Opinion and Perspective

Succeeding in Online and Hybrid Teaching Environments

Frances Shiobara

Kobe Shoin Women's University

When the COVID-19 pandemic first hit the world, most institutions of higher education found themselves having to suddenly switch to a completely different teaching method. Online degree programs often take years to develop by teachers experienced at using technology in their classrooms and with students comfortable with online learning. Forcing all higher education teachers and students switch in a matter of days or weeks to online learning and teaching was completely new territory. As the Chair of the English department at a university in Japan I found myself having less than a month to prepare teachers and students for the start of a new academic year teaching fully online. In this paper I will outline how my department handled the training and support of teachers and students. I will give an account of what worked and what we should have done better. In the conclusion, I will look to the future. What have we learned? What should we do if we are hit by another worldwide pandemic? Most people agree that this experience of teaching and learning online has changed education fundamentally. This new knowledge could be harnessed to improve learning outcomes in higher education.

COVID−19が世界で流行し始めたとき、高等教育機関はあ突然今までとはまったく異なる教育方法に切り替える必要性に迫られた。オンラインの学位プログラムは、オンライン学習に慣れた学生を対象に、教室内でのテクノロジーの活用経験が豊富な教員により、長年かけて開発されることが多い。等教育機関の教員と学生が数週間のうちにオンライン学習・指導に変更せざるを得ない状況は未曽有の事態であった。英語学科長である私は、完全にオンラインで教えなければならない新学年の開始に向けて、教師と学生の準備をする時間が1ヶ月もないことに気づいた。この論文では、私の学部がどのように教員と学生のトレーニングやサポートを行ったかを概説する。そして、何が上手くいき、何がもっと上手くいくべきだったかを説明する。この経験から我々は何を学んだのか。また今後、世界的な大流行に見舞われた場合、私たち教育者は何をすべきなのか。オンラインで教え、学ぶというこの経験が教育を根本的に変えたということはほとんどの人が認めるところである。高等教育における学習成果を向上させるために、この新しく得た知識を活用することができよう。

In March 2020 every university in Japan were faced with a huge challenge - with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan, they needed to decide on the spur of the moment how to start the new academic year in April. Most universities chose to start holding classes online, but although Japanese society is technology rich, there has been relatively little technology use in most educational institutions (Moritz, 2017; Salcito, 2010). TALIS (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019) found that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, only 35% of teachers in Japan felt prepared to use ICT in the classroom despite 60% of them receiving formal ICT training, and 53% having had recent professional development in ICT (Figure 1). As a result, when the universities decided to switch to online classes many teachers did not feel prepared for emergency online teaching (Donnellan et al., 2022).

In addition, students had not been using ICT extensively in the classroom. Some students may have been interested in ICT and had used it for personal study, but the majority of students were as ill-prepared as their teachers (Figure 2). Although the number of students in Japan with access to a computer had increased from 40% in 2003 to 66% in 2009, the percentage had fallen to 59% in
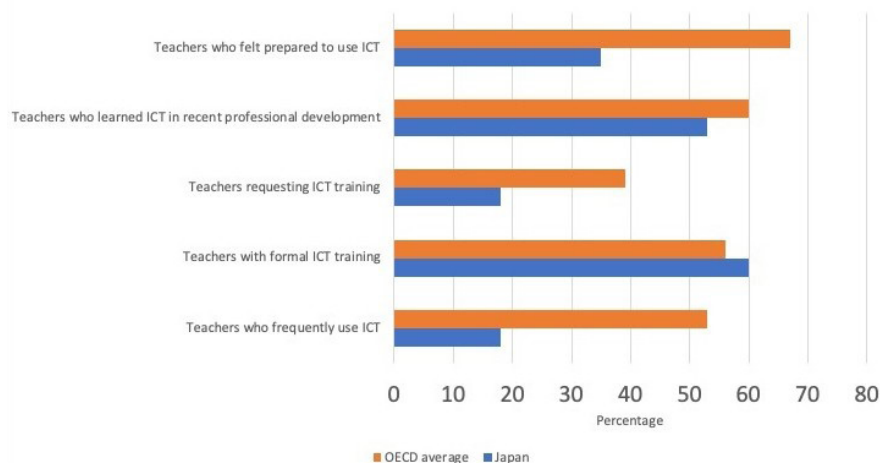

Figure 1. Teachers' preparedness for ICT-based teaching prior to the crisis
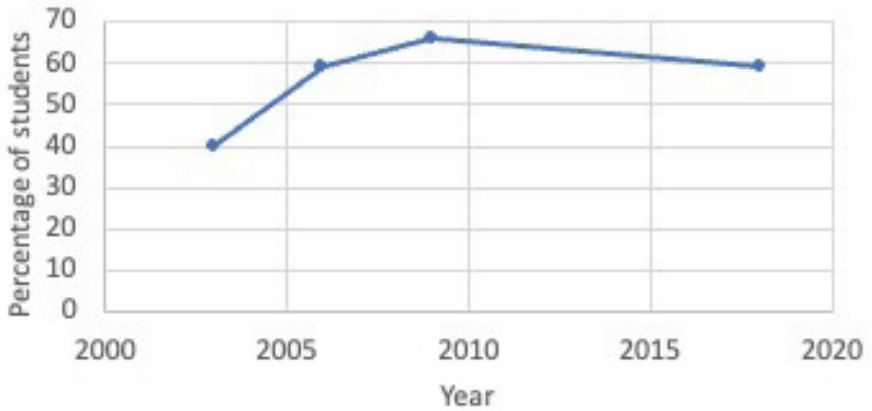Source: OECD, 2019

Figure 2. Access to computer that students can use for school work and link to the internet in Japan. Source: OECD, 2021

2019 (OECD, 2021).

The fall between 2009 and 2019 is probably accounted for by the increase in the use of smartphones, with technological capabilities making students feel it was unnecessary to purchase a computer as well. While students were attending on-campus classes, they could use the university facilities to complete any assignments that needed to be done on a computer, but after the COVID-19 pandemic started, students no longer wanted to use public transportation and in some cases were not allowed to enter their universities. Smartphones are excellent for searching on the internet and listening, but are not suitable for the majority of tasks necessary for online education. The screen size of smartphones is very small making it very difficult for students to read long articles as well as presentation slides used by lecturers in classes. In addition, the lack of a keyboard makes it difficult to type long articles, even when students are proficient at texting. There are applications for word processing, presentation slides and spreadsheets available for most phones, but these are not easy to use and often lack some of the capabilities of the computer. In summary, although smartphones are excellent for some tasks, they were not designed for online learning and

cannot be used as a substitute for a laptop or desktop computer.

During the pandemic, universities and Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) had some difficult decisions to make. On the one hand, students and teachers' health and safety needed to be protected. On the other hand, the quality of education needed to be upheld. When considering health and safety, the universities responded in various ways (The Mainichi, 2021). Some universities elected to stay fully online for the first two years of the pandemic, whereas other universities tried to continue with face-to-face classes as much as possible. In some cases, individual teachers were allowed to decide whether their class would be face-to-face or online, but other universities allowed students to choose to attend campus classes or study online. Unfortunately, decisions to teach online did not come without health costs. The deterioration in mental health of young people has been noted around the world (Chen & Lucock, 2022; Ochnik, et al., 2021; Giuntella, Hyde, Saccardo, & Sadoff, 2021). In Japan in particular, the number of suicides among young people were the highest in 2020 since data became available in 1980 (Kyodo, 2021). In a survey of Japanese university students in July 2020, 44.7% said that they did not find their university lives fulfilling, citing online classes as one reason (National Federation of University Co-operative Associations, August 2021). In view of this, the decision of whether to conduct online classes or face-to-face was a very difficult one.

Many universities and schools realized that students did not have the tools to function productively online. Some universities lent laptops to their students or gave money to students to invest in laptops and install Wi-Fi in their home. MEXT provided a variety of funds to support low-income families as well as university fee exemptions for students suffering from financial hardships. In addition, they provided funds to schools and universities to improve disease control such as the purchase of thermometers, disinfectant, and masks (MEXT, 2020a). At the university level, although MEXT stated that they would assist students with Internet access (MEXT, 2020b), provision of support for university students was left largely up to the individual universities. The response from universities was varied. Some universities gave as much as ¥100,000 in a

one-off payment to help every student buy a computer or improve their home Wi-Fi; others provided less money or only provided funds to students who requested assistance (Kyodo News, 2020). While this money undoubtedly helped, many students, having lost their part time jobs during the pandemic, spent the money on living expenses.

Solutions to Support Students and Teachers

Many of the dilemmas cited above were faced by my university. In the next sections I will outline how the university and my department in particular approached these challenges.

Supporting Teachers

A large proportion of teachers at universities in Japan are part-time lecturers. This means that they may work at a number of different universities all using different Learning Management Systems (LMS), student conferencing software, and rules for delivery of classes. As noted above, these different policies, combined with a lack of experience teaching online classes, made teaching very confusing for teachers working at a number of different universities. In order to support part time teachers, my university tried to simplify the login system, provide workshops, and provide materials made by full-time faculty.

The university requires an ID and password to access the website, LMS, university computers, and Wi-Fi. The first way in which teachers were supported was to make all of these use the same ID and password. This proved to be very useful for teachers and students. During the two years since we first went online very few teachers or students forgot their password and ID. The second way in which teachers were supported was through workshops. Initially the university provided on campus workshops for all teachers on how to use the LMS. Unfortunately, these were in Japanese. Very few of the English department teachers attended, either because they did not want attend a face-to-face workshop during the COVID-19 pandemic, or they did not feel that they could understand the Japanese explanation. Due to this, the full-time faculty members in the English department offered various workshops on Zoom showing teachers how to use the LMS as well as how to use Zoom for teaching.

These were very effective and most of the teachers said that they enjoyed them. Later, further workshops were offered on how to grade students and how to input grades into the university website. These were not well attended, but appreciated by the teachers who did attend them. Chat rooms were also set up in the LMS for teachers to ask advice and share expertise. This was used actively by some teachers and experienced teachers shared a lot of advice. There was also a telephone advice center for teachers in the university. This proved very useful when teachers were having immediate problems.

Finally, the full-time staff tried to provide materials for part time teachers. This had mixed results. In some cases, the teachers were grateful to be provided with quizzes and assignments made for the LMS which students could access. In other cases, the teachers were not teaching coordinated classes, or they wanted to use their own materials. This brings up an important problem of how much the university should have prescribed teaching styles. Most teachers want to be free to teach in a way they view to be appropriate for the subject matter and students. On the other hand, universities have a responsibility to the students to ensure a high quality of education. Teachers may lack the necessary skills, try to avoid learning about new technology or not take the time to create materials on the LMS. In this case, teachers were given suggestions and encouragement to follow best practices in online teaching, but the teachers were given the freedom to teach their own class in the way they saw fit.

Supporting Students

Students were all given a lump sum of money to invest in purchasing hardware or upgrading internet capabilities in their home. In addition, all students were given an initial workshop to help them access and use the university LMS. These workshops were very well attended and in general can be judged to have been successful based on the ease with which students started online learning. At the same time, all students were given a headset to use during video lessons. These headsets were not well used - most students used their own earphones or their computer microphone and speaker. As the majority of students did not use headsets it is probable that they were not comfortable using these.

To ensure students' readiness for online learning, each full-time teacher in my department was allocated a group of students to contact before the start of the semester. Initially students were contacted through email. Students were asked whether they had access to the internet and whether they felt confident using the LMS. Any students who did not respond to the teacher were telephoned directly by the department assistant. Out of more than 400 students less than 20 needed to be contacted by telephone. No students expressed any difficulty in accessing the internet or anxiety using the LMS, although as the semester began some students had difficulties with internet connections. Specifically, some students had returned to their hometowns in very rural areas, which did not have reliable internet connections. Teachers were asked to respond flexibly to students who could not access the internet at the time of the lesson. The problem with this type of rule is that it is open to abuse from students who did not attend class for other reasons. When classes began, students were again surveyed by teachers to find out if they could do the tasks specifically needed for that class. Videos were also created for students explaining how to use the LMS and university messaging system.

Students were offered various types of technical support. A number of classrooms were converted into self-access centers with powerful Wi-Fi and charging cords for each desk. Students were also given access to computers in the university. In addition, a technology support center was set up to advise students on hardware or software issues relating to their study. Unfortunately, although there were very competent staff available, this facility was under-utilized. That may have been because students did not have any significant problems, they took advice from their friends, or they did not want to go to the campus to get advice.

Successes

Many teachers were surprised and empowered by what they and their students managed to achieve. As Matthew Stretcher, a professor at Sophia University said, "A lot of us doubted it and expected to have our worst semesters online. I had a great semester. We all came out of this with a new skill set" (Cohen, 2020, para. 8).

The greatest success was the flexibility of the students to change to an online learning environment. The vast majority of students coped very well with the new learning environment exceeding everyone's expectations. Students learnt to make and upload videos for speeches and presentations. Very few students had difficulty accessing the LMS or video conferencing system due to their technical ability. It was usually Wi-Fi reliability that caused problems. Most teachers also adapted to the new teaching environment. At the end of the first and second semester, the course evaluations were similar to the previous year's face to face classes. Students appreciated teachers who spent time helping individual students, but criticized teachers who were too strict about deadlines, which students may have had difficulty keeping due to connection issues.

The annual speech contest and poster presentation contest were held very successfully through video conferencing and the audience was able to respond through a shared survey. The poster presentation contest was possibly better than in the past as it was easier to read the posters on the screen. The university conversation lounge shifted to an online version and many students enjoyed this opportunity to have contact with native English teachers.

Another phenomenon that was observed is that shy students sometimes participated more actively online. Singh (2021) stated that although most academics thought that face to face was better than online learning, in asynchronous activities such as using discussion forums, online learning was very effective in encouraging participation from shy students. Presentations were also areas where many students felt more confident presenting on Zoom or by video. When students videoed themselves, they reported practicing more than when they were presenting live, and rerecording themselves many times to get the best possible recording.

Problems

Many students and teachers rose to the challenge of online learning, but not everyone has access to the same resources such as supportive family members, a quiet place to study, reliable Wi-Fi and a computer. Andreas Schleicher, Director for Education and Skills, OECD noted, "Students from privileged backgrounds,

supported by their parents and eager and able to learn, could find their way past closed school doors to alternative learning opportunities. Those from disadvantaged backgrounds often remained shut out when their schools shut down" (Schleicher, 2020, p.4). This was true even in a relatively affluent country such as Japan. Some students did not have a suitable place to study and did not have access to a reliable Wi-Fi connection. This significantly disadvantaged them, especially when teachers imposed strict attendance rules for Zoom sessions.

Students and teachers spoke of fatigue. This was probably caused by a mixture of factors, but the strain of being on video conferencing for long periods has been noted by researchers at Stanford University (Ramachandran, 2021). Teachers were offered flexibility in teaching their classes, so students did not need to be in video conferences all day as they did at some universities. This seemed to alleviate the situation as did offering a few classes face to face from July 2020. This allowed students to meet their peers at least one day a week.

Another problem that occurred was due to the freedom offered to teachers. Some teachers decided to use software other than the university LMS and video conferencing. These software sites were a mixture of LMS offered through the textbook, online learning platforms and other freely available software to share presentations and discussions. Some students sometimes had difficulties registering on these alternative software sites, which meant that although they completed tasks the teacher could not see the completed tasks. In other cases, students did not want to share their email address in the registration process due to privacy concerns. The teachers seemed to be using excellent resources, but some students did not want to use other software. In this case, teachers had to change the materials or assignments for individual students or for the whole class.

Teachers also needed ongoing workshops. At the end of the semester, it was noted that the use of video conferencing and LMS had been very varied. Some teachers needed more support after getting over the initial hurdle of teaching online. In order to make more sophisticated classes, teachers needed to gradually improve their online teaching skills. Some teachers did this through their own study, but the majority of teachers stayed with what was safe and what they had learnt to

use. On the other hand, students tended to ask their friends for help and support. The final major problem was to try to offer hybrid classes once some classes were offered face to face. These did not work well in language classes. Possibly standard lecture classes can be taught in the classroom with a camera recording a live Zoom session, but in the language classroom teachers were moving around the classroom out of the camera and microphone's range. This left online students with a much worse learning experience than students in the classroom. In addition, testing was often not fair with online students able to take an open book test, but students in the classroom could not. This necessitated teachers creating different tests or grading in different ways, which created a lot of extra work.

Lessons Learned

1. Teachers and students are adaptable. Don't underestimate them.
2. Simplifying IDs and passwords helps students and teachers.
3. Students do not like being asked to use a variety of software.
4. Teachers need initial training and ongoing support and training to upskill.
5. Students benefit from initial training, but are more likely to ask their friends than attend workshops and help desks.
6. Students sometimes study more in online classes when videos and reading are set for out-of-class learning.
7. Online learning is not a replacement for face-to-face classes, but an excellent resource.
8. Students and teachers have different challenges, so flexibility is needed to take into account technical and psychological issues.
9. Hybrid classes are not as effective as either face to face or online.

Conclusion

The past four years have been an incredible period of innovation in education around the world. Teaching styles that were thought impossible to implement were successfully implemented. The purpose of this reflection was to share what

was learned at one university in the hope that it can inform other university managers and teachers. It is not anticipated that anything as dramatic as this will happen again, but many of the lessons learnt can be incorporated into classes to move to an education system that is suited to the teaching material and situation.

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Author Bio

Frances Shiobara is currently Director of the Foreign Language Education Center. She was previously Chair of the Department of English. She has a Doctor of Education from The University of Liverpool, UK. Her main areas of interest are teaching English to young learners, and attitudes to technology in education. fshiobara@ shoin.ac.jp