

Online Teaching and Emergency Remote Learning at Himeji Dokkyo University During the COVID-19 Pandemic



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Introduction

Himeji Dokkyo University, like many educational institutions around the world and Japan, decided to go online in April 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital preparedness of educators is an important factor in the effectiveness of successfully moving toward remote learning. According to the OECD data gathered in the 2019 PISA test [1], Japan ranks the lowest in teachers having the technical and pedagogical skills to integrate digital devices in instruction and furthermore is ranking last in having time to train. This paper will examine the digital preparedness of English educators at Himeji Dokkyo University and the different steps that were taken to help the teachers to be ready for “emergency” remote learning.

The pandemic started before the first scheduled classes in April 2020 which means that all Himeji Dokkyo students with the exception of a few students are currently doing most of their learning online.

Background

ICT infrastructure

Himeji Dokkyo University uses Google for Education and Google Classroom as the main learning management system (LMS). All students have their own school Gmail email address and were instructed on how to log in. The university provided teachers with Japanese language instructions on how to use Google Classroom. Educators were also offered access to devices. In the second semester of 2020, educators were giving full access to the online portal and were able to input grades from home.

Training for English instructors

On a voluntary basis, English instructors were invited to join a Google Meet session where the main investigator of this research and a fellow instructor answered questions concerning Google Classroom and alleviate any concerns about remote learning. These sessions were recorded and made available for teachers who could not attend. One meeting was held before the beginning of each semester. The second meeting was preceded by a short need analysis survey and the second meeting tried to answer some of the problems that educators faced during the first semester.

Method

A survey was conducted with English language instructors. The university has 8 full time language instructors and 18 part-time instructors. The survey was electronically distributed using Google Forms and the instructors were informed that their data would remain anonymous and would be used for research. The survey consists of 23 questions about teaching remote learning classes at Himeji Dokkyo University. Out of the 23 questions, 16 were multiple choice and 7 were open ended questions where the teachers could write their answers and give their personal opinion. The survey was distributed between the first and the second semester so the teachers would have the opportunity to reflect on their past teaching practice under the unique circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. 9 teachers responded to the survey.

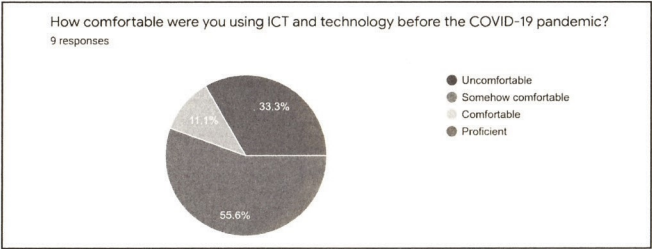
Results

The 9 responses doesn't allow statistical significance, but it represents the current situation within the limited confine of English educators at Himeji Dokkyo University.

Out of the 9 respondents, 6 were male and 3 were female.

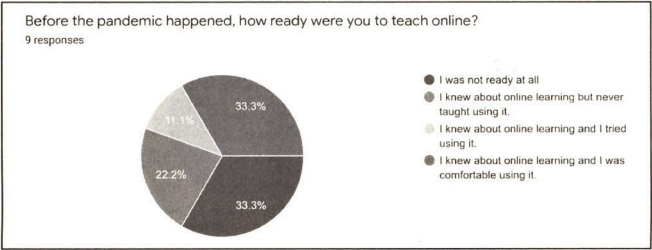
Familiarity with ICT

The survey first revealed that the vast majority of teachers were somehow comfortable with ICT and technology indicating that the current pandemic has indicated the need to upgrade their technical skills.



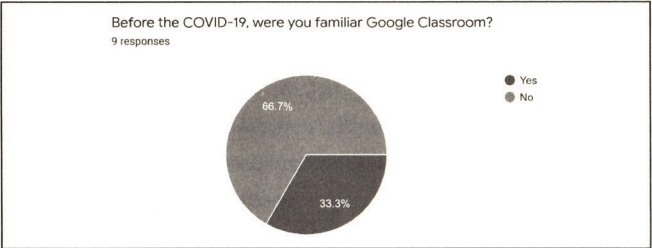
Experience with online learning

The familiarity with technology is also reflected in pre-pandemic experience with online learning with 55.5 % of teachers who had no previous experiences teaching online.



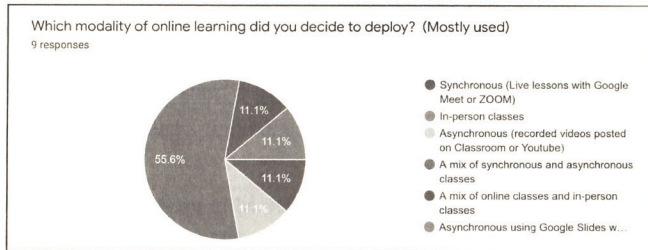
Knowledge of Google Classroom

Over half the teachers were not ready or had tried teaching online before the pandemic started. It is interesting to note that 66.7 % of teachers were not familiar with Google Classroom despite being the Learning Management System in use before the pandemic.



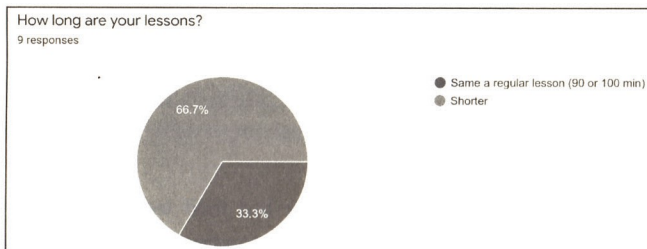
Teaching modality: synchronous vs asynchronous

Teachers at Himeji Dokkyo were offered the option to choose the modality under which they would deliver remote learning and the next survey question reveals a diversity of approaches.



A majority of teachers opted for a mix of synchronous and asynchronous classes with few teachers opting for synchronous and or asynchronous only classes.

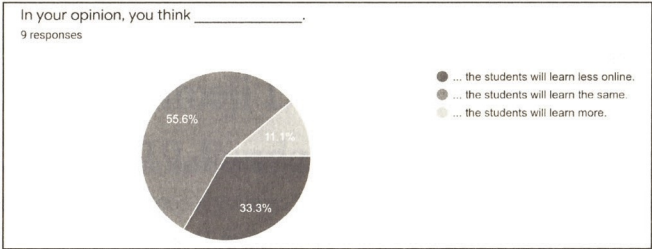
Length of classes



33.3% of teachers reported teaching lessons which were the same length as regular lessons of 90 to 100 minutes. During the online training sessions, it was recommended to teachers to reduce lesson time to avoid fatigue related to remote learning.

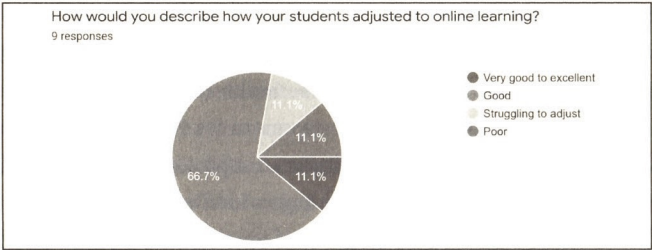
Learning outcomes

Regarding the lesson outcomes of the students, 33.3% reported that the students would learn less and 55.6 % reported that the students would learn the same. 11.1 % (1 teacher) reported that the students actually learned more.



Perception of students adjustment to the emergence remote learning

The teachers also reported how the students adjusted to online learning. The vast majority noted that the students adapted well.



Discussion

This short survey while not statistically significant reflects a variety of approaches to Emergency Remote Learning [2]. The concept of Emergency Remote Learning was introduced during the first online meeting and brought up again during the second online meeting to remind the teachers that the current situation was exceptional and mandated a different approach with the students. The insistence on the temporary nature of this online learning format was also meant to remove some of the pressure related to going online on such a quick notice.

This short survey also illustrates the struggle of educators to ensure educational continuity for Himeji Dokkyo University students. The OECD recognizes the important of teacher preparation during the crisis and a post crisis analysis of what worked and what did not work will be needed.[3]

The question of learning outcomes during the pandemic remains to be studied, yet 33.3 % of teachers felt that the students were learning less during the pandemic. Further inquiry into how the students perceived this experience will be needed to adjust the

teaching methods in the advent that the pandemic does not allow a return to normality in 2021.

Conclusion

It is yet undetermined how long the pandemic will last at the time of publication, but this small survey reveals the importance of creating a community of practice where teachers can exchange and support each other. Himeji Dokkyo University has given a lot of freedom and trust to its teacher in adapting their teaching practice to the demands of online learning. The freedom to decide the specifics of a new digital curriculum has caused stress for a number of teachers who also commented that online teaching was way more time consuming than in-person teaching and that the students were often very slow in turning in their homework. Beyond the hardship felt by Himeji Dokkyo University educators, it is to be noted that most educators intend to integrate more digital tools in their in-person classes once the health crisis is over.

This survey of educators is the first step toward a better understanding of how educators can quickly pivot to online learning in an unprecedented health crisis and how such effort can help us build resilience in the higher level educational system. This short survey seems to indicate that the pedagogy of all educators has been deeply affected by the pandemic, there is hope that some of the struggles we all faced will help us be better connected educators in the future.

References

- [1] <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/learning-remotely-when-schools-close-how-well-are-students-and-schools-prepared-insights-from-pisa-3bfd1f7/>
- [2] <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2020/3/the-difference-between-emergency-remote-teaching-and-online-learning>
- [3] <https://www.oecd.org/education/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-education-insights-education-at-a-glance-2020.pdf>

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Abstract

The 2020 COVID-19 crisis has forced Himeji Dokkyo University educators to rapidly adopt a new online teaching approach. The researcher who has participated in two online meetings where he assisted one of his co-worker in bringing English instructors up to speed on how to use Google Classroom and upload classes online conducted a short survey to better understand how teachers reacted to emergency remote learning. The result of this survey indicates that most teachers were struggling and that further analysis of students' learning outcomes is needed.