Classroom Management and Teacher Practice: Considerations Following the First Year of a Remote e-Learning Course

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Abstract

This study examines student feedback and discusses the implications of classroom management practices on a newly developed e-Learning course at a private university in Japan. The course was initially intended to be taught in a blended style: students would engage in autonomous language study online whilst also attending in-person group lessons on campus. With the advent of COVID-19, however, and the concomitant restrictions of on-campus activities, the course was rapidly modified to allow students to take the group lessons online. Student feedback on the course was collected via an online questionnaire given to the students in the final week of the semester. This paper reports on one component of the questionnaire: student feedback regarding possible improvements to classroom management. The results show a positive attitude towards the course in general; however, there were five key areas in which students suggested improvements: explanations, speaking time, group work, task time and teacher attention. Pedagogical implications and recommendations are discussed.

Keywords: computer-assisted language learning, blended learning, remote learning

Introduction

In the spring of 2020, Rikkyo University replaced its existing e-Learning course with a newly designed programme. The previous course design required students to attend class in a computer lab once a week for 14 weeks, using the e-Learning software provided by the university. The teachers' main task in the classroom was to help troubleshoot any problems the students had in using the software. Whilst students were physically present in the classroom, they were entirely responsible for their own learning.

The new course was designed to give students further autonomy whilst also providing them with motivation and opportunities to use the language they were studying. Instead of meeting in the classroom for all 14 weeks to study on a computer, students were now expected to study outside of the classroom using commercial software on their own devices and attend three group lessons in the classroom in which they would learn business English and practice the grammar and vocabulary they had studied online.

The course objectives were as follows:

a. To help students develop a practical communication ability essential to effectively function in cross-cultural business contexts.
b. To help students become autonomous learners and establish good study habits via e-Learning (regular exposure to the English language).
c. To help students improve their TOEIC scores.
(Mishima, Rappeneker, Farmer, Machi & Paxton, 2020, p. 7)

In order to achieve these objectives, students were expected to:

1) Complete 40 e-Learning lessons, and spend a minimum of 15 hours using the software
2) Complete a diagnostic test and three practice TOEIC tests
3) Attend the three group lessons and finish whatever homework the teacher assigns

4) Attend the first and final classes of the semester for orientation and review respectively

Almost every first-year student in Rikkyo University was required to take this course. The majority of English teachers in the Center for Foreign Language Education and Research taught the course for the first time in Spring 2020.

Background

The rise in the number of COVID-19 cases in Japan in early 2020 meant that the university policies regarding on-campus activities changed significantly. Many classes were now to be conducted entirely online. This semester was also shortened from 14 weeks to 12 weeks. Furthermore, teachers had to learn how to use new tools, such as Zoom and Blackboard.

Within this context, the syllabus and course requirements for e-learning needed to be modified. Instead of 40 lessons, students were now expected to complete only 30 lessons. Instead of 15 hours of study on the software, students now needed to study on it for 12 hours. Further, the example group lessons were modified to work online. Finally, e-Learning classes typically have over 100 students and the original 4-group plan would have around 25 students in each group, similar to other communication classes; however, with the reduction in weeks, the same class size was split into 3 groups of students instead of 4. This meant that each group was slightly larger than had been previously planned.

These changes to the syllabus and course expectations were relayed to teachers at the faculty development conference. However, it seems likely that many teachers were overwhelmed by the abundant changes occurring to all their courses. It is within this context that the course was conducted, and the data collected.

Data collection

Data were collected from 3673 e-Learning students via an online questionnaire conducted in the last lesson of the 2020 spring semester. All but 9 of the respondents were first year students (99%, n = 3664). The survey was emailed to each teacher of the course, who then asked their students to complete it in the last class. All respondents consented to have their data collected.

The survey was conducted in Japanese, and the vast majority (99.9%) of written responses was also in Japanese. The survey contained 17 questions:

1) The name of the respondent's teacher (this datum was ignored during the study)
2) Four Likert scale questions regarding student attitudes towards the software
3) Two Likert scale questions about the respondent's effort level and autonomous learning
4) A question asking on which devices respondents used the software
5) Seven Likert scale questions regarding attitudes towards the course and its effectiveness.
6) Two open ended questions asking which aspects of the course were useful, and which could be improved.
7) Each of the Likert scale questions were statements with the following five options to choose from: 1) strongly disagree, 2) disagree, 3) neither agree nor disagree, 4) agree, and 5) strongly agree.

A complete analysis of the survey is beyond the scope of this paper. The purpose of this article is to examine findings that emerged from student responses to question 17 of the survey which asked "このコースのどのような点を改善した方がよいと思いますか。" ["What aspects of this course do you think could be improved?"] As such, the method for data analysis introduced in the

following section will only detail procedures used for that one question.

Data analysis

Of the 3674 responses to the questionnaire, 1546 contained a suggestion for improvement. Each suggestion was translated into English initially via machine learning tools (DeepL) and followed by manual correction of poor translations. Each suggestion was then given a descriptive category. Using a constant comparison method of iterative analysis of the data (Glaser & Strauss, 2017) After An inductive analysis of the various categories, the suggestions were finally coded into 6 major themes

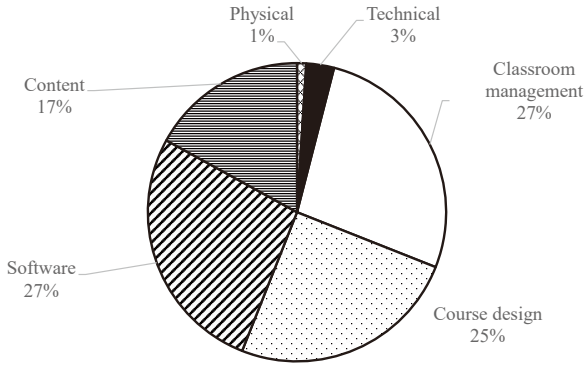
Table 1
Code descriptions.

Variable	Definition	Representative examples
Classroom management	Responses regarding the way the teacher runs the classroom. (e.g., how students are interacted with, how groups are assigned and how much spent on tasks in class.)	授業内でブレイクアウトルームでペアワークに取り組む機会があったが、そこに至るまでの一人用の課題が多く、ペアワークまでたどり着かない場合が多かった。なので、授業内課題の量を減らすか、課題にあてる時間を増やしてほしい。[There was an opportunity to work in pairs in the breakout rooms in the class, but there were many tasks for one person to get to that point, and there were many cases where the students did not get to work in pairs. Therefore, I would like to see a reduction in the amount of in-class assignments or more time allocated to them.]
Software	Responses regarding the e-Learning software.	自分の苦手な文法のレッスンを選んで学習できるわけではないので、そこを改善すべきではないかと思う。[You can't pick and choose which grammar lessons you are weak in, so I think that should be improved.]
Course design	Responses regarding the syllabus, or how the course is run over the semester.	Really English についてですが、オンライン上でカンニングなどは難しいと思いますし、むしろ調べている方が時間がかかると思うので12時間というノルマは必要ないと感じました。TOEICは素早く解かなくてはならないので時間をかけるよりレッスン数で判断した方が良いのではと。[As for Really English, I think it is difficult to cheat online and I think it is more time consuming to look it up; thus, I felt the quota of 12 hours not necessary. I think it's better to judge by the number of lessons rather than the time.]
Content	Responses regarding the appropriateness and difficulty level of the content presented via the e-Learning software, and in group lessons.	もう少しTOEICで点数をとるコツを知りたかったです。[I wanted to know more about how to get a good score on TOEIC.]
Physical	Responses regarding the physical impact of online learning.	課題をやるときに、パソコンやスマホを見ている時間が長いので、目や肩がとても疲れました。[My eyes and shoulders were very tired because I spent a lot of time looking at my computer and phone when doing my assignments.]
Technical	Responses regarding technical issues the students experienced with online learning platform (e.g., with internet connections, problems with Zoom, the student portal).	チャットに文字を打つのが大変である点。[The fact that it is difficult to type text into the chat.]

students suggested for improvement, with 36 subcategories. Definitions and examples of each major theme can be found in Table 1.

Figure 1

Students' suggestions for improvement



Note. This graph depicts the breakdown of the 1546 responses to this question.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the two most common aspects of the course that students felt could

Table 2

Classroom management code descriptions

Variable	Definition	Representative Examples
Explanations	Regarding explanations and instruction language.	重要なところは日本語で話していただくか、あるいはチャットに書き込んでくれると助かります。[It would be helpful if you could speak the important parts in Japanese or write them in the chat.]
Speaking time	Responses regarding time spent on inter-student communication in breakout rooms.	もう少し、ブレイクアウトルームの時間があればお互い確認が取れて安心すると思いました。[I thought it would have been reassuring to have a little more time in the breakout room to check in with each other.]
Group work	Responses regarding issues completing tasks in breakout rooms.	グループワークがやりにくい。[Group work is difficult to do.]
Task time	Responses regarding the amount of time allocated to tasks.	授業内で扱う予定の資料が多く、目を通しきれないことがあったので、資料は授業内で取り扱える範囲にしてほしい。また、課題は授業内に提出すべきなのか、その日に提出すればよいのか、授業時間内に提出すれば加点なのか、という基準を明確に示してほしい。[There are many materials that are scheduled to be covered in class, and there were times when I was unable to read them. Thus, I would like the materials to be limited to what can be covered in class. Also, I would like to see a clear standard for whether assignments should be submitted in class, on the day of the class, or during class time.]
Teacher attention	Responses to teacher feedback or direct one-on-one interaction from the teacher.	大人数の生徒を1人先生が受け持っているという負担は十分承知しているが、グループレッスンで提出した課題のフィードバックを少しでもいただけたら、次の学習につながるのではないかと思った。[I am fully aware of the burden of one teacher taking on a large group of students, but I thought that if I could get a little feedback on the assignments I submitted in the group lessons, it would help me learn better the next time.]

be improved were classroom management (approximately 27%) and the e-Learning software itself (approximately 27%), followed closely by the overall course design. The focus of this report is to examine deeply the responses related to one theme that emerged from the coding—Classroom Management.

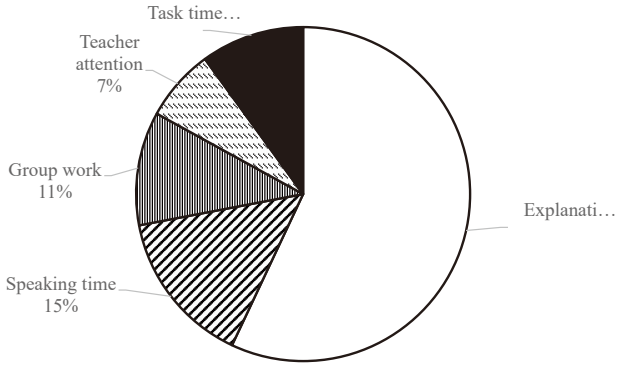
We focused this report on the findings related to classroom management for two reasons. First, this was the issue that students reported on the most. Second, although software issues were also highly commented upon, as teachers, we have limited ability to mediate technological issues. Thus, we felt that a deeper analysis of the issues related to teachers' classroom management would help others mediate their experience in teaching the course as we have more ability to control our practices than the technology being used.

The coding procedure for this theme consisted of broadly summarising the primary concern of each suggestion (Table 2).

Findings

This section introduces the findings regarding student suggestions for improved classroom management. Following this report, a discussion about the practical implications and future considerations will be examined.

Figure 2
Student suggestions for improvement of teacher classroom management.



Five themes emerged from the students' suggestions regarding classroom management:

1. Explanations: Simple instructions that are posted in writing and can be reviewed later

The most significant suggestion reported by students at 57% (n = 237) was related to having instructions or explanations that they could understand more easily. Some students struggled to understand the instructions and then, as a result could not do their assigned tasks. Also, students reported feeling unsure about their understanding of English instructions, for example, "英語だけで説明されるので、自分がやってることが正しいのか確認することができないので、日本語での説明が欲しいと感じました。" ["Since the explanation is given only in English, I couldn't confirm whether what I was doing was correct or not, so I felt that I wanted an explanation in Japanese."]

2. Speaking time: Regular opportunities for students to practise speaking English

The next most requested improvement, at 15% (n = 62), was a request for more speaking time. Some students felt the lessons were 'one sided': ("講師からの一方的な授業になっている点。" ["One-sided lessons from the instructor."], whilst others seemed to miss the opportunity to interact with peers ("もう少しほかの人と話す（意見交換、discussionなどをする）機会が欲しかった。" ["I wanted more opportunities to talk (exchange opinions, discuss, etc.) with other people."]). Thus, they indicated they didn't just want to listen to the teacher, but more opportunities to speak with others.

3. Scaffolded group work: Clear goals for group work, and regular monitoring of breakout rooms

Students also offered suggestions for improving the way that group work (in breakout rooms on Zoom) was handled (11%, n = 45). Some students felt difficulty in speaking up either due to the breakout group size or unfamiliarity with group members. For example, "初めて会う人とのオンライン上でのグループワークは少し難しかったです。" ["Working in a group online with people I've never met before was a bit challenging."], "人数が多かったので発言は緊張するなと感じました。" ["There were a lot of people, so I felt nervous about speaking up."]). Other students noted that very few, if any, participants in the group work sessions spoke at all ("沈黙の時間が長い" ["Long periods of silence."], "グループディスカッションが皆喋らず、ほぼ機能していなかった。" ["The group discussion was almost non-functional because no one spoke."]). Finally, several students felt that the goals for the group work were unclear ("もう少しグループワークの内容を分かりやすく説明してほしい。" ["I would like the teacher to explain the contents of the group work more clearly."], "グループワークのときにもう少し話す内容を明確にしてほしい。" ["I would like the teacher to clarify what we should talk about more during group work."]).

4. Task time: Sufficient time to complete tasks, considering the challenges of online learning

Approximately 10% of student suggestions (n = 43) were for more time to complete tasks, especially considering first year students' unfamiliarity with Blackboard, the university's main content management system ("授業内で終わらせなければならないタスクがあった時、真面目に取り組んでいるのにも関わらずブラックボードの掲示板のシステムが十分に理解できていなかったため完了できなかった。先生や友達に質問する時間もなかったので、よっぽど時間が余っていない限り授業時間を過ぎたらハイ終わり、というタスクは課してほしくなかった。" ["When I had a task that I had to complete in class, I couldn't complete it because I didn't understand the Blackboard board system well enough, even though I was working diligently. I didn't have time to ask questions to the teacher or my friends, so I didn't want them to assign me a task that I had to finish after class time unless I had a lot of extra time."]). More generally, students suggested that they be given more time to complete tasks in class, or less tasks overall. For example, "授業スピードが速くて、ワークシートが終わらない。" ["The class moves ahead so fast that I can't finish the worksheets."], "授業が早く、課題が追い付かない。" ["Classes are fast, and I can't keep up with my assignments."].

5. Teacher attention: Personal feedback from the teacher, individual attention during class

Overall, 7% of students (n = 27) felt a lack of attention from the teacher during class, and whilst

the difficulty of individual attention in a large class was recognised, students still felt as though they could benefit from more teacher interaction (“人数が多いということもあるが、一人一人の様子とかをもう少し気にかけて欲しかったです。” [“There were a lot of people, but I would have liked them to pay a little more attention to how each person was doing.”], “授業に対する生徒の量が多いのでひとりひとりへの対応は少ないのかなと感じた。” [“I felt that the number of students in the class was too large and that there was not enough support for each student.”]). Additionally, students desired feedback on classwork they had completed. Teachers graded classwork on Blackboard, but in some cases, they did not offer feedback (“課題の欠点をコメントして欲しい。” [“I want the teacher to comment on the shortcomings of my assignments.”], “授業で行った課題について、満点でなかった場合どこが間違えだったのか知りたいと思いました。” [“If I didn’t get a perfect score on an assignment I did in class, I wanted to know what I did wrong.]”).

Discussion

1. Explanations & Requests for Japanese Instruction

The overwhelming majority of respondents were first-year students, with presumably little-to-no experience with online learning via Zoom or Blackboard. To help reduce the cognitive load that students in a new technological environment face, some basic steps could be taken:

- Teacher instructions given ‘live’ should also be available on the learning platform (e.g., Blackboard) for reference for the students. This allows students to reference instructions that they may not have correctly heard, and to look up unknown words. In large classes, such as e-Learning, this also allows students the option to correct their own misunderstandings without interrupting the flow of the class.
- Reiterating key points and instructions in Japanese may help students feel more confident about their own understanding of the instructions and should be considered an option for classes that require it.

2. Speaking Time

Giving students regular opportunities to discuss the content of the online lectures allows students to confirm with peers that they have understood the assigned tasks. Additionally, in a course that mostly focuses on listening and reading skills, discussion allows students the opportunity to use their newly learnt language in practical ways. To achieve this, teachers could do the following:

- Schedule brief but regular breakout rooms, giving students a speaking prompt and a short task to achieve every fifteen minutes or so.
- As students in the e-Learning course only meet for a third of the semester, designing in-class tasks that prioritise speaking opportunities and use language they are learning could be beneficial.

3. Group Work

Orchestrating online group work can be convoluted in the best of circumstances. At the start of the 2020 academic year, when most students and teachers had little experience with online learning, it was particularly difficult. With that in mind, here are some suggestions to streamline the process:

- Provide students with language to facilitate turn taking
- Endeavour to check on each breakout room at least once per lesson, making sure to encourage speaking and checking for potential issue causing behaviour (e.g., students leaving both cameras and microphones off)
- After group work, ask students to report their breakout room partners' answers, to provide motivation for speaking during group work
- Start classes with group-based ice breaking activities designed to reduce breakout room speaking reticence
- Show students how to call you for help
- Show students how to view all group members on one screen (gallery view)

4. Task Time

As with group work above, a lack of online teaching experience meant that teachers were less able to accurately gauge the potential length of in class tasks. Even with experience, planning out activities for online classes can be problematic. The following suggestions may prove helpful in doing so:

- Allow students to complete tasks outside of class time without penalty
- Use shared collaborative documents where you can see their progress or Zoom's reaction or polls features to determine when students have completed tasks and adjust the workload appropriately
- Plan your classes flexibly, allowing for certain tasks to be omitted if time does not permit
- Plan for unexpected interruptions due to technical issues

5. Teacher Attention

e-Learning classes typically have over 100 students enrolled students, with weekly group lessons of more than 30 students. It can be challenging for teachers to continuously grade and give feedback to in-class assignments. However, students desire interaction with their teachers, especially when they are given less than perfect grades for an assignment. Some possible methods to achieve this are as follows:

- Use Blackboard's built-in rubric system to quickly grade and give feedback to students.
- Reserve a portion of time at the end of online classes for questions from the students. This allows students who want specific feedback a time they know they can speak to you.
- Encourage student questions via chat, and provide example language for asking questions (e.g., "What does 'X' mean?", "Can you explain the task again please?")
- Use online questionnaires such as Google Forms to allow students to ask questions anonymously
- While students are doing group work quickly go into each group and ask them if they understand the task and encourage them to ask any questions.

Conclusion

This study provides a detailed analysis of one finding that emerged as part of a larger survey of student evaluations of a newly developed blended e-Learning course. The findings indicate that

students' e-Learning experience could be improved with enhanced attention to five areas of classroom management: clear explanations they could reference after class, ample speaking opportunities, scaffolded group interaction, more consideration of the task in relation to the students' contextual challenges, and enhanced opportunities for teacher-student interaction that enables individual feedback and for students to ask questions. In addition, this paper suggests a variety of strategies to mitigate the issues raised. Considering the relative dearth of online teaching experience at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, a future study could follow up and examine what, if any, changes in online student experiences have occurred in the last two years.

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