
Practice-Oriented Paper

Setting up an Asynchronous Communicative Classroom for First-Year Students

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At the beginning of the 2020 school year, due to the threat of a global pandemic and subsequent decision by universities to shift to emergency online teaching, students often had their first interactions with peers through synchronous online systems (e.g., Zoom) that did not always perform up to par. These students reported concerns not only with being unable to access online classrooms at the required times, but also whether or not they would be able to make new friends while being socially distanced from each other. In response to these concerns, I sought to create an asynchronous online classroom environment that gave the students opportunities to communicate directly with each other in a safe setting. Through a post-course survey of 96 participants, students indicated that their confidence in using English increased and their overall learning experience was more satisfying than other online classes. Even as schools gradually returned to face-to-face teaching for the 2021 academic year, learners were still required to wear face masks in the classroom and maintain proper physical distance from each other. These conditions made interaction and collaboration difficult for first-year students who did not know each other. After incorporating asynchronous online activities that were successful the previous year, students in these face-to-face classes indicated that the communicative activities which did not require wearing masks increased their enjoyment of English and greatly improved their relationships with their classmates.

As tertiary institutions across Japan switched to emergency remote teaching at the beginning of the 2020 academic year due to the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, many instructors scrambled to set up online classrooms for their students. A decision was reached to start the school year in May at Sakura no Seibo Junior College (SSJC) in Fukushima, so the month of April was used to

collect as much data as possible from the incoming freshmen class regarding their online learning environments.

The first semester (May-August) of the 2020 academic year at SSJC was held entirely online. Teachers were given a choice of conducting their classes either synchronously or asynchronously, with student attendance and participation being evaluated through real-time interaction (synchronous) or online submission of coursework by a specific deadline (asynchronous). Based on the results of the April questionnaires, I felt that asynchronous learning would be more beneficial for the students for several reasons.

As defined by Moorhouse and Kohnke (2021), during asynchronous online learning students access course material and communicate online on their own time through a learning management system, while synchronous online learning involves students engaging with the teacher and classmates in real time through video conferencing software. Although the effects of using online video conferencing applications for English classes has been discussed from various perspectives (e.g., Alfadda & Mahdi, 2021; Hampel, 2006; Leis & Castro, 2021), the literature related to using asynchronous systems is rather limited. In this paper, I hope to help fill that gap by discussing the reasons for conducting English classes asynchronously and introducing techniques that helped make the courses successful.

Reasons for Choosing Asynchronous Learning

Although many other teachers at SSJC used the synchronous online video conferencing application Zoom for their classes in 2020, one reason I chose an asynchronous approach was that students were not always able to access the Internet from their homes. Almost half of the students shared their devices with other family members, so it was possible that they would have difficulty attending many synchronous courses. Another reason was the students' relatively low levels of English proficiency. The average TOEIC placement test scores for the incoming first-year students was 230, which put them at the lowest end (A1) of the CEFR scale (Educational Testing Service, 2019). As Chauhan (2017) noted in his discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of synchronous learning,

although high motivation may result from real-time interaction in a synchronous environment, it could prove to be a challenge for lower-level students and become a social obstacle for introverted learners who are not adept at interacting with others. Also, as summarized by Hrastinski (2008), asynchronous learning gives opportunities for reflection and the ability to process information, while synchronous learning provides only a limited amount of time allocated for learning.

The most important reason for choosing an asynchronous approach was that the students did not know each other. According to the results of the surveys our school conducted, for incoming first-year students, anxiety about making friends was just as high as keeping up with their studies while being outside of the classroom and having little to no direct contact with teachers and other students. While synchronous classrooms allow for real-time interaction, Blum (2020) found that they tended to be more formal with less opportunity for casual chats between learners. Finally, as stated by Moorhouse and Kohnke (2021), failure by the instructor to create an online learning environment with a sense of community will negatively impact student motivation. I thought incorporating a way for the students to gradually get to know each other would reduce their anxiety more effectively in comparison to being thrown together at the beginning of their tertiary studies and forced to have discussions with images on their computer screens, all in a foreign language.

Points of Consideration

After assessing the students' responses to the April 2020 surveys, three main points were considered when creating the asynchronous class learning system. The first was that the system had to be easily understood and navigated. Even though SSJC used Microsoft 365, students said they were not comfortable with the layout. Since it also was many of the students' first time to use an online learning system, they required something simple, yet interesting. Notifications from the instructor needed to be easily viewable, with ample space for providing clear instructions to reduce confusion.

The second point was that the system had to be equally usable on both

computers and smartphones. Most online systems are already compatible with the majority of popular operating systems like Microsoft Windows, Android, and iOS; however, the layout can change drastically depending on the device. Students indicated that they had difficulty in navigating the different user interfaces when they switched between devices. The ideal learning system would look relatively the same on both computers and smartphones.

Finally, the system and any associated applications had to be free of charge. Many students were not able to work at part-time jobs due to COVID-19, and they were already concerned about using up their smartphone data plans by connecting to Zoom for their other classes. The learning system should incorporate applications for students that could be downloaded for free or simply be opened up in their web browser.

The Class Management System

I chose Google Sites as the class management system both for its appearance and ease of use. Students could use the site freely without logging into Google and were able to select their subjects on the top bar of the home page which was linked to each particular class page. The current week of the class was shown at the top and the due date and time for that week's work also were clearly displayed.

Most importantly, the appearance of the class site was the same on computers and smartphones. Each task for the class was clearly marked with ample space for instructions. Any files or links were visible on all devices, and students were able to see exactly what they accessed or downloaded.

Online learning activities for my English classes included the following:

- a PDF of the previous week's homework answers (with explanations of any questions students had particular trouble with)
- an introduction to the topic with a YouTube video or an explanatory video by the teacher uploaded to YouTube
- links to textbook listening MP3s accessible through Google Drive
- comprehension questions submitted and graded automatically through Google Forms
- links to outside applications for interaction

In an exit survey, students indicated that they appreciated the relatively fixed format and order to the activities on the site and were able to understand the required tasks easily since the activities were clearly numbered.

The Participants and Classes

A total of 96 Japanese female first-year college students participated in the two asynchronous classes used in this study. Neither class was a requirement for graduation. In the reading skills class, which focused on reading comprehension and structures of English compositions, students submitted oral recordings of textbook readings for evaluation and also had weekly written interaction with their classmates. The other class was a general English class that focused on grammar and vocabulary skills. A larger number (64) of students registered for this class, so I decided to incorporate the spoken interaction in this asynchronous course in order for more of them to have a chance to get to know each other without masks.

Interaction Through Writing

The writing style of interaction took place on the free interactive writing application Padlet (<https://padlet.com>). On it, students were able to share their opinions with each other about a topic provided by the teacher. The layout was similar to a social networking system (e.g., Facebook) and looked identical on both computers and smartphones, so it was easy for students to navigate. As Kleinsmith (2017) found in their study of using Padlet to increase student engagement, the application can allow students to work together with classmates more easily and to feel more comfortable sharing information with each other.

As over 70% of first-year students indicated that they were worried about making friends, incorporating weekly interaction with classmates was a major part of the reading skills class. Doing it asynchronously brought up many issues, with the main question being how could face-to-face interaction be replicated with low-level learners? Simply repeating phrases to each other did not equate to real interaction, so a three-step interaction phase was developed: adding, asking, and answering (the 3 A's).

The first week of interaction involved the students giving (i.e., adding) their opinions related to a topic in the textbook. The following week (Week 2) incorporated asking questions to classmates about their opinion from the previous week (Week 1), as well as adding their opinion on the topic for that week. The subsequent week (Week 3) involved answering the classmate's question from the Week 1 topic, asking a question to another classmate about Week 2's topic, and finally adding their opinion about the current week's topic. Once the students were interacting with at least two classmates per week the pattern was repeated until the end of the course. After submitting their opinions before class, the students were assigned a partner for their question interaction. The teacher decided on the partners of the students in order for them to have a chance to interact with different classmates each week.

While the students interacted with each other using the 3 A's, they were encouraged to use each other's names as well as compliment and thank each other as much as possible. This allowed them to get to know each other and made their interactions more positive and enjoyable. Also, since they had a week before the next class to formulate their own opinions and replies, the less confident students were able to participate more comfortably. Accuracy was not the main goal of the interactions, but rather achieving understanding and communication with classmates. Students received credit for their work if they completed the three weekly tasks of adding their opinion, asking a question to a classmate, and answering a classmate's question. I chose to address common errors made by students in the following week's online material or at the beginning of the next class once our school had fully returned to face-to-face teaching in 2021.

Interaction Through Speaking

The free application Flipgrid (<https://info.flipgrid.com>) was used for the speaking component of the general English class. According to Stoszkowski (2018), some benefits in using Flipgrid to develop social learning are that students prefer watching each other speak on video to "boring" reading material, and those with less-developed writing and reading skills appear to prefer video-based interaction.

Flipgrid was similar to Padlet (and appeared the same on computers and

smartphones) but also allowed students to interact with each other through video. Since it was completely free to use, more discussion topics could be stored on the teacher's account compared to Padlet which had a limit on how much could be uploaded for free. Perhaps most importantly, there was an option to lock the Flipgrid classroom with a code in order to block anyone other than the class members from seeing the students' videos.

In the course, students recorded themselves speaking about a topic and then uploaded the video file directly to the Flipgrid site. They were asked to speak for at least one minute at the beginning of the course, but the speaking time gradually increased as the weeks progressed. Most students spoke on the week's topic for at least three minutes towards the end of the course.

The pattern of interaction was similar to Padlet and used the 3 A's. Again, the focus was not on accuracy but rather understanding. As with the Padlet interaction, students received credit for their work if they completed the three weekly tasks of adding their opinion, asking a question to a classmate, and answering a classmate's question. The main difference between the Padlet and Flipgrid activities was that the students were able to see each other's faces during the speaking interactions. According to the results of a post-course survey, greeting each other with a smile and being able to see the facial expressions of their classmates increased the students' motivation to participate in the interactions with their own opinions and questions.

Another successful Flipgrid activity that was not related to direct interaction was the creation of individual role plays. Since it was not possible to practice with a partner asynchronously, each student played both roles in the dialogue. Students were asked to change their appearance and/or voices depending on their role and to edit together their footage so it became a seamless dialogue. This editing was possible within the Flipgrid application, but some students chose to edit their video through other software. According to a post-course survey, watching and commenting on each other's video role plays was enjoyable for the students and also increased their own motivation to match their classmates' efforts.

Effects of the Asynchronous Courses

The asynchronous style of learning had many positive effects on the students. In an anonymous exit survey of 96 students who participated in the two asynchronous English classes in 2020, 52.4% reported that their relationships with classmates had gotten better or even much better. None answered that their relationships had gotten worse. Considering that many students worried about making friends at first, and that they went without real-time interaction in the online English classroom, the asynchronous style appears to have been successful in helping them get to know each other through communicative writing and speaking activities.

Over 80% of students indicated that their confidence in English improved, some even dramatically. No students reported that their confidence decreased. According to comments from the students, the asynchronous tasks allowed lower level learners to learn or re-learn the material at their own pace and take their time in formulating opinions or replies. The positive reinforcement from their classmates' comments also seemed to help their self-confidence.

A total of 80% of students also stated that the asynchronous English classes were more worthwhile than their other synchronous online classes for other subjects. None answered that they were less worthwhile. 89.1% of respondents to the exit survey chose asynchronous over synchronous as their preferred style of remote learning. This may be attributable to the fact that many other classes at our school used Zoom for synchronous interaction and those students reported connection issues and fatigue.

As previously mentioned, almost half of the incoming freshmen class of 2020 shared a device with other family members. A similar situation was reported in 2021. As a result, it was noticed that a large number of the first-year students who did not have their own devices at home were forced to record and submit their online assignments at times ranging from very early in the morning to late at night. Students in this situation indicated on the post-course exit survey that they appreciated being able to submit the required classwork at a time that was convenient for them before the next week's class.

Conclusion

Sakura no Seibo Junior College returned to face-to-face classes for the fall semester of the 2020 academic year. Although students and teachers were still required to wear face masks and maintain proper physical distance from each other, everyone generally seemed to be happy to be able to return to classroom instruction and interact in person. However, at the beginning of the 2021 academic year, incoming freshmen students again reported concerns with being able to make friends due to masks and social distancing. I decided to incorporate the Padlet and Flipgrid activities that were successful the previous year into my reading skills and general English face-to-face classes as online communication components. Students in these classes reported that the asynchronous online activities that did not require wearing masks increased their enjoyment of English and greatly improved their relationships with their classmates.

These past two academic years have shown many students the possibilities of learning outside of the physical classroom. As long as a classroom community is developed and nurtured, learners can have the same opportunities of interaction as a face-to-face environment. Through written and spoken exchanges on applications such as Padlet and Flipgrid, freshmen students who have yet to physically meet each other can get to know their peers on a deeper level. And, especially for low-proficiency level or low-confidence learners who require more time to formulate English output, the asynchronous online environment may even be a more productive one for them to grow.

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