

Key Elements of Online Teaching  
- The first step in learning to use the online teaching approach

Chiaki Hayashi

The Centre for the Study of English Language Teaching

JOURNAL Volume 9

FUKUOKA JO GAKUIN UNIVERSITY

# Key Elements of Online Teaching

## - The first step in learning to use the online teaching approach

Chiaki Hayashi

### Abstract

This article reports an online classroom research carried out during the influence of a highly transmissible infectious epidemic. Google Classroom (hereafter GC) was adopted for the entire 2020 academic year and instructors were informed of this new approach to teaching two weeks prior to the beginning of the first semester in April. Teachers had to conduct their GC while facing and experiencing the constraints and limitations brought by COVID-19. To understand the students' experience and thoughts towards online classroom, this article analyzes the questionnaire students did at the end of the term.

The analysis will touch upon such issues as the effectiveness of teaching, the nature of online teaching, and the problem of motivating both students and teachers. As will be shown, the '5 minutes Quick Task' worked well with online classroom and it was found that the teacher's positive attitude and stance was an effective means for encouraging students to work in the classroom.

*Keyword:* online classroom, authentic communication,  
task development

### Introduction

The transmission-preventive measures that have been imposed since the onslaught of COVID-19 brought drastic changes to pedagogical practice. The sudden need for teachers to teach their classes online meant that university lecturers had to confront to a different kind of classroom reality. Teaching under unprecedented circumstances, adapting to the new reality brought by the epidemic, teachers were forced to rethink the very nature of teaching itself. This article reports an online classroom research that was undertaken during these circumstances.

Fukuoka-Jo Gakuin University adopted online classroom for the entire

academic year in 2020, and GC was implemented as a way to promote student learning. Given the fact that the school made the decision two weeks prior to the start of the semester, instructors had to use GC under conditions stipulated by the school on very short notice. A number of unusual and situational limitations affected a range of long-established teaching procedures (classroom design, instruction style and assessment strategy). The first year university students had to attend online classes under such unprecedented, unsettling and unexpected circumstances.

This article examines the answers students gave to an end-of-term questionnaire in an effort to understand their experience of and views regarding online classroom. As will be argued, their responses shed some light on possible ways of ensuring productive, effective pedagogical practice and give an insight into interesting online classroom-related issues, such as raising both the students' and teachers' level of motivation.

### Institution's Adoption of Google Classroom

Covid-19 transmission risks have made it necessary to avoid close contact between individuals and remote-work has become the norm in many areas and fields of professional life worldwide. In the field of education, online classroom is now commonly used to ensure learning. The school the author works for decided to adopt GC as both an interactive and a distant means to teach all classes. The general teaching policy was issued on the 7th and the online teaching request was announced to all the instructors on the 10th of April, two weeks prior to the beginning of the first semester class.

The general teaching policy reflected the policies issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology-Japan (hereafter MEXT). MEXT (2020) stated its commitment to take initiatives against the COVID-19 pandemic in the field of education and take whatever measures necessary to ensure that students would carry on their learning as much as possible and that no one would be academically left behind.

Along with the announcement were instructions on how to use the online teaching system and issues - timetables and course syllabi - to be considered by teachers. Most importantly, the guidance required all online classes to incorporate the following two points:

- 1) Provide answers for questions/tasks and make suggestions
- 2) Provide the opportunities for the exchange of opinion/information among the students.

Classes that didn't reflect these two points were seen to be defective. Teachers, in other words, were discouraged to simply set tasks and collect assignments online.

MEXT also anticipated problems related to online teaching, such as the issue of data capacity and the devices students would use during online classroom. The document highlighted the problems brought by students who have little or no access to Wi-Fi. It, therefore, recommended the use of text-data as the main source of instruction. It also warned that some students might not have computers and might be using smart phones instead. Teachers were asked to allow students to submit their assignments by text-data or by photographing their work.

### The Learners' Exposure to Google Classroom

The author of this research was in charge of First-year English (hereafter FYE), a required, introductory course to English. All participating students were university students in their first year belonging to four different departments specializing in the humanities other than English. There were approximately 30 students in each class. Because the online classes started without a placement test for streaming students, the class of each department was comprised of students with varying proficiency levels in English. Furthermore, none of the students had the opportunity to meet either their instructor or their classmates, even prior to the start of the semester. They were in the dark with very little understanding of what and how they would be studying at the tertiary level.

The students' use of personal computers and other devices when studying varied significantly across the departments. Some departments provided all of their students with a tablet device. According to the results of the questionnaire distributed to the classes at the end of the semester, one third of the students used a PC. And, as the school predicted, more than half of the students used a mobile phone. In addition, one third of the students used both a PC and a mobile phone simultaneously: for example, they would use their mobile phone to listen to a CD and use their PC to

type their answers. Some students experienced difficulty even typing in English. Others faced problems relating to Wi-Fi connection at home.

### The Instructors Adopting Google Classroom

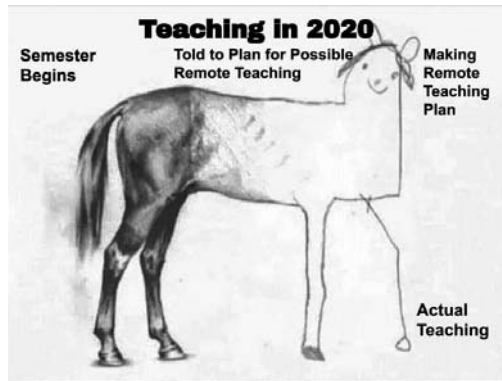
The instructor taught 4 classes a day, and each class consisted of roughly 30 students. The following day, 4 different classes were taught with the same number of students in each. The 4 classes taught in the same day were called FYE AI or FYE BI. Each of the 8 classes met twice a week. The textbook chosen for AI focused on listening while BI focused on reading. The instructor prepared for four teaching days every week, which involved a total of 446 students. Given the tight and demanding schedule the instructor had to demonstrate a type of resilience known in Japan as “having to keep pedaling so as not to fall off the bicycle” to meet the expected standard of learning opportunities. Through trial and error and the feedback she received, the instructor had ample opportunity to experiment and improve her performance as a teacher of online classroom.

Both teachers and students had to adjust to the new circumstances brought by online teaching and conform to the rules mandated by authorities, grappling daily with the problems and issues of remote learning. Mastering the technology would be the least of their worries. The real challenge consisted of delivering classes, which students thought were intellectually satisfying and constructive.

While it has been said that technological advancements would make it easier for teachers to offer to their students a wider variety of educational content, in reality, achieving this level of confidence is very difficult and using the available technology requires a great deal of practice and experience. Hence teachers are perhaps still quite a long way away from the point where they might experience professional satisfaction and contentment that result from their efforts to implement technology. Compared to the workload they had before the spread of COVID-19, the first semester of online teaching revealed that in the future teachers would be spending more time searching for appropriate approaches and strategies while preparing their classes.

In addition, the time available to prepare and adjust was very limited. The announcement to adopt online teaching came only two weeks prior to the start of the semester. Teachers were not trained how to conduct online classes effectively, but they received a manual focusing on the basic use of

the GC system, such as how to invite students to the classroom. The 'Teaching in 2020', the humorous illustration below, describes very aptly the reality and fear teachers initially faced when they experienced virtual teaching for the first time.



Photograph 1. Teaching in 2020

Given the recent trends in education coupled with the drastic changes imposed by the pandemic, we have seen the education sector taking bigger strides towards individualized learning to engage students in the learning process. Technology is playing an increasing role in a continued shift towards customizing the learning experience for students individually.

Kariya (2020) warns that it is dangerous to rely too much on Edtech, or private companies which produce online educational applications of various subjects and offer individual students customized materials which correspond to their level and progress. He suspects that the effect of Edtech, which is highly regarded as a panacea that solves all the problems in education - reduction of teachers' workload or tailoring instruction to students' level or ability - should come under more scrutiny. So rather than allow ourselves to be carried away by the advances of technology and allow our teaching to be driven by the tools we use, turning education into a more mechanical process, as teachers we should be able to build our lesson plans around real-time insights into our students' needs obtained from actually meeting and teaching the students in classroom situations.

Taking these considerations into account, the author decided to focus on what she saw as paramount in learning, that is, to ensure first and foremost her students' positive emotional engagement with the learning

process.

First, she decided to turn to research done on computer-assisted language learning (hereafter CALL) to see how it might give some essential insights into how to best take advantage of online resources. In order to build a productive CALL classroom, Yamaguchi (2004) points out that teachers can help students structure their learning and confront and tackle issues related to student motivation and autonomy.

Furthermore, the author believed in the importance of Hanson-Smith's (2001) view that, where technology is deployed to its best advantage, we should see teacher's role becoming that of a guide and mentor, encouraging students to take charge of their own learning, helping them to learn at their own pace.

Since the students were about to confront the additional hurdle of an online classroom to which they had never been exposed before, the author took an approach which ensured that her class would stay simple, clear and consistent, that it would be based on the textbook so that students would be able to learn in a safe learning environment. As the author faced the demanding and daunting task of preparing her online classes, she sensed that she was traveling along a long and arduous road, or a steep learning curve. Every class was putting a new aspect of teaching or learning to the test, such as experimenting with a new kind of task, or keeping a record of minor problems that were encountered. Based on her experience of what worked and didn't work in class, she made changes to her approach for the next class.

## A Multi-Dimensional Approach

### 1) Lesson Plan - to pace the students' learning

Considering the institutional requirements of following the class timetable and of sustaining the usual face-to-face 60 minutes lesson plan, the author decided to adopt a 5 minutes pace task delivery system, and to use it as the main mode of instruction during online lessons. This approach was thought to keep the class under control, pace the students' learning and to allow the instructor to keep a record of their attendance and of their contribution during each class. Therefore lesson plans followed the 6-stage pattern:

- ① Greeting – explanation of the class contents and goals of the day

- ② Mini Quiz – short quiz to review the vocabulary learned during the previous session
- ③ 6-7 tasks that draw upon the exercises found in the textbook - each task would be sent every 5 minutes
- ④ The answers and feedback for each task would be given once submitted
- ⑤ Final Quiz – some writing exercises using the target vocabulary and grammar
- ⑥ Final Greeting – explaining to students how the next class would unfold so that they know what to expect

This system allowed the teacher to monitor the students' individual efforts and the progress of her class. This approach also enabled the teacher to interact with the students during the session. When some students appeared to have difficulties in keeping up to the pace, the teacher was in a position to provide advice and scaffolding. If the task was relatively easy and most of the students finished and submitted their answers quickly, the teacher would quicken the pace and set the tasks earlier.

## 2) Strategies - to minimize the students' level of stress

Former research (Hayashi 2019; Hashimoto 2017) suggested that the quick task, where student complete tasks within a 5 minute time limit, is effective in attenuating the students' level of stress and anxiety when learning the target language. Not only listening tasks, but also reading and writing tasks needs to be completed within 5 minutes. The students were therefore encouraged to carry out their reading and writing tasks in 5 minutes. Skimming and scanning activities were set to foster reading comprehension. Students were encouraged to use techniques for decoding meaning. With respect to the quick write tasks, the students' speed and amount of writing would take precedence regardless of the mistakes that would be made. Longer pieces of writing would be awarded more points and all tasks should be finished within the allocated 5 minutes.

Especially in the case of slower learners, allowing the students to use dictionaries and even translation applications or devices during the class may be conducive to lowering their levels of stress and to motivating them to work harder. Such extra help can be especially useful when slow learners engage in reading and writing tasks. Many researchers point out



that it is not realistic for teachers of English to prevent their students from utilizing those recent technological developments (Gally 2019; Ishikawa 2019; Sakai 2019). They are even in favor of the teachers themselves practicing and learning how to use these devices and applications so that they might in turn be in a position to demonstrate better ways of using them to their students.

### 3) Giving Praise – to motivate students

A simple but often overlooked way of rewarding students for their effort is through words of encouragement. Learners crave praise and recognition for a task well done. Teachers have nothing to lose by making positive comments and the students' renewed motivation is noticeable when teachers acknowledge their achievements. Thanks to the GC function which automatically groups students with the same answer, instructors can provide spontaneous feedback. Slow learners can be encouraged to take a look at their textbook in advance, enabling them to finish tasks on time and receive positive feedback for the work they complete. Being prepared in advance, students can in principle commit themselves to work harder and engage more deeply with the materials being presented.

## Participants' Voice

The school mandates students to evaluate their English classes after the last class. Based on the evaluation they gave, it can be argued that the online classroom was on the whole successful. To be specific, 95 % of participants said that they actively and seriously worked during class. Additionally, 90% replied that they were able to concentrate during class. More than 80% felt that they were able to communicate during the session. Nearly 80% claimed that the motivation to learn in the future grew.

The results also included the participants' rare and unexpected comments. As the following comments indicate, students candidly described their situation and how they felt when studying online. To preserve the meaning of what students wanted to articulate, their original texts in Japanese are followed by the author's translation.

- ① 課題とテキストが見やすく、テキストもカラーでなんだかやる気が出ました。英語は苦手なのですが、この授業は憂鬱ではなく楽しんで課

題に取り組みました。テキストの内容もコミカルでとてもためになり時には面白い内容だったので余計に楽しかったです！また先生が送ってくださる課題のペースも丁度良かったのでやりやすかったです。

The assignments and texts are easy to see, and the textbook is in color, which motivated me. I am not good at English, but this class wasn't depressing and I enjoyed working on the tasks. The content of the text was also comical and very informative, and sometimes it was interesting, so it was more fun! Also, the pace at which the assignments were sent by the teacher was just right, so it was easy to do.

- ② 一つひとつの課題にコメントをしてくれたのが嬉しかったです。

I was glad that the teacher commented on each assignment.

- ③ 間違えたら訂正をもらって、正解したら褒めてもらえたので嬉しかったです。

I was happy because if I made a mistake, I was corrected, and if I answered correctly, I was praised.

- ④ 一対一で先生とコミュニケーションが取れるので、質問しやすかったです。説明もわかりやすく、回答に対しては毎回コメントをくださって、集中して効率よく学ぶことが出来たと思います。

It was easy to ask questions because I was able to communicate with the teacher one-on-one. The explanations were easy to understand, and I think that I was able to concentrate and learn efficiently because she commented on every answer I gave.

- ⑤ この授業は時間が詰め詰めで、課題が終わっても次の課題が出されて、一息つく暇が無く（良い意味で）、60分集中して授業を受けることが出来ました。

There were a lot of things we had to do in each lesson, and even after the assignment was over, the next assignment was given, and I was able to concentrate during the lesson for 60 minutes without taking a break (in a good way).

- ⑥ 一つ一つの問題に対して一人一人コメントを書きくださり、コロナウイルスの影響でずっと家に居て慣れないパソコンを使いながら、分からないことだらけの大学生活のスタートだったので、ちゃんと履修

できているのか、免許はとれるのか、などふあんなことばかりだったのですが、先生のコメントで一人で勉強しているのではないんだと救われた気がして全くやる気のなかった授業も、少しずつ集中できるようになったり、問題を解くスピードが速くなってきたり自身につながったと思います。・・・先生のコメントをもらうため前回よりもいい点数を取ろうと思って、前回の復習や次回の予習をしたり、英語は苦手だけど私なりに頑張ることが出来たのではないかなと思います。本当は英語は特に苦手だったので対面授業で習いたかったのですが、コロナウイルスの影響で仕方がないことですが、私的には対面授業と同じくらいの満足感を得ています。・・・

The teacher wrote comments for each question. I was at home for a long time due to the influence of the corona virus, and while using a computer I was not accustomed to, I started my college life full of things I didn't understand. I was wondering if I was able to take the course properly and if I could get a license, but the teacher's comment made me feel that I wasn't studying alone, so I was totally motivated. I think that even in lessons that I didn't have any interest, I became able to concentrate little by little, and the speed of answering questions became faster, which led me to gain greater self-confidence.

I'm not good at English, but I think I was able to do my best, trying to get a better score than the last time by reviewing and preparing for the next lesson. Actually, I was not particularly good at English, so I wanted to learn it in face-to-face lessons, but I can't help it because of the corona virus, but I personally feel as satisfied as in face-to-face lessons.

Participants felt isolation and confusion, just like the instructor. They liked the textbook and felt that the '5 minutes Quick Task' system provided the optimal pace for learning. Participants' messages revealed that, overall, this online classroom seemed successful, mainly because of the positive feedbacks they received. They found them encouraging.

However, the result also indicated some challenges to be met. Some students were eager to communicate with classmates during class. On the other hand, there were students who were reluctant to appear in front of the camera and communicate with their classmates.

The classes the author was in charge had no students who majored in English. It is customary for those not majoring in English to share a negative attitude towards English (Hayashi, 2019). The classroom

questionnaire revealed the fact that many students favored the online classroom because they didn't experience embarrassment demonstrating their ability in front of their peers and were able to study at their own pace, such as listening to a CD as much as they wanted.

### Final Thought

Carter & Nunan (2010) view that there are two goals language courses taught at universities must help achieve. Besides the acquisition of content, teachers must guide the students' learning process. Teachers shouldn't fulfill an authoritarian role. They should adopt the role of an organizer, whereby they control the students' pace of learning, and scaffold their learning (Yamaguchi 2004; Shiozawa 2003). This research has shown that it is also possible to apply these principles to online classroom.

The students' feedback has clearly shown that even in the virtual world, it is possible to establish an authentic, successful and meaningful teacher-student rapport. Positive, complimentary and supportive responses on students' tasks play a key role towards ensuring a safe and meaningful experience for all the participants. In spite of the off-putting and inhibiting distance imposed by having to communicate by virtual means, and even though the means of communicating between the participants during the learning process has changed and is mediated by technology, both the students' and the teachers' needs remain unchanged and need to be addressed (Takeuchi 2021).

This research has demonstrated that it is possible to break the barrier between the instructor and the learners brought by online communication. Teachers need to consider taking a more systematic, step-by-step approach so that each student in the class can pace her learning. No matter how advanced the technology is, however, it is counterproductive unless it can be practically implemented. And as Kariya (2020) argues, given the uncertainties brought by the corona virus, it is the faculty members who must use their knowledge and wisdom to the fullest to accurately understand the changes they face and make decisions based on what they learn.

On the basis of the successful aspects of this semester's online teaching experience, the author feels that, in time and with practice, both teachers and students will come to recognize and appreciate that even in the virtual world of teaching, every cloud has a silver lining. No matter

how difficult the situation, there must be a good side which becomes a ray of light for the future. And the Participants will learn to take advantage of the opportunities which online teaching offers and which are not available in the real-world classroom.

## Reference

- Gally, T. (2019). *Kikai honyaku no shimpo to genjo ni okeru genkai*. Presented at symposium: AI ya honyakuki ga shinpo shitara gaikokugo kyōiku wa dounaruka, Gengo kyōiku Expo 2019. March 10, Waseda University, Tokyo.
- Hanson-Smith, E. (2001). Computer-assisted language learning. In R. Carter & D. Nunan (Eds.), *The Cambridge guide to teaching English to speakers of other languages* (pp. 107-113). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hashimoto, S. (2017). *Pedagogical benefits of incorporating Quick Writes – a writing fluency activity*. Paper presented at JACET 56<sup>th</sup> International Convention, Aoyama University, Tokyo, August 30.
- Hayashi, C. (2019). Quick Task Effect: focus on students' perceptions. *The Centre for the Study of English Language Teaching Journal*, 7, 131-144.
- Kariya, T. (2020) *Korona-go no kyōiku he. Oxford karano teisyōu*. CHUKORON-SHINSYA.
- Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology-Japan(2020). *Reiwa 2 nendo ni okeru daigaku nado no jyūgyō no kaishi nado nituite*. [https://www.mext.go.jp/a\\_menu/shotou/zyouhou/detail/\\_icsFiles/afildfile/2018/04/06/1369637\\_3.pdf](https://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/zyouhou/detail/_icsFiles/afildfile/2018/04/06/1369637_3.pdf).
- Carter, R and Nunan, D. (2010) *The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511667206>
- Ishikawa, Y. (2019) *Consideration for Effective Use of Japanese-English Machine Translation: Application of a Writing Strategy*. Paper presented at FLEAT 7, International Conference on Foreign Language Education and Technology, Waseda University, Tokyo, August 8.
- Sakai, S. (2019). Henka no jidai ni tachiaite. *Gengo Kyōiku expo 2019 yokousyū*, 1.  
<http://www.waseda.jp/assoc-jacetenedu/expo2019.pdf>
- Shiozawa, T. (2003). Netto no naka no kininaru yougo. *The English Teachers' Magazine* December, 14-16, Taishukan, Tokyo.
- Takeuchi, O. (2020). Online Eigo Jyūgyō no ryūui ten – kouka wo umidasu tameni, *The English Teachers' Magazine*, October 69-8, 66-67, Taishukan, Tokyo.
- Yamaguchi, C. (2004) Jisyū-gakusyū wo unagasu eigo CALL wo mezashite -Toward Self-directed Learning Through English CALL. *LET Kyūshū-Okinawa BULLETIN*, 4, 61-70.