

General Education English Live Online Lessons: Report

Wakako TAKINAMI*¹
Masahiro KOBAYASHI*²
Shirley LEANE*¹

Education Center, Tottori University

1. Introduction

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, English teachers were required to teach online. This article reports on teachers' experiences with their first-ever online teaching in the first semester in 2020 and shares valuable lessons they learned from the experience.

2. Institutional support provided

Zoom, a videoconferencing software program, was chosen as the method of delivery for live online English lessons at Tottori University. Interaction is essential for language learning, and Zoom – unlike Google Meets, the university's preferred platform – allows breakout rooms where students can work in pairs or small groups. In addition to Zoom, the teachers used Manaba, the university's e-learning system, for attendance checks and tests. Teachers were not familiar with either Zoom or Manaba, so workshops were held before the start of the first semester and again in the middle of the semester.

2.1. Workshop held before the start of the first semester

The aim of the workshop was to help teachers learn how to use Zoom and Manaba. Instructions were given on how to create and set up a Zoom account, how to schedule a lesson, how to start and end the lesson, how to share Keynote and PowerPoint slides, and how to use the breakout room function for pair and group work. The teachers were then divided into groups to try breakout rooms. More instructions were given on how to download student lists from Manaba and how to post information and upload files. Suggestions were made about how to check attendance using Zoom and Manaba.

2.2. Workshop held in the middle of the first semester

The aim of the workshop was to show teachers how to use Zoom and Manaba for the mid-term tests. Instructions were given on how to make tests using

*¹Education Center, Organization for Educational Support and International Affairs, Tottori University, Assistant Professor

*²Education Center, Organization for Educational Support and International Affairs, Tottori University, Associate Professor

Manaba, and the teachers tried making a test using sample questions. In addition, a demonstration was given of how to do a listening test using Zoom and Manaba, and the teachers practiced sharing audio clips through Zoom. Suggestions were made regarding what to do before a test to prepare the teachers themselves and their students for the test and what to do during the test to avoid cheating.

2.3. Additional support

Throughout the semester, additional technical support was provided to teachers on request. Moreover, toward the end of the semester, an instruction manual was translated into English so that teachers could submit their final grades online, on the university's course management system.

3. Survey results

The survey was conducted at the end of the first semester in order to learn about and record teachers' experiences with online teaching. The survey, modelled on a questionnaire carried out by Asahi Shimbun and Kawai Juku for their nationwide research on Japanese universities, asked about the training workshops, online lessons, online tests, and students' performance in online lessons. The survey also asked for comparisons between online and face-to-face lessons. All 16 teachers in the English for International Communication Program completed the survey and shared their experience of teaching General Education English lessons online. Lessons included communication and reading-focused classes for first year students and four-skill classes for second year students. The survey results are reported below together with further feedback gained from an online meeting where the teachers reflected on and evaluated their online teaching experience.

3.1. Workshops to learn how to use Zoom and Manaba

Teachers reported that the workshops had been helpful. Regarding the workshop held before the start of the semester, 14 teachers out of 16 (87.5%) attended the workshop and learned how to use Zoom and Manaba. All of them either strongly agreed (43.8%) or agreed (43.8%) that the workshop had been helpful. As for the workshop held in the middle of the semester, six teachers out of 16 (37.5%) attended the workshop to learn how to use Zoom and Manaba for the mid-term tests. Of the six who attended, two (12.5% of 16) strongly agreed and the other four (25%) agreed that the workshop had been helpful.

The teachers' comments, most of which concerned the initial workshop, show what they found helpful as well as how the workshop could have been improved. Most of the teachers had never taught online nor used Zoom and Manaba before. Therefore, the workshop helped them gain basic knowledge about the tools and information on how to conduct lessons using them. Teachers also appreciated having opportunities to practice using Zoom and Manaba. However, they were

given less than a week to prepare for their first lesson, which was not sufficient for them to adequately prepare. Some teachers commented that the workshop would have been more helpful with more time to digest the information and ask questions while practicing using Zoom and Manaba. If there had been time, a second training workshop would have provided better support for the teachers.

3.2. Online lessons

There were both moderate successes and difficulties with the online lessons. Regarding lesson planning, almost all the teachers either strongly agreed (25%) or agreed (68.8%) that they had been able to do lessons as they had planned. Only one teacher out of 16 (6.3%) was not sure if the lessons had gone according to plan. As for teacher-student interactions in class, approximately half of the teachers (nine out of 16) either strongly agreed (18.8%) or agreed (37.5%) that there were adequate interactions between the teacher and students during lessons. However, other teachers disagreed (25%) or strongly disagreed (12.5%) that there were adequate teacher-student interactions in class. One teacher (6.3%) was not sure if there had been adequate in-class interactions with the students. As to student-student interactions in class, less than half of the teachers (six out of 16) either strongly agreed (12.5%) or agreed (25%) that pair work and group work had gone well. A large number of teachers (43.8%) disagreed with the statement that pair work and group work had gone well, and three teachers (18.8%) were not sure how student-student interactions in class had gone.

A closer look at the teachers' comments gives a deeper understanding of the successes and difficulties that they had when teaching online. Firstly, regarding lesson planning, teachers were able to cover the textbooks mostly as they had planned, but that does not necessarily mean that they were able to cover as much as they had in face-to-face lessons in the past. One teacher covered approximately 70% of the regular face-to-face classes and some said they had covered slightly less. This might have been caused by the time-consuming nature of online lessons. Some teachers commented about the time it took to share a computer screen or sound files. It also took time for students to go to and come back from breakout rooms. Another teacher noticed students needed much longer to complete assigned tasks. This new online teaching environment, however, seemed to lead to additional in-class activities. A few teachers made teaching materials such as quizzes and surveys using Manaba and incorporated these extra activities into their lessons.

Regarding teacher-student interactions in class, even without the casual contact available in face-to-face lessons, teachers seemed to find ways to communicate with their students. For example, some teachers asked each student questions to check attendance and to check their understanding. Some used the Zoom chat function and its hand-raising function. One teacher conducted a survey at the end of every lesson to get feedback from students.

Efforts toward good communication continued out of class. Many teachers received and responded to emails from their students. Some also posted important information on Manaba. Some teachers said that they had received more comments and questions in the surveys, plus more emails from students than in previous years. However, teachers sometimes did not notice messages sent by students using the Zoom chat function, and students sometimes overlooked information posted by teachers on Manaba. Some teachers were not sure how well their students understood the lessons or how they were doing because visual and aural information through the computer was limited.

Compared with teacher-student interactions, student-student interactions were not as successful. Some teachers were unsure about the effectiveness of pair and group work, mainly because they had no control over what students were doing in the breakout rooms on Zoom. Without the presence of a teacher some students were easily distracted, and when the teacher visited the breakout rooms, they found students chatting in Japanese about a completely unrelated topic. Apart from individual motivation and self-discipline, the student's year level seemed to make a difference to the involvement in the Zoom lesson. Teachers struggled to encourage second year students to participate in pair and group work. On the other hand, first year students actively participated in pair and group work and enjoyed communicating with their classmates. This is most likely because most of them were at home alone and the Zoom breakout rooms during English lessons were their only chance to "meet" their classmates and make friends.

Technical issues appear to be one of the big problems that teachers had to deal with during their online lessons. Problems included their own (e.g. learning how to play audio and share sound with students, or moving from one breakout room to another) and their students' (e.g. unstable internet connections, or first-year students' struggling with copying and pasting a password). Most of the problems diminished toward the end of the semester though as teachers and students gained experience with online classes.

3.3. Online tests

For the mid-term test, teachers had no choice but to do the test online. One teacher (6.3%) decided not to do mid-term tests, another teacher (6.3%) did the mid-term tests face-to-face in the classroom, and the other 14 teachers (87.5%) did their mid-term tests online. Among the 14 teachers, almost all either strongly agreed (6.3%) or agreed (68.8%) that the tests had gone well. One teacher (6.3%) disagreed and another (6.3%) was not sure if the tests had gone well or not. At the end of the semester, teachers were able to choose whether to do their final tests face-to-face or online. Seven out of 16 (43.8%) chose to do their tests face-to-face, but nine teachers (56.3%) remained online and they all either strongly agreed (12.5%) or agreed (50%) that the online final tests had gone well.

Despite such relatively positive responses, teachers' comments reveal that the struggles and issues with online testing outweighed the advantages. The most serious issue seemed to be that it was difficult to observe students during the test and make sure they were not cheating. Beyond the computer screen, the students had textbooks and dictionaries at hand and their smartphones and Google Translate were also readily available. There was also no way for the teachers to know whether the students were alone in the room or not. Teachers tried various ways to deal with the issue. One teacher provided a list of dos and don'ts in both English and Japanese at the beginning of the test. Others made their students keep their camera and microphone on the whole time during the test. Another teacher asked questions verbally and the students typed the answers. Another teacher set open-ended questions which required the students to think and give their opinion. Another also avoided questions that the students could find the answers to in their textbooks, but this teacher allowed students to look at their textbooks and notebooks for ideas and also to check their dictionaries and smartphones for spelling. When incorporating the test results into final grades, one teacher placed greater importance on interview tests than online tests and scored the interview tests more strictly. Some teachers set tasks/assignments in class or for homework and used these scores to compensate for the test results.

Another issue was technical problems, which included teachers sometimes finding it difficult to hear students during the interviews due to background noise; students requiring more time to type in English or being unfamiliar with the format of online tests. One teacher used class time to give a practice online test so that students became familiar with the style of questions as well as listening to audio and answering questions at the same time online.

The greatest advantage of online testing seemed to be the auto-scoring function of Manaba. It also collates all the scores at the end of the semester. Some teachers commented Manaba made the marking and grading much easier and helped save time. Other teachers said that online interview tests went like clockwork and shy students seemed comfortable taking interview tests online.

3.4. Students

Teachers gave relatively positive evaluations of their students' participation and understanding. Regarding students' participation, three quarters of the teachers either strongly agreed (12.5%) or agreed (62.5%) that their students had actively participated in the lessons. However, one teacher (6.3%) strongly disagreed and another teacher (6.3%) disagreed. The other two teachers (12.5%) were not sure if their students had actively participated in the lessons. As for students' understanding, many of the teachers either strongly agreed (12.5%) or agreed (56.3%) that their students had had a good understanding of the lessons while a quarter of the teachers (25%) were not sure. One teacher out of 16 (6.3%) strongly disagreed that students had had a good understanding of the lessons.

A closer look at the teachers' comments provides more information about what students were like in the online lessons and how the teachers tried to check the students' understanding. Regarding student participation, teachers described it in various ways. One teacher thought that the students had tried their best but participation in online lessons was vastly inferior to face-to-face lessons. In another teacher's eyes, the students did not seem as nervous about asking questions and giving their opinions in front of their classmates in online classes, and more questions were asked in the online environment than in regular face-to-face lessons. Another teacher described how differently students had participated in online lessons. Most of them kept their microphone off. Many of them tilted their camera and hid their face. Some of them wore a mask. The teacher still believed that the students had taken pair and group work seriously and was satisfied with their participation. Some teachers found it difficult to monitor students' participation in the breakout rooms on Zoom, so they asked questions or asked for reports afterwards to see how actively the students had been engaged in the activities.

As for students' understanding, teachers tried to check it in different ways. Just like in face-to-face lessons, several teachers asked follow-up questions and called on individual students for answers. If the students seemed to have an inadequate understanding, the teachers gave more explanation. A few teachers encouraged students to check answers in pairs and others encouraged students to ask questions in class if they had trouble understanding. One teacher noticed that more students asked questions in class, which had rarely happened in face-to-face lessons, by sending private messages using the Zoom chat function. Some teachers made the most of Manaba and gave vocabulary tests and writing tasks to support students' learning. Correction and feedback were also given using the course management system. Teachers' efforts to help their students continued after the classes finished. Some teachers remained in the online classroom for a while after the end of the lessons in case students wanted to ask questions. Others responded to students' emails and answered their questions.

Teachers' comments also reveal that the number of absentees was not as large as expected and one teacher saw a better turnout in first-period classes. Another teacher gave surveys at the end of every lesson, using Manaba, to get feedback from students and replied to every question and comment from students by email. The number of questions and comments appeared to increase and as a result it took the teacher quite a long time to respond to individual students.

3.5. Comparison between online lessons and face-to-face lessons

Almost all the teachers felt that face-to-face lessons were better than online lessons. Fourteen out of 16 either strongly disagreed (37.5%) or disagreed (50%) that they had been able to do better lessons online than face-to-face while the other two teachers (12.5%) were not sure.

A closer look at the teachers' comments shows how the teachers felt about online lessons in comparison to face-to-face lessons as well as what they discovered through the experience of teaching online. It seems that teachers found different advantages and disadvantages of online and face-to-face lessons. For example, teachers can monitor the classroom more effectively in face-to-face lessons. They can walk around the classroom and help students with pair and group work. In the classroom, students can check their understanding with a classmate sitting next to them. On the other hand, it is difficult for teachers to see how students are doing through the computer screen. This becomes even more difficult with large classes such as Communication English B. In addition, teachers are able to make stronger personal connections with their students in face-to-face lessons. Students can also work on more tasks like interactive activities and discussions in face-to-face lessons than in online lessons.

One of the greatest advantages of online lessons is that the survey function of Manaba allows teachers to give students immediate vocabulary or grammar practice. Several teachers are considering continuing to use Manaba for surveys and assignments even after they go back to face-to-face teaching. Other advantages of online lessons include teachers being able to use the chat function of Zoom to highlight key words and important concepts. They can also hear students, even shy ones, more clearly in online lessons.

4. Lessons learned from this experience

After 15 weeks of online teaching, one of the valuable lessons we learned is that preparation and information sharing are key to successfully dealing with emergencies. Workshops are helpful for teachers preparing for and dealing with new ways of teaching. Sufficient time should be provided for teachers before they start classes, so they have adequate training and fully understand what they should do and how they should do it.

Once lessons start, successes and difficulties that teachers are experiencing should be shared regularly during the semester. This time some teachers used Manaba and successfully incorporated additional activities like vocabulary and grammar quizzes and writing tasks into their lessons. Each teacher tried various ways to communicate with students to check their understanding, but some teachers were unsure whether or not their students had understood the lessons. Furthermore, despite all the efforts, issues with pair and group work in breakout rooms as well as with online testing remained unresolved. Some teachers found Manaba's auto-scoring and score-collating functions useful. However, this information was not shared until after the semester had finished. Information-sharing meetings during the semester would have provided more help to teachers. Class observation, online in this case, might also have been helpful.

5. Conclusion

2020 has probably become one of the most difficult and unforgettable years for teachers. Online teaching was definitely a challenge and teachers learned a lot by trial and error. One thing we learned from this challenging experience is that there are parts of online teaching that we can use to improve our face-to-face lessons even after the COVID-19 crisis has finished.

References

Sato, T. & Tsuchiya, R. (2020, August 24). オンライン講義 課題と手応え [Online Lessons: Issues and Positive Effect]. *Asahi Shimbun*. P. 17.

Appendix

Online Teaching Survey

For each subsection, please answer every question.

Section 1: Workshops to Learn How to Use Zoom and Manaba

1.1. Did you attend the workshop held before the start of the first semester where we learned how to use Zoom and Manaba? (Yes/No)

1.2. The workshop before the start of the first semester was helpful.

- ① Strongly agree
- ② Agree
- ③ Disagree
- ④ Strongly disagree
- ⑤ Not sure (Unable to answer)

1.3. Did you attend the workshop held in the middle of the first semester where we learned how to use Zoom and Manaba for the mid-term tests? (Yes/No)

1.4. The workshop in the middle of the first semester was helpful.

- ① Strongly agree
- ② Agree
- ③ Disagree
- ④ Strongly disagree
- ⑤ Not sure (Unable to answer)

1.5. Please share your thoughts on the workshops. (e.g. what you found helpful, what should have been provided at the meetings, etc.)

Section 2: Online Lessons

2.1. I was able to do lessons pretty much as I had planned.

- ① Strongly agree
- ② Agree
- ③ Disagree
- ④ Strongly disagree
- ⑤ Not sure (Unable to answer)

2.2. During lessons, there were adequate interactions between the teacher and students.

- ① Strongly agree
- ② Agree
- ③ Disagree
- ④ Strongly disagree
- ⑤ Not sure (Unable to answer)

2.3. Pair work and/or group work went well.

- ① Strongly agree
- ② Agree
- ③ Disagree
- ④ Strongly disagree
- ⑤ Not sure (Unable to answer)

2.4. Please share your thoughts on online lessons. (e.g. how much you were able to cover, teacher-student interactions, communication between students, successes, main difficulties, etc.)

Section 3: Online Tests

3.1. How did you give your mid-term tests? (Online/Face-to-face/Did not give mid-term tests)

3.2. The online mid-term tests went well.

- ① Strongly agree
- ② Agree
- ③ Disagree
- ④ Strongly disagree
- ⑤ Not sure (Unable to answer)

3.3. How did you give your final tests? (Online/Face-to-face/Did not give final tests)

3.4. The online final tests went well.

- ① Strongly agree
- ② Agree
- ③ Disagree
- ④ Strongly disagree
- ⑤ Not sure (Unable to answer)

3.5. Please share your thoughts on online tests. (e.g. successes, main difficulties, etc.)

Section 4: Students

4.1. Students actively participated in the lessons.

- ① Strongly agree
- ② Agree
- ③ Disagree
- ④ Strongly disagree
- ⑤ Not sure (Unable to answer)

4.2. Students had a good understanding of the lessons.

- ① Strongly agree
- ② Agree
- ③ Disagree
- ④ Strongly disagree
- ⑤ Not sure (Unable to answer)

4.3. Please share your thoughts on students. (e.g. how you encouraged student participation, how you checked their understanding, how you got feedback from your students, etc.)

Section 5: Comparison with Face-to-face Lessons

5.1. I was able to do better lessons online than face-to-face.

- ① Strongly agree
- ② Agree
- ③ Disagree
- ④ Strongly disagree
- ⑤ Not sure (Unable to answer)

5.2. Please share your thoughts on online lessons in comparison with face-to-face lesson. (e.g. advantages of online lessons, things you have discovered

through teaching online that could help improve your classroom teaching in the future, issues that you still need to deal with when teaching online in the second semester, etc.)