Using Technology to Teach English Communication for Repeaters

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Abstract

Eight students (n=8) attending a required course called English Communication at one university in Japan were taught during fall AY2020 (i.e., from September 2020) after the instructor reviewed literature from January 2017 to August 2020 on teaching EFL learners who are repeating their courses. When class began in September, the instructor started teaching 15 sessions on zoom with each session consisting of two 90-minute sessions on zoom, and took notes after class based on class observation after each session. Based on a synthesis of literature review and notes based on observation, it became evident that (1) a semester-long twice a week 90-minute course based on having students make answers based on open-ended questions can elicit increasingly complex responses from students whose TOEIC scores range from 295 to 345 points in the target language; and (2) having students submit reflections at the end of each class can enable teachers to understand difficulties students are facing with developing their linguistic skills and encourage students to reflect on themselves for personal development. Details of literature review, open-ended questions, and notes based on observation will be presented to help the audience think about ideas that can be applied to their own classes.

Keywords: English Communication, Japanese University Students, Retaking Required Courses

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Introduction

A review of literature between 2017 and 2020 suggests eight key points EFL instructors should keep in mind to support remedial EFL students at the university level. First, instructors should keep in mind how their actions can affect students' levels of motivation (Han, Takkaç-Tulgar, & Aybirdi, 2019; Jodaei, Zareian, Amirian, & Seyyed, 2018; Khouya, 2018; Quadir, 2017). Second, instructors should aim for low-stakes, high-interest instruction (Quint Oga-Baldwin & Fryer, 2018). Third, instructors should allow students to use visuals when presenting (Iida, 2020). Fourth, instructors should allow students to become used to performing assigned tasks and teachers should be persistent to get students to complete tasks instead of adjusting them immediately (Yamaoka, 2019). Fifth, instructors should consider students' interests and classroom dynamics for tasks (Ghonsooly, Hassanzadeh, Samavarchi, & Seyyedeh, 2017; Yamaoka, 2019). Sixth, instructors should consider various ways to provide feedback and consider cognitive-load on students when providing feedback (Ghosn-Chelala and Al-Chibani, 2018). Seventh, instructors should provide updated content and materials (Custorne & Beh, 2018; Ghonsooly, Hassanzadeh, Samavarchi, & Seyyedeh, 2017). Eighth and finally, instructors should provide successful experiences for students (Ghonsooly, Hassanzadeh, Samavarchi, & Seyyedeh, 2017; Quadir, 2017).

The author reviewed the aforementioned literature, written between 2017 and 2020, from August 2020 to September 2020, to prepare to teach a course on English Communication for eight university students in Japan. Although the author has been teaching the course since 2018, preparation for the fall of academic year 2020 was felt to be particularly important. Specifically, while instruction during 2018 and 2019 were in the classroom, instruction during 2020 was completely online due to COVID-19. The course was designed for students whose TOEIC Bridge scores were between 115 and 130 points, equivalent to between 295 and 345 points on the TOEIC test (ETS, 2006). The ensuing sections will cover: (1) course design, (2) reflections on teaching that consider both the literature review and the instructor's weekly field notes, and (3) implications for instructors teaching EFL.

Course Design

After a review of literature, the course syllabus was reexamined. This was done for the instructor to teach his students as effectively as possible throughout the course. The course consisted of 15 sessions from September 23rd, 2020 to January 13th, 2021. Each session consisted of two parts: a 90-minute session from 1pm to 2:30pm (i.e., third period), and another 90-minute session from 2:40pm to 4:10pm (i.e., fourth period). There were three components to grades: (1) Class Activities, (2) Midterm Quizzes, and (3) Final Quizzes. Each activity consists of one or two open-ended questions. For each question, students were required to write at least seven sentences for their answers. Forty minutes were allocated to introduce two open-ended questions and for students to work on the questions while on zoom (zoom Video Communications, Inc., 2023). The instructor stays on zoom to support students when they have questions. The purpose of setting aside 40 minutes and providing feedback as necessary within that timeframe was so that the instructor can consider students' cognitive load, or more specifically, the intensity of tasks they can manage within a given time-frame (Ghosn-Chelala and Al-Chibani, 2018). The students are required to submit their work in approximately 40 minutes for the tasks they worked on before the midterm. This was followed by a five-minute break, in which the instructor compiled work submitted online by the students into one Microsoft Word document. After work from students were collected, the instructor allocated 45 minutes to provide feedback to the entire class commenting on points

the students did well on and points they could improve on. Students took a ten-minute break before the next period (i.e., fourth period).

During the fourth period, the instructor had students enter another zoom session through another zoom invitation for internet security, and had students prepare for oral presentations during the second-half of fourth period. During the first half, students were asked to: (1) practice for fluency, intonation, pronunciation, pauses between sentences, and emphasis of words, and (2) were encouraged to present without looking at the scripts that they wrote, so the tasks do not become perfunctory. In the second half of the period, eight students who registered for the course were asked to present in the order they were assigned, and were given a maximum of three minutes to present. Feedback on good points and points to improve on were provided. For their assignments, they were asked to submit a reflection by 10 pm on the day the class was conducted in Japanese, their first language, in at least seven sentences, focusing on two points: (1) the contents of their classmates' presentations, and (2) what they learned from feedback from their instructor after their presentations. They were also asked to include the edited version of their scripts based on feedback from third period.

After the first six sessions, session 7 and session 8 were midterm quizzes to assess students' ability to communicate in English. For session 7, the students were required to present on: (1) one question they prepared and presented on before, and (2) one answer to an original question they made themselves. For session 8, the students were required to present on: (3) another question they have prepared and presented on before that they did not present on during session 7, and (4) one answer to another original question. The students were asked to think of an original question themselves after they became familiar with a variety of open-ended questions. This was done so that students could reflect on questions that they felt were personally relevant in the target language after they have become familiar with different types of open-ended questions in the target language (Quint Oga-Baldwin & Fryer, 2018).

After the first eight sessions, there were four more sessions, followed by two final quizzes. From sessions nine to twelve, they continued to work on open-ended questions like before the midterm quizzes but this time by using reading materials to support their answers. Following the midterm quizzes, from reading the students' weekly reflections, the instructor felt that students were ready to be introduced to the concept and the practice of not only providing answers to open-ended questions but also providing answers with evidence. For final quiz part 1, for review, students were required to: (1) present on one question that they have presented on before the midterm, and (2) make and answer one original open-ended question. After that, for the final session for this course, the students were required to: (1) present on one question that they have presented on after the midterm, and (2) make and answer one original open-ended question using at least one source to support their answer.

Reflections on Teaching: Adjustments Throughout the Course

The first session was held on September 23rd, 2020, and out of eight registered students, six attended the class. The lesson unfolded as designed. However, out of six students, only one student was able to write full answers (i.e., at least seven sentences) to the two open ended questions. With previous literature suggesting that teachers should be persistent with the tasks and allow time for students to get used to tasks (Yamaoka, 2019), while providing successful experiences for students (Ghonsooly, Hassanzadeh, Samavarchi, & Seyyedeh, 2017; Quadir, 2017), the teacher provided full credit for all students attempting to complete tasks by turning in what they could write within the allotted time. One student mentioned that she was not

used to computers and typing. However, the student also mentioned that she will try to stay with the class, and it was good to know the flow of the entire course during the first session. She has mentioned that she will stay with the other students as much as she can.

During session 2, seven out of eight students attended. Most students found it difficult to submit responses to two open ended questions. However, most were able to finish writing detailed responses to one question. A student requested that the instructor provide questions before the beginning of each class, so students who wish to work on the questions beforehand could work on them before the session starts. Since literature on EFL has suggested that instructors keep in mind how their actions can affect students' levels of motivation (Han, Takkaç-Tulgar, & Aybirdi, 2019; Jodaei, Zareian, Amirian, & Seyyed, 2018; Khouya, 2018; Quadir, 2017), the instructor accommodated for that student's request by allowing students who wish to get a head start on the open-ended questions 15 minutes prior to the start of each session after session 2.

During session 3, six out of eight students attended. The student who requested the instructor to have students start to work on their two questions 15 minutes before the start of class seemed to have started early and was able to submit 10 to 15 minutes before the deadline. That student requested that he stay with the instructor voluntarily after class and discussed what he is currently working on related to his English studies and how that is connected to his future vision. Upon reflection, accommodating the student's wants may have successfully contributed to building rapport with the student. The instructor ended the class with a certain level of concern for those who were absent during the session, in terms of developing a routine for working on their English.

During session 4, several students entered their zoom sessions late but six out of eight students attended. The questions were more complex this time than previous ones. Only a few students could answer both questions within time allotted. During the presentation portion of the work, several key words and phrases that they can pronounce or enunciate better were pointed out. Students seemed to not be able to pronounce words that they were not familiar with. For example, many could not pronounce the word *specifically*. They also had trouble enunciating words particularly words that are plural (e.g., countries). After the feedback phase, it was difficult for many students to read smoothly from the scripts that were edited. They had difficulties pausing at appropriate places for information that they presented for their presentations to be processed and clearly understood by the instructor. Words of encouragement were provided to start practicing for the midterm, in which one component of it was to ask students to present their answers to one open-ended question that they have presented on before. Their jobs were to prepare to present so they could present smoothly without looking at their scripts during their midterms. A reminder was given ahead of time so that students can have successful experiences during the midterm (Ghonsooly, Hassanzadeh, Samavarchi, & Seyyedeh, 2017; Quadir, 2017).

During Session 5, seven out of eight students who were registered attended class. It was the first time for one of the students to attend. The class went smoothly. One student asked to leave early because he had things to do. In his open-ended response to one of the open-ended questions on how he would change once he graduates from university, he said he will be busier, and he wanted to get many things done while at university. Another student expressed how lonely he felt as a result of not being able to meet faculty members and other students face to face. Upon reflection, providing opportunities for reflection after class as part of their course assignment after every session was effective in providing the instructor an

understanding as to factors outside of the classroom that could affect the quality of students' levels of class participation (Quint Oga-Baldwin & Fryer, 2018).

For session 6, class went smoothly. Students seemed to have gotten into the habit of writing class reflections, and many students have started to derive intrinsic motivation from answering the questions. This is aligned with Yamaoka's (2019) suggestion that instructors should allow students to become used to performing assigned tasks and that instructors should be persistent to get students to complete tasks instead of adjusting them immediately. On the other hand, one student was absent two times in a row.

However, during Session 7 and 8, there was a midterm, and all students attended the class. Although each of the four midterm quizzes was only 5 percent of their grades and were low-stakes (Quint Oga-Baldwin & Fryer, 2018), the word *midterm* might have encouraged attendance particularly during a difficult time with COVID19 in which many students were taking classes online which was a mode that they were unfamiliar with instead of on campus. During third period, students presented on their answers to one of the twelve questions we had already covered. Students scored from 3 to 4.5 points out of 5 points on the quality of their presentations. During fourth period, students presented their answers to an original question they came up with themselves. What students talked about included: (1) lessons and experiences from the time they were university students, (2) future goals, (3) hobbies, and (4) dreams of going abroad. It seemed that students with students' dreams of going abroad, learning English was relevant, and what students needed was successful experiences to build their confidence and ability to utilize English abroad (Ghonsooly, Hassanzadeh, Samavarchi, & Seyyedeh, 2017; Quadir, 2017). Students scored from 3 to 5 points. Five areas that they can improve on were addressed: (1) eye contact, (2) avoid long pauses, (3) pronunciation, (4) intonation, and (5) avoid long pauses if possible. With session 8, there was another midterm, and all students showed up for the test. Students did not have problems with intonation. For the future goals of the course, it was recommended that students present without their scripts as much as possible while trying to avoid long pauses, practice pronunciation of difficult and unfamiliar words for accuracy, and avoid long pauses.

Session 9 was the first session after the midterm. The initial plan was to have students do the same routine of having them write out scripts during the first 40 minutes. However, that task turned out to be 60 minutes, because after the midterm, the instructor planned to have students read an article and provide open ended answers noting the similarities and the differences between the opinion of the author of the article and their own. One student has said after the first 30 minutes that he cannot finish writing in 40 minutes. So, time was extended to 60 minutes. Before the 60-minute time limit, students were asked to turn in their scripts and the instructor started providing feedback after 60 minutes was over. The feedback extended to fourth period, and after that, the instructor explained in detail about the contents of the reading for students to rework on their scripts as their assignment due by 10pm on the same day. Students were expected to rehearse for their presentations next time, and the instructor told the students that he would provide feedback on their speaking during the next class.

For session 10, one student did not show up, and because there were three students absent last time, the instructor had them present towards the end and provided feedback first on the assignments that those who attended class turned in. Seven students did their presentations during the last half of the third period and the instructor gave students feedback on parts that they can further improve on. During the fourth period, the instructor provided feedback on

scripts that those who were absent submitted before the start of fourth period. The instructor also went over speaking tips so that they could recite their presentations in front of the whole class for the second time during the second half of fourth period. This time, students were asked to write reflections that is at least seven sentences in length in English due by 10pm on the same day focusing on what they learned from their feedback and their classmates' presentations. Three students submitted their assignments on time, and one student e-mailed the assignment at midnight stating that the student forgot to press send. This felt inevitable due to COVID-19 and online courses. The fatigue from numerous assignments as well as the increase in the level of this new assignment in which students are asked to write in English as well as due to the number of absences last session, it was reasonable that four out of seven students who attended this session submitted their assignment.

Sessions 11, 12, and 13 were challenging for students, and striking the balance between persistence (Yamaoka, 2019) and success (Ghonsooly, Hassanzadeh, Samavarchi, & Seyyedeh, 2017; Quadir, 2017) was difficult for the instructor. For session 11, students read an article on diversity and prepared their scripts for two questions related to the topic. Two students wrote that they felt their lack of competence. Some reasons noted were a lack of knowledge about society in general from not being able to answer in detail to the two questions on diversity and the quality of their work compared to their classmates. It made sense for the instructor to address those two points during the next session. Specifically, some students enrolled in the course have taken several courses with the instructor and they have an advantage over those who have not taken any, so it is better for the students to mentally reframe and think that with effort, they can achieve the level of proficiency that their classmates have achieved. For session 12, the students presented on their articles and the instructor provided feedback, and for session 13, the instructor had students write about the similarities and differences of challenges college students abroad and college students in Japan are facing and possible solutions to alleviate the situation using one source.

While the task of providing answers to open-ended questions using a source was difficult, the students during the final assessment (Session 14 and Session 15) showed growth because of overcoming the challenge. During Session 14, students took final assessment quiz 1 parts 1 and 2, and one student was absent. Overall, students' presentations were clear. They projected and they could get their message across clearly. Students still could improve on their fluency by avoiding long pauses, speaking without looking at the script and making more eye contact, and refine their pronunciation and intonation. During the second half, feedback was provided, and students did not ask specific questions afterwards. For Session 15, students took final assessment quiz 2 parts 1 and 2, and all students showed up to class. Everyone who showed up to class passed, and there was an improvement of overall fluency and accuracy in students' output.

Conclusion: Implications for Instructors Teaching EFL

This paper examined eight university students who are repeating a required English Communication course at a university during COVID-19, when all class sessions normally conducted in the classroom turned into online instruction via zoom. Aligned with the literature on EFL in the tertiary setting, instructor's actions seemed to have influenced students' level of motivation to participate in class (Han, Takkaç-Tulgar, & Aybirdi, 2019; Jodaei, Zareian, Amirian, & Seyyed, 2018; Khouya, 2018; Quadir, 2017). In reality, however, because the course was conducted on zoom and some were attending class from smartphones and some from their personal computers, it was difficult to have students use visual aid as

suggested by literature when presenting (Iida, 2020). As literature suggests, it is important for instructors to anticipate technical difficulties (Alizadeh, Mehran, Koguchi, and Takemura, 2019). Having students write reflections after each class session can clarify students' technical issues as well as other responsibilities students are facing. Furthermore, having students write answers to open-ended questions can help the instructor understand students as individuals including their interests and that can be conducive to a positive classroom atmosphere in which the instructor not only can understand about the linguistic skills of the individual students but also become involved in facilitating their development of becoming responsible citizens. Each instructor at university can possibly formulate their own open-ended questions (Custorne & Beh, 2018; Ghonsooly, Hassanzadeh, Samavarchi, & Seyyedeh, 2017) and make the questions more challenging (Yamaoka, 2019) as their courses progress, to help his or her students for their linguistic, cultural, and social development while considering cognitive load, classroom dynamics (Ghonsooly, Hassanzadeh, Samavarchi, & Seyyedeh, 2017; Yamaoka, 2019), and the balance between students' success and the degree of challenge for each task that is provided in and outside of class.

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