Student Feedback on SILC Online Learning Provisions During the Covid-19 Pandemic

by

Gareth HUMPHREYS* *and* **David BOLLEN***

Abstract

This paper elaborates on a survey relating to online learning experiences of second-year students on the SILC English programme during the Covid-19 pandemic. The survey was delivered online, in the first face-to-face class following a 4-week period of online instruction at the beginning of the 2020/21 academic year. Student feedback was important in providing SILC teachers with an impression of students' experiences as well as students' general perspectives towards online learning. Feedback also helped in gauging the effectiveness of the online learning provision and in identifying emerging challenges. Results showed variation in the extent to which students engaged with online learning. Analyses of survey data had implications for educational practices during the remainder of the semester as the SILC adapted to a hybrid face-to-face and 'on demand' online system.

Key Words: student surveys, teacher reflection, online learning

1. Introduction

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, SILC classes moved online at the start of academic year 2020/2021. Following a 4-week online learning experience, a survey was carried out with all second-year students on the SILC English programme, to which there were 822 responses This report outlines results from the survey, which was organised into four sections:

- Online learning experiences
- Communication
- Beliefs about online learning
- Student performance

The report provides an overview of the SILC learning provision during this 4-week period and concludes by providing some interpretations and reflection on possible implications of the results as SILC teachers adapted to new modes of learning content delivery.

2. SILC online learning provision

Students in the first two years of study at Sojo University take two compulsory 90-minute English classes weekly. Ordinarily, these classes are interactive and communicative, supported by e-learning. Due to conditions brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, it was necessary to adapt practices by providing the two weekly classes online. This situation was maintained for a 4-week period, before face-to-face classes partially resumed (students attended one face-to-face class a week, and one 'on demand' online class).

＊Senior Assistant Professor, Sojo International Learning Center

The curriculum for second-year students in the SILC has recently incorporated reading and vocabulary units using content relating to study majors. These lead to a short teacher-supported research project which students design and conduct in class. There is also a unit focused on self-directed learning. During the 4-week online period, the students worked on the reading and vocabulary units.

Converting this content for online instruction was challenging. However SILC teachers have traditionally worked collaboratively on goal-setting and lesson design and there is familiarity among teachers with the Microsoft 365 package, and the Moodle online learning platform. This collaboration in lesson design and planning, as well as familiarity with Microsoft 365 and Moodle, proved useful as we switched to the online provision.

Organising lesson planning and activity design by department was also effective. Individual teachers were in charge of content for specific departments, leading small teams of teachers working on content relating to the different courses available at the university. The teachers responsible for each department in the academic year 2020/2021 are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 SILC curriculum lead teachers by department

Teacher	Department
Jon Rowberry*	Pharmacy
Gareth Humphreys*	Biotechnology
David Bollen*	Mechanical Engineering
Lin Shu-wen*	Computer Information Systems
Rob Hirschel*	Design
Oliver Edwards*	Aerospace Engineering
Mark Howarth*	Nanoscience
Jonathan Donnellan*	Art
Chris Ott*	Life Sciences
Kayoko Horai**	

*Curriculum group leader
**TOEIC coordinator, learning adviser, and adviser to teachers working in each department

3. Designing the student survey

The research was guided by three questions:

1. What were the students' experiences learning online on the SILC programme?
2. What were the students' general perspectives towards online learning?
3. In what ways could the student feedback help SILC teachers develop and maintain engagement and learning?

In designing items for the survey, the two researchers working on this survey independently drew up a list of possible items and then collaborated in finalising the survey design. It was decided, based on the research foci, to organise the survey into four categories (online learning experiences, communication, student performance, beliefs about online learning). The researchers then identified the most essential items to elicit insightful data relating to the research interest. The items were then shared with second-year teachers to obtain their feedback and ensure the survey was more collaborative.

The survey was conducted using Survey Monkey with a link available in the SILCOnline Moodle platform. Items were translated into Japanese. The survey was conducted during the first face-to-face class and was completed anonymously.

The final list of items is displayed in the following section with the student data.

4. Results

Table 2 displays the data from the student surveys, organised into the four categories. Students were also invited to leave an open-ended response to the final question: Do you have any other comment?

Table 2 Survey results

Online learning experiences

	非常に賛成	賛成	少し賛成	少し反対	反対	非常に反対	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
The course instructions are clear								
%	43.92	45.50	9.00	1.22	0.24	0.12	822	4.31
	361	374	74	10	2	1		
The course tasks are appropriate for the level of the course								
%	31.75	45.13	18.98	2.80	1.09	0.24	822	4.03
	261	371	156	23	9	2		
The teacher provides interesting online tasks								
%	36.37	48.05	14.23	1.34	0.00	0.00	822	4.19
	299	395	117	11	0	0		
I enjoy online learning								
%	33.70	37.23	22.99	4.26	1.09	0.73	822	3.96
	277	306	189	35	9	6		
Overall, how do you rate your experiences in this course?								
%	34.18	38.81	19.59	5.23	1.34	0.85	822	3.97
	281	319	161	43	11	7		

Communication

	非常に賛成	賛成	少し賛成	少し反対	反対	非常に反対	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
I possess sufficient computer skills for doing online work								
%	22.63	30.90	28.22	15.09	2.07	1.09	822	3.54
	186	254	232	124	17	9		
The teacher is accessible outside of class								
%	50.00	32.24	13.75	3.04	0.73	0.24	822	4.27
	411	265	113	25	6	2		
The teacher is helpful when I have difficulties or questions								
%	53.16	37.23	9.12	0.49	0.00	0.00	822	4.43
	437	306	75	4	0	0		

I feel comfortable communicating online in English								
%	28.10	36.50	24.21	9.73	0.97	0.49	822	3.80
	231	300	199	80	8	4		
I can discuss content with classmates outside of class using, for example, LINE								
%	22.02	27.37	23.36	11.80	9.73	5.72	822	3.23
	181	225	192	97	80	47		

Student performance

	非常に賛成	賛成	少し賛成	少し反対	反対	非常に反対	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
I feel I am achieving the learning outcomes								
%	15.69	28.95	36.86	15.09	2.07	1.34	822	3.37
	129	238	303	124	17	11		
I am motivated by the online learning content								
%	18.86	30.78	33.33	13.63	1.95	1.46	822	3.47
	155	253	274	112	16	12		
I am able to manage my time effectively and easily complete tasks on time								
%	18.73	32.24	31.27	12.53	3.65	1.58	822	3.45
	154	265	257	103	30	13		

Beliefs about online learning

	非常に賛成	賛成	少し賛成	少し反対	反対	非常に反対	TOTAL	WEIGHTED AVERAGE
I enjoy online self-study								
%	28.83	33.33	26.89	8.39	1.58	0.97	822	3.77
	237	274	221	69	13	8		
I feel that face-to-face contact with my teacher is necessary to learn								
%	27.74	36.13	27.62	6.08	1.70	0.73	822	3.80
	228	297	227	50	14	6		
I believe that online learning is more motivating than a regular course								
%	20.92	25.06	29.56	17.52	4.01	2.92	822	3.33
	172	206	243	144	33	24		

I prefer online English classes to face-to-face classes							
21.90 %	23.84 %	27.01 %	18.25 %	5.47 %	3.53 %	822	3.28
180	196	222	150	45	29		
I would prefer English classes to be 'on demand'							
18.37 %	23.60 %	29.68 %	21.41 %	4.50 %	2.43 %	822	3.23
151	194	244	176	37	20		

Selected open-ended responses

Most students did not select to respond to the final survey question: Do you have any other comment? However, selected responses are included to represent some themes in perspectives among students. These themes are for illustrative purposes and are not the product of comprehensive thematic coding. The responses are included in their original form with a machine-translation in English.

Among those that responded, there were reports of some technical challenges in accessing the online classes and content, particularly around internet connection.

"一度繋がりにくくなった時は焦りました"
"Once it became difficult to connect, I was impatient"

"PCが不調で授業に参加するのに時間がかかってしまうことがあった"
"Sometimes my PC wasn't working well and it took me a long time to attend the class".

"時々、サーバーが重いのか動作が止まり何度もリロードして無駄な時間を過ごしました"
"Occasionally, the server was heavy or stopped working, reloading many times and wasting time".

"SILC ONLINE 全体が重くなりがちで、たまに繋がらなくなる"
"The entire SILC ONLINE tends to be heavy, and sometimes it becomes difficult to connect".

There were also some complaints about communication problems.

"他の人に聞けないから、先生の言葉を聴き逃したり、聴き取れなかったとき、置いていかれる"
"I can't listen to other people, so if I miss the teacher's words or can't hear them, I'll leave them behind"

"先生の発音が聞き取りづらいことがまれにある音が聞こえないことが多々ある"
"In rare cases, the teacher's pronunciation is difficult to hear"

"すべて英語で話されているため時々何を言っているのかわからないまま授業が進むことがあり"
"Since everything is spoken in English, sometimes the class goes on without knowing what you are saying"

Some students were frustrated about the length of some tasks, as extending beyond class times. In places, this frustration was related to SILC server issues preventing activities from being completed within the allotted class time.

"課題が授業時間内に終わらないことが多かった"
"Assignments often did not finish within class time"

"授業の課題に取り組む際に、シルクのサーバーが重くなり授業の時間内に課題を解決できなか"
"When tackling a lesson task, the SILC server becomes heavy and the task cannot be solved within the lesson time".

5. Discussion of results

Following the data display, the report now discusses interpretations from the data next to the three research questions.

What were the students' experiences learning online on the SILC programme?

Feedback was generally positive on the online learning provision. It appeared most students felt there was clarity in learning instruction and the tasks created were generally perceived as appropriate for the course. Most students appeared to enjoy aspects of the online learning and rated their experiences

positively. Students also reported some motivation for working in this way and a sense that they were achieving learning outcomes. This feedback suggests the online learning opportunities we created were largely perceived as effective in supporting achievement of learning goals.

Nonetheless, there were reports, as illustrated by the open-ended student responses in the previous section, of challenges to learning. Frustrations reported tended to relate to technical challenges, including computer, communication, and server issues. Some students also experienced difficulties in following teacher instructions.

Before the online classes started, concerns among some teachers were expressed about how students would communicate with us. Those concerns do not appear to be supported by these results. Many students reported finding teachers accessible and helpful during and outside of classes. Many also reported confidence communicating in English online. A willingness to communicate with one another was seen with many students comfortable using other channels to seek advice on the online content.

What were the students' general perspectives towards online learning?

The category on beliefs about online learning was interesting as we adapted to the hybrid system of class and online learning. There was a spread of responses to items here, representing a range of individual perspectives. Some students clearly prefer online learning over face-to-face classes. This is understandable, particularly if students are coming in from far away, if there is not a clear differentiation between SILC and online classes, or if there is a lack of clarity as to why they are coming in.

Preferences for online learning are, however, complicated by views that face-to-face contact is necessary for learning purposes. These results are potentially meaningful for the combined online and face-to-face system.

In what ways can the student feedback help SILC teachers develop and maintain engagement and learning?

Following this 4-week online period, we appear now to have a consistent and reliable way to contact (most) students using email. It may be in our interests to maintain this with regular emails to classes with updates and encouragement. There is a risk now that face-to-face classes have resumed that emails will be used less to communicate with the students which could be problematic if we need to rely on them again. That is to say we should give students a reason to check their emails regularly.

Since returning to face-to-face classes there have been adjustments required given necessary restrictions on providing the kind of activities many SILC teachers may prefer. However, it is useful to consider the survey results on online independent learning in addition to researcher observations on task completion as improved on last year (there has been more consistent and focused task engagement among lower level students). This consideration challenges notions that learning is most effective because it is lively and because (some) students are speaking. Clearly on a communicative curriculum speaking tasks can be meaningful but learning opportunities have been shown to be reasonably effective in these changed conditions.

It is also worth considering that for some students, using another language in a communicative classroom can be a confronting experience. There may be a tendency to neglect this in lesson designs. Thinking more carefully about the range of learning preferences and personalities in classes may turn out to be beneficial for future lesson design.

To support planning in these conditions, it would be useful for SILC teachers to continue to develop and

share creative ideas which promote task engagement, imagination, and reflection as we adapt to these new educational challenges.

6. Limitations

Surveys such as this are easy to administer and can reach a large of number of students. However, we should be aware of some limitations of surveys that rely primarily on closed-ended items. These issues include:

- Students may not provide accurate responses
- Answers may not be the product of serious reflection
- Students may respond in ways they perceive the teacher prefers
- Students may be bored and eager to finish a survey quickly
- Pre-determined research categories and items may represent bias
- There may be ambiguity in the wording of items

A further limitation of surveys is the extent to which they can capture a full understanding of individual experiences and perspectives. Items tend to be oversimplified and do not fully account for complex and individual experiences. The final open-ended question enabled some meaningful responses to be given which attempted (somewhat) to address this issue. A fuller qualitative understanding of these experiences may be arrived at using student portfolio data at the end of the semester.

Further attempts to control limitations were made by opening up the survey items for review among those using them before the survey was carried out. This was to support a collaborative process in survey design and for any enhancements to be proposed. In wording, it was assumed (though not made explicit) that the students would understand the survey in the context of the recent online learning. The survey was conducted to gain an overall impression of experiences. It was not designed to be replicated or as an in-depth study.

7. Conclusion

The student survey provided students with the opportunity to reflect and provide useful feedback on the online learning period. Variation in data was elicited from the students, indicating a range of individual and likely complex experiences. Despite inherent issues in student surveys, giving students opportunities to express their feelings in this survey and others like it is worthwhile in itself.

While impressions from the data may vary, the process was useful to encourage reflection among teachers on this recent online learning period as well on the potential implications moving forward. The reflections are important for building understanding about how SILC teachers may continue to work together effectively to promote engagement and learning in these unpredictable educational conditions.