

EFL teacher experiences in Japan: Remote language teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Introduction

Much like most aspects of everyday life, the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted the work and lives of teachers. Specifically, many shifted from face-to-face (F2F) classes to remote teaching for the majority of 2020 and portions of 2021. While some Western countries are now beginning to emerge from the pandemic, in large part due to widespread vaccination (Nirappil & Shammass, 2021), other areas of the world have not been as fortunate. For instance, at the time of writing (June 2021), most urban areas in Japan were under a quasi-state of emergency, which is essentially a soft lockdown, and the nation ranked second worst out of 38 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries when it comes to vaccination rate (Ito, 2021). Thus, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were still felt by many teachers and students in the country at this time.

Although it is too early to understand the full impact of the pandemic on university life and education, initial studies indicate that it has been hard on students and teachers alike. In a global survey of over 30,000 students from 62 countries, Aristovnik et al. (2020) found that students were generally satisfied with the support they received from their universities during the pandemic. However, a lack of computer skills combined with a perceived increased workload made them less accepting of online classes. Marek et al. (2020) also conducted a global survey but focused on university instructors. Findings from their research, which involved 418 university faculty from various countries, indicated that most teachers experienced more stress and higher workloads. Moreover, answer variability was high among the respondents, suggesting that individual teachers experienced the pandemic in different ways. However, one variable did predict how participants responded to the survey, i.e., past experience with online distance learning had a significant relationship with positive survey responses. Lastly,

in a study comparing different models of online instruction, Tang et al. (2020) found that Chinese university students had mostly negative views of online learning. Specifically, they disliked synchronous online courses and were dissatisfied with the level of communication provided by their teachers. On the other hand, they had more favorable opinions towards courses which utilized the flipping classroom model, which in turn, resulted in higher levels of student attention, learning, and evaluation in classes taught using this approach.

The aforementioned studies by Aristovnik et al. (2020), Marek et al. (2020), and Tang et al. (2020) highlight the unique struggles that faculty and students have faced during the pandemic. However, aside from a small-scale study by Kawasaki et al. (2021), which compared the learning outcomes of Japanese students who took a remote nursing course in 2020 with those who took the same class F2F in 2019, there has been a paucity of research in the Japanese university context. Thus, the aim of this study was to address this gap in the literature by examining the following research question: *What are the experiences of Japanese university English as a foreign language (EFL) instructors towards remote language teaching during the pandemic?*

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a narrative research design to understand Japanese university EFL teacher experiences during the pandemic. As defined by Czarniawska (2004), narrative study is a qualitative research design in which “narrative is understood as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions” (p. 17). In the case of the present study, the event or experience studied is remote language teaching in Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), “Narrative research is best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single individual or the lives of a small number of individuals” (p. 71). As such, the inclusion of only two participants in this study is appropriate for the chosen research design.

Participants

After gaining approval from my university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), two male participants named John and Kevin (pseudonyms) were invited via email to participate in the study. I knew both teachers as they were former colleagues, so they

provided convenient access to participants who fit the inclusion criteria, namely, they taught English at the university-level in Japan and worked in the country for the duration of the pandemic. In other words, I used convenience sampling to recruit participants in the study. Both participants had lived in Japan for an extensive period of time, John for 8 years and Kevin for 19 years. Each teacher was a native English speaker, John from Australia and Kevin from the U.K. John had six years of university teaching experience in Japan while Kevin had three years. John was a permanent faculty member at one university whereas Kevin was a part-time instructor at three different universities. Due to their differing employment/workplace situations, I hoped to gain different perspectives on their teaching and work experiences during the pandemic. In terms of their self-assessed L2 Japanese ability, John and Kevin rated themselves A1 and B1 respectively according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) self-assessment scale (Council of Europe, 2021).

Data Collection and Analysis

I interviewed both participants in semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A for interview questions) during June of 2021. The interviews lasted approximately 30 and 45 minutes each with an average interview time of 36.5 minutes. Both interviews were conducted via Zoom. The interviews were audio and videorecorded for later transcription and analysis. Recordings of the interviews were uploaded to and transcribed by [Otter.ai](#), an automated online transcription service. Afterward, I used [Atlas.ti](#), a popular qualitative analysis software, to support the data organization and analysis process. Follow-up emails and phone calls were also exchanged with the participants to gain a deeper understanding of their interview responses as well as to confirm the accuracy of my interpretation of the data.

The interview data was analyzed using thematic analysis, which according to Braun and Clarke (2006), is a method for “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 79). An inductive approach was used when coding, i.e., the codes and themes identified were connected strongly to the data. As such, codes were developed using a combination of in vivo and descriptive coding. That is, some codes were taken directly from the participants’ own words while others were created based on the main topic of a given excerpt (Saldaña, 2013). After the first stage of analysis, a total of 58 unique codes were developed. However, after the elimination and merging of codes as well as member reflections which will be described in more detail below, the

final coding scheme consisted of a total of 36 codes, 12 categories, and four themes (see Appendix B).

In order to enhance the credibility or trustworthiness of the data analysis, member reflections, also known as member checking, was conducted during the final stage of analysis. In other words, my analysis was provided to the participants to determine whether they deemed it as accurate or true. According to Tracy (2010), the use of member reflections can show that there is an alignment between the analysis of the researcher and opinions of those being studied. Per guidelines by Birt et al. (2016) regarding member checking, each participant was given my written analysis with pertinent sections, including direct quotes by each teacher, highlighted for their convenience. In their response, the teachers were asked to consider the following three questions: (1) Does this analysis match your experiences and opinions? (2) Do you want to change anything? and (3) Do you want to add anything? After I conducted member reflections with the participants via email and phone, several revisions were made. Namely, some of their direct quotes were edited for accuracy and my description of the first theme was revised in order to soften the language that was initially used.

Findings and Discussion

Theme 1: Limited professional development

The first theme I identified was limited professional development (PD). Whether it was due to PD sessions being held in Japanese or because PD sessions were not perceived as useful, the participants expressed that there were some limitations in the PD offered by their respective workplaces. While both noted that most PD sessions were in Japanese, the teachers differed in their reactions to this. Specifically, as shown in the excerpt below, Kevin believed that his university should have been more inclusive and afforded opportunities for PD in other languages.

At the start of the semester, there was a session on how to use the online management system. And it was all in Japanese. So I have a friend who started at the same time. And we were talking about going into this session, but he said, ‘Oh, yeah, well, it’s... it’s all in Japanese. So I don’t think it’s necessarily for the foreign teaching staff.’ So we kind of agreed together, that we weren’t going to go to that session... But I was just a bit surprised that they only offered it in in one language,

especially for people who maybe have not been in Japan so long and you know, are not going to understand Japanese much more than *konnichiwa* or something.

On the other hand, John placed the blame on himself for not having the prerequisite Japanese ability to understand the professional development opportunities offered at his workplace “So yeah, I mean, there are a lot of things, but most of it’s in Japanese, and I don’t really join it, just because it’s, it’s too hard. And that’s on me. My Japanese level is not at a proficient enough standard where I could follow that.” These differing viewpoints illustrate the potential for variability among teachers when faced with the same issue, which is in line with the findings from Marek et al. (2020) who also examined teacher experiences during the pandemic.

Another issue that was identified related to PD was that some of the sessions or training materials could have been more targeted to different technological competency levels. For instance, John was surprised by the basic online teaching tips that were offered by his workplace.

I think that the target audience for this is kind of maybe the older, can I say like maybe late 50s, Japanese professor or someone who never really uses the Internet. So I don’t want to sound arrogant, but I feel like I’m already, I’m beyond using those, those things that they’re aiming for... some recent topics were like, how to use YouTube smoothly in your classes...I’m pretty comfortable switching between windows or doing all that different stuff.

Similarly, Kevin noted how one of his workplaces provided a manual on how to use the learning management system rather than producing a video-based how-to guide, “There’s a manual for this online management system...I just think the approach the whole approach to it wasn’t the best. I would have thought a more modern approach would be for someone to make, like a YouTube video about how to use, I mean, nobody really reads manuals anymore.” This outdated approach to PD and training is representative of Japan’s stance towards instructional design and technology, i.e., most training materials in the country are simply digitized forms of traditional media (Suzuki & Jung, 2018).

Theme 2: Low student engagement

Another theme that I identified from the interview data was low student engagement, which was exemplified in a variety of ways. For instance, as seen in the passage below, John indicated that most of his students turned their cameras off; thus, it was difficult for him to gauge whether students were actively engaged during lessons.

Engagement is the biggest, I think it's the biggest issue in Zoom. Just it's very obvious, if the screens are dark, there's no way I can even tell if the students are even there. So obviously, I tried, like, I even tried to ask even more questions to everyone just to get them to respond. And if there's a huge lag time, then usually I know they're not there, they're not paying attention.

This lack of active engagement is also represented in the silence displayed by Kevin's students while they were in breakout rooms within Zoom.

So at the start of each class, if it's a speaking class, I'll generally give the students like five or six questions, and I'll talk about them myself. Let me start a little bit, give my own ideas, you know, just simple questions. And then I'll put the students into breakout rooms. And what I found with this particular, with one particular class was there was just complete silence. I'd go into each breakout room and be maybe like five, five breakout rooms, and in each one silence...

While Kevin later acknowledged one of the potential reasons for this silence (i.e., many students were commuting to the university during synchronous lessons), this finding highlights a trend among Japanese EFL learners, one that has been prevalent long before the pandemic started "There is a general consensus that the educational system has resulted in Japanese learners with weak English communication ability and low motivation to learn the language" (Nakata, 2006, p. 166). Although the idea of East Asian EFL learners as reticent and passive can be problematic (Shao & Gao, 2016), there are a few factors that may contribute to Japanese students' unwillingness to actively participate in the language classroom. First, Japanese learners are not as accustomed to learner-centered instruction and thus may be less comfortable speaking up in class (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008). Moreover, there is often little to no discussion in class at Japanese high schools (Chen, 2013), which in turn, may make it difficult for

Japanese students to discuss topics in university EFL classes. These studies demonstrate that long-held educational practices within the country can influence how learners behave in class, even when teachers adopt learner-centered approaches.

Theme 3: Teaching with a variety of digital tools

An additional theme that was identified through my analysis was the use of a wide array of digital tools. In total, 17 different digital tools were coded from the interview data. The use of a variety of technologies is illustrated in the quote by Kevin below in response to a question about how he conducted his classes during the pandemic.

Yeah, a variety of techniques. Yeah, there's not, not just one thing, but using, using lots of different, different things. But mainly Google Classroom, videos, Google Forms, Apps 4 EFL. What else? Of course, Lingo Lab is one I use. Of course Kahoot.

The list of digital tools mentioned in the interviews included learning management systems (LMSs) such as Google Classroom, Moodle, and Microsoft Teams. Moreover, the teachers noted several digital writing aids including DeepL, Grammarly, and Google Translate. Synchronous and asynchronous video tools such as Zoom and Flipgrid respectively were also discussed frequently.

As noted by John, learning about more digital tools was one of the key benefits of remote teaching. In addition to the online conferences he attended, he learned about new educational technologies through his friends and colleagues.

Yeah, you know, just getting to know, more online tools. I've attended a few like, conferences, and just, just listening to my, to my colleagues and friends and co-workers who have offered up like different tips, different apps or something to improve their class has been very beneficial.

The use of a variety of online tools by the teachers in this study aligns with the results of Marek et al. (2020), who found that university instructors used an array of technologies while teaching during the pandemic. In their study, most of the participants stated that they ended up not using the LMSs provided by their workplaces. In contrast, both teachers in the present study indicated that they used their universities

LMSs to varying degrees. The fact that teachers have used an assortment of educational technologies highlights their resourcefulness when confronted with the difficult circumstances posed by the pandemic. While some teachers may not have been previously accustomed to using technology in their classrooms, emergency remote teaching has motivated many instructors to use a variety of digital tools in their teaching practices.

Theme 4: Satisfaction with online teaching

The final theme that I identified was an overall satisfaction with online teaching. Both John and Kevin indicated that they were generally satisfied with the remote language teaching experience despite the aforementioned challenges regarding student engagement and limited PD opportunities. As shown below, John took a relaxed approach to teaching during the pandemic and understood that his workplace had to balance interests among many stakeholders.

I'm a pretty easygoing guy. So you know, yeah, whatever happens, happens type of thing. And, you know, I think, I think my school, I think, my school and everybody's trying to do their best. Everyone, you know, obviously, a lot of interests and concerns have to be balanced. And so I'm pretty happy with how everything's happened.

The fact that both teachers expressed positive feelings towards remote language teaching was somewhat surprising given that previous research on teaching and learning during the pandemic has skewed negative (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Marek et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2020). In fact, Kevin noted in the interview that many other teachers might have had a more negative experience compared to the one he had.

Obviously, if you interview another person, you might get somebody that absolutely hates teaching online. But for me, it's been a generally positive experience. Yeah, I mean, obviously, it would be nice to be on campus and see people etc. Get out the house. But yeah, I don't think I've had the same kind of bad experiences a lot of other people seem to have had.

Each teacher expressed a different reason for their positive perceptions towards

remote language teaching. As stated in the description of the previous theme, John was happy with the new knowledge he had gained about digital tools. Kevin on the other hand felt that online teaching gave him more control over class management. Specifically, it allowed him to better understand the level of engagement among students compared to teaching F2F teaching.

I think there are some good aspects to teaching online. Yeah, definitely. Yeah, let's see, for example, like breakout rooms, it's, it's very easy to like, check on the students. So you can go into each individual room. And you can really get a good feel for who's talking and who's not. Whereas in the classroom, it's sometimes difficult to, to do that... So I think in terms of class management, having everything at your fingertips really does make things easy, I think. Yeah. And, like I say, you can go into each room, and you can see if students aren't talking, you can give them a bit of motivation, you know, ask if there's any reason they aren't talking, ask them which question we're on, for example.

Based on my analysis, preparedness for online teaching seems to have been a key factor in both teachers' satisfaction towards remote language teaching. John stated that many of his teaching materials were digital prior to the pandemic, so the shift to online classes was fairly seamless "...for me, personally, there wasn't too much of a change, because all my primary material anyway, I had it on like PowerPoint... So actually, for me, I was quite prepared." In contrast, Kevin noted that he spent a lot of time preparing for his online classes, particularly earlier on in the pandemic. However, this preparation allowed his classes to run smoothly, which in turn, resulted in lower levels of stress for both the teacher and students.

So I think in the first year, I think last year, I was spending, like hours making materials because I wanted everything to be up and running for the class. I didn't want the class time to come around and need to be doing stuff on the fly. I wanted to be prepared like weeks in advance, so that when the classes came around, they're all set to go because that would be easy, easier for me. And easier for the students. So less, less stressful all around for everybody.

Conclusion

As the world begins to emerge from the pandemic, it is necessary to investigate the experiences of teachers to understand the unique challenges they faced during this challenging time. By doing so, institutions, professional organizations, researchers, and other instructors can better support one another if an emergency remote teaching scenario were to occur again in the future. Accordingly, the primary goal of this study was to examine the experiences of two university EFL instructors in Japan. Based on my analysis, four themes were identified from the interview data: (1) limited professional development, (2) low student engagement, (3) teaching with a variety of digital tools, and (4) satisfaction with online teaching. These findings highlight that while the teachers did experience some issues, they had mostly positive perceptions towards online teaching during the pandemic.

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Appendix A. Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. Since the spring 2020 semester, there have been a lot of sudden changes in our teaching lives because of the pandemic. Can you tell me how you've conducted your English classes during this time?
2. Now, I want to invite you talk about 1-2 specific teaching challenges that you faced during the pandemic. Please share in as much detail as possible.
3. We've all struggled with different teaching challenges over the past year. Having said that, are there any aspects of your professional life that have been enhanced due to online teaching during the pandemic? [If yes, please tell me more about that]
4. Can you tell me about the professional support, if any at all, you've received from your workplace/s during the pandemic?
5. Many teachers have sought out professional development during the pandemic (e.g., webinars, virtual conferences, online communities focused on remote language teaching) to enhance their online teaching practices. Please tell me about the professional development, if any at all, you've sought out.

Appendix B. Final Coding Scheme

Theme 1: Limited professional development

- Examples of limited professional development
 - Japanese-only professional development
 - Basic professional development
 - Ineffective medium for professional development and training
- Teacher reasons for not utilizing professional development
 - Low proficiency in the Japanese language
 - Professional development not catered towards foreign faculty
 - Professional development not useful

Theme 2: Low student engagement

- Signs of low student engagement
 - Silence
 - Long delay in response time
- Factors which contribute to low student engagement
 - Cameras off
 - Lack of digital literacy
 - Students commuting during synchronous classes

Theme 3: Teaching with a variety of digital tools

- Language management systems
 - Google Classroom
 - Moodle
 - Microsoft Teams
 - El Campus
- Digital writing aids
 - Grammarly
 - DeepL
 - Google Translate
 - Turnitin
- Synchronous video
 - Zoom
 - Microsoft Teams
- Asynchronous video
 - YouTube
 - Flipgrid
- Language-learning digital tools
 - Apps 4 EFL
 - LingoLab
- Online assessment
 - Google Forms
 - Kahoot!
- Presentation tools
 - PowerPoint
 - Keynote
 - Google Slides
- Word Processors
 - Word
 - Google Docs

Theme 4: Satisfaction with online teaching

- Benefits of online teaching
 - Learning about digital tools
 - Enhanced classroom management

- Preparedness for online teaching
 - Pre-made materials
 - Spending time making new materials

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Abstract

While research has examined instructor experiences to teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic (Marek et al., 2020), there is a paucity of research pertaining to the Japanese teaching context. Thus, this study employed a narrative research design to investigate the experiences of two English as a foreign language instructors who worked at the university-level in Japan. Four themes were identified by the researcher: limited professional development, low student engagement, teaching with a variety of digital tools, and satisfaction with online teaching. These findings reveal that while these teachers had some issues teaching remotely during the pandemic, they had positive experiences overall.

