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Author(s)	David, Watts
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Lessons learnt from implementing EMI classes online

DAVID WATTS

Abstract

This article briefly describes how the author approached the problem of offering presentation and discussion classes on an online basis as a consequence of restrictions due to the Coronavirus pandemic over a period of nearly two years at a Japanese university. After a description of the online courses and activities, reflections are provided as to how the dynamics of these classes could benefit more traditional face to face settings in addition to students' reactions and feedback on the roles they were required to fulfil. It is hoped that this article might prove useful to any educators attempting to implement online or face to face classes at the tertiary level of education, in particular in Japan, and more generally in the sector elsewhere.

Keywords: Zoom, Corona, English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), online education, classroom management

Introduction

With the advent of the Corona pandemic worldwide generally, and for the purposes of this article in Japan specifically, it was a shock and an enormous challenge for many educators to be faced with the prospect of delivering meaningful educational opportunities to their students in an online setting. Many were faced at short notice with the challenge of how to at least to some extent replicate traditional educational experiences online. While acknowledging this was a traumatic and difficult time for many students and educators alike, this article attempts to demonstrate one of the possible benefits for the face-to-face classroom that was gleaned from the experience of online course delivery.

This informal article aims to describe how a number of face-to-face elective classes at Osaka University were transferred to online classes during the pandemic, which necessitated all classes being offered remotely. The initial iteration of the course is briefly described, along with weekly tasks and assessment criteria. A method of transferring these classes to an online platform is then examined, and some student feedback and teacher reflections are offered.

Description of courses

The classes that this article relates to have been described in an earlier issue of Frontier (Watts, 2018). The classes are aimed at third and fourth year English major students with a TOEIC score of 730 or over. The number of students is on average 20 to 30 in each class. Six presentation and discussion skills classes are offered, with largely similar formats, but covering cultures and societies of different areas around the world. These classes provide students with opportunities to research, make presentations, initiate and participate in discussions and draw conclusions

in English. As such, they can be seen not so much as English classes, but Area Studies classes with English as a medium of instruction (EMI). The six classes are Global Issues, Cultures and Societies of the Americas, Cultures and Societies of Africa, Cultures and Societies of Asia and Oceania, Cultures and Societies of Europe and History and Culture and Society of the UK. Each semester is divided into three sections (see Table 1.) Each section consists of four presentation and discussion sessions in the classrooms and one completion and submission of a writing assignment, typically a summary and discussion of the previous four weeks' presentations in class, for the purposes of knowledge consolidation and assessment.

Students are expected to make weekly presentations, each time looking at a different topic and (where appropriate) a different country or area. The table below is an example of the kind of topics that students are typically asked to research, make presentations on and discuss issues arising from them. As these are all two - semester courses, the topics differ between the two to avoid repetition or monotony.

Table 1. Typical topics for presentation and discussion

WEEK	CULTURES AND SOCIETIES OF THE AMERICAS SEMESTER 2
1	HEALTH / HOMELESSNESS
2	EDUCATION
3	FAMILY / MARRIAGE
4	NATURAL DISASTERS, THE ENVIRONMENT, ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
5	WRITING ASSIGNMENT 1
6	NATIONAL EVENTS / FESTIVALS AND HOLIDAYS
7	SPORTS AND GAMES
8	TRADITIONAL CLOTHES AND COSTUMES / FASHION
9	FOOD AND DRINK PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION
10	WRITING ASSIGNMENT 2
11	POLITICS AND MONARCHY
12	CRIME, POLICE AND JUSTICE
13	INFRASTRUCTURE, TECHNOLOGY AND TRANSPORT
14	SEXUALITY AND GENDER
15	WRITING ASSIGNMENT 3

In addition, students are provided with suggestions for research, an example of which is shown below. As the expected presentation length is between 5 and 8 minutes, students are not expected to cover all aspects suggested, but to pick out the areas of particular interest to them, bearing in mind the individual peculiarities of the country that has been assigned to them.

Table 2. Example of research suggestions for a weekly presentation preparation task

TOPIC	SUGGESTIONS FOR RESEARCH
EDUCATION	- SYSTEM - HISTORY - IMPORTANT ORGANIZATIONS / PEOPLE - UNIVERSITY ATTENDANCE - VOCATIONAL TRAINING - CLASS SIZES AND CLASSROOMS - ACADEMIC STANDARDS - HOME SCHOOLING - LITERACY / NUMERACY RATES OVER TIME - LANGUAGE LEARNING - SCIENCE / TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION - HOMEWORK - URBAN / RURAL AREA DIFFERENCES - RICH / POOR DIFFERENCES - GENDER DIFFERENCES - TRUANCY / BULLYING / VIOLENCE - SAFETY - FUNDING (% OF GDP) - PRIVATE / STATE EDUCATION PROPORTION - GOVERNMENT POLICY - NGO'S (WHERE APPROPRIATE) - PUBLIC ATTITUDES - PROBLEMS / SOLUTIONS *• WHAT IS THE STANDARD OF EDUCATION IN YOUR ALLOTTED COUNTRY?* *• WHAT CAN JAPAN LEARN FROM IT AND VICE VERSA?*

Assessment

In the face-to-face version of these classes, students are assessed weekly (where possible, given the relatively large number of students in each class) on a number of criteria. These include an ability to use presentation software effectively, an ability to create clear, relevant and original content, a demonstration of depth of understanding of their subject and a demonstration of objectivity and critical thinking as befits the academic environment. Students are also expected to make demonstrable progress in the development in their English language presentation and discussion micro-skills, namely an appropriate use of academic vocabulary, clear and effective pronunciation, a high level of grammatical accuracy and more generally, an ability to engage confidently and enthusiastically with other classmates on the variety of weekly themes. Assessment also includes students' ability to appropriately summarise and provide reactions to the presentations in the assessed writing assignments in Weeks 5, 10 and 15.

Order of tasks in the pre-pandemic classroom

As noted earlier, in regular, pre-pandemic face-to-face courses, most of the classes offered typically followed a similar order of tasks. Students were required to prepare a presentation before the class. Once in class, they were assigned into groups of roughly 4 or 5 students, and made their presentations in turn, while taking notes to help them with subsequent tasks. After

each presentation, presenters were requested to ask two open comprehension questions and one secret comprehension question in order to facilitate a neat, summative ending to the presentation but also to check to what extent the audience had followed the content of the presentation. After completion of the presentations, students then regrouped and summarised what they had learnt to their new group members. As each student in the class was allocated a different country or (in the case of History and Culture and Society of the UK) different specialisms, there was no chance of replicated data from the presentations to be summarised. As a result, there was potentially a rich amount of information available to the new group, as each member would have seen possibly 4 presentations, and of course prepared their own. Assuming 4 or 5 members in the new group, the scope of background information to inform the discussion was very wide. This required sufficient flexibility from the teacher and students, especially in terms of time management, as inevitably some groups would complete their presentations at different times, according to factors such as group size and length of individual presentations.

Concerns about going online

As it became clear that classes would have to be delivered online, it was necessary to consider how to attempt to, as much as possible, replicate the classroom experience using Zoom. Apart from the obvious lack of experience both of the teacher and the students of this unfamiliar platform, the challenge seemed to be how to maintain a number of key features of the classroom presentation and discussion sessions. Naturally, it was desirable to maintain the essentially communicative characteristics of the face-to-face classes in the Zoom sessions. The main problems envisaged were not only how to replicate the rather complex classroom management, but also to keep students engaged with their presentation, information exchanging and discussion tasks. In a typical classroom setting, the teacher could monitor each group to ensure the students are 'on task', but this was felt to be more challenging on Zoom. Another problem that was anticipated was whether students would be able to comprehend and complete the tasks required of them for each session. This is perhaps an experience shared by almost any educators attempting to use the Zoom platform for the first few times. With all this in mind, novel solutions were required for the successful implementation of online classes.

A typical Zoom session

Although each class was naturally different, according to the members, they all typically followed a similar pattern. Students were greeted in a plenary session and were divided into groups of 4, 5 or 6 using the Breakout groups function within the Zoom platform. The teacher then allocated each student an administrative role within their small group. These roles are described below.

Administrative roles for students within breakout groups

In order to facilitate the smooth running of the class, it became clear that one possible solution could be giving responsibility for the administration to the students. As in the

classroom situation, it was felt that the most appropriate group size should be either 4 or 5 students. Before separating out students into their breakout rooms, the following text was shared with students, and each student was allotted one of the tasks by the teacher. After a number of different methods of allocating, it was found that the quickest and most efficient was to spend 3 or 4 minutes leading the class session at the start of the lesson. This also gave the teacher an opportunity to greet each student and ascertain that the technology was working. A deadline was then set, typically around halfway through the class, and the Timekeeper was specifically asked to ensure this deadline was achieved. Once the students were placed in their breakout rooms, the teacher's next tasks were to ensure that everyone had entered successfully, and to monitor all groups by entering and leaving each in turn.

Table 3. Student roles and tasks in online Zoom breakout groups

1 **Timekeeper -** make sure everyone is on time, and move on to feedback and discussions when everyone has finished their presentation
2 **Questions leader -** make sure everyone asks content questions before and after each presentation
3 **Feedback leader -** make sure everyone gives and receives feedback at the end of all the presentations
4 **Discussion leader -** choose the order of people to ask their questions and move the discussion to the next question when it is time
5 **English police -** ensure all members speak only in English

As can be seen in Table 3, students were allocated one of five administrative roles. The overall control was given to the **Timekeeper**, who was entasked to choose the order of presenters and encourage other group members to adhere to the deadline. The **Questions leader** was asked to ensure that comprehension questions, both open and secret, were asked and answered at the end of each presentation. **Feedback leaders** were required to facilitate feedback on each other's presentations. Each student should give feedback to at least one team member. Different groups did this in different ways, reflecting the variety of presentations and presenters. The teacher also visited each breakout group to ensure that effective feedback was being provided and to add input if it was felt necessary and appropriate. Factors that were suggested were put up on the chat area of the Zoom platform for students to refer to. These included students' reactions to what they had seen and heard in the presentation, the pace and length of the presentations, clarity of voice and slides, structure, vocabulary, pronunciation and whether students had carried out their presentations using notes or a script. In addition to providing feedback to other members of the group, students were also encouraged to give self assessment. This might typically include how they thought they had improved on a weekly basis, or perhaps how they had challenged themselves to work in different ways based on watching others' presentations. When feedback was complete, and if time allowed, the **Discussion leader** was required to choose which students' questions should be asked and in what order, to ensure that everyone in the group was given a chance to contribute and to move onto the next question

when discussion had come to an end. In most cases, this section of the lesson did not typically last long as the deadline was often reached.

When the halfway point deadline was reached, all students from all breakout groups were summoned back to the main session in order to be randomly assigned new groups. At this point, it was very important for each member of the new group to have not been in any of the others' old groups so that summaries could be completed without redundancy or repetition. In addition, the teacher chose new discussion leaders for each group to ensure the smooth management of the second part of the class.

Teacher role

Because of the essentially decentralised nature of the activities described above, while the breakout groups were in session, the teacher's role was mainly a monitoring one. As they moved from one group to another, students might occasionally ask questions, but for the most part this was not necessary. The teacher was therefore freed up to complete student assessment tasks (as described above).

Effectiveness of breakout rooms online

Bearing in mind the essentially communicative nature of the face-to-face version of the courses detailed here, without the Breakout Room feature available on Zoom, these classes would have been impossible. It took a great deal of time to consider how these classes could best be implemented given the restraints of the software and other factors. Student feedback (detailed below) suggests that the implementation of these courses online appear to have been a success.

Implementing the administrative roles in the classroom

Once it had become possible to return to the traditional classroom setting, there were opportunities to incorporate some of the ideas that had developed organically from the online versions of the class. One of these was to continue using the Breakout Room jobs document as a basis for the administration within each group of 4 or 5 students even in the classroom environment. Unlike in the online version, where the teacher allocated jobs individually, group members were able to choose their role themselves, most commonly through a quick Scissors / Paper / Stone session. Students then carried out their respective roles in their groups, as well as completing their presentation, information gathering and feedback tasks.

Students' reactions to their allocated roles

As noted earlier, one anticipated problem was whether students would be able to fulfil their allotted roles in their groups and thus facilitate the successful completion of the weekly class tasks. It was felt that in the vast majority of cases, students were more than able to do this, and took great pride in taking the lead for their particular role. One possible reason for this was the nature of the cohort of students; all being English major students and well aware that their

classmates wanted to maximise their chances of talking and listening in English in the inevitably solitary period of the online class provision period. It could also be seen that they were required to learn different and perhaps new English skills, namely facilitating and cooperating as a team.

Students' feedback

An informal questionnaire conducted in class produced some interesting and encouraging responses from around 30 students. The questionnaire asked students about their least and most preferred role, easiest and most difficult roles, whether they had similar roles in other classes, and what skills (both language and others) they felt they had learnt through performing these roles in class.

There seemed to be no overall consensus from the students on the most difficult or easy tasks, as students found different roles challenging for a variety of reasons. Some found timekeeping the most difficult; for example 'presentation time is different from person to person' or 'I do not want to interrupt others' presentation'. Others found being the feedback leader was the most difficult because, for example, 'keeping a good atmosphere is sometimes difficult' or 'sometimes team members have nothing to say to presenters'. Still others felt the discussion leader was the most difficult, because, for example, 'it's difficult to come up with good discussion questions'. A common favourite role was the English police, as, for example, 'I really want to use this time to practice English'. Similarly, the question leader was popular as, for example, 'almost all people don't forget to bring questions so the job burden is very light'.

Without exception, all students said that they did not perform these kind of roles in any of their other classes. From this we can deduce that this was probably a novel element of their experiences at university.

Skills that students felt they had picked up through performing these roles fell into language and personal categories. Language skills included listening skills in order to give constructive feedback, an ability to keep speaking, prompt replying to classmates, how to initiate conversation and how to come up with discussion questions quickly. Almost all students replied positively that performing the roles had improved their language skills in some way to some extent. Personal skills acquired included time keeping, leadership, communication skills, feedback, encouraging others to discuss, multitasking, a sense of responsibility, and skills of evaluation of others' presentations. Many students replied positively to this question, which again was seen as encouraging for continuing this aspect of the classes in the future.

Considerations for the future

Student feedback was extremely useful in thinking of ways to improve this aspect of the courses in the future. Many aspects of the system described here appear to have been welcomed by students and after a period of getting accustomed to their roles, are now an accepted part of the course. Certainly there are many positives to take away from the student responses to the questionnaire, but it is clear that some extra consideration needs to be taken to clarify the role of the Feedback leader in future versions of the courses. One student suggested that more time

be taken at the start of the course for more training on what is expected of each role. This would seem sensible, so thought needs to be given as to how to effectively achieve this.

Conclusion

This brief article has attempted to highlight one positive effect of the experience of enforced online class provision due to the Corona pandemic on class management after the return to the classroom. A brief description of the pre-pandemic course, including a typical syllabus, student tasks and assessment criteria was followed by a comparison to its online counterpart, including adaptations necessitated by the medium. The students' classroom roles which developed out of the Zoom sessions were detailed, and how these roles were reintroduced into the subsequent face-to-face classes was also described. Largely positive student reactions and feedback were examined, and future improvements based on this feedback were considered.

Reference

Watts, D. A. (2018). Implementing English Language Content Based Elective Classes At Osaka University. 外国語教育のフロンティア, (1) 285-292.