COVID-19 Pandemic and Online Classroom Interaction in the Japanese Context

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This paper investigates the challenges EFL instructors faced while delivering online classes during the pandemic in Japan in order to help language instructors improve the quality of classroom interaction they provide. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven EFL instructors at the English Department of a Japanese university. Participants revealed how they overcame challenges to engage students in online class interactions. However, the instructors pointed out that the online pedagogical training that they had received was inadequate. The paper argues that universities should formulate standardized guidelines for online education and expand the opportunities provided for instructors to receive adequate training.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound effect on the way in which instructors carry out their teaching responsibilities. When countries around the world were ordered to close their schools, both instructors and students of foreign languages were coerced into using the internet before they were fully prepared (Hodges et al., 2020). As a direct consequence of the pandemic, there was a sudden shift in the way online education was carried out without of any prior notifications or guidelines.

The traditional classroom approach to educating students was superseded by the use of online teaching and learning despite evidence that a significant number of instructors lacked abilities in using internet technologies prior to the pandemic. Furthermore, the interaction between students and instructors was significantly reduced when compared to the typical classroom setting (Mehall, 2020). Nishikawa (2020) argues that students in Japan demonstrate a lack of active participation during their online classes. They attempt to remember what is covered in class by listening carefully and taking notes. Students have also reported experiencing problems such as the expense and difficulty of securing a stable Internet connection at home, the frustration of learning on new online learning platforms, and the sensation of being isolated from society because of their online studies. They had little time to get to know their fellow students before their classes moved online, and they didn't have a mentor to turn to for advice or clarification. Consequently, new students frequently experienced feelings of alienation and loneliness (Nishikawa, 2020).

An investigation into how instructors coped with the sudden shift to online learning can shed light on how they planned their work in this new context. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how English as Foreign Language (EFL) instructors at a Japanese university conducted online classes during the pandemic. Specifically, the researcher investigated how these instructors managed classroom interactions and overcame obstacles in order to maintain their students' interest and in-depth engagement in their online classes. Moore (1989) defined three distinct forms of online interactions within the setting of distance learning which include student-content, student-teacher, and student-student interactions as follows:

A) A phenomenon known as student-content interaction takes place when a student's mental processes interact with the subject matter that is being studied in a way that causes a change in the student's level of comprehension, viewpoint, or cognitive structures (Moore, 1989).

B) Both students and instructors engage in student-teacher interaction when a teacher creates a lesson plan, gathers information, delivers a presentation, plans student dialogues, and encourages students to engage in interaction with one another (Moore, 1989).

C) A student is engaged in student-to-student interaction when he or she engages in interaction with other students in the same group, regardless of whether or not the instructor is present (Moore, 1989).

This study will focus on these three types of interaction outlined by Moore.

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Research questions

The following research questions will guide this exploratory research:

1. During the pandemic, how did EFL instructors manage classroom interactions in their online classes?

2. What difficulties did EFL instructors confront when attempting to manage interactions of this nature?

Method

This paper investigated the quality of classroom interactions in online education during the pandemic with a qualitative research methodology (Creswell, 2014; Dornyei, 2007). Seven EFL instructors working in the English department of a Japanese university participated in this research investigation. As shown in Table 1, they have with an average of 9.7 years of classroom teaching experience and none of them had ever taught a class via the internet in the years leading up to the pandemic.

Instructor E was able to use computers effectively before the pandemic. Only two of the seven instructors, F and G, had prior experience completing training programs that were associated with information technology.

Instructor G conducted research on the ways in which computers could help students learn the foreign language. He assigned movie making projects to his students before the pandemic. His students were a group of freshmen enrolled in a mandatory EFL course for Japanese university students in the fall semester of 2019. The movie making project was the major component for this course in order to develop students' digital empathy. In this project, 45 students in two classes were divided into 10 self-selected groups made up of 3 to 6 students. However, instructor G had to cancel his movie making project at the start of the pandemic due to the social distancing measures.

During the pandemic, both instructor F and G assigned weekly paragraph writing and discussion forum assignments to their students, combined with peer-to-peer evaluation using an online rubric tool, as well as self-monitoring and proofreading activities pertinent to enhancing the input given to the student. All instructors stated that they had never conducted online classes before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, they had a fundamental comprehension of technology. The instructors' university in Japan informed them that they had to teach online for a full academic year, beginning in late April 2020 and ending in early March 2021 because of the pandemic. Their university asked them to use Microsoft Teams business edition for teaching all classes. The ninety minute online were taught by all EFL instructors with between 20 and 30 students in each class.

The EFL instructors were contacted through emails by the researcher who explained the purpose of the study and asked for their participation. A total of nine instructors expressed interest in taking part in the study. However, only seven instructors showed up for the interviews. The

Table 1. Participants' experiences			
Instructors	**Classroom experience**	**Online teaching experience before the pandemic**	**Online teaching experience during the pandemic**
A	7 years	N/A	Microsoft Teams lesson
B	10 years	N/A	Microsoft Teams lesson
C	12 years	N/A	Microsoft Teams lesson
D	9 years	N/A	Microsoft Teams lesson
E	8 years	N/A. Was able to use computers effectively	Microsoft Teams lesson
F	7 years	N/A. Had courses in IT	- Microsoft Teams lesson - Online posting assignments
G	15 years	- N/A. Had courses in IT - Research focused on Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) - Movie making assignments	- Microsoft Teams lesson - Online posting assignments

researcher used semi-structured interviews because they allow for a more in-depth assessment of how instructors dealt with interactions and the obstacles they had when teaching online (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001). Audio recordings were made of each of these interviews, which were carried out using Microsoft Teams. The duration of each interview ranged from 25 to 35 minutes.

Following that, the researcher transcribed the responses gained from the interviewees. The goal of each interview question (see Appendix A) was to elicit responses from instructors regarding how they managed students 'online interactions and the challenges they faced while instructing online classes during the pandemic. Charmaz's (2014) thematic analysis method was used for data analysis. The interview transcripts were coded utilizing an iterative approach to the process using open nodes. Furthermore, the Moore (1989) framework, which consists of three distinct kinds of interactions (student-content interaction, student-teacher interaction, and student-student interaction), was utilized as a guide for analyzing the data and classifying the activities that instructors reported doing in their online teaching. Additional themes contributed to answering the second research question about how online instructors planned activities and how difficult it was for them to manage interactions when they were teaching online.

Results

In response to the first research question, the outcomes of this study revealed the ways in which the instructors managed student interactions. All instructors enabled student-content interactions prior to engaging in synchronous interaction with students; yet, less than half of them managed student-to-student interactions in the form of online forums before or after the synchronous sessions.

Managing student-content interaction

According to the interviews, three instructors, E, F, G used free digital tools such as: Kahoot quizzes to check their students' comprehension, FlipGrid for short video discussions, Ted-Ed, which has a library of short video lessons created by instructors and students on a variety of topics, and ClassDojo, which is a digital communication and sharing platform connecting instructors and their students. However, online classes were successfully delivered by the other four instructors without the utilization of any learning management systems or platforms. For example, instructors A, B, C, D communicated with all of their students via email.

The three instructors E, F, and G each gave their students a wide variety of online additional assignments to help them put what they were learning in class into practice. Furthermore, E, F, and G gave the students exams to check whether or not they had been paying attention in class and whether or not they comprehended the content that had been presented. they were able to check to see if their students had completed their tasks, but they did not provide grades because they did not have enough time to check the content in detail. For example, instructor F asked his students to do online posting assignments. This instructor mentioned that he collected student homework through the use of ClassDojo.

Instructors A, B, C, and D asked their students to deliver short presentations for the online class every week. For example, Instructor B mentioned that he gave his students the task of delivering an online speech of one minute's duration. The four instructors asked each student a few questions to determine whether or not they had engaged with the various materials. Most students, as indicated by the instructors, tried to complete their homework prior to their scheduled online meetings with their instructors. Instructor B noted that "It seemed that the majority of students read the pre-class materials." However, six out of seven instructors did not make it a priority to ensure that students comprehended what they was being taught

According to the findings of the study, there was a degree of uncertainty regarding the quality of the interactions. Instructors handed out announcements and assignments to students and occasionally answered their questions. Instructor G mentioned that he used ClassDojo to provide materials for each of his classes and used email to contact his students occasionally. Furthermore, more than half of the instructors merely asked their students to interact with the materials, but did not provide additional explanation of the material or assess their comprehension. When determining which students had finished their assignments, four instructors relied on assessments. To determine whether or not students comprehended the material, just one instructor marked the homework that students handed in. The majority of instructors failed to ensure that students had an adequate understanding of the subject content. While some instructors prepared activities for student interaction with the content, there was a paucity of information about the nature of such interaction.

Managing student-teacher interaction

All instructors communicated online with their students using Microsoft Teams, which was provided by the university. They were successful in accomplishing this goal through utilizing PowerPoint slides and having direct interactions with the students. Five out of the seven instructors delivered classes through direct instruction method to their students, who listened and remained silent throughout the lesson. This type of training is referred to as "one-way" instruction. Instructor D pointed out that "Students turned off their microphones and cameras during

the online sessions since their connections were unstable and did not allow for in-depth involvement." They all agreed that they were unable to monitor or communicate with all students at the same time because so many of the students had turned off their cameras, and that some students did not actively participate in the online sessions. The instructors hoped to pique the students' interest by having them react to questions posed to them. For example, Instructor C mentioned that he had the students react to his questions by calling out their names.

Although they used a variety of technologies and one-way and two-way communications, both online and offline, the interactions between students and instructors were limited in scope and shallow in depth. Furthermore, during the sessions of the class, each instructor tried to use "breakout rooms" to separate the students into smaller groups for the purposes of having discussions, working on group projects, and engaging in other activities. However, the instructors noticed that when the students got together in smaller groups, they spoke Japanese instead of English. For example, Instructor E stated that he had to constantly monitor students by entering, leaving, and reentering breakout rooms to ensure that students practiced their conversations only in English.

Two of the seven instructors worked on establishing online discussion groups for the students. Instructor F indicated that he posted a statement as homework to his students and encouraged them to read it and decide whether or not they agreed with it. After that, it was expected of them to postpone substantive original comment by mid-week and two responses to other student comments by the end of the week.

Managing student-student interaction

Before the pandemic, two of the instructors assigned their students to work in groups to prepare and deliver presentations in front of the class. These instructors conducted their online classes in the same manner as before. The majority of instructors did not encourage or assist student conversation over the relevant time period. Only two instructors attempted to establish online discussion forums where students could interact. One of them stated what they did as follows: "I emailed them with recordings of the sample talks and requested them to watch the videos and provide their comments underneath the video; then we had an open discussion over the video" (Instructor G). The discussion forum was not a compulsory assignment, so student participation was voluntary. Therefore, most of them chose not to join in the conversation. Instructor G stated, "students only questioned me when they did not comprehend the task or subject, but they rarely commented on one another's videos."

Only two instructors (D and G) organized group activities where students may connect with one another and monitored Microsoft Teams dialogues during synchronous sessions. Instructors A and F assigned group work as part of their asynchronous activities. The students were instructed to adopt a persona and record a conversation for submission. Instructor A pointed out that they did not notice how the students communicated or worked to complete the objective, which required teamwork from the students, during the activity.

Despite the fact that three instructors (E, F, and G) facilitated student interactions, other instructors did not organize any synchronous conversations in which students could share opinions. For instance, Instructor B indicated that she did not organize student interaction because the focus of her class was reading, and she did not believe that student interactions were necessary. Despite the differences in how instructors established connections between students, it is noteworthy that instructors who had previously used online learning built up significantly more interactions between students than the other instructors.

Instructors inadequate training

All instructors agreed that the university only trained them on how to use Microsoft Teams in terms of how it runs, rather than training them on how it can be utilized in the online classes. Instructors who had never taught their classes online before found that it was difficult to engage their students in their teachings, build classroom interactions, and handle students who were not paying attention while they were online. In addition, Instructor B emphasized the need of instructors to gain knowledge from one another as well as the Internet.

The instructors who taught students online needed to think of ways to keep their students interested in the material they were studying. They claimed that no matter how hard they tried, they were unable to properly engage students or manage their classrooms when teaching online. This was the case regardless of how much effort they put into it. It was also revealed that the university did not have a unified method for making sure that students took part in the activities. For instance, all the instructors reported that they were unable to ask their students to turn on their cameras while they were participating in online classes. Instructor D pointed out that he was oblivious to what was happening during the lessons. Additionally, he mentioned that several of his students consistently logged out of Microsoft Teams before the end of lessons without giving notice.

Discussion

Student-content interaction

Prior to lessons, instructors assigned readings to students on Microsoft Teams. However, several instructors failed to check whether students worked on the readings or contributed to conversations about them. As a result, a number of students failed to pay attention to lessons or prepare for next sessions. According to Garrison and Cleveland (2005), students pay little attention to the materials they are offered when instructors don't develop critical discourses. In other words, providing content alone was insufficient for in-depth learning. This is due to the fact that few learners simply interacted with the materials to take quizzes. They didn't actually focus on the meaning of the materials. Instead, they concentrated on the surface level needed to complete their purpose as easy as possible.

Confucianism is prevalent in Asian nations such as Japan, where students rely heavily on their instructors as their primary source of knowledge. In many societies, judging students' work functions more as a form of discipline than as a means of stimulating learning. It was pointed out that even university students in the United States would seek out information sources depending on what they believed would have the most impact on their assignments and grades (Murray et al., 2012). Research has shown that students learn more efficiently when they interact more regularly with the materials they are studying (Zimmerman, 2012). Research suggests that students' homework should include tasks such as watching videos, reading texts, engaging in online forums, writing reflective essays, doing worksheets, taking quizzes, and participating in discussions that occur at different times. Giving students such assignments has been found to boost their academic achievement (Johnson-Curiskis, 2006).

Student-teacher interaction

Instructors attempted to engage students both asynchronously and in real time. They delivered content by screensharing slides and lecturing alone rather than interacting with their students. There was insufficient in-depth learning, which involved a number of students who did not participate. This was due to the students' lack of autonomous learning skills as well as instructors ' reliance on one-way communication.

Five out of seven instructors used to lecture their students prior to the outbreak. Even after switching to online education, they continued to use this method. Derakhshan et al. (2021) points out that lecturing was the most common technique of online instruction used by instructors. This is because Confucianism has influenced the educational system of the Japanese society. This educational theory emphasizes that lecturing should be performed by instructors, while students should listen attentively and take notes (Bui, 2019). Moreover, because this technique of education was more familiar to the instructors, they felt more comfortable to continue using it during the pandemic.

In addition, instructors were not well trained on online education and were unaware of the importance of interaction. Due to their lack of standardized training, they taught based on their intuition and what they felt to be beneficial. The findings imply that instructors should use question-and-answer sessions to engage students in real-time online interactions. This conclusion is consistent with Wilson and Stacey's claim (2004) that instructors have a substantial impact on the development of interactions that lead to profound learning.

Student-student interaction

Three out of seven instructors were found to have organized interactions that were synchronous or in separate online forums and discussions. However, the instructors did not always observe or participate in the discussions. In addition, instructors with experience in online education and a basic understanding of ICT were more able to initiate student interactions than instructors with no similar experiences. Students rarely connect with one another because the majority of the instructors do not build up and guide the discussion.

Cho and Tobias (2016) argued that online conversations amongst students can be advantageous. However, the present study found that there was little interaction amongst students. This is consistent with other research results that instructors must organize and lead online interactions because they do not naturally develop (Pawan et al., 2003). Similarly, according to Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005), deep learning activities such as collaborative practice and peer discussion cannot occur in the absence of instructors who give classroom instruction and direction. Instructors attempted to instruct students online using the same traditional lecture tactics they used in face-to-face meetings since they did not know how to teach online. In face-to-face classes, instructors may generate projects, group projects, and pair projects quickly. However, because it was difficult to post those activities online, they delivered lectures, as this was the easiest option. Instead of using external resources, Japanese students typically sought guidance from their instructors.

Instructors should encourage students to engage in more synchronous and asynchronous online peer interaction. This will promote in-depth study and help students develop their critical thinking skills (Chieu & Herbst, 2016; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). Peer interaction helps students

learn, but if instructors don't incorporate it into their lessons, students won't do it on their own, which will result in shallow learning (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005).

Instructors inadequate training

Trust and Whalen (2020) pointed out that teachers typically used self-directed learning to address challenges that developed during the transition from traditional classroom-based instruction to the emergency remote instruction required during COVID-19. When asked about the difficulty of setting up synchronous and asynchronous online interactions, the majority of instructors stated they had never taught online before the pandemic. Therefore, they had to discover via trial and error how to manage their online classroom interactions.

Although the school supported them in mastering Microsoft Teams, the training they received was limited to the bare essentials and the impact of using Microsoft Teams on their quality of instruction was never discussed. The findings support the assumption that online teaching is difficult because instructors lack appropriate expertise of the online learning and teaching environments (Zamani et al., 2016). In light of this, the current study provides a convincing justification for why instructors who were pushed to transition to online instruction needed both pedagogical and technological support. Instructors needed their university to adopt a learning management system that is the same for all of its courses, provide peer support and mentoring, and create an online community where they can discuss best practices.

In light of the findings, the professional framework proposed by Baran-Łucarz (2014) could serve as a model for teaching aids. This framework addresses how to design, how to use technology, how to manage, how to communicate face-to-face and online, how to teach, and what to teach, as well as explicit policies for evaluating online instruction.

Conclusion

All participating instructors made efforts to engage their students with the material through assignments. Instructors interacted with students at varied times and through diverse channels. They asked the students to pay attention during their online classes, but several of them did not appear to be fully interested in what was being taught. According to the findings, it is recommended that both synchronous as well as asynchronous activities, such as online forums and group discussions, should be utilized to develop more collaborative learning. During synchronous sessions, instructors could review the material, respond to student questions, and offer new topics for discussion.

The study revealed that instructors needed more and better pedagogy and technological training. It also revealed the necessity for schools to give instructors clear standards for incorporating online learning into their practices. Continuous professional development in information and communication technologies (ICTs) and distance learning is necessary for teachers to handle their classes during times of crisis (Trust & Whalen, 2020). Using school-based embedded technology facilitators is one way to train instructors due to the rapid pace of technological advancement and the ever-changing nature of classroom needs (Reinhart et al., 2011). Despite making a contribution in the field, this study contains some limitations. The study hasn't examined the effectiveness of various interactions in fostering meaningful interpersonal relationships. Future research may be able to explore how elements such as curriculums and course materials impact the way instructors manage student interactions.

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Appendix

Interview questions

1. Did you have any prior experience in the field of online teaching before the pandemic?

2. Did you have any prior experience with technology before you began teaching online?

3. During the pandemic, what digital tools are you using?

4. Could you explain how you used each of the digital tools?

5. Which tools did you utilize most of the time? Why?

6. How were you able to continue teaching students online despite the pandemic?

7. When you were speaking in front of your class, did your students pay attention? If the answer is yes or no, how did you find out?

8. How did you boost students 'engagement?

9. During the time that you were online, what kinds of challenges did you face?

10. Would you say that your students were happy with the classes that you taught?

11. How did you determine whether or not students were making progress?

12. In what ways do you believe you could make yourself better?

13. What kind of assistance should the university provide you with for teaching online classes?