

Assessing the Efficacy of Online L2 Lessons: A Pilot Study with Practice-Based Attempt

Yoichi SATO

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1. Introduction

In the early 2020, the unpredicted outbreak of Novel Coronavirus (or, COVID-19) resulted. In order to take measures, Japanese schools experienced unexpected campus shut-down, making it impossible for educators to conduct regular face-to-face lessons in class for a certain period of time. Consequently, a myriad of educators had to drastically change their teaching styles so as to meet the social need. This disequilibrium has not fully settled as of 1st of September 2020. We educators should still deal with difficulty handing this pedagogical challenge.

As an alternative way to guarantee quality educational services, many universities determined to conduct online teaching. Some employed online live teaching while utilising remote meetings system, such as Zoom, WebEx, and Microsoft Teams. Others chose to employ on-demand teaching approaches, with Learning Management Systems (LMS) as a platform to distribute learning content. At the Faculty of Business Administration, Toyo University, we also faced tons of challenges due to this unpredictable social change.

This study in this light will explore the efficacy of online teaching, especially with a special focus on on-demand online lessons where students study with English as a second language (L2) used as the medium of instruction. It should be noted that this study is just an initial attempt to investigate how students learn through online lessons. It should also be noted here that this paper was originally developed out of the online presentation the author delivered on 29th

of July 2020 as a part of faculty development activities at the Faculty of Business Administration, Toyo University.

In the following section, I will discuss the issues of online English teaching in Japan, including the trend and the emerging issues, based on my personal interview with my English teaching colleagues both inside and outside Toyo University, while referring to my own teaching experience to supplement the argument.

2. Status quo and designing this research

Looking at the recent nationwide trend, we can generally agree that language teachers prefer to teach online live lessons while using remote meeting services. This is arguably because *here and now*, otherwise labelled as on-site and real-time interaction, is one of the indispensable elements of any communicative language teaching. Some even reported that online learning platform can potentially afford authentic interaction between/among students. Nevertheless, others argued that, given that the current situation is of emergency, the language teachers should also provide an option of on-demand teaching in order to afford relatively free-access learning environment with time-restriction free services at universities. Although the debate over the education efficacy of this online teaching, live or on-demand regardless, still continues, the majority of educators apparently agreed to understand that students would be able to learn the content through on-demand lessons, relatively comfortably while overcoming some online technical problems, including the accidental unstable network connection and limited data-transfer.

The author tried both real-time live teaching and on-demand teaching online in the first semester in 2020. This experience led me to highly evaluate the efficacy of conducting on-demand lessons through online, let alone that of online live lessons, in order to guarantee quality education services for students who were deprived of their learning time in class this year. Apparently, there is a burgeoning interest shown in exploring the efficacy of doing online education (e.g., Yamazato, 2020). This study, in order to supplement this discussion, will focus on on-demand teaching in L2 classes as an initial attempt to explore its pedagogical efficacy, while referring to my actual teaching practices in the first semester of the year 2020 as the primary data source.

(1) About online teaching

First of all, I would like to start with defining on-demand teaching online in comparison with real-time live teaching online. In this paper, I will refer to any online-mediated teaching that happens real-time as online live teaching. My

personal interview with my English teaching colleagues suggested that, to conduct online teaching, remote meeting services were commonly used, including Zoom, WebEx, Microsoft Teams and Google Meet, just to mention a few. In contact, on-demand teaching refers to the forms of online teaching where pre-recorded and edited videos are desirably used as a means of instruction. The videos are often distributed through ToyoNet-ACE, an in-house LMS of Toyo University, so that students can learn the content at their discretion. The author is fully aware that there are many other forms of on-demand teaching existing, but still is convinced that the aforementioned approach is most commonly used for language teaching in the sphere of Japanese tertiary education.

Some educational researchers reported that there was a tendency for L2 teachers to rely more on real-time online live lessons than on on-demand lessons, in order to realise quasi-real-time interaction. Others also argued, however, that conducting only real-time online live teaching can occasionally be deemed slightly problematic for some students whose Internet access is limited. This was found particularly true especially for freshman students at Toyo University this year who started their new lives on their own, based on my in-class survey.

Considering this nature, I made my final decision to mainly provide on-demand lessons in my classes, as they focus on reading in nature and thus do not require as much real-time interaction in class as that of speaking-oriented and/or listening-oriented classes. This did not mean that all of my classes were conducted only as on-demand approaches; I sometimes conducted real-time online live teaching in order for students to deliver their presentations as a part of class requirement.

In retrospect, I found on-demand lessons moderately beneficial for students of my classes in that it would help them learn the content very sufficiently. They could utilise various kinds of learning resources available online, including using auto-caption functions, watching the videos over and over again, and constantly checking the meaning of unknown words, so as to achieve sufficient understanding.

(2) About ToyoNet-ACE

In order to effectively inform students of their given assignments, including the content and submission procedure, and deadline, I used ToyoNet-ACE as a platform of distribution. I published Course News on a regular basis, in which students can obtain any necessary information to complete the course work through text-based delivery.

In addition to the text-based information, I also uploaded the voice-over

recording in which students were informed of the tasks they were supposed to completely every week. This voice-over recording was prepared bilingually (i.e., in English and in Japanese) so that students with limited proficiency in English could supplement their understanding based on explanation in Japanese. Besides, I also set up the forum where students can interact with me and I named this page as *online office hours*. Students were also allowed to have a Zoom meeting with me when they saw necessary. Finally, I also uploaded various kinds of useful information to facilitate students learning, including free online resources and some other extra learning materials that I created by myself. Obviously, on-demand lessons cannot always be looked at as the one-size-fits-all approach to teaching online, there being some potential limitations.

3. Research context and participants

For this initial attempt, I chose five of my courses: four of my required Business English courses, and my elective GBC course. Classes were held once a week. Students in these courses appeared moderately motivated since many of them continuously met the deadline to submit their assignments.

In the required English courses, students were expected to study English vocabulary and expressions specific to content pertaining to business administration and intercultural management. Those who were enrolled in these required English courses must answer 1) weekly vocabulary quizzes, 2) questions based on course videos, and 3) questions based on the coursebook (Sato *et al.*, 2020), in order to show how much they learnt to understand the course content. The grades were determined based on the submission results; the submission success rates and the accuracy of the submitted answers. Some opinion-statement tasks were also taken into consideration for judging how eagerly students studied throughout the courses. All of these tasks were given on ToyoNet-ACE, and students were expected to submit the assignments on the LMS.

In GBC, a similar class format to the aforementioned was employed. In this GBC course, the enrolled students were supposed to study the issues of corporate training as a strategy to develop global human resources. Students must watch weekly course videos every week and answer questions relevant to the content of the videos. Students were also asked to write some opinions about the videos to show how much they exerted themselves to learn. At the end of the course, students were required to submit term-end paper to propose newly conceptualised corporate in-house English training as a part of global human resources development strategies of an imaginary company in Japan. The educational efficacy of this course topic has been explored in many of my

previous research projects (Sato, 2018; 2019)

To design this research, I employed a consequentialist approach. The said online teaching was implemented to take measures to prevent further outbreak of COVID-19 in the sphere of tertiary education. Because of this contingency, I was not able to take time to previously design and sufficiently prepare for this educational research project. Hence, I designed and developed this current research project while implementing the online teaching practice during the semester period. Due to this exploratory and trial nature of this research, I must hereby declare that I could not manage to establish the proper research methodology, including the data collection methods and their analytical methods. I will revisit this malpreparedness with regard to research design later on, as a potential limitation of this research project.

For this initial exploratory pilot study, I relied on my own teaching log, students free-comments about the lessons, and e-mail-based correspondence with students, as the main sources of data. The students whose comments were used as the research data sources were contacted so as to obtain their consent to partake in this research project. The respondents were fully informed that their contributions to this research was totally voluntary, and thus their participation did not place any influence on their eventual grades.

4. Practical report

In this section, I will explore how the students perceived this trial-round on-demand lessons in the spring semester of 2020. In order to draw a general picture of the students' perception, I conducted this initial analysis. Because of this exploratory nature of this study, I do not wish to generalise any of the research findings of this paper. It should be noted here again, because of the unpredictability of the COVID-19 outbreak in the early 2020, the researcher was not able to spend sufficient time designing and developing this current research. Readers of this paper are advised to be fully aware of this research limitation and thus to carefully consider their own research context when applying this initial finding.

As analytical focuses, I will talk about 1) information delivery, 2) lecture format and 3) teacher collaboration in the following sections.

(1) Information delivery

First of all, I would like to look at how students perceived the information delivery approaches of my on-demand lessons. As was aforementioned, ToyoNet-ACE was used as a platform of distributing any necessary class information. Students were informed of assignments as well as their deadline. Information was delivered primarily through text-based media, and

secondarily through podcast-like audio-recorded media. Below are some comments from students.

1-1 ACEを開くとトップページに、何をすればいいのかが指示されているのでわかりやすかったです。[Once I opened ToyoNet-ACE, I could get the instructions about what I should do this week, so I could easily understand.] (A first-grader)

1-2 これまで英語が苦手だったのですが、先生のラジオ番組の英語を聞くのが毎週楽しみになりました。[I thought I was not good at studying English before. But, I found it interesting to listen to the teacher speaking in English in his radio programme every week.] (A first-grader)

1-3 文字だけだとなにをすべきかイマイチわからないので、他の授業もこういう風にしてほしいです。[Only text-based media did not help me understand what I have to do. I want all classes to be like this.] (A second-grader)

In general, students took the above multichannel information delivery relatively positively. Our experience can tell us that many students do not regularly check ToyoNet-ACE to get information. This tendency was also observed at the very early stage of this spring semester when I was still delivering the information only through text-based media. This situation, however, was dramatically improved immediately after this multichannel information delivery was introduced.

The first comment suggested that the audio-based information delivery approach was found somewhat effective. I originally uploaded this audio-file as a supplementary material to the text-based media. I kept updating this audio-based information weekly. Not only the student as was shown as 1-1 above, but also many other students said that it helped them better understand the class-content, and they also reacted positively to this approach.

At the same time, as was indicated in comment 1-2, the radio-like information delivery formats created some kind of entertainment for some course-takers. It is noteworthy that some students commented that the teacher's radio programme contributed to forming their habit to regularly check the class information uploaded on ToyoNet-ACE, arguably due to its potentially entertaining characteristics.

Finally, a first-year student as was shown in comment 1-3 expressed his/her difficulty fully getting the information only through text-based media. Unlike second graders or higher, the first graders of this year had to experience online

teaching, live or on-demand regardless, without having taken any face-to-face courses at Toyo University. This condition has lost them their opportunity to get used to using ToyoNet-ACE as a platform of class-information delivery through trials and errors. Some students even recommended that other classes employ this information-delivery approach to help them better understand the class-related information, especially weekly assignments.

(2) Lecture-format

To produce YouTube videos for on-demand online lessons, I videorecorded my lessons and edited them by using movie-creating application installed in my computer. Each episode consists of 25 to 30 minutes lecture with some slideshow used as visual aids. This on-demand lesson approach also allowed me to show my face to course-takers, and thus the students were able to see me teaching even remotely. The students asked how the teacher speaks with his teacher communicate and who the teacher is supposed to be all the created online videos have been approved it on YouTube to allow students to use the auto caption function to help them better understand the teaching content spoken in L2.

After the on-demand lesson students were asked to answer some questions and submit it to demonstrate how much they understood the content. There were five true-or-false questions about the content of the video lecture, followed by a free opinion-statement question. I provided five to six open-ended questions related to the content at the end of the videos, so as to help students further explore the discussion topics on their own. The students were asked to choose one of these questions and state their own opinions in English. To evaluate the submitted writings, an evaluation rubric table was disclosed in advance so students could be fully informed of point of evaluation, including cohesion/coherence, writing stylistics and creativity. It should be noted here that this evaluation rubric table was developed and distributed to students through ToyoNet-ACE, along with its careful explanation.

Below are the comments from the students

2-1 先生の顔が見えたことでお人柄がよくわかり、安心して授業を受けることができました。[Because I was able to see the teacher's face, I could understand teacher's personality, which helped me comfortably take the lessons.] (A first-grader)

2-2 英語の授業なので、動画を何度も繰り返し見ることができて助かっています。わからないところは字幕で確認しています。[In this English lesson, I was able to watch the movie over and over again until I

understood the content. I could also see the auto-caption to check what I did not understand.] (A second-grader)

2-3 まさか先生に YouTube でお目にかかれるとは！ [Such a surprise that I could see the teacher on YouTube.] (A fourth-grader)

The above excerpts suggested that students celebrated the on-demand lessons, largely because they could see teacher's face. It was indicated, according to the comment 2-1, showing the face of the teacher even in on-demand lessons will potentially help students better understand who the teacher is, what they want to do in class, and what type of personality they have, leading to create some healthy and comfortable learning atmosphere on the students' end.

The second excerpt (2-2) clearly suggests that making the video available online helped the students better understand the teaching content, as it gives them the opportunity to repeatedly watch the lesson content. The student of the excerpt 2-2 happened to be motivated enough to study the content over and over again until they reached the proper understanding. Besides, selecting YouTube as the venue to publish the content was inspiring for some students, as it is one of the most popular online media recently. It is noteworthy that some students found teachers' using YouTube more or less motivating for them, as the comment 2-3 also implied.

In addition to the said on-demand lessons, I sometimes conducted real-time online live lessons through a remote meeting application, namely Zoom. This allowed students a quasi-real-time interactional opportunity with the teacher. At the same time, students could better understand the course content. The use of this remote meeting application to supplement on-demand lessons was also found beneficial in that students were able to gain insights that only on-demand information delivery cannot potentially afford: spontaneous information delivery, shared screen, and whiteboard function. This experience also suggested that multimodal and multidimensional communication between teachers and students would occur even through online lessons.

(3) Teacher collaboration

In this section, I will refer to the possibility of teacher collaboration, which is often deemed as peripheral but still is beneficial. First, I organised a guest speech session online that was financially supported by *Sangaku Kyodo Suishin Tokubetsu Kyoiku* (or, Industry-Academia Joint Promotion Special Education) project. To do so, I chose my GBC as the venue. As a guest speaker, I invited an in-service corporate English trainer who works for various kinds

of Japanese companies. During the guest speech, spontaneous English communication between the teacher and the guest speaker was broadcasted to the students. This collaborative activity resulted in a quasi-real-world communication in which students were involved as peripheral participants. This approach also allowed the students to be involved in the sociocultural interaction while students were using their second language as a means of socialisation within a community of practice they inhabited.

In addition to the above collaboration, I also made a teacher collaboration video in which Professor Sekaguchi kindly participated. He and I intended to make this movie clip in order to have students quasi-experience class-outside environment. Please allow me to express hereby my greatest gratitude for Professor Sekaguchi to kindly and voluntarily be involved in this project. I published this movie clip to the students through ToyoNet-ACE so that they could relax themselves in their free time. Below are the comments from the students about the above two collaborative projects.

3-1 先生が、授業のためにシンプルにしてくれた英語ではない英語を聞くチャンスがあって面白かったです。[It was interesting, because it was not the simplified English that the teacher spoke for the purpose of lessons.] (A third-grader)

3-2 坂口先生の意外な一面が見れて、超高感度アップ！[I saw a different aspect of Professor Sakaguchi, which impressed me very positively.] (A fourth-grader)

3-3 先生、歌うまいっすね！[You're a good singer, Professor!] (A second-grader)

As was indicated in comment 3-1, watching the actual interaction where the teacher realistically communicated with a guest speaker while using English as a *lingua franca* was stimulating for student. They could possibly have a chance to be even peripherally involved in in real-life English conversation without any linguistic simplification as well as modification. Generally speaking, the students are used to listening to classroom English. Hence, this realistic interaction is somewhat eye-opening. It is also suggested that this realistic interaction also motivated them to be more integrated in English-speaking discourse community.

Furthermore, the teacher's entertaining performance, apart from the aspects of teaching English, was also inspiring for some students in that it could help them understand what type of person the teacher is in a holistic perspective.

In my other study (Sato, 2020), it was suggested that showing the teacher's aspects in class, other than what the students are used to seeing, could help create different type of motivation for students.

5. Conclusion

In this pilot study, I discussed the efficacy of online teaching based on the students' retrodictive reactions. Special analytical attention was paid to on-demand online lessons where students study with English used as their L2. It should be noted that many students found this on-demand teaching style satisfactory for mainly three reasons. First, the multichannel approaches to information delivery was found effective, especially first-graders. Second, making the lesson videos available online was deemed efficient in that it allowed students to check the content to their heart's content. Third, the collaborative teaching also inspired the student in two aspects; 1) stimulating the students' integrative motivation and 2) entertaining them to create instrumental motivation. This collaborative approach also contributed to eliciting some positive feedback from the course-takers.

This initial attempt still leaves the following points for further consideration. To begin with, teachers have to be aware that some students faced problems obtaining information consistently as a result of the technological insufficiency. Some students failed in preparing the adequate network environment at home. This infrastructure problem in the first semester of the school year 2020 resulted from the contingency owing to the unpredictable outbreak of COVID-19. Considering the most appropriate online teaching approach depending on the students' network capacity will thus be the next topic of inquiry.

Next, future research should deal with how to effectively conduct online lessons in students' L2. I conducted all of my lessons in English, which is the mutual L2 for me and most of the students. My personal experience shows that many language teachers, automatically or intentionally regardless, try to adjust their lexico-grammatical level depending on the students' proficiency. However, teaching online will make it difficult for teachers to judge their students' current level properly, and thus many such teachers may have difficulty adjusting their classroom language. Future research should pay attention to this teaching issue to find the best solutions. I just mentioned two future research perspectives over online teaching, but I am fully aware that there are many more untouched issues that researchers have not been aware of yet. Researchers are advised to eagerly tackle the issues of online teaching to provide more effective online learning environment on students.

Lastly, I would like to refer to the limitations of this research. Because of the unpredictable outbreak of COVID-19, I failed in previously designing and

sufficiently preparing for this educational research project. As an alternative, I employed a consequentialist approach; I conducted this current research project on the one hand while engaging in the online teaching practice on the other. This exploratory and trial nature of this research did not allow me to establish the proper research methodology. However, this study is exploratory in nature.

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