

# Adapting to teaching restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic in Japanese universities

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**Abstract.** Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of States of Emergency were announced in Japan, that drastically and suddenly shifted teaching practices in tertiary education. This study explores how teachers working within this field navigated this pedagogical shift. Furthermore, examples will be given for both the potential restrictions and benefits of utilizing distance learning in EFL tertiary education. The research is based upon both a review of existing literature concerned with EFL education, as well as two qualitative interviews with university teachers based in Japan. The collected data underwent thematic analysis, and the results indicated that complications were brought about by this new teaching approach, such as a lack of social interaction. However, some benefits were also apparent, such as stakeholders becoming more familiar with instructional technology, or the discovery of more effective teaching methods. This study aims to look at how this technology may be used in the future to not only alleviate pressure brought about by extreme circumstances, but also to enrich the learning environment in contemporary tertiary education settings in Japan.

**Keywords:** 4IR, COVID-19, EFL, online learning, educational technology, tertiary education Japan, higher education Japan

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating impact on many aspects of our everyday lives, including economic, environmental, and in particular interest to this study, an accelerated “digital transformation” [14, p. 153], the effects of which on Japanese tertiary education will be explored in this paper. In Japan, States of Emergency were announced in March 2020 that restricted travel and social interaction [6]; which forced some schools to close in order to follow and adjust to these guidelines. Although by May 2020 some schools were “to gradually resume classes” [11], the pandemic continued to influence the educational system, which led to a number of educational institutions nationwide turning to online learning as a safe alternative to face-to-face classes, as the prolonging of classes for an unforeseeable period of time would have been impractical:

“Initially, when Japanese schools were closed in March 2020, most schools postponed their classes for a certain period. When this period was prolonged, these schools initiated distance learning practices that, at that point, were quickly becoming the new standard.” [8]

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The circumstances under which these changes were brought about meant that these shifts in curriculum and teaching approaches were both sudden and wide-reaching. As curriculum change within the field of tertiary education is notably an extremely complicated process that can take a substantial amount of time to undertake “owing to organisational complexity, strongly held and diverse values and the power of vested interests” [2, p. 206] it is perhaps not surprising that this process was stressful for many stakeholders, in particular the students [5].

This paper aims to look at how this turbulent time was navigated, and how university teachers in Japan attempted to alleviate some of the stress this sudden transition would have on their students. This study is informed by qualitative data collected from two semi-structured interviews with key informants in this field, details of which will be explored in the following Methodology section of this paper (1.4).

To distinguish this research from other studies regarding the adoption of digital technology following the COVID-19 pandemic, it will focus very tightly on tertiary education in Japan, and in particular ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) courses. This tight focus can be explored in great detail, as not only is the author based in Japan and has worked within the field of tertiary education in Japan both during and before the pandemic, the key informants are equally qualified to talk on this matter. While the study may be of particular interest to ESL/EFL teachers in Japan, it is hoped that the findings are universal in their nature, and can be applied to a wide range of educational fields of interest.

### **1.1. Problem statement**

The main issue this paper hopes to explore is the difficulties university teachers based in Aichi Prefecture, Japan, faced during the sudden shift in teaching practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how they did their utmost to retain a high level of quality in their classes. A particular focus will be held on the restrictions brought about by online learning platforms, as well as any inherent benefits these approaches may have moving forward. In looking at these adaptations to teaching approaches, it is believed that tertiary education stakeholders will not only become more familiar with the potential benefits of instructional technology, but may also gain a better understanding of how to once again adapt, if similarly catastrophic complications arise again. This knowledge was gained from the experiences of two key informants, and their feedback and expertise has the potential to better equip universities in Japan (and around the world), to be flexible enough to tackle similar problems in the future, with the assistance of digital teaching tools. If such lessons are not taken on board, then the aforementioned stress-inducing process of forcing pedagogical change may well continue to be a cause for concern.

As will be explored in more detail, the data was collected from two qualitative interviews, and the information from these key informants will inform the findings of this paper, which will undergo thematic analysis. These findings will then be triangulated with other, contemporary studies concerned with a similar field of study. While the data collected may point to there being inherent benefits to this instructional technology, especially if it is utilized to its fullest potential, as the data is collected from a very focused source, the findings cannot be seen as representative of the entire field of tertiary education in Japan, no matter how definitive the findings may be. Instead, this paper can act as a clear example of why educators should strive to keep their

teaching methods contemporary, and shows that while the shift in teaching approaches during the pandemic was not without its growing pains, lessons can be learnt that benefit the learning environment for both the students and the teachers.

## 1.2. Research questions

1. How have teaching methods in Japanese universities changed during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How did teachers adapt to these changes?
3. Will teachers continue to use any of these differing approaches even after the pandemic has finished?

## 1.3. Research objectives

In Japanese universities, there has been sudden shifts to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, including shifting back and forth between in-person and online classes [15]. Both students and teachers have had difficulty adjusting to the shifting teaching approaches. This qualitative study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of how university teachers based in Japan adjusted their teaching approach to improve the learning environments of their students. Furthermore, it will argue that there are inherent benefits to embracing this technological infused teaching approach, and that it could be advantageous to both university teachers and students in Japan if lessons continue to be enhanced by instructional technology, even after COVID-19 restrictions are lifted and this technology is no longer mandatory.

## 1.4. Methodology

In order to explore how university teachers based in Japan adjusted their teaching approach to improve the learning environments of their students, this study relied heavily on the qualitative data that was collected from interviews with 2 university teachers based in Japan. Although some deductive secondary research was involved in the process, as existing studies were referred to, it was in large part a constructivist qualitative study.

The sampling method was two interviews with key informants that were conducted on Zoom at a time convenient for the interviewees. The interview was guided by an interview protocol (see appendix A) that consisted of 1 multiple choice question and 6 open-ended questions, and the interviewees were also given the opportunity to explore any other topics they thought may have been relevant. The aim was to speak with each interviewee for at least 20 minutes, as this was thought of as an adequate amount of time to gain in-depth information. Fortunately, both interviews lasted more than 30 minutes. Teacher 1 was interviewed just past 8pm on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June, 2021, and Teacher 2 was interviewed at 3:30pm on the 29<sup>th</sup> of July, 2021. Each interviewee was sent a copy of the interview protocol 3 days prior to their interview, to confirm that they were comfortable with the topics that were to be discussed. As the sample size was so small, the teachers were selected carefully to ensure different perspectives were explored; this was achieved by Teacher 1 being a full-time teacher who mainly works at one university in Nagoya City (although does work part-time elsewhere) and Teacher 2 is a part-time teacher who works at several universities around Nagoya City. Both teachers have been teaching in Japan for a

number of years, and were employed in tertiary education in Japan both during and before the pandemic, so that they not only had first-hand experience of the pedagogical transition, but could also accurately compare pre-pandemic and post-state of emergency teaching approaches.

As the method of analysis was based around the interpretations of the interviewees' experiences, the data collection was purposefully very thorough and the interviewees' responses were both recorded in full and verbatim transcripts were created for each of the interviews (see appendixes D & G).

To measure the variables of these interviews, a list of codes was created (and an additional code was created during the observation process). The video recordings of these interviews were closely observed and the aforementioned codes were assigned to suitable sections of the interviews. This information was collated in an Excel file, which allowed for the filtering and sorting of information. This meant that comparisons and further observations could more easily be made (see appendixes E & F).

## 1.5. Literature review

The texts referred to during this study were all concerned with the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on tertiary education (especially in Japan) and/or the use of instructional technology in higher education environments. Due to the contemporary nature of this study, focusing on texts written after the initial outbreak of COVID-19 was central in exploring the topic of how tertiary education changed due to the pandemic. However, to examine the fundamental views on instructional technology, it was also considered important to refer to texts written before the pandemic, as they would offer an insight into the use of instructional technology, without being influenced by the pandemic, and the sense of necessity it brought about in adopting said technology in the classroom. Although not an extensive list of the texts referred to throughout this paper, below are some key studies that informed this study's findings.

### 1.5.1. Texts written before the pandemic

Klaus Schwab's 2016 book, *The Fourth Industrial Revolution* explores the idea of how digital technology is likely to become synonymous with more aspects of our everyday lives. While it does not focus on education, it does explore the idea that while there may be benefits to this technology, there is also the possibility that it could cause a multitude of problems, and it is the shared responsibility of the global community to ensure the technology is not only used to its fullest potential, but also applied in a way that actively benefits people:

“We are all in this together and risk being unable to tackle the challenges of the fourth industrial revolution and reap the full benefits of the fourth industrial revolution unless we collectively develop a sense of shared purpose.” [13, p. 109]

A book that takes Schwab's work and applies it specifically to education is the 2018 text, *Teaching in the Fourth Industrial Revolution: Standing on the Precipice*. Comprising of 8 chapters that explore the ways in which the fourth industrial revolution (hereon referred to as 4IR) impact education, the chapter titled *Evolution of Technology in the Classroom* is of particular interest to this study, as it examines the ways in which teaching approaches are adapting alongside the

evolution of instructional technology. Furthermore, Timmers [17] argues that adopting this technology in the classroom can give students applicable skills that can be of assistance once they enter their chosen career; while written before the pandemic, he addresses the importance of mastering videoconferencing, a technology that was heavily relied upon during the pandemic for synchronous online classes:

“If videoconferencing across distances and cultures is commonplace in the workplace, schools must give students experience in this practice.” [17, p. 107]

Timmers [17] also states how workplaces will upload materials so that they are instantly accessible to the entire workforce, and this too is a practice students should familiarize themselves with. It could be argued that online learning platforms, such as Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, or Moodle, offer a similar function, and teachers instantly assigning projects or uploading materials is yet another example of how the pandemic could have unwittingly taught students skills that they could utilize in the future.

To gain a better understanding of the impact this shift in teaching style could potentially have on university students in Japan the chapter titled *Interpersonal relationships and mental health among Japanese college students* by Katsunori [10] and featured in the 2006 book, *College Students: Mental Health and Coping Strategies*, gives a very rounded overview of the considerations educators should keep in mind when approaching students in Japan. This could then be applied to better understanding what impact the pandemic could have on students in Japan, and what challenges they may have been facing.

### 1.5.2. Texts written during the pandemic

While Schwab’s 2016 text looks at the growing influence and power of modern technology, the book he co-authored with Thierry Malleret in 2020, *COVID-19: The Great Reset* [14], looks at how the pandemic accelerated the world’s usage of this technology. While this text is very insightful, it does not focus on education alone. Specific studies such as *How the COVID-19 Pandemic is reshaping the education service* [8] and *The effect on online learning on communication between instructors and students during COVID-19 pandemic* [1] look specifically at the implementation of digital technology in educational settings due to the pandemic, and how this technology could be applied to educational settings even after their use is no longer mandatory.

While the ways in which this technology is implemented is a worthy field to study, it is also worth considering the emotional and mental impact this technology may have on stakeholders, which is a topic explored in *Examining the Associations between COVID-19-Related Psychological Distress, Social Media Addiction, COVID-19-Related Burnout, and Depression among School Principals and Teachers through Structural Equation Modeling* [9]. This paper examines the ties between COVID-19 induced stress, depression, and burnout, which is a serious drawback to this unprecedented time in educational history, and one which deserves more focus in the future. As will be explored later, the lack of community and interaction is a demerit that both interviewees observed in their own classrooms.

## 2. Findings and discussion

The findings from the interviewees were very telling, and although Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 had very different experiences during the first term of the 2021 academic year, there are strong similarities in regards to their teaching approaches, their ability to adapt, their use of multimedia and the frustrations they experienced.

One point that both teachers very clearly pointed out was that their teaching style was forcibly changed during Aichi prefecture's states of emergency [16]. Like many other universities in Japan, the institutes they worked for moved from face-to-face classrooms to some kind of online lesson [3]. Furthermore, both teachers stated that they were also asked to return to the classroom once this state of emergency had ended, meaning their lessons saw not one, but two large shifts in the first half of the academic year.

### 2.1. Constraints of online learning

Of the varying ways in which lessons were conducted, both Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 stated that they believe that the majority of students would prefer face-to-face classes in comparison to a form of online class, Teacher 1 had even asked some of his students the same question:

“I think most of the students were happy to come back in fact I asked them and [the] majority were excited to come back.” (Teacher 1, 2021, Lines 192-193)

Both teachers agreed that one of the key factors as to why students preferred face-to-face lessons was the social aspect of the classroom was extremely difficult to replicate:

“They really really seem to enjoy the like social atmosphere of of the actual face-to-face classroom.” (Teacher 2, 2021, Lines 126-127)

Teacher 1 supported this claim and cited it as the reason why the students (and him as well) were keen to return to the classroom:

“The thing that teachers and students like [...] is just that buzz [...] the atmosphere in a classroom that you don't get on Zoom [...] and I missed that and I've enjoyed it having been back the last week and I think the students missed that.” (Teacher 1, 2021, Lines 225-227)

The importance of this social aspect could be an important aspect for a number different reasons that are strongly connected to the environments in which Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 work and teach. Firstly, they are both EFL/ESL teachers, and one of their primary goals is to assist their students in the acquisition and mastery of the English language. It has long been understood that one of the most vital aspects of learning a foreign language is the learning environment in which the student attempts to do so:

“Mastery of a foreign language requires more than the use of utterances which express propositional meanings and are conventional. The form of utterances

must also take into account the relationship between speaker and hearer, and the constraints imposed by the setting and circumstances in which the act of communication is taking place.” [12, p. 53]

As both Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 stated, the online learning platform is lacking in regards to the social aspect that is much more prescient in the face-to-face learning environment. For online classes, the ease of free communication is interrupted by the platform, which makes talking freely amongst a larger group more difficult online, and studies have shown that “online learning indeed has a negative impact on communication and its effectiveness between instructors and students.” [1]

Even during their face-to-face lessons, both Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 listed a number of constraints, including the requirement of masks, face-shields and even plastic dividers placed between the students and the teacher. Teacher 1 also spoke of the limitations set upon him, which restricted him from moving around the class (which we will explore in more detail later in this study). However, it is worth reiterating that there are far more constraints when the lessons are moved online, with students no longer being able to passively talk with one another, instead they must actively turn on their microphone and in turn be heard by the entire class, as Teacher 1 pointed out “I think the world has realized that the thing to do is mute yourself when [...] a teacher or a manager is talking.” (Teacher 1, 2021, Lines 245-246). This obviously impedes on the social aspect of the classroom, lowers the opportunity for students to casually or freely talk to the teacher, or communicate freely with their peers.

A second potential drawback of this physical setting being replaced with a digital one is that it could inadvertently make Japanese students feel more isolated and discontented in the class.

“Many Asian cultures have a belief in the interdependence of self with others. A major life task of the Asian cultures involves forming and maintaining a social relationship which the self sees as its meaningful part. For Japanese people with the view of self as interdependent, interpersonal relationships have a specific significance.” [10, p. 107]

The role of community, and figuring out one’s role in that community is an important aspect of life in Japan and many other Asian countries, and this process (which may well be subconscious) is perhaps even more difficult to navigate online. While Teacher 1 (British) and Teacher 2 (North American) may not have been aware of this importance Japanese people have in regards to interpersonal relationships, it is a credit to their teaching approach and observational skills that this is an aspect of online learning that they thought was most bothersome for their students.

Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 also both agreed that some of the students may well have preferred online classes, pointing to reasons including less extroverted students having enjoyed a more peaceful learning environment, and the lack of time restraints making the learning process much easier:

“For some quieter students they might like it [...] I don’t know whether some really appreciate that quiet time to be one-on-one with a [...] classmate to actually not be interrupted and not have too much background noise.” (Teacher 1, 2021, Lines 183-186)

But while a small number of students may well prefer the isolation they can enjoy due to online learning, the stress brought about by the pandemic and the required acquisition of increased technology literacy could lead to many stakeholders becoming overwhelmed or demotivated, “as the psychological distress associated with COVID-19 increases in individuals, their sense of burnout associated with COVID-19 also increases.” [9, p. 12]

## 2.2. Potential benefits of online learning

While there were a multitude of drawbacks and complications to moving classes online, both interviewees also observed some tangible benefits. Teacher 1 claimed that he has learnt a great deal whilst teaching online, and the new skills he has acquired have improved his teaching methods:

“The whole process of going online [...] has probably helped my organization of classes in general.” (Teacher 1, 2021, Lines 279-280).

Teacher 1 points to the specific benefits of being able to instantly share materials with the students, without needing to bring physical papers or books to class. He also mentioned that some online learning platforms also include an automated grading system, which can alleviate some of his workload.

Teacher 2 also spoke of how he has used Google Docs to improve his online writing classes, as the instantaneous editing feature allows for him to share feedback and comments with the students very easily. The process was so successful, he believes he will continue to use the practice even after the pandemic has passed:

“I think I’ve been getting [...] a higher word count from the from the online [...] writing journals than I was the traditional written ones.” (Teacher 2, 2021, Lines 441-443)

Here Teacher 2 has taken the constraints put upon him i.e. teaching online, and adapted his teaching approach to create a system that not only helps improve the online learning experience, but potentially improves upon the effectiveness of the approaches previously found in face-to-face classes. Teacher 1 was equally as proactive in looking at the limitations put upon his classes and thinking of ways to use them to his advantage:

“I was always trying to think of more things you can do at home that you can’t do at school so a simple activity like show and tell I did with my oral communication students that worked really well because they’re in their room or they’re in their living room and you know there are things that are really important to them that mean a lot to them that they wouldn’t have at school [...] so that was that was kind of fun [...] and we did we did some lessons about food, one of my communication class[es], and I took the laptop to the kitchen and [...] little games I did with them [...]like [...] guess what was in my fridge [...] playing around with those kind of things [...] I did try” (Teacher 2, 2021, Lines 268-276)



Here Teacher 1 lists an example for both a student-led and teacher-led activity, both would encourage interaction amongst the students, and both are only possible with online lessons. While the teacher and the students were based at home, which may not be an optimal learning environment, due to spatial limitations, noise, or a multitude of other factors, Teacher 1 used this limitation to his advantage in creating an activity that turned being at home from being a nuisance to being a novelty. Not only did this have the potential to create an enjoyable and engaging activity, it could also have gone towards improving the social aspect which was said to be lacking from online classes; the digital space was personalized and instead of a merely being a static screen, it could become a window into the life of the teacher (and students willing to involve themselves in the activity).

It is worth noting however that the approaches adopted by Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 may not be applicable to all classes. Some teachers may not have the option of sharing their surroundings with their students, or may be unwilling to do so in fear of compromising their perceived authority over the class. Similarly, teachers may not teach classes for which Teacher 2's approaches would be applicable, or they simply may lack the technological knowhow to put these changes into effect smoothly. However, the aim of this study is not to recommend individual methods, instead it would argue that the most important aspects to creating supportive, effective, and engaging classes, no matter the restrictions under which they are taught, is the enthusiasm and flexibility of the teachers who undertake them.

### 3. Conclusion

Although the past 2 years have been a very turbulent time, it could be argued that a teacher's flexibility and willingness to use new technologies, learning platforms, and teaching approaches was key to ensuring the success of these hastily implemented changes to teaching approaches. Both teachers interviewed used the technology forced upon them in different ways, but the both shared the same goal, to use it to its fullest potential and make their lessons as beneficial for themselves and the students as possible. These benefits being it improved the interviewees' organizational skills, made the distribution of materials easier, feedback was more easily shared with students and some projects could even be graded automatically. Students too could also reap the rewards of gaining a better level of computer literacy, as well as skills that may well be applicable to their professional endeavours, as aspects of the technology they familiarized themselves with during the pandemic may well become synonymous with their working life (be that file sharing or videoconferencing for example).

Of course, it is impossible to predict what the future holds for learning approaches in Japan, but classes moving online due to the necessity of growing COVID-19 cases [18] has forcibly familiarized both students and teachers with technologies and methods they may have otherwise been unfamiliar with. In regards to both Teacher 1 and Teacher 2, they took this opportunity to update and adjust their lessons to better fit the digital platform, but in some regards, the new methods they trialled actually improved their learning environments, and some of the practises they are keen to continue using.

The commotion caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden shift in teaching styles does not need to be merely a painful memory, it can be the starting block for change and a way

in which life can be improved for all. Harold James argues that the global community often finds itself more connected after a global crisis, and the combination of a pandemic and easily accessible technology make this a markedly rare opportunity:

“Today, data occupies the same position – linking the world and offering solutions to major problems, including government incompetence. New types of information might help leaders attack some of the inequalities and injustices highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic.” [7, p. 18]

This same opportunity can be seen in the realm of higher education, teachers can save time, become more organised and explore different styles to distribute their materials and classes. Students on the other hand will be given the opportunity to use technology that may well become synonymous with the 4IR influenced workplace into which they will be graduating. Although the learning curve for these new approaches may be steep, the rewards that can be found afterwards can be beneficial to both educators and students alike.

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## **A. Interview protocol for Teachers 1 and 2**

URL: <http://www.sb-publishing.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Appendix-1.pdf>

## **B. Observation report (incomplete) for Teachers 1 and 2**

URL: <http://www.sb-publishing.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Appendix-2.pdf>

## **C. Observation report (complete) for Teacher 1**

URL: <http://www.sb-publishing.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Appendix-3.pdf>

#### **D. Verbatim transcripts of Teacher 1 interview**

URL: <http://www.sb-publishing.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Appendix-4.pdf>

#### **E. Coding for Teacher 1**

URL: <http://www.sb-publishing.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Appendix-5.pdf>

#### **F. Matrix of coding for Teacher 1 (size adjusted to fit in appendix)**

URL: <http://www.sb-publishing.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Appendix-6.pdf>

#### **G. Verbatim transcripts of Teacher 2 interview**

URL: <http://www.sb-publishing.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Appendix-7.pdf>