From Class to Screen: Educator Perspectives on the Transition to Virtual Classroom Teaching in Japanese Universities During a Global Pandemic

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Abstract

As a measure taken to prevent further spread of the 2019 Novel coronavirus during a global pandemic, English language teachers at universities around Japan transitioned from traditional face-to-face classrooms to virtual online classrooms in early 2020. Through a collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative survey data collected from language teachers currently teaching at Japanese universities, this study provides a report of those university language teachers' experiences of the transition from teaching students in real classrooms to providing language classes in virtual classrooms. Modern online teaching platforms and tools have been very useful in helping language teachers implement Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) pedagogy. However, the majority of teachers found that this momentous change in language education has so far proven to be a poor substitute for the effective communicative environment that a real classroom offers. The findings from this study may provide an indication of what improvements to make in alternative methods of language teaching when such methods are needed.

Keywords

CALL, communicative language learning, English for specific purposes, higher education

1．Introduction

On 17th April 2020, it was reported that the Japanese government had declared a nationwide state of emergency in response to the rapidly growing number of COVID-19 infections in at least seven different prefectures (Eiraku & Yamamoto, 2020). When societal activities resumed 1 month later after the state of emergency was lifted, a list of preventative actions were provided by the World Health Organization to reduce the spread of the coronavirus such as regular hand sanitation, wearing of face masks in public places and social distancing measures of remaining at least 1 meter part from other people (WHO, 2020). This has had significant implications on the nature of English language teaching in higher education.

Communicaltive language teaching uses a task-based approach that involves learners activating

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language schema to interact with others in the target language (Nunan, 2004). Therefore, continuing with such a pedagogy would result in a violation of the necessary safety measures required during the COVID-19 global pandemic. In order to mitigate this issue, institutions have had to adapt and transition to online teaching formats (Donoghue, 2020). With such a sudden and dramatic shift in the environment that communicative language learning in now taking place as a result of a global pandemic, it is important to understand the kind of changes digital classroom teaching has brought for teachers at universities in Japan and how difficult it has been for them.

2. University English Education in Japan

Having no local models of the language and studying English for primarily instrumental purposes, Japan is placed at a disadvantage as an expanding circle ESL nation when it comes to communicative language learning (Mckay, 2002, LoCastro, 1996). Many universities in Japan now provide students the chance to further their L2 skills through task-based learning (TBL). Since learners at university are at a stage where professional development begins to equal academic achievement, the content of such lessons follow an English for specific purposes (ESP) theme which helps students 'seeking to identify particular conventions for language use in certain domains of professional and occupational activity' (Widdowson: 2003; 69). TBL also provides benefits to Japanese students outside of the classroom as 'not only do college students represent the immediate future users of English, but the rise of English Medium Instruction (EMI) at the college level in Japan has attracted international students, resulting in an increased use of English as a common language of communication (lingua franca) at Japanese universities' (Galloway

and Rose, 2017; 06). Japanese higher education has overcome the difficulties in using language teaching methodologies so divergent from those used in public schools. However, as a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic, it now faces the fresh problem of rapidly adapting to new teaching formats using technology. Japanese news outlets have earnestly reported how Japan has fallen behind other nations in the use of "edtech" (educational technology) and that the challenges brought forth by the global pandemic may give the Japanese education system the perfect change to make much needed progression (Kittaka, 2020).

Previous research has revealed that the nature of TBL has translated mostly successfully to a virtual classroom environment. However, from a student perspective, distance learning through CALL and virtual classrooms on an exclusive basis may deprive them of the chance to take back their social lives and develop social skills through clubs or 'circles' (Bailey, 2004).

3. CALL & Virtual Classroom Teaching

The concept of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), at this point, has been a well-established concept in academic research and literature for approximately half a century (Levy, 1997). The term 'CALL' has its origins in the UK 'reflecting a student-centred focus on learning rather than instruction (Davis, Otto & Rüchoff, 2013; 67). As task-based learning is the focus of a communicative language classes, it was well-matched in CALL as 'it was recognized that computer tools might be an option to facilitate the implementation of a methodology for language learning focusing more on authenticity in contents, contexts and tasks` (2013; 87). As the role of the internet and technology has taken on an increasingly vital role in facilitating the needs of our daily lives

and creating a globalized society since the turn of the century, a wide range of academic research has been produced to evaluate the increasing prominence of CALL as an exclusive language teaching format. A comparative study between online and offline French language programs at Carnegie Mellon University found that higher language production rates especially in writing in the online program received higher credit scores. In addition, students taking the online program reported spending more hours on independent study outside of the virtual classroom compared with their offline counterparts which seemed to reflect a greater amount of language learning progress (Chenoweth & Murday, 2003). CALL was implemented into the Japanese language program at the University of Alberta as an evaluative project shortly after. From a pedagogical standpoint, CALL provided students on this program with many opportunities to authentically interact with each other and students using the content of the curriculum. However, students often experienced difficulties with compatibility and application management despite orientations being provided regularly (Kabata, Wiebe & Chao, 2005). Despite the distances involved, the virtual classroom still provides the social presence (Williams & Christie, 1976) that fuels the willingness of students to take risks in their communicative activities (Kehwald, 2008). However, it is important to note that recent studies using current language acquisition theories have not been able to provide a complete understanding of the 'multifaceted nature of social presence in multimodal communication between language learners' (Satar, 2015; 481).

Earlier research into the effectiveness of language learning through virtual classrooms found that Synchronous Learning Management Systems (SLMS) provided teachers with tools that facilitate multimodal interaction between students. For example, sub cyber classrooms used for small groups of students to complete activities in the target language allowed students to control the discourse topic favorable for language acquisition (Chen & Wang, 2008). Such virtual classroom tools are available in videoconferencing applications used today such as Zoom.

Although virtual classroom teaching has developed to have a variety of merits, it is still questionable as to if teachers would be able to confidently and efficiently implement CALL pedagogy and provide an effective learning experience through an online LMS. In order to integrate such tools into their teaching, it is necessary for language teachers to have a certain level of competency in CALL that consists of both technological and content knowledge (Golonka *et al*, 2014, Hong, 2010, Jones, 2001, Liu & Kleinsasser, 2015, Yang & Wu, 2012). However, methods of raising teacher competence and closing the gaps in digital divergence (Uzunboylu & Tuncay, 2010) are emerging. Through a series of surveys, class observations and group discussion recordings, it has been found that effective teacher training and competency development for CALL can be achieved through project-based learning (PBL) whereby teachers can 'acquire knowledge through the design of usable artifacts such as lesson plans' (Tseng & Yeh, 2019; 95). Such an approach would allow teachers to develop CALL competency by bringing the new knowledge gained into their personal teaching contexts (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006). Sociolinguistic studies have also been conducted to try and address the potential reasons behind Japanese teachers' low competency in CALL methodology. A case study focusing on the cognitive development of two Japanese teachers using online teaching methodologies over a period of 16 years found that 'the large gap in technological skill and interest between them and their students raised the

teachers' awareness that they needed to modify their values and reconsider their expectations towards ICT' (Kitade, 2015: 413).

Overall, the implementation of virtual classroom teaching and well-refined CALL methodologies in communicative language classes at Japanese universities this year could provide improvements in student language acquisition and confidence in using the target language in group activities. However, teachers' experience and expectations in using online teaching tools and LMS present drawbacks in the initial implementation of virtual classroom teaching.

4. This study

Considering the radical changes in education and society that have taken place in 2020 due to the global pandemic, this study aims to examine the initial reactions and results of changing to virtual classroom teaching and using online LMS for universities across Japan that provide communicative English language classes to their students. The following research questions have been proposed to address this issue:

1. What impact has transitioning from face-to-face to online classrooms had on communicative language teaching at universities in Japan as a result of a global pandemic?

2. Which online learning tools and management systems have teachers found to be most useful in implementing communicative language teaching online during the spring 2020 school semester at universities in Japan?

5. Methodology

A mixed methods approach was taken in order to collect data that would help formulate the most accurate response to the research questions posed. An online survey was created using questions designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. For quantitative data questions, a linear scale response device was implemented from one to four. The number one represented the strongest negative response and four represented the strongest positive response. Using such as response device allowed respondents to provide a more accurate reflection of their experience e.g. specifically how positive or negative online language learning was for them. Qualitative data was collected in parallel with this by asking respondents to provide specific reasons for their choice in the quantitative data questions in the form of short written answers. The experiences of English language teachers in different universities and locations in Japan are likely to vary. Respondents' specific opinions and reasons can provide further clarity and understanding of such unique situations. A vital element that quantitative data collection may miss.

Participants

A total of 16 university English language educators who had switched from face-to-face to online classroom teaching in Japan since April 2020 responded to the online research survey distributed in August 2020. All respondents were asked about communicative language classes taught at their primary higher education institution.

6. Findings

The findings for this study will be grouped according to the following survey question pairings:

- Question one & two (quantitative and qualitative data collection regarding face-to-face and online classroom teaching)

- Question three & four (quantitative and qualitative data collected on online learning

tools and learning management systems used)

- Question five & six (quantitative and qualitative data collected regarding the overall impact the transition to online teaching has had on communicative language teaching and learning)
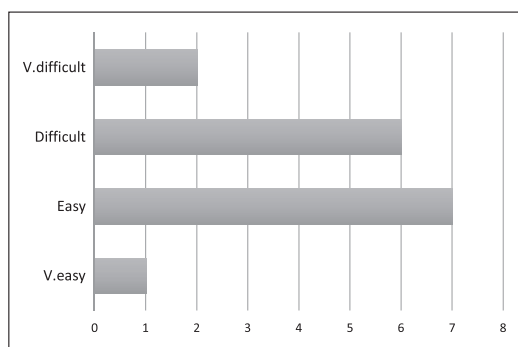
Question One & Two

Figure 1: **Teaching communicative language classes online compared to face-to-face classroom teaching**

Figure 1 shows answers from respondents on how easy or difficult they thought teaching communicative language classes online at their primary institution was compared to teaching the same classes face-to-face in the traditional classroom environment.

A number of common themes were found in what factors respondents thought contributed to a difficult experience in transitioning to online language teaching:

1. A lack of time to set up a system for online learning

   "Our university did not give us a lot of time to transition"

   "Everyone was floundering"

2. A lack of student understanding or guidance in using online teaching tools

   "lack of any real explanation to the students"

"[students] not turning on cameras"

Factors that contributed to a positive experience included:

1. consistency in university teaching policy:

   "My institution made Zoom a blanket policy"

2. Teachers' personal aptitude using electronic devices:

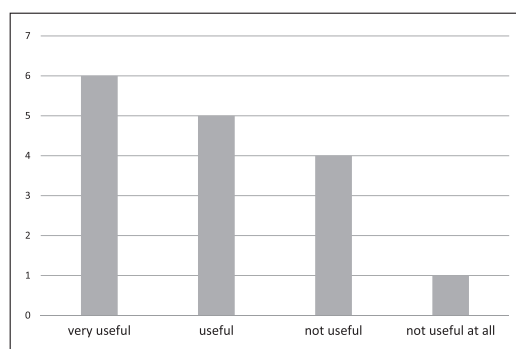   *"I'm good at using computers".*

Question Three & Four

Figure 2: **usefulness of online learning tools for communicative language teaching and learning online compared to face-to-face classroom teaching**

Figure 2 represents the responses given by language teachers about how useful they felt the online learning tools and management systems utilized were in their online teaching in providing their students with a communicative language learning experience that was equal to or better than that provided by face-to-face classroom teaching.

Table 1 below lists the learning management systems (LMS), hosting platforms and online learning tools that the respondents reported they used and how many of them used each tool. A small number of respondents did not specify what they used.

Table 1: Online tools used

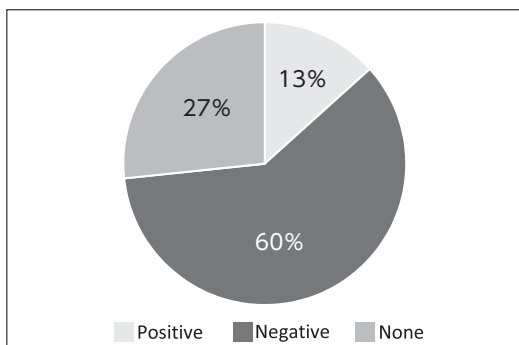| LMS & Hosting Platforms	Online Learning Tools
Zoom (9) Google classroom (9)	Google docs (3) Youtube (1) Flipgrid (3) Kahoot (1)

Question Five & Six

Figure 3: overall impact on communicative language teaching at universities in Japan

Figure 3 shows the opinions of all respondents on what the overall effect the transition from a face-to-face classroom teaching to a virtual classroom format has had on communicative language teaching at their institution.

Respondents were also asked to provide possible reasons that influenced their opinion on this issue.

Reasons for responding "positive":

"For generally shy classes, there was better opportunities and less distractions for students to talk with other classmates when doing pair or group work"

Reasons for responding "none"

"Teaching is teaching".
"Too soon to see the outcome".
"I think this transition hasn't occurred for long

enough nor on a wide enough scale to really know its impact".

Reasons for responding "negative":

"It doesn't correctly address the real life environment".

"Language classes require face to face human interaction".

"There's little to no interaction and not a lot of feedback provided to the students".

"It doesn't give students the chances to talk to the teacher. Dozens of students refused to answer questions because of how their voice was received".

"Students want to be with their classmates"

"What I feel I am doing is training my students to be effective English communicators on Zoom, which may be a very worthwhile practice. However, they are likely to be less prepared for face-to-face communication as a result".

7. Analysis

When looking at the respondents' experiences in the transition from face-to-face classroom teaching to virtual classroom teaching, university language teachers were evenly divided overall on how easy or difficult it was with 12.5% of respondents stating it was very difficult, 37.5% for difficult, 43.7% for easy and 6.3% for very easy. To understand this result we can look to the qualitative data. Difficulties in making the transition to online language teaching stemmed from teachers not being given adequate time to set up and prepare their own LMS which resulted in many respondents haphazardly setting up virtual learning and sharing spaces on third party platforms such as Google Classroom. Furthermore, respondents' institutions did not provide suitable awareness and information to the students on the online learning tools and LMS that were to be used to facilitate their language learning for the

foreseeable future.

In contrast, some respondents reported their institution implementing positive measures to ensure that online learning was utilized as best it as it possibly could be as a preventative measure against the spread of COVID-19 amongst teachers and students by making the use of Zoom as a hosting platform for classes a blanket policy across all departments. Consistency in the delivery of classes between teachers in any particular institution would provide a more uniform and therefore easier transition despite limited time being provided.

The personal aptitude of teachers in CALL teaching methodologies as well as general proficiency in using online software may have been a contributing factor in their experience in making the transition into online communicative language teaching. Some respondents cited a lack of experience in online teaching as a reason why they thought the transition online was a negative one. However, a respondent stated that they were highly proficient in using computers which allowed them to make the change very easily. Uzunboylu & Tuncay (2010) found in their study of digital divergence in teachers that a more experienced teacher had more limited digital skills. Therefore, the age of the respondents could have played a key role in influencing their experience of the transition. However, personal information was not collected on the respondents in this study.

60% of respondents stated that the transition from face-to-face to online classroom teaching in universities has had a negative impact on communicative language teaching. In the reasons provided, it is clear that a number of important elements of classroom teaching has been lost such as being able to provide detailed, in-class feedback to students and the presence of an environment where students can benefit from face-to-face social interaction and be with their peers. In addition, respondents reported that although students were learning language skills through online classes, they were processing and using language in a clinical manor and therefore not likely to be prepared for L2 spoken interaction in a natural context.

27% of respondents decided that there was no significant impact either way on communicative language classes. The most common reason provided was that the practice of online teaching as a common alternative to face-to-face classroom teaching in communicative language classes has not yet been in place long enough for a decisive impact to be seen. This may provide some justification on the even divide on the respondents' experience of the transition to an online teaching format.

It is important to note that a small percentage of respondents (13%) stated that the impact of teaching exclusively online has had a positive effect on communitive language classes. One respondent noted that the online format had provided language learners of a shyer disposition improved opportunities to participate group activities and practice speaking in pair work.

8. Conclusion

Using the data collected from the survey and the analysis, conclusive responses can now be given to the research questions proposed at the beginning of this study:

1. What impact has transitioning from face-to-face to online classrooms had on communicative language teaching at universities in Japan as a result of a global pandemic?

The results of this study show that the majority of university language teachers that responded to the

survey found that overall, the transition from face-to-face to online classroom teaching has had a negative impact on communicative language teaching mostly caused by an insufficient understanding of the LMS used and a lack of time provided by institutions to set up and test tools needed for online language learning.

2. Which online learning tools and management systems have teachers found to be most useful in implementing communicative language teaching online during the spring 2020 school semester at universities in Japan?

According to the data collected from the survey, the vast majority of respondents (almost 70%) found the online language learned tools and LMS used to be useful or very useful. The most commonly used LMS and hosting platforms were Zoom and Google Classroom. As well as this, Flipgrid and Google Docs were the most commonly used online teaching tools used. All of these were external applications that were available to use in online learning before the transition to online language learning took place at universities.

Studies conducted in the field of CALL and virtual classroom teaching have demonstrated that it is an effective medium of delivering communicative language learning. The wide variety of tools that can be used in the most commonly used platform, Zoom, such as screen sharing, text chat, interactive whiteboards and sub virtual classrooms can serve as a 'catalyst for discussion in the target language' (Chen & Wang, 2008: 111). Some have concluded in the past that a virtual classroom is no substitute for face-to face teaching and tasks must be adapted to fit the medium (Hampel, 2006). Although the findings from this study have shown that tools and

applications in LMS programs today are very useful in rivaling the communicative language learning experience of a face-to-face classroom, the views of the respondents have echoed this viewpoint.

In contrast to previous research, more than half of the teachers that participated in this study reported an overall negative effect in transitioning to a virtual classroom environment. However, further investigation is warranted in the near future to see a possible shift in findings after more time has passed where both teachers and students have become fully comfortable with a less familiar teaching environment and improvements have been developed.

9. Limitations

There are a number of issues that affect the reliability of the findings presented in this study. Firstly, the small sample size of respondents to the survey may not represent the experiences of all language teachers at universities in Japan. Institutions often differ in policy and approach and the teachers themselves have a varying level of experience and skill in providing language learning in a virtual face-to-face classroom. Such factors outlined in digital divergence (Uzunboylu & Tuncay, 2010) can include gender, age, race and socio-economic background. This study could be expanded to take into account such respondent variables.

Secondly, this study focused on the transition from face-to-face to online communicative language teaching as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic exclusively at universities in Japan. To fully comprehend this change on a national scale, a broader approach would need to be taken to survey other educational institutions that provide communicative language classes such as language schools and K-12 institutions.

Finally, any fundamental changes in language

learning and whether certain pedagogies are successful (or not) can be measured with a high degree of validity from the academic performances of the learner. A single semester of an academic year may be not be sufficient to gauge the full extent of how online classroom environments are effecting language teaching. The transition to online language teaching was a reactive measure done in sudden fashion. Both student and teachers require time to develop the technical competency for using the LMS (Chen & Wang, 2008). Therefore, once university students have had more time to adapt to this alternative teaching format, a comparative analysis of student test scores from online communicative language courses between two different academic years may provide a clearer understanding in the future.

Due to the limitations in the scope and depth of this study, the findings should be interpreted as preliminary impressions from university language educators on what initial changes the transition has made to the landscape of communicative language teaching and what aspects of it may continue to be utilized or improvement moving forward.

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