thus, the researchers felt they could reach the largest audience by reaching out through this platform.

### Participants

While the researchers wanted to reach out to English teachers regardless of their nationality, the majority of respondents were foreign English teachers. Japanese English teachers represent about 15% of the sample in the initial survey. Though this group most likely makes up the majority of part-time university English teachers in Japan, on this project the number of Japanese nationals is thought to be low due to how the call for participants was distributed. The language used to communicate in the social media groups mentioned above is English. Japanese instructors tend to have a sense of low self-efficacy in terms of English proficiency no matter how high their English level (Pracer, 2014). Having numerous academic societies such as The Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET), which conduct their business in Japanese might be another reason for the lack of interest in participating in this project. As a result, many might have felt hesitant to participate because they are more comfortable using their first language (Pracer, 2014).

After removing duplicate responses, and ineligible participants (primarily those who hold full-time university teaching positions), a total of ninety-five part-time university instructors from across Japan participated in the initial survey. Table 1 provides an overview of the gender and nationality of the participants.

**Table 1: Gender and Nationality of Participants**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Number</b>
Male	47
Female	44
Prefer Not to Say	4
<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Number</b>
USA	37
Japan	13
Canada	13
UK	11
No Reply	9
Australian	4
Other	8

N = 95

There is a three to one male to female gender ratio among full-time university teachers in Japan (Nagatomo & Cook, 2019). The data, as shown in Table 1, reveals more equal numbers of male and female instructors at the part-time level. These numbers may reflect that women typically hold more part-time positions than men in Japanese society. In fact, in 2020, female employees held 54.4% of part-time positions (Gender Equality Bureau Cabinet Office, 2020). While the majority of respondents to this survey came from Anglophone countries (USA, Canada, UK, Australia), almost a quarter of those indicated their nationality came from other countries, including Japan, Brazil, France, Singapore, and Taiwan. This shows the rich diversity of the English language teaching population at Japanese universities.

The survey was open to all part-time university level English language instructors in Japan. In addition to the diversity of nationalities, the participants' level of education and the level of experience of teaching at higher education in Japan was quite varied. Most respondents, 75 out of 95, worked for 1-3 universities. Regarding the total number of classes taught, 4 distinct groupings emerged. Three groups consisting of between 26-29% of respondents, reported teaching 1-5, 6-10, and 11-15 classes respectively. The last group, consisting of 16%, reported teaching 16-20 classes.

## Discussion

### Experience with Educational Technology

As previously mentioned, the researchers saw that their colleagues seemed very stressed or even panicked, which provided the impetus for this study. A primary reason for these sentiments seemed to be that many instructors were not very familiar with educational technology. Thus, they felt at a loss about how to begin planning their ERT classes. One of the things the researchers wanted to better understand from the survey was the online learning and teaching experience of part-time Japanese university English instructors prior to the start of ERT because this would shed some light on the reasons many felt unprepared for the move to ERT. The researchers were also curious to learn how part-time instructors were supported in the hasty lead-up to ERT. With this base, the researchers felt they would be better able to track the participants' learning curves throughout the first year as well as to understand how the situation related to their resilience, sense of wellbeing, and overall satisfaction with their jobs.

Questions on the survey asked participants about their personal experience studying or teaching online, previous use of applications (apps) or other internet-related technology in their classrooms, and whether their university had an online class or learning management system (CMS / LMS). To the question, *What have you studied entirely online?*, there were 4 groups with experience: studying a hobby (27%), studying for a teaching qualification (19%), studying for a

masters degree (28%), and / or a doctorate degree (6%). It should be noted that respondents were able to click each area that pertained to them, so it is possible that one respondent could be included in multiple groups. The largest group of respondents (37.5%) had no previous experience with online learning.

On the question about experience with teaching online, only two respondents reported having taught a course entirely online prior to ERT. Yet, when asked about previous experience using apps or websites in their classroom, 65 teachers responded yes, while 30 responded no. This would indicate that while teachers had little experience of teaching completely online, many had previously incorporated at least some Internet-based technology in their pedagogy.

Lastly, when asked if their university had a CMS or LMS, 55 responded that all of their universities had an LMS, 27 indicated that some of their universities had an LMS, 10 were not sure, and three responded that none of their universities had an LMS. We can see that the participants had a wide range of experience with learning or teaching using technology. Even though most of the instructors responded that all or most of their institutions had some kind of LMS, it is important to note that teachers probably were not very familiar with these systems prior to the 2020 academic year. The researchers inferred this from the sense of urgency noted in the online teaching groups and the high levels of attendance at impromptu technology seminars that were organized by members of the teaching community in Japan throughout March and April 2020. These seminars showed that instructors were desperate to learn ways to implement ERT and to provide a positive experience for their students in the new learning environment.

### **Institutional support**

Besides learning about part-time university instructors' experience using educational technology before the pandemic, the research group was interested in learning more about institutional support provided by the universities the instructors in the survey worked for. Participants reported feeling financially insecure due to the delayed start of the academic year, voiding of contracts, pay cuts, and needing to purchase or upgrade their devices and internet service in order to teach online. Most reported that upgrading their equipment came without financial support from their institutions even though many institutions provided such support to students. They also reported unpaid preparation time for their classes exponentially increased as they needed to make PowerPoint lecture notes and videos, upload class materials to the CMS/LMs, create new activities suitable for the online environment, learn how to use various applications, and navigate different course delivery systems depending on the university or even among departments at universities where they worked. Their concerns can be seen in replies from the open-ended survey question.

*One of the universities mentioned they might cut our salaries because of online teaching requires less time to work.* (Teacher 3, Initial survey)

*We are only PTers, expected to do this job with little support and no added financial reward for this additional commitment. They even stopped paying the transportation fee - we don't use it now but they could have just kept paying it as a little reward.*  
(Teacher 7, Initial survey)

I have to deal with learning 5 systems, separate emails, logins, passwords, and 400 students. (Teacher 17, Initial survey)

Part-time teachers tend not to be treated equally with full-time teachers with regards to university resources. ERT heightened this because the resources denied to part-time teachers were often the ones they needed to teach online. Additionally, they noted that financial and training support is often provided to full-time teachers and many universities offered similar support to students. This was not always provided to part-time teachers though.

*No reimbursements for equipment... I have not thought twice about purchasing some new bits to enhance the quality. This only becomes a gripe when we hear of the good burgers provided to full timers to buy some fancy stuff !!* (Teacher 20, Initial survey)

*One of my schools... offered all students 50,000 [yen] to make sure they could cope with the tech challenges they face. All of us part-timers are left scratching our heads that they would ignore us so completely.* (Teacher 23, Initial survey)

69.5% of the instructors who participated in the survey reported they had worked at their institutions for six or more years, and thus considered themselves long-term employees. Prior to the pandemic they tended to feel satisfied with their working conditions and the amount of support offered. They also felt a sense of trust in their colleagues and their work environment in general. The participants most-likely felt this way due to teaching similar classes long-term, familiarity with their institutions, and comfort with teaching materials and methodology. This was suddenly upended with the pandemic, which created uncertainty about their ability to provide meaningful instruction to their students in an untried environment and often feeling a lack of support for learning how to use CMS / LMS when universities suddenly decided to move to the ERT class format.



In the questions about ERT training from the universities, the participants generally seemed to feel the initial training was insufficient. 53% reported only 2 hours of training, 6% reported more than five hours, and 24% reported receiving 1 hour or less of training for ERT. Some teachers might have missed information about training sessions due to emails being sent in often formally worded Japanese that was difficult to understand, or not receiving information because it was sent to university affiliated email accounts that they did not realize had been set up for them or know how to access. This led to 85% of respondents indicating that they either did not feel ready for online teaching or simply hoped they were prepared for the task. 63% also indicated that they did not know whether further support would be available once classes began.

*My university department was clearly overwhelmed. I held back contacting them with certain questions... I get how busy they are and figured there are newer members on staff who are freaking out more than I am.* (Teacher 30, Initial survey)

*The training was well-intentioned but ineffective... The content of the demonstration was limited to "neat features" which would have been more in line with a sales meeting.* (Teacher 35, Initial survey)

*I really wish that universities had offered more training and support, especially in English for many of my colleagues lack Japanese language skills.* (Teacher 35, Initial survey)

While survey participants generally reported feeling unsure about their ability to conduct effective ERT classes, and sometimes disappointment in the training and initial support provided by their institutions, they showed empathy about the situation. Some noted that they realized the institutions and full-time instructors were overwhelmed as well, and that though often insufficient, in many cases there were attempts to give basic training for ERT. They reached out to friends, online groups such as the newly formed social media group called OTJ, which was established as a forum for teachers to help each other with technological issues in April 2020, and acknowledged attempts by full-time faculty to support them.

*The English department did their own trainings with teachers working together to try out software and discuss how to use it. This process was actually quite motivating.* (Teacher 40, Initial survey)

*Individuals in each program that I teach have been very helpful and want to support the part-time teachers as much as possible.* (Teacher 43, Initial survey)

*First I was so surprised when I got the news, but at the same time I got a list of workshops online organized by [the author] that supported me emotionally, mostly showing a totally new world.* (Teacher 17, Initial survey)

### **Supporting Part-time Instructors Moving Forward**

The pandemic still persists in 2022, and we have become used to teaching in the classroom with Covid protocols in place. The situation early in the 2020 academic year shed light on several issues related to part-time university English teaching staff in Japan. First, many tended to feel comfortable in their teaching situations and the support provided by their institutions prior to the pandemic, which is a positive point that should be acknowledged. They generally understood university policies, and aside from occasional emails with information about textbooks, syllabi, or grading, did not feel a need for more support. When the pandemic hit, they suddenly felt the need for more support and understanding from the institutions where they worked though. Perhaps this was one reason teachers began expressing their feelings of stress and panic. Suddenly, the sense of security and comfort with their institutions turned into a desperate need for high levels of support to learn how to use online platforms and develop course materials to begin ERT. Unfortunately, the full-time instructors and staff at many Japanese universities were not prepared to give this support because they also had not been trained in the platforms and skills needed for holding classes online.

There are important takeaways from the ERT experience. First of all, there should be acknowledgement of the resilience and hard work of part-time English language instructors who, no matter how stressful the situation was personally, learned how to use the various online platforms used at their institutions, provided engaging lessons, and supported their students. These teachers spent an incredible amount of unpaid time preparing lessons for their students and often paid for upgraded devices, applications, and Internet service necessary to teach online out of their own pockets. This shows dedication to providing a positive learning environment that should also be acknowledged by the institutions where they work. Finally, it is important for the institutions themselves to retain lessons learned during the Covid pandemic. Developing and maintaining effective methods of communication in both English and Japanese, regularly inviting part-time instructors to participate in faculty development or training sessions, and providing timely updates about university policies would help part-time instructors maintain trust in the institutions where they work and prepare for changes in instructional methods. It would also help them feel more

appreciated and that they are positioned as part of their workplace community rather than outside elements. The Covid pandemic showed that we have no idea what the next situation might be that disrupts our “normal” routines or when it will occur. Maintaining preparedness by providing training and good channels of communication will help universities and the instructors who teach at them cope with whatever might turn up in the future.

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