

A Report on Online English Classes: Reflections and Implications

Yukako Hatakeyama

Abstract

This paper reports my online English classes in the first half of the academic year 2020 and how they were perceived by the students. First, each class's characteristics and activities are described, and my reflection as an instructor is shared. Then the results of the student survey on my classes are reported. The participants took measures to improve the environment for online classes, yet some experienced disturbance of class more than a few times. Most of the students understood the class content well, found it easy to ask questions, and liked small group activities, but approximately half of them found the assignment load heavy. The implications of these findings are discussed.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has directly affected our lives since its outbreak in early 2020. Seeing the spike in infections, on April 7th, Prime Minister Abe declared a one-month state of emergency for seven prefectures, including Tokyo, to contain the spread of the new coronavirus (Reynolds & Nobuhiro, 2020). This was extended nationwide on April 16th ("Japan to Declare Nationwide," 2020). The state of emergency was lifted gradually by May 25th ("*Abe Declares Coronavirus Emergency Over*," 2020).

The lifestyle of people seems to have changed considerably since the outbreak of COVID-19. People started to pay more attention to wearing masks, having "social distance" with others, and washing hands. More people worked remotely from home. Instead of going out shopping and dining, shopping online and having the goods and foods delivered have become more prevalent (Kao Corporation, 2020). These behavioral changes influenced people, both physically and mentally. Education was one of the major areas where many changes took place. In tertiary education, most universities delayed the starting date of classes. Almost all universities decided to give classes remotely instead of having face-to-face classes in the first half of the academic year 2020 (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2020, May 13).

2. Ochanomizu University's Preparation for Online Classes

In response to the spread of COVID-19 and the stay-at-home request by the Tokyo metropolitan area governors, Ochanomizu University decided that it would delay the beginning of the semester to May 7th and that it would provide Zoom (a cloud-based video-conferencing software platform) accounts to full-time and part-time teaching staff (T. Miura, personal communication, April 1, 2020). After the state of emergency was declared, the university's campus was closed from the afternoon of April 8th. During the campus closure period, the students registered for classes online, and the instructors' preparation for classes continued.

On April 22nd, the university announced that all of the first-quarter classes (May 7th-June 24th) would be done remotely. Subsequently, it provided instructions and manuals for giving online classes to all the teaching staff. In the meantime, support for the students, such as lending laptop PCs and mobile Wi-Fi, was provided. Online classes started on May 7th, and the university continued to support the students by handling technical trouble-shooting, providing financial aid, and conducting surveys. The survey results were shared with the teaching staff.

The English Department and the Foreign Language Education Center (FLEC) supported the foreign language teaching staff. The FLEC held meetings online in April. The English Department provided bilingual materials for teaching online using Zoom to the Core English Program instructors. Zoom Q&A sessions were held online three times before the beginning of the semester, where administrative information and teaching ideas were shared. In these meetings, Zoom's various functions, such as polling, creating breakout rooms, and screen sharing, were demonstrated, and the participant teachers could experience how it would be like in class. Moreover, a forum for the teachers in the Core English Program was created in FLEC's Moodle site. Many pieces of information have been shared since then.

In addition to the information provided by the university and the English department, I could get information through various occasions. I attended training sessions held by International Christian University (ICU), where I work part time. Subsequently, the classes at ICU started, and I started teaching online using Zoom from late April. Besides, I visited multiple websites to get tips for using Zoom, what to keep in mind in giving remote classes, and better utilizing Moodle's function. The resources provided by the University of Tokyo on its portal site (<https://utelecon.github.io/>) were quite helpful. I also watched several archived video recordings of the symposiums on teaching online, posted on the National Institute of Informatics (<https://www.nii.ac.jp/event/other/decs/>), thanks to information shared with the teaching staff at Ochanomizu University (M. Oguchi, personal communication, April 9th, 2020). Through this opportunity, I realized the importance of the so-called "data diet," reducing the amount of data transmitted through Zoom.

3. My Classes

In the first half of the academic year 2020, I taught six English classes per week online, using

Zoom: two classes of Intermediate English I (Speaking/Writing, S/W), one class of Basic English I (S/W), one class of Advanced Communication Training I, one class of Global English I, and one class of Basic English Skills Development.

3.1 General Principles

I, as an instructor, tried to plan and give lessons so that the class time would be invaluable for the students. To achieve this goal, I kept in mind the following three principles: 1) to enable the students to interact with one another, 2) to give them enough opportunities for output in English, and 3) to digitize the materials and use Moodle, the learning management system at Ochanomizu University, as a platform for students' learning.

As for the first principle of enabling the students to interact with one another, the use of breakout rooms in Zoom was a key. Since Zoom has a function of creating breakout rooms either randomly or manually, I mostly put the students into random groups to interact with peers, regardless of their majors. Since many students' videos were turned off in the main session, the time in breakout rooms, when they could turn on their video and unmute their microphones, seemed to have become precious. Indeed, they were hungry for communication opportunities.

As for the second principle, students' time and opportunities to give output (i.e., to speak or write) were secured. For example, the time for input-oriented activities (such as listening to the teacher's explanation) and output-oriented activities (such as sharing ideas in small groups) were alternated. In the same vein, the whole class activities, where receptive skills tended to be used, and those in breakout rooms, where they used productive skills more often, were alternated as well.

In terms of the third principle, I digitized most of the materials as preparation. The digitization included making PDF files of the handouts. Those files were used in class by the share-screen function of Zoom. I could highlight or color code the parts that required attention while explaining. They were uploaded on Moodle as well.

I used Moodle for the students to review the class, submit their assignments, and receive feedback. I briefly emailed each class's content and the homework, using the "announcement" function of Moodle, after each class. It was to help the students review the lessons and confirm the homework and those who missed (part of) the class grasp the class's content. I also created several short video clips explaining the basics using Screencastify (www.screencastify.com), a free screen recorder which enables us to record, edit, and share videos for their review. Google Forms was another useful tool. I used it for vocabulary quizzes and the students' writing reflections by embedding the link to each form on Moodle.

3.2 Basic English I (S/W) (20 Students)

Basic English is a course for first-year students, and its foci are on developing students' speaking and paragraph-writing skills. In addition to the instructor's explanation, the students engaged in activities requiring output and interaction. For example, they had speaking activities at the beginning of class. Also, before reading the sample paragraphs in the textbook and going

over the questions as a class, they shared answers and ideas in small groups. Furthermore, they engaged in peer review of their drafts in pairs.

A teaching assistant (TA) participated in the activities in breakout rooms to support the students. After each class, she shared what she noticed during the lesson and in breakout rooms. Since the students had gotten used to online classes around mid-June, she assumed additional responsibilities of reading the students' drafts—while they were in peer review—and providing overall feedback on their drafts.

3.3 Intermediate English I (S/W) (17 and 20 Students)

Intermediate English is basically for sophomores who completed Basic English, and its focus is on developing students' speaking and essay-writing skills. Like Basic English, the students had output and interaction opportunities in class. The last class was for presentation sessions where each student gave a presentation in breakout rooms. In one class with 20 students, they received feedback from ETS Criterion®, an online writing evaluation service. They shared the feedback and questions about the feedback in small groups in breakout rooms.

3.4 Advanced Communication Training I (27 Students)

Advanced Communication Training (ACT) is an elective course for those who are hoping to study abroad and to develop their communication skills in English. Most of the class time was for speaking and discussion activities in English; students checked their comprehension of the texts, shared ideas and reactions, and practiced discussion skills in breakout rooms.

In addition to these regular lessons, the students had two presentation opportunities: individual presentations in the middle of the term and group presentations at the end of the term. As for individual presentations, they gave presentations about the first theme of the semester—culture. After each presentation, the students in the same breakout room had discussions, facilitated by the presenter.

The last two classes were for six group presentations about the second theme of the term, propaganda. The students had three to four weeks to prepare for their presentations. Over two hours of class time was secured for preparation: 10 minutes for the first meeting, 30 minutes for the second meeting, and 90 minutes for the third meeting.

In the first group meeting, the students exchanged their contact information and agreed on what everyone would prepare for the following week—reading the text of their assigned topic. In the second group meeting, they checked comprehension of the text, decided the person in charge of each part, and agreed to prepare the slides and manuscripts in a week. In the third meeting, they used full class time to prepare for their presentations. The slides and the manuscripts were ready, and they went through a rehearsal while checking the time. They gave feedback on each other's slides for improvement. In some groups where some students had difficulty, the peers provided suggestions and ideas.

On the day of the presentation, each group gave a 10-minute presentation in the main room

using Zoom's screen-sharing function. Then the students moved to pre-assigned breakout rooms. A student from the presentation group facilitated discussions for about 10 minutes, and the 5-minute feedback session followed. The quality of the performance was very high, thanks to the students' hard work and preparation.

3.5 Global English (10 Students)

Global English, an elective course for juniors and seniors, aims to get students to have international perspectives. In this class, a textbook using news stories was used. In addition to speaking activities, the students listened to audio recordings and then read aloud along with the audio (i.e., overlapping, also called parallel reading). After comprehension check, they shared experiences and ideas about the topic, first in breakout rooms and then with the class. Finally, they discussed the pros and cons of the statement about a controversial issue. Since they had gotten good at presenting pros and cons by the middle of the term, this activity turned into a mini debate from the second half of the semester. In this class, the students listened to a news story each week, wrote listening journals as homework, and shared them in small groups. At the end of the term, they individually gave presentations in breakout rooms.

3.6 Basic English Skills Development (8 Students)

Basic English Skills Development is an elective course targeting first-year students who are not confident enough in English. For those who feel less confident in listening and speaking, a textbook about contemporary America with video clips was used. Since the link to the video and audio clips had been available on the publisher's website, students watched the video clips as homework. In class, I played a video clip in a low-resolution mode for confirmation and shared the transcripts on the screen so that they can read aloud the texts. They also shared their answers and ideas in breakout rooms.

Thankfully, the author of the textbook happened to contact the teachers using the book to see whether their online classes were going well. After a few exchanges of email, he volunteered to come and visit our online lesson. The students prepared questions for the author, which were shared with him in advance. His virtual visit continued for about 45 minutes, where he answered their questions, showed some unpublished behind-the-scene video clips, and talked with them. After the visit, they wrote thank-you notes. The entire experience seemed to have stimulated and motivated the students to study English.

4. Observation of Students and Reflection of Classes from the Instructor's Viewpoint

As I became accustomed to giving online classes, I started to realize some benefits of online classes and challenges.

4.1 Benefits of Online Classes

There were more benefits to online classes than I had expected. First, I could identify the students more easily thanks to their names shown on the screen, which helped me assess their performances earlier in the semester. The second was creating random groups/pairs for breakout rooms. This could be done instantly using Zoom, which enabled the students to work with multiple partners in one class. Switching partners often in one lesson is possible but not feasible in face-to-face classes as it requires some students to move physically, which takes time. The third benefit was that the students were seldom absent from or late for class. It seemed that they could sleep longer and eat breakfast, thanks to the eliminated commuting time. They kept up with the class and assignments, which resulted in few failures in the courses. The fourth was that the students could see the screen better. Unlike in face-to-face classes where the students in the back rows have difficulty seeing the screen, everyone could see the close up online. The fifth benefit was that many students asked questions in and outside of class. They communicated with me orally or by chat during lessons and did so by email as well. They also asked questions using Google Forms, which were, initially, for them to write their reflections. Lastly, the tracking of the students' assignments has become easier. Their exact submission dates were recorded on Moodle.

4.2 Challenges in Online Classes

There were also several challenges that I faced during the semester. The first challenge was that I could not instantly check the students' understanding as most of their Zoom videos were turned off, unlike in face-to-face classes where I can check their facial expressions and behavior. The second was the assignments given to the students. Even though I had planned the amount and type of homework not to place an excessive burden on the students, it still seems that the students had to study harder than in regular years. It may be explained from two changes—the implementation of Active Learning Hour and the switch to online classes—which both started in the academic year 2020 at Ochanomizu University. Third, a few students seemed to get mentally exhausted. This may be in part because they were busy with or overwhelmed with the assignments. Another possible reason is that the students did not have time to chat with their friends, relax, and relieve stress. In response, I tried to reduce the homework by letting the students start writing paragraphs and essays in class or prepare for group presentations in class. To make it happen, I reduced some exercises and focused only on key points.

5. Student Survey Results

5.1 Methods

Data Collection

Before the first half of the academic year 2020 was over, I had prepared an anonymous

questionnaire survey of students who were registered for my class during the period. The survey scheme and questions were approved by the Research Ethics Committee on September 9th, 2020. I sent the survey questions using Google Forms to 102 students on September 10th. The questions were the same for all classes, but a separate form was used for each class to enable further analyses. A reminder email was sent after a week (on September 17th), and the survey was closed after ten days (on September 21st). A total of 55 participants responded. The response rate was 53.9%.

Survey Questions

The survey questions had four sections. The first section was about the participants' environment. The second section asked their perceptions of content and activities in lessons. The third section was about the assignments. The last asked their overall satisfaction and the benefits and disadvantages of having my English classes online.

Data Analysis

After the survey was closed, the data was converted to a Microsoft Excel sheet. The responses to the multiple-choice questions were analyzed by calculating the totals and percentages. Some of the answers were broken down by class for further analysis. The participants' responses to open-ended questions were coded and summarized.

5.2 Results

Devices Used for Taking Online Classes (Multiple Answers Allowed)

As can be seen in Table 1, 100% of the participants used PCs for taking classes with some using smartphones and tablets as well. From the participants' comments, large screens and functionality (i.e., easiness to chat, receive files, and raise virtual hands) were the advantages of using PCs. Some switched to smartphones for a better connection when their Internet connection was not ideal. Unless noted otherwise, the number of participants is 55 (N=55) in this paper.

Table 1

Devices	PCs		Smartphones		Tablets	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
	55	100%	7	13%	2	4%

Frequency of Disturbance of Classes

As in Table 2, 29% of the participants had almost no trouble taking online classes, and over 40% experienced disturbance of classes once or twice in the semester. While the two categories accounted for the majority, the remaining quarter experienced disturbance in more than one-third of the total classes.

According to the participants' comments, the examples of disturbance included being unable to move to breakout rooms, sudden screen freeze, video delay, and noise. Some attributed these instances of disturbance to their weak Internet connection, the weather (e.g., windy, rainy, etc.), and many students' videos being turned on. Some pointed out that the weak connection was caused by two or more people at home using the Internet simultaneously for online classes and/or remote work.

Table 2

Frequency of Disturbance of Classes

Frequency	None/Seldom		Once/Twice		1/3 or more		2/3 or more	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
	16	29%	24	44%	13	24%	2	4%

Measures Taken to Improve the Environment of Taking Online Classes (Multiple Answers Allowed)

Table 3 shows what the participants did to better take online classes. More than half (56%) turned off their Zoom videos, and nearly half (49%) arranged a better Internet connection. More than one third (36%) asked their family members for cooperation, such as not using the Wi-Fi, being in other rooms, and staying quiet. Nearly one third (31%) installed the latest version of Zoom. These measures were followed by preparing PCs (20%), including borrowing the university's devices. One participant wrote that she prepared cables and earphones for stable connections and better sound quality.

Table 3

Measures Taken to Improve the Environment of Taking Classes (Multiple Answers Allowed)

Measures	Improving Internet Connection		Preparing /Buying PCs		Using Smartphones		Asking for Family's Cooperation		Installing (the Latest) Zoom		Turning Off Zoom Video		Nothing Special		Others	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
	27	49%	11	20%	3	5%	20	36%	17	31%	31	56%	8	15%	2	4%

Places for Taking Online Classes (Multiple Answers Allowed)

As many as 85% of the participants took classes at home, living with their family members. This was followed by at-home living alone (13%), and in dormitories (9%) and university classrooms (9%). One participant living in a dormitory stated that she experienced some inconvenience when taking classes in the shared space. See Table 4 for details.

Table 4

Places for Taking Online Classes (Multiple Answers Allowed)

Place	Home		Dormitory		Home (Alone)		University		Others	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
	47	85%	5	9%	7	13%	5	9%	0	0%

Understanding of Class Content

As many as 73% of the participants understood the class's content very well, and the remaining 27% somewhat understood the class. See Table 5.

Table 5

Degree of Understanding Classes

Degree	Very Well		Somewhat		Not Much		Very Little	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
	40	73%	15	27%	0	0%	0	0%

Frequency of Attending Classes

As in Table 6, 96% of the participants attended almost all the classes.

Table 6

Frequency of Attending Classes

Frequency	0-1 absence		2-3 absences		4-5 absences		6+ absences	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
	53	96%	1	2%	1	2%	0	0%

Favorite or Helpful Activities in Class (Multiple Answers Allowed)

Table 7 summarizes what activities the participants liked or found helpful. Since they experienced different activities depending on class, it may be inappropriate to discuss only the total numbers. Still, it is noteworthy that many participants' preferences revolved around those using breakout (BO) sessions where intensive communication and exchange of different ideas took place. Sharing opinions and ideas and comparing homework answers (SH) in breakout rooms were their favorite, chosen by 67% of the participants. Speaking activities at the beginning of the class (SP) in breakout rooms also scored high (47%). The next popular activities were the instructor's explanation (EX, 38%) and student presentations (PS, 35%). They were followed by going over textbook questions as a whole class (TQ, 29%), although the popularity varied among classes.

Peer review (PR), which took place only in the writing classes, was relatively popular (38% on average). The participants also liked brainstorming topics and sharing their writing topics in breakout rooms (WT, 31% on average). About 28 % liked writing in class (WR). There was only one class where ETS Criterion, an online writing support tool, was used, and they liked the activity of sharing the feedback from Criterion (CR, 36%). In Basic English, the TA's feedback on the students' drafts (TA) was favorably perceived (33%).

In three non-writing classes, the popularity of presentations (PS) is notable (62% on average), and other activities' popularity was in line with the overall trends. In Global English class, debating (DB, 33%) and sharing of listening journals (LJ, 33%) were popular, as well.

Table 7

Favorite or Helpful Activities in Class (Multiple Answers Allowed)

Activities	SP		EX		SH		TQ		PR		CR		TA		WR		DB		PS		WT		LJ		Other	
Place	BO		Main		BO		Main		BO		BO		Main		Main		Both		Both		BO		BO			
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
IE (S/W) (n=6)	3	50%	2	33%	2	33%	0	0%	4	67%	N.A.	-	N.A.	-	0	0%	N.A.	-	0	0%	5	83%	N.A.	-	0	-
IE (S/W) (n=11)	4	36%	6	55%	7	64%	4	36%	3	27%	4	36%	N.A.	-	4	36%	N.A.	-	3	27%	2	18%	N.A.	-	0	-
BE (S/W) (n=12)	5	42%	3	25%	9	75%	2	17%	4	33%	N.A.	-	4	33%	4	33%	N.A.	-	N.A.	-	2	17%	N.A.	-	0	-
ACT (n=14)	6	43%	5	36%	11	79%	4	29%	N.A.	-	N.A.	-	N.A.	-	N.A.	-	N.A.	-	11	79%	N.A.	-	N.A.	-	0	-
GE (n=6)	4	67%	3	50%	3	50%	1	17%	N.A.	-	N.A.	-	N.A.	-	N.A.	-	2	33%	2	33%	N.A.	-	2	33%	0	-
BSD (n=6)	4	67%	2	33%	5	83%	5	83%	N.A.	-	N.A.	-	N.A.	-	N.A.	-	N.A.	-	3	50%	N.A.	-	N.A.	-	0	-
WC (n=29)	12	41%	11	38%	18	62%	6	21%	11	38%	4	14%	4	14%	8	28%	N.A.	-	3	10%	9	31%	N.A.	-	0	0%
Non-WC (n=26)	14	54%	10	38%	19	73%	10	38%	N.A.	-	N.A.	-	N.A.	-	N.A.	-	2	8%	16	62%	0	0%	2	8%	0	0%
Total (N=55)	26	47%	21	38%	37	67%	16	29%	11	20%	4	7%	4	7%	8	15%	2	4%	19	35%	9	16%	2	4%	0	0%

Note. IE stands for Intermediate English, S/W stands for speaking/writing, and BE stands for Basic English.

ACT stands for Advanced Communication Training, GE stands for Global English, and BSD stands for Basic English Skills Development.

WC, or writing classes include the three classes from the top of this table: Two IE classes and one BE Class.

Non-WC, or non-writing classes include the the next three classes: ACT, GE, and BSD.

Ease of Asking Questions to the Instructor

As Table 8 shows, 35% of the participants found it easy to ask the instructor questions, and 51% found it somewhat easy to do so. However, 15% found it either somewhat difficult or difficult.

Table 8

Ease of Asking Questions to the Instructor

Degree	Easy		Somewhat Easy		Somewhat Difficult		Difficult	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
	19	35%	28	51%	7	13%	1	2%

Methods of Asking Questions (Multiple Answers Allowed)

Out of the 55 participants, 43 (78%) asked questions. Of those, 49% asked questions orally in class, and 44% asked orally in breakout rooms while the instructor was visiting them. Asking questions by chat (30%) and asking questions by email (21%) followed.

Table 9

Methods of Asking Questions (Multiple Answers Allowed)

Methods	Orally		By Chat		Orally		Orally		By Chat		By Email	
	in Class		in Class		in BO Rooms		before Class		before Class		Outside of Class	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
	21	49%	13	30%	19	44%	0	0%	1	2%	9	21%

Note. N=43. BO stands for breakout.

Clarity of Instructions about Assignments

As shown in Table 10, 78% of the participants found it easy to understand the instructions

about assignments, and the remaining 22% somewhat easy.

Table 10

Clarity of Instructions about Assignments

Degree	Clear		Somewhat Clear		Somewhat Unclear		Unclear	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
	43	78%	12	22%	0	0%	0	0%

Clarity of Feedback on Submitted Assignments

As to the instructor's feedback on submitted assignments, 84% of the participants perceived that it was easy to understand, with 13% feeling somewhat easy and 2% somewhat difficult. See Table 11.

Table 11

Clarity of Feedback on Submitted Assignments

Degree	Clear		Somewhat Clear		Somewhat Unclear		Unclear	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
	46	84%	7	13%	1	2%	0	0%

Assignment Load

In terms of the assignment load, a little over half of the participants (53%) found it just right, while the remaining half found it either somewhat heavy (42%) or heavy (5%). Table 12 provides the details. One student wrote that she was happy to read the instructor's feedback and be able to ask questions. Another student wrote that emails from the instructor reviewing the lesson's content and confirming homework helped her feel relieved.

Table 12

Assignment Load

Degree	Heavy		Somewhat Heavy		Just Right		Somewhat Light		Light	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
	3	5%	23	42%	29	53%	0	0%	0	0%

Overall Satisfaction of the Classes

As in Table 13, nearly three-quarters of the participants (73%) responded that they were satisfied with the classes. A quarter (25%) answered that they were somewhat satisfied. One student (2%) showed dissatisfaction.

Table 13

Overall Satisfaction of Classes

Degree	Satisfied		Somewhat Satisfied		Somewhat Unsatisfied		Unsatisfied	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
	40	73%	14	25%	0	0%	1	2%

Advantages of Taking Classes Online (Optional)

As Table 14 shows, 12 of 26, or 46% of those who wrote comments, stated the use of breakout rooms as an advantage of taking my classes online. Out of the 12, eight commented that they could interact with various people they might not have communicated in face-to-face lessons. Some other benefits mentioned were that the discussions were not disturbed by the voices of different groups, that they could switch from one activity to another as the timeframe was visible, and that they could be more proactive in speaking.

Six participants (23%) wrote the environment as an advantage. One student appreciated that she could take classes without being exposed to the risk of COVID-19. Another wrote no commute as an advantage, and a third stated that she was absent less than usual thanks to taking classes at home.

Five participants (19%) wrote that there was no difference. One student wrote that although she hopes to have face-to-face classes, she found that the same things could be done in online lessons.

Three participants (12%) wrote that the explanation using the share-screen function as an advantage. One student wrote that highlighting important points contributed to their learning, and another student found that showing the transcripts of video clips on the screen was helpful.

Other comments (nine participants, 35%) varied in content. One student wrote that it was more comfortable to ask questions by using chat.

Table 14

Advantages of Taking This Class Online (Optional Questions)

Points	BO Rooms		Environment		No Difference		Share Screen		Others	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
	12	46%	6	23%	5	19%	3	12%	9	35%

Note. N=26.

Disadvantages of Taking Classes Online (Optional)

As Table 15 shows, 19 participants wrote comments on the disadvantages of my online classes. Four (21%) were about the inconveniences due to Internet connection. One wrote that she could not complete activities in breakout rooms when her partner's connection was weak. Another could not fully understand nor react to her partners' ideas because of connection problems.

Another four comments (21%) were about presentations. One pointed out that it was hard to

see and practice body language in online presentations due to the small screen size of Zoom; another wrote that presenting online is different from doing so in person.

Three comments (16%) were about communication. One wrote that it was harder to understand the peers' facial expressions and feelings; another wrote that it was harder to decide the timing and the person to start speaking. The other wrote that discussions would have been more active face-to-face.

Two participants (11%) wrote that they could not find any disadvantages. Another two (11%) reported that since voice quality was inferior, it was sometimes difficult to understand English as a non-native speaker.

The other four comments (21%) varied in content. One participant missed the opportunity to talk about class outside of class, and another missed that she could not make friends with those in other majors. One wrote that she felt as if someone were always watching her if her video was turned on. The other suggested that the instructor stay in Zoom after class to receive questions because she was hesitant to ask questions in class.

Table 15

Disadvantages of Taking This Class Online (Optional Questions)

Points	Internet		Presentation		Communication		None		Voice Quality		Others	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
	4	21%	4	21%	3	16%	2	11%	2	11%	4	21%

Note. N=19

6. Discussions and Conclusions

From the survey results, it became clear that the participants prepared and took measures to take classes online. Without these efforts, giving and taking online lessons would not have been possible, and I feel grateful for their and families' preparation and cooperation. Yet some experienced more than a few instances of disturbance in class. I reconfirmed the importance of being considerate of those who do not necessarily have an ideal environment. Asking the students to turning off the video when they are not in breakout rooms or called on can be emphasized. Encouraging them to call for help is another. It might be an instructor's expertise to have a back-up plan.

The fact that the participants could understand the class well and that they were present in class most of the time is encouraging. It is in line with the result of the university-wide survey of students showing that 87% of those who took the core courses using Zoom either "fully understood" or "mostly understood" the class content (T. Miura, personal communication, August 20, 2020). The digitization of materials and effective use of the screen-sharing function seem to have somewhat contributed to their understanding. Emailing the content of each lesson and homework assignments seems helpful.

The preference for various activities in breakout rooms is noteworthy. It seems to come from the students' desire to communicate with peers, speak in English without being conscious of the

bigger group's eyes, get stimulated by peers, or interact with peers from different backgrounds. Besides, the instructor's mini-lectures or explanations and checking the answers to questions as a class are perceived favorably. Thus, having the right balance of group work and whole-class activities may be the key.

The result that the participants felt less hesitant to ask questions is relieving. More than 80% of the participants thought it either "easy" or "somewhat easy" to do so, and 78% asked questions at least once. Still, there are a certain number of participants who felt it hard to ask questions. This may suggest that efforts to let them ask questions are necessary. Allowing enough time for Q&A, showing multiple ways to ask questions, and guiding them to the idea that asking questions benefits the entire class, are the things to be implemented next semester. Besides, as one participant suggested, finishing each lesson a few minutes early and letting them ask questions before ending the Zoom session is worth considering.

Assignment load is one area that needs improvement. A little over half of the participants found it just right while the remaining half felt it "somewhat heavy" or "heavy." This, too, is in line with the university-wide survey results, showing that 64% felt the assignments are "too heavy" or "somewhat heavy" (T. Miura, personal communication, August 20, 2020). In retrospect, their perception may also have something to do with the shorter-than-usual 13 weeks in one semester, where they had packed schedules. It could also be explained by their loneliness in doing assignments by themselves, different from their regular student life of doing homework in the library after class with their friends. It may also be true that the homework from many classes accumulated and made them feel overwhelmed. In response, revising the amount and nature of assignments and its due dates is called for. Giving them time to write their paragraphs or essays during class time and letting them prepare for their group presentations in class, as I have attempted, may help reduce their workload outside of class.

As many participants noted, it turned out that we could do many activities—done in face-to-face classes—in online lessons as well, if not entirely. Indeed, there are inconveniences and sudden and uncontrollable troubles while online, as mentioned earlier in this paper. Keeping in mind the essential learning outcomes, being attentive to students' understanding, needs, and feelings, and being flexible while having back-up plans for accidents may be essential.

Giving classes online triggered me to rethink about what and how to teach from scratch, resulting in the replacement and elimination of activities. These efforts seem to have been positively perceived by the participants, yet I must bear in mind that the voices of 46% of those who took my classes are not heard—they may have more critical views. Moreover, as online classes may continue for a while, underlying issues, such as students' mental and physical conditions, may emerge, and unexpected challenges may face us. As an instructor, I would like to see challenges as a catalyst for viewing the common practices, or what we take for granted, from a fresh perspective.

References

- Abe declares coronavirus emergency over in Japan*. (2020, May 25). Kyodo News. <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/05/a1f00cf165ae-japan-poised-to-end-state-of-emergency-over-coronavirus-crisis.html>
- Japan to declare nationwide state of emergency amid virus spread. (2020, April 16). *The Mainichi*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20200416074627/https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20200416/p2g/00m/0na/085000c>
- Kao Corporation. (2020, May 12). *Shingata korona uirusu ga kurashi ni ataeta eikyou:8,492 nin no chousa kara mieta seikatusha no genzai* [Influence of new coronavirus on people's lives: current situations of people seen from the survey of 8,492 people]. Kao. <https://www.kao.co.jp/lifei/feature/567/>
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. (2020, May 13). *Shingata kotona uirusu kansensyou taisaku ni kansuru daigaku tou no taiou jyoukyou ni tsuite* [Circumstances of universities regarding measures against new coronavirus infections]. https://www.mext.go.jp/content/202000513-mxt_kouhou01-000004520_3.pdf
- National Institute of Informatics. (n.d.). *Shigatsu kara no daigaku tou enkaku jyugyou ni kansuru torikumi jyoukyou kyoyuu saiba shinpojium* [Cyber symposiums for sharing the circumstances of work on remote classes at universities since April]. <https://www.nii.ac.jp/event/other/decs/>
- Reynolds, I. & Nobuhiro, E. (2020, April 15). Japan's Abe warns virus surge in invoking emergency. *Bloomberg*. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-07/japan-s-abe-declares-state-of-emergency-over-coronavirus>
- The University of Tokyo. (n.d.). *Onrain jyugyou/Web kaigi potaru saito @ toukyou daigaku* [Online Class/Web Conference Portal Site @ the University of Tokyo]. <https://utelecon.github.io/>

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank 55 anonymous participants who kindly responded to my survey and gave invaluable input. I would also like to thank our talented teaching assistant Ms. Kimika Mastuyama for her continued support throughout the semester. Finally, I am grateful for the valuable feedback given on this paper's earlier draft by the anonymous reviewer.