

A Practice Report on a Selection of Online Language Classes in the ELP Program

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Introduction

Due to the coronavirus pandemic of 2020, classes worldwide were forced to be held online in an unprecedented number. In Japan, many universities moved classes in all subjects online while the physical campuses were closed. Likewise, language classes in the English Language Passport (ELP) Program at Osaka Shoin Women's University were conducted online for the first time. This paper will look at a selection of English language classes that one instructor conducted in Spring Semester 2020 and identify challenges in implementation, analyze certain successful activities, and propose suggestions for the improvement of future online classes.

Class Structure

The English language classes examined in this paper fall under two basic categories, writing classes and speaking classes. Class levels ranged from first year to third year classes. The classes utilized both “off-time” and “on-time” assignments. Off-time class activities consisted of course material uploaded to the university's online learning platform. Students were free to view learning material and submit assignments at any point within an allotted time period. Conversely, in on-time class activities, students were required to participate during the original class time period.

The writing classes examined here were conducted mainly in off-time assignments. An optional on-time 90-minute period was available, during which, the instructor could be reached by Zoom to answer questions or help students. For writing classes, students were required to have the technological ability to do the following actions:

1. use Manaba – an online learning platform all students have access

to. All university classes had a Manaba page in which the instructor could send out class announcements, conduct class surveys, give and collect assignments. Manaba also assisted in record keeping and grading.

2. view Word documents
3. view videos via Google Docs
4. upload assignments via Word, PDF, or photograph

The speaking classes examined were a combination of on-time and off-time assignments. Students were required to meet on Zoom for 25 minutes of face-to-face lessons once a week. In addition, there was about an hour of “off-time” assignments to complete. The technology requirements for these classes included all the tools for the writing classes with the addition of the ability to:

5. use Zoom – an online conferencing tool that allows people to meet virtually via video.
6. film videos either by phone or computer
7. use Mediasite – a tool to convert videos into manageable data packets. This tool was necessary for students to post video assignments on Manaba.

As one can see by looking at these lists, students were required to navigate a number of different technologies to be active participants in their online classes.

Challenges

As with any major change to a system, there were unforeseen issues and challenges with online classes throughout the semester. Moreover, although interactive activities appeared to be essential for providing meaningful and motivational language instruction, serious barriers exist for implementing such activities. This section will highlight two of the major challenges for the classes examined in this paper.

The first of these issues was familiarizing students with the format

of online classes. Since there was no overarching consensus of how online classes would be conducted, each instructor organized their own classes differently. Thus, students were forced to follow several online class systems simultaneously. With students possibly having over eight different instructors in one semester, this was not an inconsequential burden. Compounding the issue, instructors were also designing online classes for the first time. Therefore, the method of class implementation naturally evolved throughout the semester. A lack of consistency in a student's timetable and within individual classes, meant that students had to learn and adapt to many new systems.

The next serious challenge concerned the technological literacy of the students. In all classes examined in this paper, a certain number of students had difficulty with the technology that was required for completing assignments. In particular, first-year students struggled as they were exposed to Manaba and Mediasite for the first time. While second and third year students had some familiarity with both Manaba and Mediasite, they had never been required to use them at such a high level of frequency. Moreover, there were students who struggled with even the basic action of viewing Word or PDF documents. Thus, technology became a barrier to learning for students in all years.

Successful Activities

While there were difficulties with conducting online classes, there were also positive aspects. When analyzing the speaking and writing classes, two activities stood out as successful. These activities were judged as successful based on three main factors. First, these activities were those in which the students directly performed the target skills. For example, a speaking class activity in which students were actually speaking, as opposed to filling out a grammar worksheet. While both of these activities may eventually contribute to improvement of the target skill, the change to an online format made creating activities that directly focused on target skills more challenging. Thus, activities that were able to focus on target skills were particularly

valuable. Next, these activities were judged as successful by the instructor when looking at the quantity and quality of participation by students. Finally, these were activities that were frequently mentioned in both the midterm and end-of-the-semester class surveys by students as enjoyable and contributing to improvement in their language skills. Based on these factors, both the small group Zoom speaking lessons and free writing letters were considered as outstanding in their success during online classes.

Small Group Zoom Lessons

In the speaking classes, the instructor implemented small group Zoom lessons as part of the on-time class activities. For each 90-minute lesson, students were divided into three groups (6-8 students) and were assigned one 25-minute time slot. The rest of the lesson was conducted by off-time recorded videos and assignments. The small size of the Zoom groups was chosen to increase the amount of speaking time for each student. Students were encouraged to turn on their cameras and required to actively participate in the Zoom lessons.

Time in the Zoom lessons was spent in interactive activities rather than direct instruction. On Zoom, students asked each other questions and presented on the topic of the class. For instance, in one class focusing on food, students spent half of the Zoom class asking each other questions about food, and the other half of the class individually reporting on their eating habits to the group. All students were thus allowed time for interactive and productive speaking in each Zoom lesson.

The small size of the groups in the Zoom lessons was essential for allowing the instructor to facilitate communicative English interactions among low to intermediate-level students. The short time limit of the class also focused students. It attempted to limit the so-called “Zoom fatigue” caused by the differences between in-person communication and talking over a video conference application (Johnson, 2020). Overall, these small group Zoom lessons were interactive and practiced the target speaking skills.

Free Writing Letters

The second truly successful activity was the free writing letters in the writing classes. Students began each writing class by writing a letter to the instructor. There was always a letter writing prompt, but students were free to ignore the prompt and write on any topic they wished. Writing prompts ranged from the casual to the serious to the comical, such as: *What did you do on the weekend? What changes have happened in your life because of coronavirus? What superpower would you want?* Students were instructed to not use dictionaries or worry about grammar. No word limit was put in place. Instead, students were instructed to spend 10-15 minutes writing. Consequently, students' responses varied in length depending on their abilities and interest in the topic. In response to the letters, the instructor would write a short 3-5 sentence personal response. The instructor's response did not include grammar corrections, but instead focused on replying to the content of the students' letters.

Not only did free writing letters promote communicative interaction in the target language skill, it also allowed students to know that their voice and thoughts were being considered by the instructor. Online classes made feedback on students' assignments challenging. Therefore, it was important that students had the chance to receive feedback that was not just focused on evaluating their skills, but also responding to their ideas and feelings. This activity was designed to increase interaction and motivation while making students feel that the instructor was paying personal attention to them even though they were no longer meeting in-person.

Recommendations

While it is the preference of many instructors to continue to hold classes in-person on campus, the Spring 2020 semester should be analyzed in the event it becomes necessary to conduct English classes online again. Many changes can be implemented to improve the quality of online classes. The following are two major recommendations to enhance the success of future

ELP Program online classes at Osaka Shoin Women's University.

First, it would be beneficial for all students to be required to complete technology training before the main university classes start. Although a training was held for using Zoom, this was not adequate to address all the students' technology needs. Ideally, the instructors should generate a list of the technology required for their classes. After compiling this data, a training program should be designed to cover all necessary skills. The common assumption is that young people are skilled at using technology, but this is not true for all students. In fact, a survey conducted with Japanese university students, showed that many students lack basic computer literacy (Murray & Blyth, 2011). In this survey, it was found that while 67% percent of the students had 2-8 years of experience with using computers, their skills with basic computer programs was significantly low. About 55% of the students surveyed never or almost never used word-processing programs, and 78% had never or almost never used software for presentations (Murray & Blyth, 2011). Even though Murray and Blyth's survey is nine years old, it anecdotally supports the cause of confusion and trouble students had in the classes examined by this paper. Students who lack these skills are put at a distinct disadvantage when participating in an online class, so extra support should be provided by the university to increase the possibility of student success.

The second key point in future implementation of online classes is to increase the number of interactive tasks presented to students. As has been suggested by supporters of the communicative language teaching approach, interaction in which learners exchange meaningful information is a key feature of successful language learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Some instructors in other departments adapted to moving to online instruction by posting lecture videos for students to watch. These may be appropriate in covering certain educational material, but for language learning, they are often inadequate instruction. The underlying feature in the successful activities of the small group Zoom classes and the free writing letter writing was the communicative interactive element. In both activities, students had

the opportunity to exchange ideas on topics that were meaningful to them in the target language. The students were able to gauge the other participants' understanding of their words by the responses that they were given. Not only did these activities serve as language learning, the activities also worked to maintain the students' motivation. Communicative interaction provides meaningful context to language learning so that students are not learning in a void.

Future online classes should focus on developing interactive tasks that students can complete online. Instructors should look for ways to decrease their own workload by involving the students more. For example, in the letter writing activity mentioned earlier in this paper, the instructor was responding to the students individually. This reassured students that the instructor was being attentive to their lives and concerns, but was excessively time consuming on the instructor's behalf. However, with more planning, a system could be set up so that the students responded to their classmates' letters under the supervision of the instructor. Thus, reducing the burden on the instructor while also maintaining the communicative interaction of the task. One major disadvantage of interactive online tasks is the time in which the instructor spends creating and implementing such activities. Therefore, group effort should be made to develop these activities as these actions can be difficult to take individually. Supporting groups of instructors that contribute concrete suggestions for creating interactive tasks could be extremely beneficial. Through planning, experience, support and attention, instructors could increase the amount of interactive online tasks in the future while decreasing their workload.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the coronavirus pandemic has brought many challenges to the field of education. Moving classes online has been difficult for universities that had little previous experience with conducting online classes. The unconformities in the structure of online classes and students' low computer literacy contributed to issues for both instructors and students

throughout the semester. However, interactive language learning activities are possible in online classes. Activities that allow students to exchange meaningful information through interactions with classmates and the instructor are valuable for improving both linguistic skills and motivation. Such activities should be supported by technical training for students, a measure in conformity of the implementation of online classes, and support for instructor to reduce their workload. Since this was the first time online classes were implemented in Osaka Shoin Women's ELP Program, there were many lessons to be learned from both the successes and failures of this semester. It is the hope that we, as instructors, can learn from our experiences and those of our colleagues to improve the quality of future online classes.

References

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