

Reflecting on My Reflections from My ERT Journey

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The morning of April 1, 2020 was a memorable day for me. It represented my return to work after an eight-month long maternity and childcare leave, and my daughter's first official day at daycare. The spring of 2020 also marked an increase in Covid-19 cases in Japan. My university responded by postponing the start of classes until mid-May, and eventually, announced that the semester would be conducted online. Then the local daycares were closed.

May brought about what I called the "awakening". My initial confidence and optimism were replaced by exhaustion and determination as I prepared for lessons, taught my students, and graded assignments all while caring for my daughter at home at the same time. Thankfully, in June my daughter was able to return to daycare, but by sending her there every day, I teetered between feeling guilty that I sent her back and fear that she was exposed to so many people and might get sick.

As the semester came to a close in August, I felt relief that I had survived the experience and gratitude to the daycare staff who had kept my daughter safe. I also felt trepidation because my university announced the fall semester would also be conducted online. My presentation concluded the same way my classes had, by looking back and reflecting on what I had done, why I had done it, and what I could do differently or better going forward.

Objectives

- To raise awareness of the challenges mothers face trying to balance their responsibilities regarding work and childcare.
- To highlight the importance of connections and communities, especially when working and teaching remotely.

Practical Implications

To survive the world of ERT as a mother of an infant, I would love to say that I developed a recipe for success, but there was no time for that during ERT. That being said, here I share my top four tips for survival.

1. Keep it simple

I realized that there was no need to use multiple apps or have high-tech videos for lessons. Students appreciated my simple, detailed instructions and repetitive routines. Many of my students wrote in their reflections that they thought the structure of my class was easy to follow thanks to the materials that I provided.

2. Become involved in your communities

Staying connected with my communities was vital for my wellbeing during ERT. Most days, I did not venture outside of my home and had only my daughter to talk to (and she couldn't talk back). Strengthening connections with others through online Facebook communities like Online Teaching Japan (OTJ) and trying to support my colleagues, especially part-time lecturers, through Zoom training and reflective practice opportunities, proved to be an indispensable experience for me. Learning from others, connecting with colleagues, and knowing we were all in this together made the situation more bearable.

3. Create a welcoming classroom community

Online learning can be a lonely experience for everyone. I was mainly teaching first-year students who had not met their classmates face-to-face. For many, they had not even visited the campus yet, so providing them opportunities to feel like a member of a community was an essential goal for my classroom. Regardless of the lesson format, providing opportunities for students to interact with each other, and hopefully, see each other's faces, will foster an English learning community. Snyder (2019) stresses that our "ultimate goal" should be to foster "a collaborative classroom community" (p. 142). As only a handful of my classes were held synchronously each semester, Flipgrid, a video recording site and smartphone application, allowed my students and I to build a warm and welcoming community for everyone by posting, watching, and replying to each other's videos during our asynchronous classes.

4. You don't always need to be working

This was the hardest idea for me to accept during my experience. I often felt that I was constantly working. With my dinner table as my desk, there was no clear way to separate my workday from my private life. There was always more that needed to get done. More videos to record, more assignments to check, and more time needed to care for my daughter. I continually tried to be vigilant with scheduling to meet the needs of my family, my students, and myself, often in that order. Though I rarely achieved the balance that I desired, I somehow always managed to get everything done.

Reflective Conclusion

Looking back on my experience, I understand ERT was a new experience for me, but it was not unique to only me. Undoubtedly, other parents and caregivers were facing similar situations that I faced. In the end, I can say with confidence that I am satisfied with how my classes were designed and implemented, given the time and resources that were available. Using mainly Google Classroom and Flipgrid with occasional Zoom lessons allowed me to help my students develop a class community. While some students felt nervous recording their face and voice for others at the beginning of the semester, by the end of the semester, many students realized that my rationale was not just for their English proficiency but also to help them make friends and feel a part of a community.

Most importantly, I believe that on the days my daughter had to join our lessons due to daycare closures or a random fever that my students could see firsthand the challenges women face working full time while being mothers. It is challenging, but it is not impossible and allowing students to share in that experience was one benefit of ERT.

Finally, I hope that through reading about my experience, other parents feel a sense of camaraderie with me. I also hope that everyone understands the importance of connections both inside and outside of the classroom because wherever you teach, face-to-face, hybrid, or fully online, the relationships and communities that you help foster form the heart and soul of teaching.

References

Snyder, B. (2019). Creating engagement and motivation in the Japanese university language classroom. In P. Wadden & C. C. Hale (Eds.), *Teaching English at Japanese universities: A new handbook* (pp. 137-143). Routledge.

About the Author

Adrienne Verla Uchida is an assistant professor at Nihon University College of International Relations, Japan. She has been teaching in Japan for 17 years. Her research interests include reflective practice, professional development, project-based learning, and curriculum design. She is trying to be the best Mama and educator that she can be.

Link to presentation on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbaT4cFYOCA>

