Teacher and Student Perspectives of Online Learning During the COVID Pandemic

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Introduction

Dramatic changes to the education landscape resulted in many adaptations after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and universities in Japan were no exception. This paper examines the relevant research into online learning in Japanese universities, perspectives of teachers with regards to online learning, and finally an examination of students' views of online learning in contrast with face-to-face lessons. The content of this paper offers an analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data related to student and teacher perceptions on digital learning, with the goal of providing a guide to both instructors and administrators in navigating the realms of online and in-person lessons through the turbulent COVID and post-pandemic eras.

Literature Review

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, educational institutions around the world had to adapt and quickly develop methods for online learning. This current paper focuses on data gathered at a university in central Japan, but it helps to also look more broadly at how teachers and students reacted to these changes in various settings both inside and outside this country.

   At some universities, instructors found success by working together and forming support groups as the shift to online teaching was occurring. This allowed for teachers less comfortable with technology to adapt more quickly, and also created opportunities for instructors to share teaching materials that worked well within digital learning environments (Cowie, 2021). Our

university took a similar approach—during 2020 teachers would meet online once a week to troubleshoot problems and share ideas with similar success. Researchers in Indonesia found that many teachers reacted to the change to online learning with concern, stating that traditional educational methods should not be abandoned despite having to teach online (Fitria, 2020). Within that same study however, a majority of instructors surveyed found that their institution was supportive of this shift to digital learning, with 84% stating they received enough support to be able to teach well online. Other researchers found more mixed reactions from teachers about online learning, with people stating they felt confident overcoming technical problems that arose, but feeling less confident in regard to the actual methods of instruction during online classes (Putri & Sari, 2021). This trouble with conducting classes included things like difficulty giving feedback related to assignments, as well as how to best administer tests while online.

There were particular problems found around the world with regards to student teaching and assisting teachers new to their education environments during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Swedish teacher trainees placed in schools located in Japan, India and Kenya were not able to physically travel to their workplaces, instead having to teach over Zoom from their home country. Although they were assisted by teachers who were present with the students in the physical classrooms, the trainees reported a variety of difficulties due to the hybrid nature of the classes, including monitoring students during activities and trouble with internet connectivity (Hansson, 2021). Although hybrid classes contain their own sets of difficulties, these same issues are present during purely online courses as well, and therefore further work must be done toward dealing with problems such as these if digital learning is to continue.

As can be expected, students' reactions to online teaching and learning varied greatly depending on the location, socio-economic status of families and institutions involved, and the quality of teaching that was presented to them. In Chile, students were found to have positive feelings toward the use of technology for educational purposes, but worried about possible cases of discrimination that could occur when students and their families were unable

to pay for the cost of online education (e.g., computers, internet access, etc.) (Sepulveda-Escobar & Morrison, 2020). This same survey asked student teachers in this setting for their opinions on online learning as well, and many of the responses included worries about the lack of chances for interaction with students while online, as well as their lack of ability to practice the classroom management techniques they had studied as part of their teacher training. Researchers in Vietnam polled students on their reactions to online learning, looking specifically at the use of Microsoft Teams for the purposes of conducting classes digitally (software that the authors all used at our institution as well). They found that students were mostly positive about the use of Teams, citing in particular the enjoyment of asynchronous chatting that is possible within Teams posts (Yen & Nguyen, 2021). The authors of that study believe that online communication of this kind for the purposes of education may be beneficial for students suffering from social anxiety or who have trouble following class material in real time, as it allows them to go back and review class contents, as well as think carefully about how they want to respond to discussion questions and other prompts. Similar problems were found in Vietnam with regards to trouble with internet access, which even in the developed country of Japan where the authors of this paper work, can be an issue in some communities.

Teacher Survey Regarding Online Classes

Background and Methods

In an effort to better guide the curriculum of the Liberal Education Center (L.E.C.) at Aichi Prefectural University during the COVID pandemic, the management of the L.E.C. decided to conduct an anonymous survey of English teachers in the Liberal Education cohort. The teachers who took part in the survey consisted of both contracted (full-time) teachers as well as part-time teachers (*hijokin*).

The survey conducted in January 2022 reflected the thoughts and opinions of teachers in the Liberal Education Department regarding their English

language courses taught to non-English major students from a variety of departments including Foreign Language Studies (Chinese, French, German and Spanish) as well as Computer Science, Education and Social Welfare, Japanese Literature, and Japanese History and Culture Studies courses. Seventeen total participants took part in the survey. All information gathered was anonymous and questions posed in such a way as to help us better understand the experiences and opinions of teachers when comparing online courses versus courses conducted live and in-person. The survey was part of an overall effort to gauge teachers' experiences and opinions with teaching online lessons as required during the COVID-19 pandemic. Part of the rationale for the survey was to better prepare for online courses should the need arise in the future. All results were shared during a meeting in which survey responses were discussed and a free-form discussion was held as part of the professional development program at Aichi Prefectural University at the end of the second semester in January 2022.

The COVID-19 pandemic remains fluid and while, as of October 2022, the pandemic is far from over, some normalcy has returned to university campuses across Japan. For example, as of this writing all Liberal Education courses that had moved online are now conducted face-to-face. These policies were mandated by governmental policy at the prefectural level as well as by the university administration and implemented by various departments and centers at the university. The L.E.C. education courses covered in this survey are English courses which include both academic as well as communicative content and primarily are divided into first and second-year courses (but with some elective 'content-based' English courses as well). The other departments' teachers within Liberal Education were not a part of the teachers' survey which focused on only the English courses taught.

The goal of this research is to help gauge teacher and student experiences and recommendations of online teaching in the hope that should the need arise, the experiences of adapting lessons to online learning formats will be beneficial. This research is intended to be largely practical rather than theoretical. It should be stressed again, that the situation—not only in education but in all aspects of society—remains fluid and COVID numbers,

in addition to strain varieties and severity of infection, are constantly changing.

Results

The feedback of the teachers will be explored in their entirety below.

Which was more time consuming for you as an instructor with regards to course preparation? *(Please check one)*
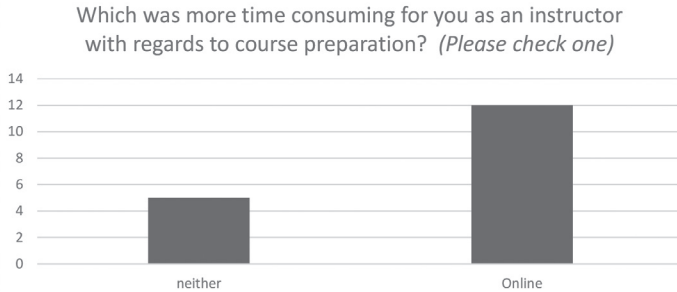
Figure A. Preparation Time—Online vs. Face-to-Face

In this survey question, the result is clear—online lessons took more time to prepare while a number of teachers believed that neither took more time. No teachers surveyed felt that face-to-face classes took more time to prepare than online courses (and thus that option is not included in the graph).

How much time did you spend communicating online with your students in comparison with face-to-face classes? *(Please check one)*
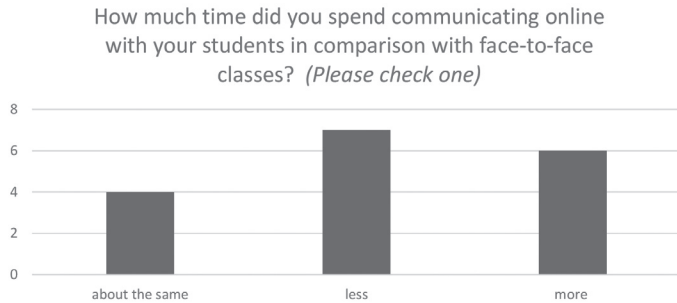
Figure B. Time Constraints—Online Vs. Face-to-Face Lessons

In Figure B the survey result showing which manner of class required more time for communicating with students, demonstrates a wider distribution of

responses than in regards to preparation time for courses.

Over the past academic years how did you conduct online lessons? *(Please check all that apply)*
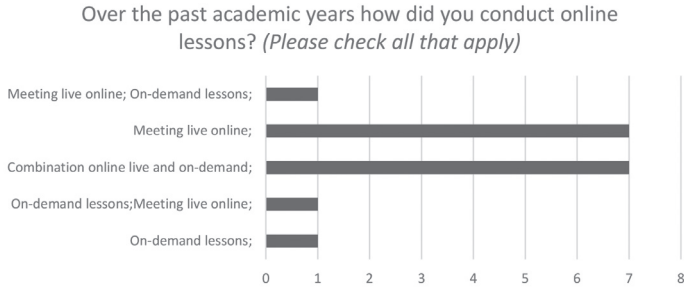
Figure C. Method of Online Lessons

This survey result was interesting in that it showed how different teachers approached online lessons with a variety of methods from meeting primarily live online with some on-demand lessons to on demand classes only. Full time teachers were required to meet their students at the regular class time and conduct live lessons, however there was some flexibility in this requirement for part-time teachers. The survey shows that while meeting live or meeting live in some combination with on-demand courses was most common, others met at times live and at times set on-demand lessons and one instructor only set on-demand lessons.

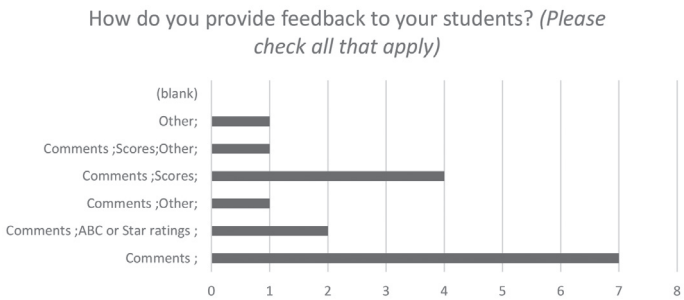How do you provide feedback to your students? *(Please check all that apply)*

Figure D. Feedback to Students

This survey result was fairly straightforward in that it described the different

methods in which teachers provided feedback for their students which was not mandated by the university but entirely at the teachers discretion. While there were a variety of methods for providing feedback, comments (or comments in some combination with other types of feedback) were the most common.
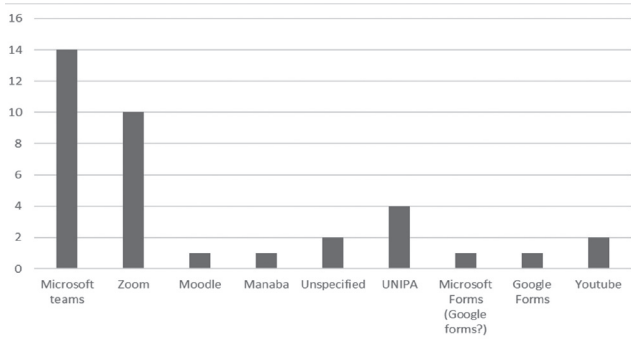

Figure E. Platforms Utilized

In Figure E we can see that a wide variety of platforms were used by teachers in providing online-content. Microsoft Teams and Zoom were by far the most common. It should be noted that access to Microsoft Teams as a platform was provided by the university to all teachers since the university had a subscription service and this service was available to all instructors free of charge.
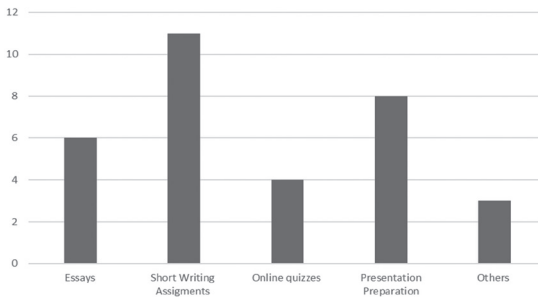

Figure F. Homework Assignments by Type

In Figure F we see that a wide variety of online assignments were given to students and these were also similar to assignments given to students in face-to-face classes as part of the normal curriculum.

List of Other Suggestions for Online Lessons (all responses)
- Generally speaking, I think face-to-face classes are more effective.
- When you teach online, we have more difficulty finding out students' mental or psychological abnormality. I have had this problem this semester. In the end of the semester, it turned out that a student has developmental disability. I really wish I had been notified in the beginning of the semester.
- Remote teaching should be avoided unless it is an emergency. Humans are not machines. There is no substitute for a face-to-face experience when it comes to education *(Original comment translated from Japanese)*.
- In online classes as well, I feel that it is important for both the teacher and the student to have classes at a fixed time, as in face-to-face classes, in order to maintain a regular rhythm in their lives *(Original comment translated from Japanese)*.
- Use Google Classroom rather than Teams.
- I think it went fairly smoothly but of course we don't know if it will be required to go back online or in person. It seems the decision should be made from a health standpoint (these past two years different departments seemed to have different guidelines this academic year some teachers were completely online at Kendai while in the Liberal Education we were face-to-face.) As for the actual lessons, Zoom and Teams seemed to work well and teachers also had the freedom to use other applications as they saw fit which I feel is appropriate.
- Flexibility in time and even assessment criteria is essential for accommodating students' different personal and technological capabilities.
- I have a professional studio here, 4 cameras. If people are familiar, or could become familiar with multiple HDMI camera inputs, switchers,

audio, 3-point lighting, white balance color adjustments, physical green screen with those with blue eyes, green screen or blue screen for others, etc., online could actually be more effective than in person. I spent about 400,000 yen of my own money to ensure that the students received the best experience possible. I suspect most teachers don't want to spend that kind of money so must work with what they have.

Student Survey Regarding Online Classes

Background and Methods

The survey related to students' opinions regarding online courses was conducted by the Aichi Prefectural University's Committee of Faculty Development from December 28 in 2021 to February 14 in 2022. The participants of the survey, which was conducted in Japanese, were students who were currently enrolled in Aichi Prefectural University selected by five faculties at the university. It should be noted that while the students' survey focused on a variety of students across different majors, the teachers' survey involved those instructors teaching English in the Liberal Education department. Each faculty member asked for 10–20 students who were willing to participate in the survey and 65 students were requested to complete the survey in total. The survey was administered by means of semi-structured questionnaires and was completed by 35 students (a response rate of 53.8%) through the university online portal, UNIPA. Permission to analyze the data from the survey by the FD Committee was obtained from the FD Committee Chair and the Division of Academic Affairs. Students were told that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. A sample of questions and responses are listed below as well as in the Appendix.

1. What was good about online classes compared to the face-to-face classes and why?
   a. What do you feel were the learning benefits of online learning?

    b. What do you feel you have learned actively in the online classes?

    c. What class content and methods do you feel are appropriate for online learning?

    d. Others (free comments)

2. What was wrong with the online class compared to the face-to-face class and why?

    a. What aspects of the online class did you find less effective for learning?

    b. What do you find burdensome with many assignments in online classes?

    c. What class content and methods do you feel are not appropriate for online learning?

    d. Others (free comments)

Results

For the purposes of our thematical analysis of this qualitative data, we narrowed our focus from a total of 618 responses regarding language education in general and selected and summarized 29 responses regarding online vs. face-to-face learning with relevance for our research. Then, we categorized these responses into positive or negative comments. Of the 29 responses were further categorized as 6 out of 29 as "positive" and 23 out of 29 as "negative" regarding online learning and language education.

Positive Comments (total of 6)

Positive comments were divided into two main categories, Learning Environment and Effect on Studying as stated below:

1. Learning environment:

    a. I could come to know unknown classmates communicating through the breakout room.

    b. I could concentrate more because I had a sense of tension that I was being watched.

    c. I had more homework and spent more time for study

2. Effects on studying
   a. I could see the movement of the instructor's mouth that was useful for pronunciation practice (2/6)
   b. It was easy to search the Internet and immediately check for clarifications

Negative Comments (total of 23)

Negative comments were divided into four separate categories: Online not being suitable for language classes, Students' differences in attitude, Teacher/student interaction, and Physical difficulties of networking.

1. Online classes is not suitable for language classes (8 out of 23)
   a. Online classes is not suitable especially for communicative ones (5 out of 23)
   b. Online classes is not suitable for role-playing, pair work or group activities in language class (6 out of 23)
   c. Language class should be conducted face-to-face with eye contact. (2 out of 23)
2. Students' differences in attitude: Online class requires more student autonomy, and without instructor's supervision some students don't participate fully. (2 out of 23)
3. Teacher/students interaction: It is difficult to ask questions to native speakers through monitors in online classes (1 out of 23)
4. Physical difficulties of networking: Poor network condition does not allow for smooth communication. (2 out of 23)

As can be seen above, students preferred face-to-face to online learning by a wide margin and highlighted specifically the need for in-person instruction when it came to language courses. Many students found the need for communication in language classes to be conducted in person to better facilitate active learning and group work. Poor network connections added to negative opinions about language learning. Positives of online learning were relatively few, however some students felt online learning did in fact have benefits.

Discussion

The general impression among teachers was that while many felt face-to-face lessons preferable, when online lessons were required due to COVID safety concerns, online lessons were able to be carried out without major disruption. Despite this, the survey also highlighted some differences in preparation time by instructors, with online lessons requiring more time to prepare than face-to-face lessons. This was also true in terms of teachers providing feedback to their students requiring more time online than in a face-to-face classroom setting.

One of the clearest benefits for students and teachers (perhaps in particular part-time teachers who must commute to various campuses—not an insignificant amount of time) was that classes began and ended with *no travel time required*. Some Aichi Prefectural University students commute approximately two hours from their homes both within the prefecture as well as neighboring prefectures such as Mie and Gifu to the Nagakute campus each day. The added time given to their schedule for other activities or rest was seen by many as positive. For some teachers, much could be achieved from a home office compared to commuting and working outside the home, and indeed this is an ongoing issue for workplaces around the world even outside of education. As stated in the survey—despite perhaps this main convenience (along with the obvious benefit of protecting oneself from COVID) most teachers clearly felt their lessons were more productive and gave their students greater benefits if they were conducted in person. Again, this was contingent on the policy of keeping students (and teachers) safe from COVID infection.

As for students, many clearly prefer face-to-face language classes, while many students recognize the advantages of online classes in other lecture-type courses, highlighting the *manner of class delivery* in valuing the benefits of online versus in-person lessons. In other words, with regards to communication and active engagement, in-person lessons are preferred and students' overall perception is that language classes, especially communicative classes, should be conducted face-to-face.

When conducting online lessons, a wide variety of platforms/software were utilized as demonstrated in Figure E, with Zoom and Microsoft Teams being the most commonly used. Unfortunately, both teachers' and students' Wi-Fi access and reliability were factors in conducting lessons. This impacted both instructors as well as students in that if an instructor's video was interrupted or truncated, students had difficulty in understanding and participating. Students' Wi-Fi connectivity determined how effectively they could both understand the instructor as well as communicate with their fellow students in Zoom breakout rooms, for example.

Conclusion and Directions for Further Research

As evidenced by the replication crisis in social science research, what may hold true for one institutional setting may not necessarily hold true for another. The findings of these types of surveys are always specific to a given place and time and the culture that surrounds that academic setting. With this caveat stated, it may be argued that holding in-person, face-to-face lessons, when safe to do so, should take precedence over online classes, especially in interactive and communicative language courses. This is particularly true in a setting of language learning which relies on social, cultural and group dynamics, rather than relying on linguistic input alone.

What is promising is that in this survey there is some agreement between both teachers and students in regard to the benefits of in-person lessons, especially when it comes to communicative language courses. Students and teachers largely agree that when institutions are safely able to do so, the benefits of holding classes in person outweigh the negatives or inconvenience.

Further, while outside the limited scope of this paper, it seems that especially in a society as time-starved as Japan, the four years of undergraduate study provide students an opportunity to not only explore their given majors and elective subjects, but also to understand more of themselves, interact with others, and freely develop as individuals as they grow from childhood to adulthood. Being on campus physically, all things considered, is an arguably better way to experience these important years rather than solely in front of

a device, but this of course must be weighed with the importance of keeping students safe and an ability to utilize online resources as the situation arises, which while not flawless, was mostly manageably when carried out using sound online teaching methodology.

While this research project was naturally limited in scope to the conditions at Aichi Prefectural University and specific courses, there are several avenues for future promising research:

- Examining whether or not there might be situations where online courses are *voluntarily* instituted as a benefit to the students
- A further exploration of negative consequences of conducting courses online (ex. isolation, loneliness) and how these weigh in contrast with the benefits of the reduction to exposure to COVID virus
- Whether or not 'hybrid' classes (simply defined as courses that are conducted by some members of the class in the classroom and others participating online from their homes or other locations) are worthwhile for students
- The degree to which teachers are able to 'opt-out' of face-to-face classes based on their own personal fears or concerns regarding COVID despite guidelines that deem it safe to teach in person

As demonstrated above, these are some of the complexities of teaching during the COVID era, and the answers are yet to be found. As for the research gathered in this project, it will hopefully provide a guide to others in navigating the complex area of managing both student health and safety as well as perceived benefits and drawbacks of engaging in online learning from both a teachers' and students' perspective. This project should be seen as one small piece of a complex puzzle in the analysis of online learning vs. face-to-face lessons which continues to evolve and requires further study.

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Appendix A: Students' Comments on Online Language Classes

Students were asked "What is your opinion about the online classes?" Below are excerpts from their responses. (Original texts are translated from Japanese)

1. To be able to talk and exchange opinions with complete strangers when discussing with classmates→to be able to watch the teacher's mouth movements in pronunciation class because of the automatic assignment to the breakout room

2. In the real-time type remote class, compared to the face-to-face class, I had the feeling that I was always being watched, so I took the class with a sense of urgency. I then worked on the day's assignment so that I could answer when the teacher asked me to.

3. If I had a question during class, I could quickly look it up on the computer at hand. In person, I couldn't do this because it wasn't very good to have my phone or computer open, but now I can look up things I don't understand while listening to class instead of just leaving them there, so I think my understanding of the class content has deepened.

4. More time to learn about the content of the assignment because of the increased number of assignments.

5. The only time I experienced both face-to-face and remote was in a liberal arts language class, but I didn't feel much hindered by the remote.

6. I think that face-to-face classes are more effective for language-related classes (grammar, subscriptions, communication, etc.) and the quality of the classes is higher.

7. In classes that require consultation with others (e.g., foreign languages), there are many areas that cannot be fully understood just by looking them up, so I felt that the learning effect was not as great as in person.

8. I did not feel that I was able to learn much in areas that required

communication, such as languages, debates, and presentations. The distance inevitably reduced my opportunities to converse with others.

9. When conducting discussions in remote live classes, I personally feel uncomfortable doing so and feel like I'm just consuming time.

10. Even though it was a communicative English class, there were classes that ended with a few written assignments and no English was spoken at all.

11. Inability to have a lively discussion
    →Difficult to talk in the right timing.
    →Unless the participants were already familiar with each other, it was difficult to speed up the conversation (due to mutual reservations). Sometimes I was almost ignored in the breakout rooms.

12. The conversation classes were conducted online, but some students were not actively engaged in, and the quality of the classes was low.

13. I would have liked to have taken the German conversation class face-to-face.

14. There is a big difference between a live person speaking and watching a video. When learning to speak in a foreign language, it is easier to speak and more effective to learn by actually making eye contact and conversing than in an online class where it is difficult to hear.

15. I don't think online is suitable for foreign language classes. In learning a foreign language, actually pronouncing the language and talking to other people using that language are the key to improving language skills, but it is difficult to do these things in a remote class, and in this respect, foreign language classes are not suitable for remote delivery.

16. Classes that involve role-playing. It was difficult to understand the other party's reaction and situation remotely, so it was hard to do such activities.

17. Classes in which students communicate with many people in the class. In classes such as foreign language classes where it is necessary to communicate with many more people than in group work, I felt that the time needed to switch breakout rooms, etc. was wasted.

18. Regarding the foreign language classes, I felt the following.

→Difficult to understand the tension and emotions of the other party.

→Poor internet connection creates a lag, making it difficult to practice natural conversation.

→It is difficult to listen to the teacher's pronunciation up close.

→When the class is divided into breakout rooms, the teacher and other people around you are not actually nearby, so you cannot control yourself and end up speaking in Japanese when you should be speaking in a foreign language.

19. Not suitable for communication (conversation) or grammar classes *(Multiple students expressed this same opinion.)*

20. I wanted to take conversation class face-to-face.

21. Language classes. Foreign language courses in liberal arts courses (so-called "second foreign languages") and major language courses are specific examples. This is because it is difficult for teachers to closely monitor students' responses and understanding.

22. Although I have not experienced this, since pronunciation is also studied in language classes, I felt that a face-to-face format would be more suitable for practical learning in an environment where Internet equipment malfunctions do not occur.

23. Did not feel suited for interactive or communicative classes.

24. Conversation classes with foreigners are difficult to ask questions on the spot when online.

25. Some students use translation apps for all of their English writing, and the degree of commitment to distance learning is largely left to the students

Others (Free Comments)

1. With the risk of infectious diseases, we believe that it would be effective to open and participate in language (second foreign language, major language) classes in an online, real-time format and without masks. This is because it allows students to practice pronunciation and conversation without hesitation against infection. I also believe that being able to see the facial expressions and mouth

shapes of the other students would be effective in language learning.

2. I think it was a major change in the study environment for students who had considered studying abroad but decided against it due to the various risks involved. For students who enrolled the college with study abroad as one of the indicators when choosing a university, the study environment seems to have worsened considerably.

3. During the reading aloud and other speaking activities, there was a time when only the students in the face-to-face class were reading aloud and the students in the online class were only listening to them, which I thought was unfair. (Simultaneous hybrid class)

4. Especially for language classes, I want to be in an environment where I can communicate directly.

COVID-19下の遠隔授業に関する教員と学生の視点
──外国語教育における一側面──

クリス・ワイル、片岡由美子、ジョッシュ・ブルノティ

概要

　2020年度開始早々に、世界中の教育機関ではパンデミックの感染制御の政策下における対応を迫られたが、継続的な教育の機会提供を目的に遠隔授業の取り組みが求められ、それは感染拡大の程度に応じて対面式授業と並行する形で続いている。

　本論では、2020–2021年度の愛知県立大学における教養教育の英語教育を担当する教員に対し行った遠隔授業の実施方法と効果・問題点についての調査（非常勤講師を含む17名より回答）と、別途学生に対して行われた遠隔授業の評価（各学部より抽出された65名の学生による回答）について分析した。

　その結果、教員側の総体的な認識として、遠隔授業と対面授業を比較した際、多くの教員が対面授業の方が望ましいと考え、また同時に感染症の安全性の問題から遠隔授業が必要な場合は大きな混乱なくオンライン授業を実施できた点を高く自己評価していた。しかし、授業の準備時間、学生へのフィードバックの所要時間、またオンライン授業で使用するプラットフォームに関して教員間の違いがあることが浮き彫りになった。

　学生側の外国語教育における遠隔授業の受容として、語学の授業では対面授業を好む学生の意見が多数を占め、その他の講義型授業では遠隔での授業のメリットを認識する学生も多く、遠隔授業と対面授業のメリットを評価する上で授業の提供方法が重要視されていることが明らかになった。特にコミュニケーションや能動的な取り組みに関しては対面式の授業が支持され、語学の授業、特にコミュニケーション系の授業は対面式で行うべきだというのが相対的な学生の反応であると言える。

　今回の調査で、特にコミュニカティブな語学授業の場合、対面式授業の利点について、教員と学生の双方が健康の観点から安全に授業を行うことができる場合、その利点は、マイナス面や利便性の問題を上回るという点でほぼ両者が同意していることが明らかになった。