

Reflections on Teaching EFL in Japanese Universities during the Covid-19 Pandemic: From Surviving to Thriving

Pino Cutrone
Nagasaki University

Siewkee Beh
Osaka Ohtani University, Japan

The initial onset of the pandemic created great stress and difficulties for my colleagues and I, as it resulted in our institutions suddenly mandating that all classes be taught online from April 2020. While some of our smaller classes could be conducted face to face at various points when the pandemic appeared to be coming under control, most of our classes remained online throughout the entire first semester and have continued to be online intermittently as the pandemic's fourth wave is now in full effect. When the pandemic first began and classes were suddenly shifted to an online environment, institutions and teachers alike were completely caught off guard and were suddenly forced to adapt to the new environment. In addition to being ill-prepared for this, no one knew how long the pandemic would last and, therefore, how much we should really commit to learning about online instruction.

Thus, in this original state of flux, there appeared to be more questions than answers, and there existed a large discrepancy in what teachers around us were doing in their remote classrooms. Some teachers relied on asynchronous methods, which often resulted in them recording their lectures and posting them and/or other materials on an LMS (Learning Management System) for students to access in their own time, while other teachers employed a synchronous mode of instruction, which often entailed using videoconferencing software, such as Zoom, to conduct lessons in real-time. It was clear from the start that most teachers did not have extensive knowledge or experience with online instruction, and the initial nature of the ad hoc lessons reflected this. In this paper, my colleague and I, two EFL teachers in the Japanese university context, reflect on our teacher journeys during the Covid-19 pandemic. From our trials and tribulations, we learned a great deal and went from simply

surviving initially to ultimately feeling quite confident in the way we approached teaching our students remotely. In this paper, we hope to pass on some information that will help administrators and teachers in a similar context.

Objectives

- To consider how institutions and administrations in Japan could better handle the shift to online classes.
- To reflect upon how EFL teachers in Japan could better prepare themselves for success in adapting to a remote teaching context.
- To provide teachers with some practical suggestions in how to approach their online classes moving forward.

Practical Implications

First, it is necessary to consider the important role that institutions and administrators have in helping their instructors find their way. In addition to mandating clear, uniform and timely policy guidelines, it is paramount that school administrations provide their teachers with consistent and extensive training and development opportunities in the area of online instruction (Cutrone & Beh, 2021a). There should not have to be a global pandemic for institutions to initiate this training, and it should go well beyond the fundamentals of showing instructors simply how to navigate an LMS or video conferencing platform. For all its technological advances, Japan has been slow to adopt to modern trends that utilize online tools in educational settings, and the pandemic has, thus, served as a wake-up call for educational institutions that have relied mainly on traditional face to face settings.

Second, it was clear to us that not all teachers were especially keen to teach online, with many

viewing it as a necessary evil that they would have to suffer through only until the pandemic ends. Thus, in addition to the administrations they work for adapting to the times, it is imperative that teachers themselves also accept that online learning will be a valuable part of the curriculum moving forward (Friesen, 2012). As such, with more experience, as well as time, resources and support dedicated to online instruction, teachers must continue to look for ways to develop in this area on their own as well. We learned a great deal through trial and error over the past year, as well as by sharing our experiences with other teachers, reading up on this topic and exploring new pedagogical methods (Cutrone & Beh, 2021b).

Third, once teachers are fully cognizant (and on-board) with the demands of the new and ever-changing world we live in, they can begin to consider how best to approach and apply online instruction. In our opinion, when teaching remotely, EFL teachers in Japan would be wise to make a concerted effort to not only monitor students' progress but also to keep them as engaged as possible. We found that students who may be reticent in face-to-face classes run the risk of all but disappearing in an online setting (Cutrone & Beh, 2014). For this reason, we advocate synchronous lessons over asynchronous lessons in most cases. When soliciting feedback concerning remote lessons from our students, most students expressed their strong desire to be able to communicate with their teachers and classmates in real time. With this in mind, we found the most effective teaching method to be a flipped approach, in which students spent some time previewing (or reviewing) the lesson material asynchronously (and independently), and then using the subsequent synchronous class time to interact with their peers and apply what they have learned (Abeysekera & Dawson, 2015).

Reflective Conclusion

In conclusion, while the health crisis and economic fallout caused by the Covid-19 pandemic globally are obviously tragic, some positive effects emerged over time in our teaching context. For instance, we observed how a country like Japan that has traditionally been slow and somewhat hesitant to fully embrace online practices in ELT finally began to recognize the need to adapt its practices to fit the modern and ever-changing world. Furthermore, we

saw and experienced first-hand how teachers such as ourselves were forced out of our comfort zones. By having to adapt to the changing circumstances, we were able to, ultimately, evolve our crafts and explore new and modern ways to educate students using the Internet. In addition, students were also able to develop digital literacy skills, which will, undoubtedly, serve them well in the modern, globalized world moving forward. Indeed, we feel this is only the beginning. With renewed emphasis and attention, we feel that online instruction in Japan will only continue to get better.

References

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About the Authors

Pino Cutrone is an Associate Professor in the School of Global Humanities and Social Sciences at Nagasaki University, Japan. His research interests include pragmatics, discourse analysis, intercultural communication, sociolinguistics relating to Japanese EFL learners, CALL and study abroad. He has published widely in the field of Applied Linguistics and Intercultural Pragmatics.

Siewkee Beh is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Education at Osaka Ohtani University, Japan. She

focuses her research on English educational policies in Asia and is also interested in how a Task-Based Approach can promote language learning in her teaching context. She has published numerous articles in this area.

Link to presentation on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z2kE1ljP8t4>



The poster features a vertical sidebar on the left with icons for a laptop, a tablet, and a coffee cup. The main content is divided into three horizontal sections: a blue header, a teal middle section with speaker portraits, and a pink footer with event details.

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