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International Exchange Program during Covid-19: The Positive Aspects of Virtual Learning Considering the Future of Studying Abroad

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Abstract: Many studies abroad programs have been canceled as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Virtual learning or virtual mobility has been proposed as one alternative. Everyone seems to be under the impression that this is not working. This case study will provide some insights into the positive aspects of virtual programs by examining whether there is a difference between virtual learning and in-person courses in terms of learning improvement. It will seek to answer the research questions: 1) Can the virtual programs fill the vacuum created by the halt in the physical mobility of students, and 2) Can virtual learning continue to play a role on return to the pre-Covid-19 normalcy? To analyze student learning effectiveness, the CEFR scale and questionnaire were used. The tentative answer to the research questions is that virtual learning may not be inferior to in-person learning, at least in terms of short-term intensive English language learning.

Introduction

The novel coronavirus infection (Covid-19) became a global epidemic, a pandemic, in just a few months after the first case of infection was reported in Wuhan, China, in early December 2019. In Japan, classes were abruptly changed from face-to-face to online beginning in April 2020. This was the catalyst for the start of online instruction, with which no one had any experience in our educational institutions.

Since then, we have been hearing many terms to describe the way of taking classes remotely such as e-learning and virtual learning. Now e-learning may be familiar to most people, but how is this different from virtual learning? At this moment (as of August 2021), it has been very hard to find a definition of the term ‘virtual learning’ in the Oxford dictionary, the Collins dictionary, as well as others. The only related terms to be found have been e-learning or distance learning.

E-learning or electronic learning is online instruction by a teacher where students can join and complete work at their own pace and their schedule. Virtual learning is a lot more active. Students join live lessons with their teachers and have the capability to ask questions and even chat with their classmates¹. There are advantages and disadvantages. However, there have been few previous studies comparing virtual learning and face-to-face learning in a detailed manner. Which is the most effective is a question that is yet to be answered.

Research Questions

Many study abroad programs are being canceled. Virtual learning or virtual mobility has been proposed as one of the possible solutions. If we are to accept the

¹ TEGNA (2020)

popular assessment, many believe that it is not working, and the world wants to move back to face-to-face learning. In this session, some ideas about the future of studying abroad including virtual learning will be discussed. Our research questions are as follows:

Q1. Can the virtual programs fill the vacuum created by the halt in the physical mobility of students?

Q2. Can virtual learning continue to play a role even after we return to pre-Covid-19 normalcy?

Methods

To explore the answer to the key questions above, the Overseas Language Program course at the University of Hyogo was focused on as a case study. The aim was to determine if there existed any positive aspects to virtual programs by looking at whether there is a difference between virtual learning and face-to-face classes in terms of learning improvement. This course was chosen for the comparative analysis due to the difference between the way classes were offered in the 2019 and 2020 school years. In the 2019 school year, the classes were offered on-site and face-to-face, while in the 2020 school year, this class was offered online. The language training program was conducted for five weeks intensively in both years.

According to the syllabus of the Overseas Language Program course, the program consists of an English intensive language course held by instructors of a college in Manila, Philippines. Language classes were held every day to enable students to follow all lectures and seminars conducted in English in the Global Business Course at the University of Hyogo until they graduate². Tests were conducted regularly by the instructors of the college. The test results became the main criteria for the grades.

To analyze the learning effectiveness of the students, the CEFR³ scale and a questionnaire were used. The average English proficiency of Japanese people is said to be A1 to A2 in the CEFR scales. A1 is the lowest level, and C2 is native-like. The University of Hyogo requires students at least a B1 level when entering. Students were asked to take a mock exam before and after the training to measure the improvement rate of their English proficiency. The questionnaire was used to scale satisfaction with the course. The respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the most dissatisfied and 10 being the most satisfied. In the 2019 school year, this program received almost 100% positive evaluations from students.

² One of the course highlights is that all other classes are conducted in English. March 2, 2022, <https://www.u-hyogo.ac.jp/em/en/gbc/overview/index.html>.

³ The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. It is widely used in academic and business circles, including by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) as the evaluation scale for English in the new courses of study.

Results (Questionnaire)

Table 1 offers a one-week schedule as a sample of the five-week intensive language training program. A brief overview of this program is as follows. Basically, the training was conducted for five hours per day, and the following training contents were provided.

Orientation was held on the first day of training. A placement test was conducted at the same time. Of the five hours of class per day, four hours were devoted to private lessons (one-on-one training). The private lessons included TOEFL Test Preparation and Review (every Monday through Thursday) and the training in six key areas (listening, speaking, writing, reading, grammar/structure, vocabulary) to improve TOEFL test scores.

Of the five hours per day, one hour was allocated for group lessons. Training was conducted based on a) Social Club: English conversation practice based on society, culture, and customs. b) Interaction: students worked in groups with university students in the Philippines to exchange opinions and engage in discussions based on familiar themes. c) Special Program: each week, a theme was set, and discussions were held. Such topics as “Sustainability”, “Entrepreneurship”, “Critical Thinking”, “Global Leadership” are the focus of those discussions. Mock tests were held twice during the program period. Group presentations in English were held on the last day of the program.

Although we showed some of the results obtained regarding the students’ improvements in the English language when giving the presentation, in this section, we will describe the results of the questionnaire survey, due to the limited space available.

Table 1: A sample week of the intensive language program

Week 2	8月 31	9月 1	9月 2	9月 3	9月 4	9月 5	9月 6
TIME	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
8:00am - 9:00am	BREAKFAST						
9:00am - 11:00am	TOEFL IBT 1:1 Speaking: Independent Speaking, Question 2 Writing: Integrated Writing, Astronomy	TOEFL IBT 1:1 Speaking: Independent Speaking, Question 2 Writing: Integrated Writing, Astronomy	TOEFL IBT 1:1 Speaking: Independent Speaking, Question 2 Exercises Writing: Integrated Writing, Development	TOEFL IBT 1:1 Speaking: Integrated Speaking, Question 3 Writing: Integrated Writing, Development	TOEFL IBT 1:1 Weekly Assessment (1 hr Mock Test) Lesson Continuation		
11:00am - 1:00pm	TOEFL IBT 1:1 Reading: Factual Information Listening: Gist-Purpose	TOEFL IBT 1:1 Reading: Negative Factual Information Listening: Detail	TOEFL IBT 1:1 Reading: Negative Factual Information Listening: Detail	TOEFL IBT 1:1 Reading: Sentence Simplification Listening: Making Inferences	TOEFL IBT 1:1 Weekly Assessment (1 hr Mock Test) Lesson Continuation		
1:00pm - 2:00pm	LUNCH BREAK						
2:00pm - 3:00pm	Special Program: Interaction with Enderun Degree Students (1:3)	Special Program: Critical Thinking (1:15)	Social Club (1:5)	Special Program: Critical Thinking (1:15)	Social Club (1:5)		
3:00pm - 5:00pm							

Table 2 shows the answer to question 1 regarding the overall satisfaction with the program. The respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the most dissatisfied and 10 being the most satisfied. The average point was 7.44 out of 10. The most common response was 8 (23.3%) on a scale of 1 to 10.

Five students out of 43 (11.6%) rated 10 out of 10 scales; 31 students (72.0%) gave an evaluation greater than 7 points out of 10; and 41(95.3%) out of the 43 respondents chose more than 5 out of 10. There are two students who gave a rating lower than 5 (4.6%) out of 10 and who were not satisfied with this program.

Table 3 shows the answer to question 2 regarding the satisfaction with the one-on-one class. The average point was 7.86. Eleven students out of 43 (25.3%) rated 10 out of 10, which was the highest response rate among the students. Five students responded below 5 points.

In question 3 (Table 4), the students were asked about their satisfaction with workshops. The average point was 7.58 out of 10. The most common response was 8 (27.9%) on a scale of 1 to 10. 38 (88.4%) evaluated the workshops with more than 6 points.

Question 4 (Table 5) asked about the satisfaction with the group work, and the average satisfaction point was 7.49. The most common response was 7 (23.3%) on a

Table 2: Overall satisfaction with the program

Points (10)	Respondents (43)	(%)
10	5	11.6
9	8	18.6
8	10	23.3
7	8	18.6
6	5	11.6
5	5	11.6
4	1	2.3
3	1	2.3
2	0	0
1	0	0
0	0	0

Table 3: Satisfaction with one-on-one class

Points (10)	Respondents (43)	(%)
10	11	25.3
9	6	14.0
8	10	23.3
7	9	20.9
6	2	4.7
5	3	7.0
4	1	2.3
3	1	2.3
2	0	0
1	0	0
0	0	0

Table 4: Satisfaction with workshops

Points (10)	Respondents (43)	(%)
10	7	16.3
9	4	9.3
8	12	27.9
7	11	25.6
6	4	9.3
5	3	7.0
4	2	4.7
3	0	0
2	0	0
1	0	0
0	0	0

scale of 1 to 10. The students worked in groups with Filipino university students to solve the problems given during the workshop. It was the first experience for them to study with non-Japanese students.

Table 5: Satisfaction with group work other than workshops

Points (10)	Respondents (43)	(%)
10	6	14.0
9	7	16.3
8	8	18.6
7	10	23.3
6	7	16.3
5	3	7.0
4	2	4.7
3	0	0
2	0	0
1	0	0
0	0	0

Finally, the students were asked about the impression regarding their English improvement. Question 5 was a subjective question, but each learner was asked whether they perceived that their English skills had improved after taking this language training. The result was that 86% of students felt their English skills improved (Table 6). Out of 43 students, 37 (86%) answered that their English skills had improved more or less, including “improved a lot” (20.9%) and “slightly” improved (65.1%).

Table 6: Do you feel that your English skills have improved a lot?

Improved a lot	9	20.9
Slightly improved	28	65.1
Not much improvement	4	9.3
No improvement	2	4.7

Discussion

Many study abroad programs are being canceled due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Virtual learning or virtual mobility has been proposed as one of the possible solutions. However, the general consensus seems to be that it is not working, and the world wants to move physically. Against this backdrop, we put in place a virtual learning program as a substitute for the on-site language program and studying abroad opportunities. For this preliminary examination, we looked at the results of a survey on students' satisfaction with the intensive language program so far.

We simply used a 10-point scale for this evaluation. It could be speculated that the responses would have been more consistent or cohesive if a 5-point Likert scale had been used. However, as seen in the answers to questions 1-4, we can conclude that the online class evaluations were generally positive and the participants were satisfied.

As for the satisfaction with the overall program, we found 36 (83.7%) students were satisfied. Regarding the satisfaction with the one-on-one class, the average

point was 7.86. The most common response was 10 (25.3%) on a scale of 1 to 10. In other words, one out of every four students answered being satisfied with the one-on-one-based learning style. Almost 80% of students evaluated the workshops and group work with points of more than 7, respectively. Although there remains room to consider why students, who rated their answers lower than 5 out of 10, were not satisfied with this program, most students were satisfied with this program overall.

We need to analyze how the students who answered that they were not satisfied responded in question 5 based on a cross-tabulation. We all have experienced the situation in which learners who initially have high scores in TOEFL or high levels of language skills tend to have some difficulties with improving their language score or skills over a short period compared with the students whose score is low. If so, it seems natural that such a student appears to answer that they were not particularly satisfied.

In addition, in question 5, we asked the students if they felt their English skills had improved. The results showed that 86% of the students thought that this intensive program had improved their English language competency. In other words, this result suggests that virtual learning may not be inferior to the on-site program in terms of learning a language or improving language competency.

Also, we measured the degree to which their English competency had improved by administering mock tests before and after this 5-week intensive language training, using the CEFR as an indicator. The results, briefly presented at the oral presentation, indicated that there was little change in English language improvement after class between face-to-face and online courses, though the analysis is on-going. We will not discuss the full results here because the space is limited. Based on these findings, we will seek to answer the research questions for this project in the conclusion section.

Conclusion

There is no substitute for the first-hand experience of different cultures on-site. Because of the relationship with the motivation of individual learners and other factors, it isn't easy to simply evaluate the results of this program and the improvement in English proficiency in general. However, our tentative answers to the research questions so far are as follows:

Q1. Can the virtual programs fill the vacuum created by the halt in the physical mobility of students?

A1. Virtual learning might not be inferior to face-to-face learning, at least from the perspective of short-term intensive English learning. We can expect virtual learning to improve language learning to some extent.

Q2. Can virtual learning continue to play a role even after we return to pre-Covid-19 normalcy?

A2. If there is no time difference involved, virtual learning is economical since there is no need to pay travel expenses to the site, and we can expect some improvement of language learning. If anything, it is likely to increase the likelihood that the virtual learning experience will be actively used to improve their language skills to some extent before they can study abroad and to make

the most of their limited time abroad. In other words, it may be possible to set a broader and deeper purpose for studying abroad than just language improvement, such as studying the sociolinguistic characteristics of the destination country, aiming to improve communication skills in interrelationships between different cultural societies, understanding different cultures, and acquiring specialized knowledge.

Those are all the analyses we have done so far. We have been continuing to analyze the positive aspects of remote learning. Before and after attending this program, each student's English proficiency was measured using the CEFR. The results are currently being analyzed, and we will publish our findings at a later date.

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