

Reflections on a University Reading Course Taught Remotely

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The spread of Covid-19 required me to teach university classes online suddenly and a reading course for first-year university students was one of them. Imagining that the students who were forced to take the course online were deeply discouraged, I hoped to motivate my students to learn English with clear goals in their minds, so I shared the following course objective in the first class:

In this global society, students should be able to use English as a tool for global communication. In this course, students are expected to think critically and objectively and convey their thoughts and ideas in an organized manner through pair work, discussions, and presentations in English based on what they read related to the latest topics from TED talks. Students are also expected to be able to use technology such as PCs effectively, which is another essential skill that they need to acquire in the 21st century. Students need to complete assignments before each class to participate in activities based on the completed assignments.

To achieve the objective above, I created many opportunities for the students to interact and work cooperatively with classmates through making discussions and presentations. I was able to see the students who had looked depressed at the beginning of the course enjoy talking with their classmates. Although the classes went reasonably well, I faced many challenges during the course. The first main challenge was that I had to change Learning Management Systems (LMSs). Although I was planning to use Google Classroom, several students could not log in because they used different email accounts instead of their university email accounts. Thus, after the second lesson, I decided to change from Google Classroom to the university's LMS.

The second problem I faced was that I gave them too many assignments. I flipped classes by having them do assignments beforehand and make discussions based on their understanding of the assignments. While talking with them, I found out

that they were being assigned so many assignments that they had no time for other things. Thus, I decided to reduce the number of assignments, though I kept the main class activity discussions.

Objectives

- To share the course objective explicitly with students.
- To make numerous opportunities for students to use technology.
- To help students build rapport with classmates in online courses.

Practical Implications

To share the course objective explicitly, first, it is important to make it clear. In the reading course, the main goal was for the students to learn English as a tool for global communication. I explicitly shared this objective several times in the classes and included activities for the students to express their opinions through pair work, discussions, and presentations in English. By sharing the course objective and incorporating activities to reflect on it, the students can understand the activities' meanings.

To make numerous opportunities for students to use technology, I propose including the specific goal of using technology as part of the course objective. As introduced, I explicitly explained "Students are also expected to be able to use technology such as PCs effectively" as one objective of the course to the students. In the course, I integrated activities where they used technology, including watching TED talks, making individual and group presentations using Zoom, finding useful websites to learn about world heritage sites, and using the LMS effectively to manage their learning. By explaining the course objective and integrating activities to use technology, students can understand the importance of using technology in this global society, especially in the society with/after Covid-19.

To help students build rapport with each other in online courses, making plenty of time to interact with classmates in English rather than listening to my speech is important. I had students talk and discuss

in a group using the breakout room function of Zoom, which was effective for them to build rapport with their classmates. The students who were required to take the course online unexpectedly were depressed, so supporting them mentally by having them talk with classmates is the most important thing when teaching classes online.

Reflective Conclusion

It was challenging to teach the reading course online; however, the questionnaire survey I conducted at the end of the semester showed that students could “use English as a tool for global communication” by making discussions and individual and group presentations using Zoom and technology effectively. It was quite impressive that the students who had not been able to use PCs well first made a group presentation to propose solutions to deal with Covid-19 related problems.

The following students’ comments helped me reflect on the course: (1) “It was the only class where I could see my classmates every week, and the group presentations helped us get to know each other even better.” (2) “Through TED Talks and presentations, I learned about various social issues, and listening to my classmates’ opinions in discussions helped me to deepen my thoughts on social issues. I think our generation needs to tackle with the social issues in the future, so I want to make the most of this experience and do my best.” It was pleasant to know that the classes became the place where they could get to know each other better, and they were able to have a positive attitude to learn English as a tool for global communication.

Despite the challenges mentioned above, I could achieve the course objective to a large degree. The most successful key to teaching an online course that I can share with other teachers based on my experience is to prioritize motivating students by having them interact with classmates and creating a positive atmosphere for learning English. To offer the same course online again in the academic year of 2021 more effectively, now I am reflecting on my classroom practice using Kolb’s (1984) learning cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. I hope I will have another chance to share my reflection.

References

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice-Hall.

About the Author

Yukie Saito teaches at a private university in Tokyo. Her main research interests are teachers’ cognition and classroom practice, the application of CEFR in teaching contexts in Japan, and the integration of EdTech into university English classes and its effects.

Link to presentation on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lv6JlfKc7bs>

