

Feature or future ?
Student reactions to learning online

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Online learning is not the next big thing ; it is the now big thing. (Abernathy, 2001)

I hate online learning. (University student in Japan, 2020)

1. Introduction

Online learning has become an established means of access to education in the 21st century, from large scale MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) catering to a vast student population spanning continents to YouTube tutorials produced and viewed by private individuals. Widespread internet connection has brought teaching material and other resources within the reach of the majority wishing to use them and enabled long distance face-to-face communication hitherto unimaginable. All this would appear to represent limitless opportunities for innovation and the development of newer, better ways in which to learn and teach.

However, looking at a typical classroom environment today and observing its inhabitants (whatever the learners' age and ability, however traditional or 'modern' the instructor) and the activities they are engaged in, one can see that no great revolution has taken place, and much, if not all, would be familiar from decades back into the previous century. Even where new techniques and technology are

introduced, these frequently serve largely in the interests of long-established procedures, while admittedly making improvements in terms of the ease and speed with which they can be performed.

Thus, the adoption of online learning may have been rather slower than the leaps and bounds in its development suggested, with a gradual, perhaps inevitable, shift towards increasing use of its advantageous aspects. This study aims to look at two distinct steps in its integration into the author's own teaching methodology and how students have reacted on both occasions, the first as but one feature of a relatively orthodox communicative curriculum, the second a complete transformation of delivery enforced by circumstance and quite likely, in some shape or form, to continue for the foreseeable future.

2. Background — selected readings

There has been a great deal of research into the application of information technology (IT) in varying degrees to education in general, not just as a subject in its own right, examples studied including works such as Bonk & Graham (2006), with their comprehensive guide to “blended learning” which combines computer-mediated learning with longer established forms, and Brabazon (2007), looking at the meteoric rise in social power and burgeoning influence of the internet and its providers on the tertiary system in particular. References to “digital natives” (Prensky, 2010) and “digital change agents” (Ryan et al., 2013) hint at how institutions need to both recognise and utilise their student population's rapid development of technological skills, quite possibly in stark contrast to some of their employees' tardier progress.

Further reading in works on motivation, especially those concerned with the local situation in Japan (e. g. Apple, DaSilva & Fellner, 2013 ; Kikuchi, 2015), led to the consideration, perhaps rather belatedly, of including elements of online learning in the syllabus for the compulsory general English courses taken by most students at the university where the author works. If successful, it was hoped that the results of Shimada's research, which were found to "indicate that learners' satisfaction with e-learning materials is likely to have a positive effect on their motivation and autonomy in learning English" (2017 : 7), might be at least partially reproduced, thereby justifying the changes in curriculum and encouraging continued and expanded use of such methods.

3. Online learning — a partial introduction

At the end of both terms in the academic year starting in April 2019 and ending in January 2020, surveys were undertaken of all first- and second-year students who had to join the author's aforementioned productive skills courses for non-English majors (from Economics, Business Administration and a combination of Sociology and Law departments). Courses under the same name are taken by different teachers in successive terms, with no coordination of content or curricula required. A total of 103 students were canvassed for their opinions in July (49 first-years, 54 second-years) and 102 students in January (65 first-years and 37 second-years), representing two, three or four classes comprised of up to twenty students each (some of whom did not respond due to absence or other unspecified reasons). Nearly identical numbers on both occasions were conducive to the making of short-term longitudinal comparisons and the relatively close totals of students in their first and second years (114 and 91 each) were also reasonably compatible for statistical purposes, with all results being converted into percentage form.

The two year-groups were using different levels of the same general skills English coursebook¹⁾ which included an online workbook element that was reserved for homework to both review and preview content usually covered in greater detail in class, where the emphasis upon communicative activity was paramount. This opportunity for autonomous study at their own pace was strongly encouraged and it was hoped might prove a motivational alternative to similar pencil and paper exercises in the text. Following a rather laborious process of registration, aided by the provision of some written and oral instructions in Japanese, most students seemed to be using the facility quite happily throughout the course, although some either came to me with practical problems they had in the process of trying to do the work or were summoned after failing to submit answers by any deadlines set, only to reveal similar difficulties. Many of these were as simple as mistakes in logging in and forgotten usernames or passwords. However, others remained something of a mystery even after repeated consultation with the publisher's technical support desk. The survey was intended to find out how widespread such issues had actually been and how the online content was viewed overall, especially by the majority who had encountered fewer problems in its use.

In the interests of simplicity and ease of response, six questions were asked in English designed to be quickly understood, requesting little more than the circling of their choice of answer from between two and five options. Two responses allowed for an extended answer which it was indicated could be given in either English or Japanese. The full questionnaire in its original form can be seen in the Appendix.

The first question asked students to finish the sentence "Using the online

1) the text will remain unnamed here in this article as it is being neither reviewed nor critiqued, except by users in regard to one part of its substantial whole.

content was...” with the appropriate assessment of how problematic or otherwise it had been. “No problem” was the experience reported by over 80% of second-year students on both occasions, with none mentioning frequent difficulties, the remainder merely that there was “sometimes a problem”. Perhaps more interestingly, nearly half the first years reported having had problems, however occasional, in the first term, but this figure fell dramatically to under a fifth by the end of the second, positive views matching their seniors’ at around the 80% mark. This may reflect my concern as their instructor with the initial results and an effort, conscious or otherwise, to avoid similar pitfalls from the outset in the subsequent term. By the end of their first year at university, students may also have finally adapted to the new and different demands being made of them in a considerably less controlled learning environment, particularly in comparison to the last three years spent in entrance exam-focussed senior high schools. Of course, the extent of trouble caused by anything judged “sometimes a problem” is also open to interpretation, but difficulties in using the online content seemed to decrease as students progressed through their first year of attendance at university, and continued to be less significant throughout the second.

Regarding the problems encountered, over half of those giving any indication of their precise nature admitted to forgetting their log-in details or encountered other obstacles to gaining access to the site, while the other half found themselves frustrated in attempts to complete tasks due to the incorrect display of certain exercises on their screens and also unable to check some of the answers they had managed to input due to inaccuracies in the automatic marking (problems that were never fully explained, even by the publisher’s so-called “advanced technical support team”). By the end of the year, only self-inflicted obstacles to logging in were reported, and by a very small minority.

Questions 3 and 4, asking about simple practical matters concerning the way in which students undertook work online, were designed and deliberately placed in the middle of the survey to provide brief respite from answers that required more careful consideration and detailed recollection, between the two optional open-ended requests for further information (Questions 2 and 5). Access via computer was substantially greater in the first term (50% over both year groups) than the second (a sharp overall decline to just 20%), with the equivalent figures for smartphone use showing a slightly less dramatic switch of 40 to 60%, the remainder being mostly students who participated via a combination of devices, including a solitary tablet user. The most significant change was seen in the first-year groups, where the number of students doing the work exclusively on their phones more than doubled from 33 to 74%, the reason for which remains unclear. Working cooperatively with other students (Question 4) was a possibility generally shunned by around 90% of participants, apart from a somewhat anomalous quarter of the second-year students in their second term professing to have done so. In spite of assurances given when administering the survey, there may have been some reluctance to admit that homework submissions were not entirely their own work, even retrospectively.

Having ascertained the extent and nature of problems that may have been faced when trying to use the online elements of the course, the short survey ended by eliciting a more general verdict on work of this nature and whether or not they would recommend it be continued in future. The results can be seen below (figures 1 and 2).

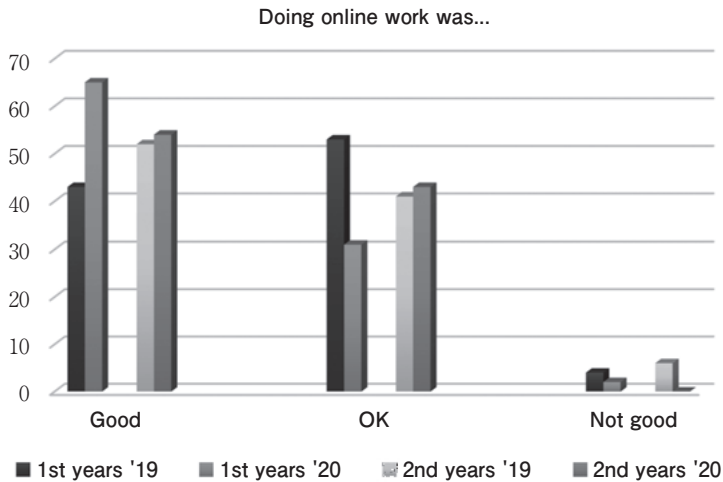


Fig. 1 Responses to Question 5

A vast majority of students viewed online content in a favourable light (if a response of “OK” is interpreted as a glass half full rather than half empty !) with only 5% responding negatively in July (‘19), dwindling down to just one or two individuals in January (‘20). Disappointingly, no respondents chose to expand upon their reasons for their positive views here, in spite of being encouraged to do so, perhaps as a result of answer fatigue (at least two official university questionnaires are habitually administered in the same end of term period) or a difficulty in defining precisely why they held such beliefs.

As for future use, most agreed with maintaining the status quo, although approximately a fifth suggested increasing the online element in such a course. A handful of members in each class felt that its use should be decreased, with only individuals in all but one of the four combined year groups recommending its removal altogether.

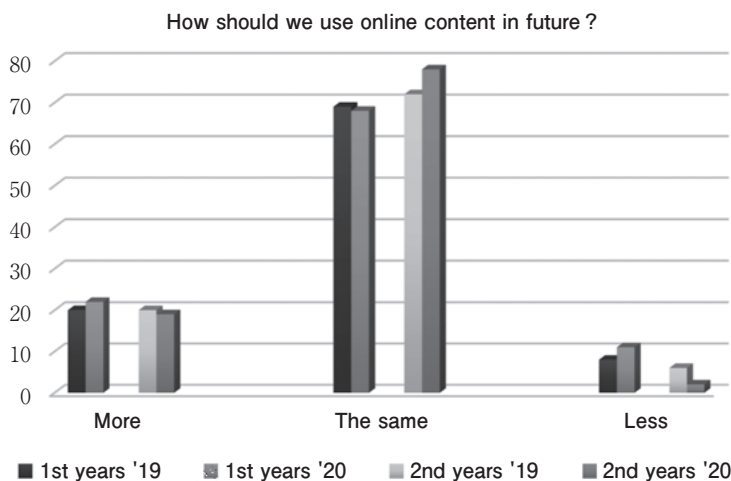


Fig. 2 Responses to Question 6

As a teacher, the fact that even a single student is not able to do the work set due to technical problems beyond their (or their teacher's) control rather than insufficient study or skill raises serious questions about the medium of the content, even if a majority of other class members express their satisfaction with the system, as here. If the teacher also finds they cannot rely on class data to be preserved (a situation, occurring during a key period of assessment, which was eventually rectified) then the cumulation of difficulties can only reflect a fundamental flaw in the selection of the materials. With some reluctance, after decades of devoted and generally satisfied use, a decision was made to switch to a different textbook series for the following academic year. A blend of text and on-screen material would continue to be used, particularly for presentation of content, but online activities would be optional for self-study rather than used as graded homework. In this way, it would be hoped that the dilemma of having to assess students with few if any scores in their online gradebooks (or spend hours attempting to find and fix the

problems that were occurring) could be consigned to the recycle bin of past errors. However, none of us could have foreseen the immense changes to the teaching situation in which this new material would eventually be used some six months later.

4. Online learning — a wholesale adoption

In classroom learning you can concentrate. It is easier to talk than online learning and easy (to ask) when you don't understand. But you can't sleep to the last minute. It is easier to be late. If it is an online class there is no time (needed) to go to school. Online classes are very influenced by the internet. We can't use the equipment in online classes. If you're in an online class, you're more likely to be lazy. (2nd year student)

As the corona virus began to spread throughout the world, the academic year starting in April 2020 found institutions in a predicament that none could have predicted and few had ready-made solutions for. How would course content be delivered in the classroom when social distancing was required to reduce any risk of infection to the minimum? How would students' movement to, from and on campus take place as safely as possible? *Would* students even be prepared to leave the comfort and safety of their own homes to come to that campus, let alone move from their hometowns to the city in which it is located?

At the author's place of work it was initially suggested that classes might still convene in person but with logistics and procedures adhering to the principle of avoiding what had become known here in Japan as “三密” (“san mitsu”), roughly translated as the three C's, namely closed spaces, crowded spaces and close-contact settings, all situations to be avoided to protect the health of everyone concerned. Seating would be suitably separated, windows and doors opened at regular intervals,

and, crucially for language classes, speaking itself kept to a bare, hushed minimum with no pair or group work allowed ! Other regulations were also proposed, but by the time work on necessary adjustments to each syllabus and its lesson plans had commenced, the first of two delays to the start of term was announced, allowing time for reconsideration of the whole situation and its rapidly changing nature, with a new start date proposed after the traditional extended public holidays that always provide a break after the first few weeks. With the initial health scare now a fully-fledged worldwide pandemic and a form of voluntary lockdown in place nationwide after various geographically limited introductions, the school calendar was once again modified for the teaching year to commence at the end of May, with all classes, in principle, to be held online.

While little or no training was provided (some guidance was eventually forthcoming, but only in Japanese, a considerable barrier for some foreign faculty with limited knowledge of the language, particularly in renownedly difficult written form), further revisions to all plans were deemed necessary, requiring the application of some form of Learning Management System (LMS) to every course and use of a suitable delivery system for either synchronous or asynchronous classes. Moodle and Zoom appeared to be the most commonly adopted platforms respectively and were accordingly provided with greater levels of support (which may, in turn, have contributed to their popularity). Aware of his own limitations and considering the likely confusion among students faced with a similar profusion of choices made by teachers on their behalf, the author followed this trend, hoping to keep any adaptation to new systems required as small and simple as possible, within what was inevitably going to be a period of considerable upheaval and continuing uncertainty.

Approximately midway through this first term, which had finally commenced after innumerable delays and adjustments, two classes taking an elective course entitled “Communication in English” were canvassed for their opinions on the “remote learning” that had become the enforced norm from the start of the academic year. As part of a module on “Comparisons”, in addition to being asked to give their own suggestions for interesting topics to discuss in subsequent classes, they also had to write a balanced view of a given pairing, with “Classroom learning vs Online learning” chosen as a topical example. While hoping to encourage them into critical thought regarding the pros and cons of both sides, this assignment also asked the students to make a decision as to which they currently felt was the better system based upon their recent and ongoing experience, suddenly much greater than that of the groups previously surveyed (described in Section 2).

As then, students came from all faculties of the university, though predominantly the two largest, Economics and Business Administration. English proficiency levels could be described as equivalent to high beginner or low intermediate, and any minimal corrections to the spelling or grammar in quotations from their work have been made for ease of comprehension only. A total of 25 written answers were received via the Moodle Text Editor, with a balance of twelve in favour of online learning, ten preferring classroom learning, plus three in which a clear verdict was not expressed. It should be noted that these results are not dissimilar to those observed the previous year by a comparable group of students who had been working mostly from their perceptions of eLearning than the direct hands-on experience of the current cohort.

Many of those who viewed online learning in a positive light overall (and a significant number of those who did not) referred to the greater convenience and

comfort of studying from home. The chance afforded for more sleep than would be possible if attendance on campus were necessary was cited by half (for more on the significance of sleep in students' daily schedules see Paterson, 2020), in comments such as "I can sleep to the last minute" and "you don't have to go to school, so you can sleep for a little longer". One respondent appeared to be unashamedly stating that "I can sleep a long time in an online class", but while the author has on occasion startled students from their slumber when visiting a particular Zoom Breakout Room, this individual probably also meant within the remote learning system rather than during a lesson itself, even if he later added that "The professor doesn't know what we are doing" as a further advantage !

In addition to having more time to sleep, the time-saving aspect of online learning in general was again mentioned in half of positive appraisals, removing both the need to commute, perhaps in bad weather, especially "for people whose home is far from the university" (in some cases over an hour's travel, that particular student kindly also including teachers in their consideration on this point), and then transfer between classrooms and buildings on campus through crowds and over distances that we as teachers perhaps tend to under-appreciate in our own personal 15 minutes of frenetic movement. Equally, the ability to get lunch without having to queue for longer than it takes to eat and make use of an adjacent bathroom much more conveniently were also seen as benefits. The following comment summarises much of the above while highlighting another less obvious point regarding not only the need to attend but also to bring all necessary items when doing so.

I think that I can study in a comfortable space for me because it is an online class. In addition, you can participate in the class in the best condition without having to worry about forgetting things.

Having made the short journey to arrive in front of their computer screen, some of the advantages stated by online learning advocates continued to include the environment, relating to quiet and comfort, as well as practical matters such as the ability to ask questions and even learn more easily.

While the responses covered thus far mostly outlined positive aspects of being able to study from home to argue in its favour, the similar if slightly lower number of those preferring what might be considered traditional classroom learning concentrated largely upon the *disadvantages* of online education and problems in its implementation. No fewer than eight of the ten such proponents wrote about technical difficulties and their adverse effect on classes, as in the following examples :

- it needs a lot of setting so it is troublesome
- it requires the maintenance of... devices such as smartphones and PCs
- it is difficult to understand... because teachers use various tools²⁾

The last comment in particular should perhaps serve as a reminder to instructors that their individual enthusiasm for some latest innovation may need to be balanced by a consideration for the potential confusion the introduction of yet another app or program to be administered and become accustomed to may cause. Tired eyes from continued computer use and a larger amount of homework, both of which would likely be confirmed by the teachers at the other end of their internet connection, were also listed as negative aspects of online learning.

2) As someone who in the past six months has had to scale as steep a learning curve as experienced in over three decades of teaching, the author can fully appreciate such students' predicament.

More positively, the classroom environment was described as more conducive to learning in general, and communication, the key element in most language classes, in particular. While still sometimes couched in criticism of the online environment, seven out of ten adherents said it was basically easier to talk in real physical proximity. This was also given as a factor in enhancing the ease in which questions can be asked to the teacher and group discussions can take place. Contrastingly, acknowledgement was made of the occasionally disruptive noise levels when large numbers of students come together in person and, interestingly, the need “to be careful about your appearance”, no doubt felt all the more acutely by those in their late teens and early twenties. For one student, the contrast was simply “that school is more fun than home” (many understandably mentioned currently missing meeting their friends), while another insightfully admitted that such enthusiasm can be detrimental to study, as “in the classroom we can talk about various things with each other but can not concentrate in English class.” Working and enjoying study with their peers *was* also seen as motivational, and it will be interesting to see the effect of the sudden shift to online provision on the results to be found by future research along similar lines to the innumerable studies produced in recent years. The last word here will be best left to a slightly older student who provided one the more eloquent comparisons :

I think “online learning” is better for me. The reason why I prefer it is I don’t need to take time to go to the university. I usually take 30 minutes to go there, so I can save my time and money for gasoline ... that is a good point for me. However, it’s sometimes quite tough to communicate with people online compared to “classroom learning” because it’s going to be a bad connection due to the wi-fi environment... It’s really stressful when you want to discuss... though I guess it’s going to be the common way to communicate from now on.

(3rd year student)

5. Conclusions

...learners may drop out of computer-mediated second language courses due to a lack of teacher support and an absence of paper-based materials such as textbooks.

(Shimada, 2017 : 3, discussing Stracke, 2007)

While it would be interesting to know exactly how students have viewed the switch to working exclusively online, that was not the remit of the current study, in spite of its title. The vast number of mitigating factors (not least of which being the variation in actual learning experience and its delivery) and insufficient time having lapsed to gain any real chronological perspective mean that both survey instrument and any conclusions drawn from its results would be hard to produce and easy to question. However, it can be assumed that while research may have been “scant...on best practices for instructing language online” to date (Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021 : 222), the floodgates will open in the very near future for a veritable tidal wave of studies on the subject. Even the most recent work has been overtaken by events in a way quite unimaginable a matter of mere months ago.

From purely observational evidence from recent interactions with students, on the one hand it would seem that first-years who have yet to experience classroom learning at university understandably wish to be given the chance to do so and meet their peers (perhaps even their teachers !) on campus for quite conceivably the first time. On the other hand, students in the second year and above appear to be more divided, between those who wish to return to the social community that their juniors have yet had the opportunity to join, and those who have discovered that, in comparison with the varied experience they underwent in the previous year, they find themselves quite contented with the “new normal”, physically removed from

that shared environment, and the benefits they feel it has brought, as we have seen in Section 3. When asked directly, the two responses have maintained a surprising equilibrium thus far, providing limited succour to those faced with making the decisions regarding how to proceed. Of course, it will be those institutions and their administration, with or without guidance at the governmental level, who have to decide on the way forward, and for their teaching staff to implement the measures taken to the extent they feel willing and able to do so. While the changes this year were as sudden as they were drastic, greater and improved preparation is seen as necessary even for a more limited movement away from the classroom to avoid a repetition of the same confusion.

...those who transition from teaching in traditional environments to teaching online should insist upon receiving sufficient professional development in online language pedagogy and in the instructional technologies that they will need to deliver their courses effectively online.

(Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021 : 274)

It is equally feasible to imagine that the headlong rush into providing education via the internet, while unlikely to be reversed, may at a minimum be slowed by yet another swing of the pedagogical pendulum back towards direct face-to-face contact and a renewed appreciation of its benefits that are negated or diminished online. Maintaining and enhancing student engagement (Tanaka, 2019) and connectedness (Bolliger & Inan, 2012) will be key factors in the success of whatever methods are chosen, most likely in some hybridised combination which hopefully represents the best of both the remote and in-person experience. Having become a near necessity in these trying times, online learning appears to have cemented its position as a permanent feature in the educational domain, and, whatever the reaction, looks certain to be a significant influence on its long-term future.

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Appendix

Online content survey

Please choose the answer that is true for you and circle it.

1. Using the online content was...

...no problem (go to 3) ...sometimes a problem ...often a problem

2. What kind of problem did you have ? (choose either or both, skip if none)

forgetting your log-in details other problem – what ?
(password, username etc.) (英語でも日本語でも OK)

3. Which did you usually use for the online work ?

PC only mostly PC smartphone only mostly smartphone PC and smartphone

4. Did you ever work with another student doing the online work ?

Yes No

5. When there were no problems, doing work online was...

...good ...OK ...not so good ...bad

Why ? (英語でも日本語でも OK)

6. How should we use the online content in future courses ?

more than about the same less than not at all
in this class as in this class in this class

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