

EFL Teachers' Experiences and Attitudes to Emergency Remote Teaching at Japanese Universities

Kym Jolley, Baika Women's University, Japan
Frances Shiobara, Kobe Shoin Women's University, Japan
Mark Donnellan, Kindai University, Japan

The Southeast Asian Conference on Education 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

In 2020 teachers worldwide faced an unprecedented situation in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Japan, this forced educators to quickly adapt face-to-face programs to online ones as the new academic year started in April 2020. Although Japan is a technology rich society, the use of technology in education had been limited up until then. A small-scale pilot study ($N=31$) was conducted to explore the experiences of Japanese university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers from spring 2020 until summer 2022 under emergency remote teaching (ERT) conditions. The overall results of the study showed positive attitudes towards continued use of digital tools once ERT ceases, but that training and support were lacking during this period. The focus of this paper will be on the themes that emerged through the qualitative coding of the optional comments added by respondents ($n=13$) to this pilot study. Four important themes were identified: previous fears of technology, technical problems, student related problems and achievements, and skills learned. Comments under these themes indicate that instructors developed or enhanced their skills with technology whilst teaching during ERT, but that many faced difficulties using institutional learning management systems (LMSs), particularly those in part-time positions who had to manage teaching across multiple platforms, and those whose LMSs were unable to cope with the increased traffic and usage. This indicates that if these new skills and enthusiasm for technologically-aided teaching are to be harnessed, improved resources and support will be required moving forward.

Keywords: Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), Digital Tools, Online Teaching

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

In spring 2020, like many educators worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic forced teachers in Japan to reconfigure lessons planned for face-to-face classes to online ones. Effective online programs usually require significant time to develop and plan. However, the pandemic did not allow for this and also mandated that teachers, some of whom were inexperienced with online teaching or computer assisted learning, had to suddenly teach utilizing technology. In some cases, this may even have included using an institution's learning management system (LMS) for the first time (Lavolette, 2022; Provenzano, 2022). Indeed, OECD data from 2019 indicates that teachers throughout Japan felt unprepared for information and communication technology (ICT) based teaching prior to the pandemic (OECD, 2019), exacerbated by the low level of online learning programs offered by institutions or the utilization of digital tools in classrooms (Apple & Mills, 2022; Aoki, 2010; Funamori, 2017). This despite a plethora of research indicating the benefits that digital learning can provide for students, most importantly, the opportunity to create a more student-centered learning environment (Aoki, 2010; Caldwell, 2018; Stevens, Bienz, Wali, Condie & Schismenos, 2021).

With this as a backdrop, it is important to understand what teachers experienced with the abrupt shift to online teaching during emergency remote teaching (ERT) and how that can help inform new policies, support, and training moving forward. Though this area is still under-researched, some limited evidence of new or heightened enthusiasm for the use of digital tools in teaching beyond ERT has been found (Donnellan, Shiobara, & Jolley, 2022; Provenzano, 2022), and anecdotally institutions around Japan are looking to harness the potential that new online class formats and digital tools can offer. With this in mind, free optional responses ($n=13$) to a small-scale pilot study ($N=31$) (Donnellan et al., 2022) were coded for themes. Four important themes emerged: previous fears of technology, technical problems, student related problems and achievements, and skills learned. These themes, salient comments from respondents under these themes, and their implications are discussed in this paper.

Background

Online learning landscape in Japan prior to 2020

Prior to ERT commencing in April 2020, there had been official efforts to promote and expand e-learning and ICT use in classrooms in Japan through governmental strategies and recommendations. Aoki (2010) outlines the various policies that the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has implemented since 2001, starting with its e-Japan Initiative, to try and promote e-learning at tertiary institutions. However, she posits that despite one of the goals of these initiatives being to increase interactiveness in classes, where ICT has been implemented it has not brought about any real pedagogical innovation, and merely replaced standard methods of classroom instruction, in the case of Japan, often lectures containing information the students need to memorize, with recorded versions (pp. 858). This mirrors what Magana (2017) identified as “translational technology use” in his model for innovation in learning, where technology is used purely for a purpose that could also be achieved without technology. Magana (2017) further states that the next stage is “transformational technology use” which is when technology is used in ways that engage the students in tasks that could not be done without technology, thus allowing students to create new content and share digital representations of their knowledge. In fact, in this current paper there is evidence that a number of teachers seemed to have moved to this

stage with their students during ERT by using tools such as Google Docs and other online platforms.

Funamori (2017) further discusses how Japanese institutions have been slow to adapt to the digital age, and cites a lack of appropriate technological support and tools at institutions, compared with other countries leading the field, as hurdles to effective implementation of wider e-learning and ICT use. In particular, they quote 2015 findings from a MEXT survey investigating ICT usage that 95% of institutions responded they don't have adequate staff or funding to create and maintain new ICT content and resources (pp. 42). In regards to EFL teachers, who are the focus of this current paper, Ferreira's (2021) qualitative look into the barriers faced by EFL teachers when trying to implement ICT in their classes found three main obstacles: 1. lack of basic equipment such as projectors, computers, and Internet access, 2. difficult to use software, 3. decisions about whether it was appropriate for class goals and objectives.

With this as a backdrop, tertiary teachers across Japan were forced into ERT, most commonly asynchronously or synchronously (Donnellan et al., 2022), in April 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For some this may even have meant accessing an institutional LMS for the first time (Lavolette, 2022; Provenzano, 2022). Indeed, prior to ERT, Funamori (2017) outlined how LMSs were overwhelmingly underutilized at institutions where they had been implemented. However, initial findings have been positive in regards to instructors' desires to continue using the digital tools they utilized during their ERT, regardless of whether they had previous experience with them or not (Donnellan et al., 2022). To harness this enthusiasm and the skills learned during the ERT enforced uptake of online learning and utilization of digital tools, just as MEXT has been advocating for, it is necessary to understand how we can most effectively transition to the "new normal". For this reason, the voluntarily added additional comments ($n=13$) to a pilot study ($N=31$) (Donnellan et al., 2022) have been qualitatively coded for themes in regards to the experiences of non-Japanese EFL university teachers in Japan. It is hoped that their experiences will help to inform policy and training in the future.

Methodology

Thirteen respondents added optional comments in response to Donnellan et al.'s (2022) pilot study ($N=31$) investigating ERT conditions experienced by EFL teachers in Japan. All respondents were non-Japanese university EFL teachers who had taught at the university level prior to the pandemic and throughout ERT. Of the initial 31 respondents, 10 were full-time tenured faculty members, 13 were in full-time contracted positions, and 8 were part-time teachers. However, of the 13 to add optional comments, seven were part-time teachers, five were in full-time contracted positions, and only one was a full-time tenured faculty member. Therefore, though a majority of the respondents for the initial survey were tenured or full-time contracted faculty members, a majority that added optional comments were part-time teachers. In fact, only one part-time respondent chose not to add a response to this section.

The 13 optional comments were qualitatively coded and explored for themes, initially by one coder and then checked for inter-coder agreement with the other research team members. Four important themes emerged: previous fears of technology, technical problems, student related problems and achievements, and skills learned. Some of the responses contained comments applicable to more than one theme. These themes, examples of pertinent comments from respondents under these themes, and their implications are discussed below.

All responses or partial use of responses are replicated authentically and have not been corrected for any perceived mistakes or unusual wording.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1: Previous Fears of Technology

Although MEXT has been encouraging the use of technology in the classroom for years, five responses under this theme identified teachers who had been resisting that change. Reluctance to change and change aversion are very common in the workplace, especially without adequate support (Snyder, 2017). In fact, two teachers commented that they were “forced” to teach online at the start of the pandemic. This type of strong wording indicates a clear reluctance to do so. However, these responses often overlap with another identified theme, “skills learned”, and both of them commented that by the end of the period of ERT they were grateful that they had learned new skills (see Comments 1 and 2).

Comment 1: ERT forced me to face my fears about online educational tools and provided me the impetus and time to learn how to implement various online tools in my teaching. The only good to come out of the COVID crisis was bringing my teaching skills into 21st century, if only to a limited degree.

Comment 2: I believe the "force" to go online these past couple of years has made me appreciate even more how beneficial it is for students to have technical/digital skills and confidence. As a teacher I also need to improve my knowledge and skills to set a good example.

Another teacher used similarly strong wording, stating that they were “terrified” at the start, but also had a positive experience in the end (see Comment 3).

Comment 3: I was terrified about it but found it quite fun in the end.

Theme 2: Technical Problems

Six responses under this theme identified various technical problems teachers faced during ERT. In particular, the different LMSs in different universities was identified as a serious problem for a number of teachers. This is particularly pertinent when we consider that the majority of these optional comments across all themes were made by part-time teachers. Many university EFL teachers work part-time at various institutions and departments, often at a different site daily. They have to navigate differing policies not only at the institutional level, but even between departments, as well as manage disparate levels of support, training and understanding from their direct supervisors and universities. Therefore, faced with these struggles it is unsurprising that they most often felt compelled to add qualitative responses. It is possible that this survey was the only place that these part-time teachers had a voice to express their attitudes to the period of ERT.

Comments further identified that the lack of an adequate LMS means that institutions are missing opportunities to circumvent common non-ERT related problems, such as when typhoons occur or there are troubles with public transport (see Comment 4). However, another comment posits that institutions may not understand how poorly their LMS performs as they don't have experience using any other LMS (see Comment 5). In this way part-time

teachers' experiences can be a valuable asset as they have insight into various platforms. Unfortunately, part-time teachers' input is rarely sought for such things.

Finally, the lack of training or the varying levels of it that were offered was also highlighted in comments under this theme (see Comments 4 and 6). At the start of the period of ERT a number of universities LMSs and WiFi systems crashed due to the sudden increase in usage (Franks, 2021). In response to these problems there have been reports that many universities worked very hard to rectify this and now have much more stable systems. MEXT also recognised the need for further support in this area and allocated \$95 million (US\$) in the supplementary budget in 2020 to help higher education institutions build better IT infrastructure for online classes and use of digital tools (MEXT, 2020). However, based on the comments under this theme it seems that part-time instructors felt that the university administration did not understand how difficult it was for teachers to suddenly master an LMS or when an institution's LMS did not perform satisfactorily.

Comment 4: I feel that institutions need to adopt an LMS/CMS that will not crash under use in ERT (Typhoons, Earthquakes, Train strikes, etc) and offer proper training to all instructors.

Comment 5: LMSs vary greatly in quality between institutions. I am using three different LMSs (Manaba, Blackboard, and a proprietary system) at four different schools. It seems as if administrators are not aware of the limitations (ie poor quality) of the LMS their institution uses because they have not had to use other LMSs. FWIW, Manaba is by far and away the worst of the LMSs I use (Note: FWIW = For what it's worth).

Comment 6: Also, as a part-timer, spring 2020 meant having to master each institution's differing LMS system and differing methods of instruction tools. Training or "just get on with it" differed from place to place.

Theme 3: Student Related Problems and Achievements

Four comments under this theme were related to problems the teachers faced with students online, as well as some of the advantages and disadvantages of students learning in online classes. Unlike non-ERT online courses, students had not enrolled in their courses with the expectation of learning online. Therefore, considerations about their privacy and anxiety about being on camera often meant that instructors had to be mindful of student boundaries in online synchronous classes (see Comment 7). However, this can also hinder the class and affect teacher motivation, which can potentially affect class quality and levels of engagement with the class (Apple & Mills, 2022). It is important to note that all of the teachers who responded to this survey were living in a foreign country, unable to visit family and friends in their home countries and possibly feeling very isolated. The period of ERT may have added to their loneliness when they had little communication with colleagues, and students did not engage actively in the class.

Comment 7: Unengaged students were also hugely demotivating. Felt very lonely teaching. No feedback or interaction.

Furthermore, though some teachers reported they had come to enjoy the flexibility of online teaching, they still felt that in order for students to improve their English, face-to-face classes were more beneficial than online classes (see Comment 8).

Comment 8: *The first year of synchronous teaching was very difficult since I needed to adapt and change all of my lessons for an online medium. Although it is now easier and more convenient for me to teach online, I think my students have more opportunities to improve their English with in-person classes.*

Though these are important insights into the ERT teacher experience it should be remembered that these problems occurred under ERT conditions, something that was unprecedented, and for which neither teachers nor students were prepared. However, moving forward, issues such as these can potentially be mitigated with clear and effective policies and training. This will be important if institutions implement new class formats that are already being discussed and utilised, such as hybrid classes, which allow certain students to join a face-to-face class online synchronously when they cannot attend campus. This training and support should not be the sole responsibility of capable individuals who show initiative in sharing their expertise. As ERT highlighted, despite MEXT advocating for more e-learning and utilisation of ICT in classrooms for years, it was a sudden, abrupt, and difficult transition to online classes. Therefore, greater top-down support to assist in online based pedagogical innovation will be needed. This is important when we consider that one of the commenters also noted how positively their students received online lessons and ICT usage in class (see Comment 9).

Comment 9: *The students seem very receptive to online and other digital teaching methods such as editing docs via Google Docs rather than a paper version, which they seem to often lose or mishandle. Many students embraced having a laptop or using smartphones when I offered online components and seem to prefer this to paper handouts. The online tools such as Kahoot, Socrative, and others were received favorably according to surveys.*

Theme 4: Skills Learned

As seen above, teachers expressed the problems they encountered during ERT, but four responses also indicated that it had been a time of professional development. Comments under this theme often corresponded with an initial fear of using technology in teaching. However, COVID-19 became the catalyst to force change, which they seemed grateful for in the end. One commenter even mentioned that they had become a “complete convert” and plans to continue using the digital tools utilized during ERT for regular classes (see Comment 10). This is particularly pertinent as Comment 10 came from the same teacher who described himself as “terrified” at the start of the period of ERT in Comment 3.

Comment 10: *I became a complete convert to Zoom, Google Classroom and Slack. Now I feel at a disadvantage if I work somewhere where I can't use Google Classroom. I plan to use it as much as possible in the future!*

In one case, ERT enforced an acceleration of a planned move away from paper and towards the greater use of online platforms and tools. The respondent explained that this was a useful time for learning and that their department plans to continue using the tools they needed during ERT (see Comment 11).

Comment 11: *Just before the pandemic we had put in a proposal to become a BYOD department. Our intention had been to move slowly toward less paper and more digital content. The pandemic forced our hand and we had to accelerate that process. We were online in some way for 4 semesters and we learned a lot during that time. We have been*

using and will continue to use the university's LMS to deliver materials, conduct tests, post discussion boards, etc. We also often use Kahoots, and other ed tech. We were limited in our use of this before the pandemic, but this has been a good addition to the program.

As these comments display, there have been benefits to the enforced ERT. Individuals have found new effective methods to conduct their classes and one department that we know of through this study had the chance to implement an already planned move away from paper and increase their digital usage. However, one concern regarding this new enthusiasm towards digital tools and online learning opportunities is how well-equipped regular classrooms and teachers are for this desired utilisation of digital tools. As Ferreira (2021) discovered, simple access to a projector or the Internet were hurdles teachers had to overcome in order to implement ICT in their classes. Part-time teachers are particularly vulnerable to this as they lack the same level of financial support that full-time contracted and tenured instructors have access to. Furthermore, it is likely that the expectations of what is possible for classes has not only shifted for teachers, but for students alike. They are the so-called “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001) and ERT enforced greater use of digital tools in Japanese classes, something which had been lacking prior to ERT. Therefore, as findings have shown a positive correlation between the use of digital tools and creating a student-centered learning environment, improving learning outcomes, and increasing student engagement (Aoki, 2010; Caldwell, 2018; Moeller & Reitzes, 2011; Stevens et al., 2021), it would be prudent for institutions to review how well equipped they are for greater use of digital and online tools for learning and teaching in the future.

Conclusion

Thirteen out of 31 respondents chose to add optional comments on a survey into ERT in Japan. Interestingly, whilst a majority of the respondents to the study were either tenured or full-time contracted faculty members, the majority of the comments added were from part-time teachers. We propose that this is because they had the most difficult time during ERT, lacking any full-time or centralized support and also having to navigate various platforms, policies, and levels of training and support at different universities. As many programs and departments rely heavily on part-time teachers to conduct their classes, their comments are an important insight into where improvements can be made, not only at the supervisory level, but also institutionally and higher.

However, all the comments offer meaningful observations regarding the experiences of EFL teachers during ERT and how that will potentially influence the academic landscape moving forward. The qualitative coding of the optional comments in our study shows that teachers gained skills that they hope to continue harnessing moving forward, but often found training and support hit or miss. Therefore, effective training and resources in how to effectively develop programs using digital tools and how to use said tools, as well as how to manage students online, will be needed as things continue to evolve. Furthermore, others noted how already available basic resources, such as institutional LMSs, were often found lacking. Therefore, if the MEXT goals of increased online engagement and usage are to be met, ERT has highlighted one basic area, that of the need for more reliable and robust LMSs, that can significantly help or hinder the online learning and teaching experience. Early anecdotal reports show that some institutions have already taken steps to rectify this situation, but as our survey was conducted in summer 2022, and respondents were still expressing difficulties with such things, it illustrates that work is still needed more broadly. Importantly, policies based around sound pedagogy will also be required if institutions continue to allow some

forms of asynchronous or synchronous learning for certain students or classes. For this to happen, continued research will be important to help inform the currently developing and differing circumstances.

Finally, this study has important limitations to consider, namely the number of respondents and the comment pool are small, and that it only looks at the experiences of non-Japanese EFL teachers in Japan. Moving forward it will be important to gain insight to student and non-EFL teacher experiences during ERT in Japan and how they may also inform the new learning environment in higher education in Japan as ERT slowly draws to a close.

References

- Aoki, K. (2010). The use of ICT and e-learning in higher education in Japan. *World Academy of Science, Engineering & Technology*, 42, 854-858.
- Apple, M.T., & Mills, D.J. (2022). Online teaching satisfaction and technostress at Japanese universities during emergency remote teaching. In *Transferring language learning and teaching from face-to-face to online settings* (pp. 1-25). IGI Global.
- Caldwell, M. (2018). Japanese university students' perceptions on the use of ICT and mobile-learning in an EFL setting. *Computer-Assisted Language Learning-Electronic Journal*, 19(2), 188-212.
- Donnellan, M., Shiobara, F, & Jolley, K. (2022). An Investigation of Emergency Remote Teaching Conditions and EFL at Japanese Universities. *Ikoma Journal of Economics*, 20(2), 83-111.
- Ferreira, D. (2021). A qualitative action research study of barriers to information and communication technology integration at a Japanese liberal arts college. *Accents Asia*, 13(1), 24-43.
- Franks, A. (2021). Truly a "learning environment"? The efficacy of Manaba for emergency remote teaching. *CELE Journal*, 29, 42-54. <http://id.nii.ac.jp/1385/00026001/>
- Funamori, M. (2017). The issues Japanese higher education face in the digital age: Are Japanese universities to blame for the slow progress towards an information-based society? *International Journal of Institutional Research and Management*, 1(1), 37–51. <https://doi.org/10.52731/ijirm.v1.i1.112>
- Lavolette, E.B. (2022). Optimizing the future of language teaching with technology in Japan. In T.D. Wayne, & J. York (Eds), *Remote Teaching & Beyond: JALT CALL 2021*(pp. 1-14). doi.org/10.37546/JALTSIG.CALL.PCP2021-01
- Magana, S. (2017). *Disruptive classroom technologies*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin, A Sage Publishing Company.
- MEXT. (2020). *Education in Japan beyond the crisis of COVID-19: Leave no one behind*. Retrieved from https://www.mext.go.jp/en/content/20200904_mxt_kouhou01-000008961_1.pdf
- Moeller, B., & Reitzes, T. (2011). Integrating technology with student-centered learning. A report to the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. *Education Development Center, Inc.*
- OECD. (2019). *TALIS 2018 Results (Volume 1) Teachers and school leaders as lifelong learners*. TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris.
- Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants. *On the Horizon*, 9(5), 1-6.
- Provenzano, C. (2022, November 14). *Keeping what worked: Retaining valuable online approaches post-EOT* [Conference presentation]. JALT 2022, Fukuoka, Japan.

Snyder, J. D. (2017). Resistance to Change among Veteran Teachers: Providing Voice for More Effective Engagement. *NCPEA International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 12(1), 93-108.
<https://www.ncpeapublications.org/index.php/volume-12-number-1-spring-2017/resistance-to-change-among-veteran-teachers-providing-voice-for-more-effective-engagement/>

Stevens, G. J., Bienz, T., Wali, N., Condie, J., & Schismenos, S. (2021). Online university education is the new normal: but is face-to-face better?. *Interactive Technology and Smart Education*. 18(3), 278-297. doi: 10.1108/ITSE-08-2020-0181

Contact email: k-jolley@baika.ac.jp
fshiobara@shoin.ac.jp
donnellan@kindai.ac.jp