Transforming Language Learning: Teaching Approaches in English Classes.

Ayako Yamashiro and Kalia Earsley (English)

Challenges and Tactics in Education

The academic year 2022-23 experienced moderate shifts in English classes in our school due to the transition both before and after the categorization into Class 5 of COVID-19 in Japan. This paper provides reflection as well as perspective of English classes with a focus on important changes experienced during the period. One of the most remarkable changes during the academic year was the restructuring of first year English classes. All classes were divided into four quarters of 20 students each, marking a shift in class organization and teaching methodology. This was aimed at enhancing the learning experience and promoting language proficiency through interaction with native and non-native English-speaking instructors. This made it possible to provide students with explicit and implicit teaching strategies for the target language according to their level of proficiency. By using different approaches to learning four skills and five areas, listening, speaking, reading, writing, and interaction in CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), it becomes possible to foster the affective domain such as attitudes towards the target language, initial and sustaining motivation, trait and state anxiety, and acculturation conducive to English language acquisition. These approaches not only create a more personalized and interactive learning experience, but also provide students with valuable opportunities for authentic language acquisition. The success of this initiative underscores the importance of embracing diverse teaching methodologies to enrich the educational experience, and prepares students for effective communication by promoting linguistic achievement.

The adoption of hybrid learning with in-person and eLearning accommodates the challenges in communication posed by social distancing measures and varying levels of comfort with the eLearning system. These methods influence learners' output as a product of input and allow for careful assessment of their eLearning process, thereby providing feedback or error treatment as necessary. Recognizing the need for flexibility, educators embraced alternative assessment methods that could be implemented both in physical and virtual settings. This approach allowed for a more inclusive evaluation process.

Reflecting on Educational Activities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19 restrictions presented unique challenges to the learning environment and necessitated the modification of instructional activities. Limitations were inevitable, but the quality of instruction was not to be sacrificed if at all possible. What follows are commentary and examples of how the pandemic affected certain aspects of the learning culture and environment and, when applicable, how challenges were addressed.

Sustainable hybrid teaching and a well-organized eLearning system were key factors in maintaining the quality of instruction under the COVID-19 implemented circumstances. Advantageously, eLearning has already been extensively developed as a teaching resource for English education, and was introduced in our English classes prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of online quizzes and the utilization of university learning support systems for

detailed class schedules has allowed for a more accurate understanding of the learning situation.

In accordance with university policies, temperature checks for instructors were conducted by electronic means at building entrances. This temperature check determined whether classes for that day would be conducted in person or via online video instruction. If an instructor's temperature check resulted in as much as a slight fever, in-person instruction was not permitted. In such cases, a laptop with an online meeting platform installed (e.g., Zoom) was made available in a classroom separate from students. This made lectures possible for instructors. However, observing students' individual live progress in, for example, a short writing assignment was not possible. Fortunately, this was not a common occurrence. Most classes were taught in-person and students could be adequately observed throughout the course.

In addition to temperature checks, masks were required for all attending students and instructors. In terms of communication in instruction, one notable challenge was the students' inability to observe the instructor's oral positioning and movement for pronunciation. In such cases, such as for demonstrating the pronunciation of the words "see" and "she," the instructor's mask could be removed for a moment, but only at a safe distance from others. This did not provide adequate visibility for all students in the classroom. To circumvent this, a comparison was made with familiar Japanese words such as "sake (酒)" and "shake (しゃけ)." This allowed students an opportunity to relate the pronunciation of English words with familiar sound comparisons in their first language.

Another notable factor during the pandemic was the students' levels of apprehension or enthusiasm in communicating and interacting. It proved useful to observe students as they entered the classroom to determine whether they maintained a certain physical distance, or preferred being in closer physical proximity with their peers before the start of class. If students showed a level of comfort in close, but not dangerous, physical proximity to their peers, it was possible to interpret this as a sign of high morale. At times when little interaction among peers was observed, an introductory anecdote using pop music was sometimes presented at the start of class. Song lyrics with examples of grammatical points studied during the course were used to engage students. Comprehension of a particular grammar point was then evaluated by asking students specific questions about that grammar point in the lyrics. Students were encouraged to discuss their answers with a designated partner and then present their answers to the class.

Despite social distancing restrictions, encouraging a maximum level of interaction and communication during each class period remained imperative. To achieve this, lessons included speaking activities done in pairs as the primary communicative exercise. Students would participate in these activities with the same partner throughout the entire course while maintaining the required social distance. This method was chosen for the specific purpose of minimizing exposure for each individual. Unfortunately, this limited the number of peers students could interact with during the course. It was a sacrifice made in order to prevent the spread of infection. To compensate for this, group activities were still occasionally—but very sparingly—used, and students had more opportunities to give class presentations while still observing social distancing guidelines. Progress was measured by observing pair discussions and assessing the quality of responses made during class presentations.

Post-COVID instruction now allows for an increase in group-focused communicative activities and interaction with a variety of classmates. Without the hindrance of mask requirements, a more personalized form of instruction is now possible. Instructors can provide visual demonstrations of proper pronunciation from an adequate distance. More instructor-group discussions and activities have been implemented into lesson plans and students are able to enjoy a more socially interactive environment during educational instruction.

What was gained from navigating pandemic restrictions in the educational environment? Modified teaching methods could prove useful post-COVID. While video-based instruction and eLearning systems provided significant advantages, they were not a replacement for the immersive quality of in-person instruction. The nationwide community of university English educators sharing information on teaching methodologies and the approaches to English classes implemented in each university through online seminars has been a significant source of encouragement. This ongoing effort post-COVID is a testament to the strength of the foundation laid in English education, and we would like to express our respect for the persistent efforts that have been made to this point. Perhaps the benefits of having endured difficulty and radical change due to COVID-19 are a newfound appreciation for social interaction, a sense of solidarity through resilience in the educational community, and renewed curiosity and inspiration for learning through human connection.