

An English Classroom in 2020

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“Every single teacher is about to have their first year teaching again” (Genta, 2020).

Like many institutions all over the world, my university decided to migrate classes online in April 2020 as COVID-19 was quickly spreading in my corner of Kyushu, Japan. As a relatively new teacher in the level of higher education, I personally found this move quite intimidating for a number of reasons.

First of all, I am an introvert who dislikes calling in any form, so the prospect of teaching through video calls was unappealing to say the least. More importantly, however, I had no previous online teaching experience nor had I even heard of Zoom, so my fears and anxieties were multifaceted: How do I keep the class dynamic? How do I keep the students engaged? How do I monitor students' progress? And what of the technical and physical difficulties that would inevitably arise given the nature of online classes?

In addition to the pandemic, 2020 brought to the forefront many important and extremely complex social issues. Most notable in my case was the Black Lives Matter protests and the riots that broke out in the United States and other countries. I was unsure about how to broach the topic in my classes, and I certainly felt ill-equipped to do so properly. However, I felt strongly that these issues be addressed because as one of my teachers in my Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) program taught me, to teach language is to teach culture and we were, at that time, essentially witnessing a real-time cultural shift.

Objectives

- To suggest some interactive online activities to practice speaking and pronunciation.
- To incorporate socially relevant themes in writing practice.
- To underscore the value of empathy in the classroom.

Practical Implications

Regarding the overall dynamic of online classes, one activity that worked in my 1st year Oral Communication class was a pronunciation activity. I prepared a number of documents with various minimal pair sets that allowed students to practice different sounds. I screenshared the documents on Zoom and students had to annotate or stamp the words they thought I was targeting. The students responded positively to this activity. I think they found it enjoyable because the ability to interact with each other instantly allowed them to have a sense of control and agency. Also, I felt that the competitive nature of the activity simulated the dynamics of an actual face-to-face class. There were times when the class would be divided in their answers, so it was thrilling for everyone to find out what the correct choice was.

My students and I used many videos and news articles for various discussion activities often in smaller breakout rooms. We also used the Zoom whiteboard feature for students to process their ideas further and/or review new vocabulary. For example, one student wrote 'Go-to Campaign', a contentious Japanese tourism program launched by the national government in an effort to help revive the country's tourism industry by giving residents travel-related discounts. This then served as a springboard for others to share their opinions about this program. Activities such as these helped me to keep the classes more active and engaging. Moreover, joining students in their breakout rooms allowed me to connect with them better as I could interact with them individually.

As for addressing socially and culturally relevant topics in the language classroom, I tried an activity in my Academic Writing class in which students chose one local or international news story every week. They then had to create a Google Document that included their own summary and opinions on the stories with proper citations. By the end of the semester, we had a shared Google folder with a collection of stories from different countries. This was useful because in addition to the students being able

to practice their writing and general computer skills, it also diffused my power as the teacher to direct their attention to particular social issues. By allowing them to bring up what news stories resonated with them, there was more diversity all around. Furthermore, I believe the students found it informative as they were able to learn about global events they may otherwise have missed. Finally, I felt like I gained some insight about my students through the stories they chose to highlight. This was important for me as conducting classes online can be dislocating.

Reflective Conclusion

2020 certainly taught us many lessons. My students and I have had to quickly adapt to the online learning format and find ways to stay connected with each other despite the physical and social separation necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Through interactive activities and discussions around relevant social issues, we were able to keep the class dynamic and engaging.

For me, it belabored the point that indeed nothing is certain. As we have all witnessed, the world as we knew it changed in an instant, fundamentally altering how we do our work and how we live our lives in general. Also, I realized that teaching is such an emotional profession. It is utterly frustrating and draining when things do not go well, but can also be highly rewarding when they do. Given all these, my biggest takeaway is that it is important for us teachers to regularly remind ourselves that we need not have all the answers, or for our classes, online or otherwise, to run flawlessly every single time. This is not to say that we do not strive to fulfill our roles as educators to the best of our abilities. We are going through unprecedented times, so flexibility, patience and empathy towards our students and ourselves are ever more imperative. I think these will, to some degree, alleviate our fears and apprehensions about our classes, and help us more effectively cope with whatever else may come our way beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reference

Genta, M. (2020, August 4). Welcome to your first year of teaching! [Image attached] [Status update]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/MonicaGentaEd/photos/2705847939515171>

About the Author

Stephanie Lim has been working as a Lecturer at Miyazaki International College, Japan for three years. Prior to this, she taught at a private language school in Vancouver, Canada for over five years. Her research interests include willingness to communicate, motivation, introversion, and gender and sexuality as they relate to language learning.

Link to presentation on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hYJ-O9eEOxw>

