Revisiting and Reassessing Online Teaching 2020-2021: What Can One Specific Ethnographic Case Study Tell Us?

Yoichi SATO

1. Introduction

It has been over a year and a half since the unexpected outbreak of the novel coronavirus, otherwise known as COVID-19. Some research has reported that practitioners in various kinds of educational institutions, including universities, dealt with difficulty preparing their online teaching as an alternative approach. Toyo University, as a part of its approach to taking necessary measures, also decided to replace in-person classes with online teaching in early 2020. In 2021, our school decided to implement Hybrid-Flexible (HyFlex) lessons to improve the quality of our online teaching programme. This situation continues as of September 2021. Today, the issues of online teaching garner the attention of many educational practitioners as well as researchers.

My previous study (Sato, 2020), in light of this, referred to the actual educational practice based off of the students' reflective comments retrieved from students taking my online courses in the year 2020. At that time, my online teaching was still at its initial stage. The result of this study indicated that online teaching, especially on-demand second language (L2) lessons, turned out to be educationally effective in that it could potentially provide students with more repetitive input learning opportunities outside the classroom. Furthermore, these on-demand L2 lessons have potential in helping

develop learners' autonomy with which practical L2 acquisition comes into play.

The aforementioned research concluded that, since the online teaching was still at the initial stage as of its publication date, further exploration would be needed in order to revisit and reassess the pedagogical efficacy of L2 online teaching in the future. Based off of the research findings, I designed and developed some business English course materials (Sato, Smoley & Ano, 2021; Sato & Smoley, 2021) to improve my online teaching quality. It was suggested future research should employ a student-centred perspective to look at how online teaching has been received by students, with a special focus on some negative aspects, for further sustainable curriculum development.

In this light, this study as a continuation of what I did in 2020, will address the issues of online teaching while incorporating more student-centred perspectives into consideration. This time, I will look at one particular student who I believe could represent a typical victim of the sudden change in the sphere of tertiary education as a result of introducing online teaching. It should also be noted here that this participant perceives the online teaching largely as negative, the reasons being illustrated in detail later on. I deliberately chose this student as my research participant in order to focus my analytical attention on the negative aspects of online teaching. I took this approach not to criticise the on-going online teaching, but to point out what remains to be explored as an attempt to further develop online teaching curriculum. In addition, eliciting students' points of view about online teaching is deemed beneficial to gain insight into how to improve our online teaching approaches in the future. To begin with, I will refer to the background information of this research to help readers understand the necessary contextual characteristics.

2. Contextual background of this study

In this section, I will refer to two different kinds of contextual background necessary to help understand why this study is needed: 1) teaching aspects and 2) research aspects.

(1) Teaching aspects

The beginning of the second decade of the 21st century has witnessed rapid social metamorphosis because of the unexpected outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The worldwide spread of this new type of viral infection has led to the imposition of restrictions not merely on economic activities, but also on wide swath of human activities including education. To safeguard public health, a number of educational institutions were obliged to make decisions to conduct online teaching, instead of accepting the level of risk inherent in the conventional face-to-face teaching environment. The majority of educational

practitioners and researchers agreed that this decision-making should be considered sensible and reasonable in the long run.

In practice, however, a great many educational practitioners were reportedly at a loss as to what to do at the very initial stage of online teaching. Our experience shows that, due to the unexpected outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent introduction/implementation of online teaching in the early 2020, teachers in Toyo University were asked to offer online lessons in the new academic year starting in April, but without sufficient time for the necessary preparation. The majority of us teachers explored agreeably appropriate styles of online teaching through trial and error. A number of reports were published so as to discuss their educational trials (e.g., Marsh, 2021; Ryan, 2021; Tamura, 2021; Wagner, 2021), but a consensus has not yet been achieved concerning how to organise satisfactory online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic period and beyond.

In my previous research (Sato, 2020), I explored the effective use of online teaching, with a special focus on on-demand teaching, and found that such online teaching could be considered pedagogically effective when it comes to content-based L2 lessons. Furthermore, it was suggested that the on-demand teaching style was found even more effective than face-to-face teaching in that, when well-designed, it could potentially provide students with more opportunities to learn the content. On the other hand, it was also indicated that the aspects of communication that L2 teaching in general largely consists of could not be obviously fully supplemented through online teaching. This is because online teaching apparently results in reducing students' real-time interaction which is believed to be one of the indispensable aspects of L2 acquisition from an educational point of view.

(2) Research aspects

Since the unexpected outbreak of COVID-19, several studies to investigate the efficacy of online English teaching, though the number is limited, emerged in the sphere of educational research in Japan. In this paper, I will refer to the three most recent papers relevant to this current study as examples of academic reports on the efficacy of online teaching. For instance, Ryan (2021) discussed the benefits and drawbacks of both real-time and on-demand lessons based on the researcher's trial and error. To improve the online learning environment for students, he emphasised "the importance of institutional support in facilitating the academic learning environment and psychological well-being of students." (p. 14) Not only learning support, but also technical support is ecessary when thinking about further curriculum development. Marsh (2021), by the same token, focused his attention on L2 writing tasks and

investigated the applicability of using a SurveyMonkey writing task in the context of online education. Tamura (2021) demonstrated how to effectively use a web conferencing system based on his trial in his L2 teacher training course. His findings suggested that the use of breakout room functions could be beneficial when it comes to group learning activities. On the other hand, it was also suggested that, compared with face-to-face class meetings, students did not feel as comfortable about sharing their opinions freely with other classmates.

Most of these studies were dedicated to the exploration of the efficacy of online teaching with a quantitative-oriented approach. However, as these three researchers were also aware, careful observation in classrooms will suggest that a more ethnographic point of view should be incorporated into future investigations, there being apparently some people/students suffering from this sudden educational change. Sato (2020), accordingly, noted that future studies should also look at the peripheral issues of this educational change and assess some negative aspects of online teaching. In this light, this study will refer to one specific case in which one student at our university has been apparently suffering from an online teaching environment.

In order to elicit the data necessary for this study, I decided to go with an in-class longitudinal, participant observation approach to researching the aforementioned student. Through the immersive involvement with one particular participant, I was able to gain deeper insight into his own situation in connection with his online learning environment for the past year and a half. I must hereby declare that this study will by no means contribute to the denial of online L2 teaching. Rather, it aims to shed light on the aspects of online teaching that have arguably been overlooked and this is for the benefit of possible future improvements to online teaching approaches. Because of the exploratory nature of this study, I do not wish to generalise any of the research findings of this study. I will refer to the data elicitation methods of this study in the following section.

3. Methods

(1) Data elicitation methods

The data for this study were elicited through the author's longitudinal involvement with one specific participant. Sato (2018) demonstrated that this micro approach will play a facilitative role in spotlighting some overlooked aspects of discourse community. This approach is also deemed useful as the first step of curriculum development to better meet the learners' needs.

Masashi, the participant of this study, has been taking the author's advanced

business English courses for the past two consecutive years. Through these two years, I conducted several personal oral interviews with him to discern his learning needs. When conducting oral interviews, a non-structured interview approach was employed, and the interviews were scheduled on an irregular basis and administered by using a web conferencing system with recording to prevent the possibility of viral infection. I will refer to the interview excerpts as the data of this study.

(2) Research participant

For this particular study, I chose this one specific student as a case study participant, because he often viewed online teaching very negatively ever since our first in-class encounter. Besides, this student continuously took my courses over last two years and he voluntarily participated in my research project while moderately understanding the concept of this study. He was fully informed well before the interviews that his participation in this study was totally voluntary, and his participation did not influence his course grades. To present data, his name was written as a pseudonym so general readers could not identify who he was. For his personal reasons, he had the tendency to try to use English as much as he could, probably as a part of his English learning even outside the class. Hence, all the interview data referred to in this paper will be presented in the original language, English, though it is not his first language.

Masashi, a fourth-year student majoring in business at a private university located in the Tokyo metropolitan area, Japan, participated in this research project. Throughout the interview, he often claimed that he had difficulty taking the real-time online lessons in 2020 due to his limited Internet environment at his home, whereas he could comfortably take on-demand style lessons. During the first semester in 2021, however, he was able to take classes, real-time or on-demand regardless, because he was able to use the computer rooms in his school with fewer restrictions because of student entry deregulation.

4. Data analysis

In this section, I will conduct a data analysis based off of the retrieved interview data. The data set was categorised into the following four domains: 1) Masashi's perception of online teaching in general, 2) how to use the Internet, 3) how to retrieve information appropriately, and 4) notes on his trial during the first semester in 2021. His actual words will consistently be shown with double quotations ("…").

(1) Masashi's perception of online teaching in general

In this section, I will refer to his comments about how he generally views the current status of online teaching. To begin with, Masashi was reluctant when his school's decision was made to conduct all classes online in early 2020. He repeatedly commented during the interviews that it was "such an irresponsible decision." This comment appears to provide a counterargument against Sato's (2020) initial finding that students were mostly satisfied with online teaching as it saves them the time spent commuting to school. My follow-up interview, however, revealed that his dissatisfaction resulted largely from his Internet accessibility at home, not from the content of the online lessons per se. Masashi explained that "my home don't have the Internet environment." He continued that "in addition, the school didn't allow us to enter" during the first semester in 2020, so he "couldn't go to the computer room" and take lessons online. He repeatedly insisted that his school did not do anything to take measures for the sake of the students. He even commented that "it was hard for a poor student like me."

Throughout my interviews, he often said that he was able to successfully take my on-demand lessons during the first semester in 2020. He found the on-demand lesson style I employed in my course very reasonable as he was able to take lessons at his own convenience. He also commented that he even felt the on-demand style very suitable for my lesson content because he "downloaded the course videos, watched them over and over until I understand and submitted answer" when he had more stable access to the Internet, the details of which will be further elucidated in the following section.

(2) How to use the Internet

As was mentioned earlier, Masashi did not have an adequate Internet environment at home. When I asked him how he maintained his Internet access to take my on-demand course in the first semester in 2020, he shared with me a very intriguing story as follows. When online teaching was introduced in his school, he obviously dealt with difficulty accessing the Internet from home. He responded that "I had to spend two hours or more taking a train" to go down to the suburb area of Tokyo where "some Internet cafes were still open" to take classes. Though he had difficulty taking the real-time lessons with that Internet environment, he was still able to take classes that were offered as on-demand style, including mine.

He continued that the situation somewhat improved in the second semester in 2020 when the school decided to reopen the computer rooms for a limited number of students. At the same time, the school library was open again, which allowed him some necessary academic reference materials as well as computer-based learning infrastructure. It was not until the autumn semester in 2020

that he was finally able to take real-time online lessons by using the school computers.

However, he also commented that, compared with other students who were able to take classes from home during the first semester, his online lesson literacy was less advanced. He said that he had a hard time "catching up with other rich students who could take lessons from home" in many instances of his attending online lessons. Please note that he attributed the cause of his underdeveloped computer literacy to the economic gap among students; he finds himself poor whereas other students are rich.

(3) How to retrieve information appropriately

At the same time, it must be also noted here that Masashi was not satisfied with all on-demand style classes. One of the most serious problems he faced was how to retrieve necessary class information appropriately in order to complete his class requirements, particularly in L2-instructed classes. He claimed that he could not easily use his school's in-house Learning Management System (LMS) by means of which most of the class-related information was delivered. In addition to this technological difficulty, he also dealt with the difficulty of the retrieved information being delivered in L2. He stated that "it is very tough to get text-based information, especially in English."

Masashi even continued that "in one business English class, teacher gave us online assignment, but no face-to-face class, so students have to get information by text only, so very tough." As was mentioned earlier, he appreciates on-demand style lessons in that they can give students some flexible learning scheduling. However, he also experienced some technological difficulty taking on-demand lessons due to to his limited network access infrastructure at home.

Masashi, to improve this situation, suggested that course syllabi contain all the necessary information about the teaching format, including online/HyFlex (Hybrid-Flexible) vs offline and real-time vs on-demand. Due to the rapidly changing nature of the current circumstances, it is technically impossible to disclose this information on course syllabi and strictly follow the schedule. Furthermore, he recommended that his school provide online literacy course where students can learn how to use web conferencing systems more effectively as the basis of future online learning.

(4) Notes on his trial during the first semester in 2021

In 2021, some face-to-face classes finally returned. Masashi decided to take more classes than he had originally planned, and to get as many credits as he

could to compensate for the academic loss he incurred in the previous year. As a fourth-year student, Masashi said he was desperate to obtain sufficient credits to meet his graduation prerequisites. Even though he now could take classes from computer rooms in his school, he would rather go with as many face-to-face classes as he could since they are apparently safer choices for him.

Nevertheless, thanks to the repetitive state of emergency declarations by the Japanese government during the spring semester in 2021, he was not able to take as many face-to-face classes as he had originally planned. To compensate, he could not help but to attend online classes. In addition to real-time lessons, Masashi also took a few on-demand style lessons as he had already developed appreciation for the value of taking video-based lessons at his discretion.

Notwithstanding, he still felt some anxiety taking some on-demand lessons because those classes required of him more advanced computer literacy as the study basis. According to his explanation, in some classes, the necessary course information was sent via email, including the deadline and the method of submission. In other classes, however, there was no email-based information delivery taking place; students were asked to constantly check the in-house LMS on their own. He commented that this inconsistency regarding the class information delivery policy made it challenging for him to understand the situation, especially when all the classes were conducted online as a result of the state of emergency. To improve this situation, he recommended that the school should decide on a fixed policy as regards the class-information delivery platforms and/or strategies.

5. What can this case tell us?

As you can see, the case I looked at in this paper should be considered extraordinary in that not having Internet access at home seems very exceptional. My personal interviews with other students of mine indicated that traveling for two hours or longer to find an Internet café to take classes online is also unusual. Besides, even though he had his smartphone, Masashi was not able to check the in-house LMS, because of his data transfer limitation, to retrieve the necessary course-related information on a regular basis, which is also an exceptional case. However, it is also true that this exceptional case does really exist and we educational practitioners as well researchers should not think lightly of this extraordinary case when further developing the online educational curricula in the future.

In Japanese society today, the majority of universities must rely on online education to provide students with substituent, but sufficient learning environments   when many face-to-face class meetings need to be cancelled to safeguard public health. In early 2020, many educators went with online

teaching due to school policy changes. In general, it was considered a reasonable and feasible decision, as was mentioned earlier. However, as the news, as well as the case referred to in this paper suggested, there are apparently some students suffering from this educational change.

Masashi's case, though it is obviously an exceptional case, can offer some important suggestions to improve the situation from a student-centred perspective. First of all, educators must pay slightly more attention to the possible technological difficulty of taking online classes. Most students can comfortably take online lessons, both real-time and on-demand, at home since they normally have sufficient Internet access. However, though the number is very limited, there are cases where students deal with difficulty using the Internet at home.

Second, teachers should be aware that some students might have trouble obtaining necessary class information properly because of the use of multiple channels. Masashi's previously-mentioned comment on the inconsistency of information delivery platforms and/or strategies highly likely reflects on his own stereotype as a technologically challenged individual. However, this case does really exist and we teachers should not ignore this fact. To improve this situation, course syllabi in the future should clearly state whether the classes will be conducted online, offline or HyFlex as well as the official method of class information delivery. It is expected that the COVID-19 pandemic will gradually settle down as the vaccination programme is implemented nationwide in the long run. Reality anticipates that, even after the current pandemic is over, the option to offer some university classes online (or, perhaps as HyFlex) will not disappear due to the recently recognised pedagogical advantages and operational convenience. To help students be better prepared for their courses, the information about class format should be provided on the course syllabus.

Third, to further proceed with online education, maintaining the Internet infrastructure is essential. Now, the computer rooms in his school are available, so Masashi does not find it very inconvenient to take classes online, especially during the first semester in 2021. However, he still deals with difficulty retrieving the necessary course-related information online, since his Internet access at home is limited. Besides, he often feels the number of computers available for students in his school is somewhat insufficient. To supplement, the school should desirably think about the possibility of offering more Internet access, for instance mobile Wi-Fi connection service, for those who have difficulty accessing the Internet from home. Failure in attending classes is highly likely to lead to a serious academic failure especially for a fourth-year student.

6. Conclusion

The unpredicted outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 has brought drastic change to university education. Instead of offering face-to-face classes, many universities in Japan decided to go with online teaching in order to safeguard public health. While some researchers are exploring the pedagogical efficacy of online teaching, there are apparently some students suffering from this alternative approach, not only because of their lack of proficiency, but also because of the technological problems arguably resulting from digital divide.

The participant of this study considered his university's decision to go with online teaching as irresponsible because he obviously had difficulty taking online classes because of his insufficient Internet environment at home. For many educators in his school, this news must sound very disappointing as many of them must have tried their best to prepare for their online lessons through trial and error. I would interpret this exceptional case not as a sign of educational failure at all, but as evidence showing that the current state of online education has some room for further improvement.

As was mentioned earlier, Masashi has a negative opinion about online teaching. The main cause of his dissatisfaction came more from his insufficient access to the Internet than from the content quality of provided education. Rather, he said he was moderately satisfied with the on-demand lessons as well as real-time lessons when the computer rooms of his school reopened so he was able to use the Internet adequately in the facility. Even when a state of emergency was declared again during the first semester in 2021, he was still able to attend real-time online lessons comfortably, let alone on-demand ones.

In this study, I deliberately looked at the exceptional case where one specific student claimed that he was suffering from the switch to online education for some extraordinary reasons. As I explained in the section of Methods, looking at an exceptional case is deemed academically meaningful in that this approach helps think about the future explorability of the relevant, untouched research field. While many other studies have delved into the pedagogical efficacy of online teaching, I attempted to shed light on negative aspects that many educational researchers have overlooked so far.

Lastly, because of the ethnographic nature of this research approach, I do not wish to generalise any of my research findings in this paper. Rather, the main purpose of this current research is to generate some new hypothesis for future exploration. Researchers are thus advised to think about their own context when thinking about the applicability of these research findings. It would be desirable if educational researchers could use this research as their basis of future exploration.

References

Marsh, R. (2021). In the shadow of Covid-19: SurveyMonkey as an illuminating path towards process writing and formative assessment. *The Center for English as a Lingua Franca Forum*, *1*, 31-39.

Ryan, J. (2021). Reflections on online English instruction in spring 2020—Benefits and drawbacks. *Shizuoka University of Art and Culture Bulletin*, *21*, 7-14.

Sato, Y. (2018). A Post-analysis of Global Human Resources Development through an Overseas Training Programme: A Case Study. *Journal of Business Administration*, *91*, 133-145.

Sato, Y. (2020). Assessing the Efficacy of Online L2 Lessons: A Pilot Study with Practice- Based Attempt. *Journal of Business Administration*, *96*, 29-39.

Sato, Y. & Smoley, S. (2021). *The day you do business in English*. Tokyo: Harima Publishing.

Sato, Y., Smoley, S., & Ano, S. (2021). *Strategic management in business English* (third edition). Tokyo: Harima Publishing.

Tamura, T. (2021). Effectiveness and problems of online lessons identified from a student questionnaire—through methods of organizing English language education II lessons held during the first half of 2020—. *The Research Bulletin of the Cooperative Faculty of Education Utsunomiya University*, *71*(1), 331-350.

Wagner, A. (2021). Task design for student output in asynchronous online English classes. *St. Andrew's University Bulletin of the Research Institute, 47*(1), 13-13.