

An Investigation of Student Attitudes towards Online English Language Classes at Japanese Universities

Dermot Lonergan

Introduction

The academic years of 2020 and 2021 need no introduction to educators around the world. As the global COVID-19 pandemic hit in late 2019, few could have foreseen the changes that would be implemented over the coming 2 years. As the seriousness of the virus became more apparent, countries began to lock down with government orders to remain at home. On April 7, 2020, the Japanese government issued its first state of emergency and companies were encouraged to allow their employees to work from home whenever possible. As such, educational institutions were faced with the situation of moving all of their classes online. The format varied from university to university. Some decided that, due to technological obstacles, classes would be held asynchronously which included uploaded worksheets, and recordings of the teacher speaking and allowed the student to work and complete the tasks within a given timeframe. Other universities decided to hold classes in real-time via video conferencing services, such as zoom. When first introduced in the spring semester of 2020, there was a feeling of apprehensiveness among both the teachers and the students.

Although online or distance learning was not a new phenomenon in many educational fields, previously in English language teaching in Japan, classes were mainly conducted in a traditional face-to-face setting. While advances in technology in recent decades has meant more IT is being used in classrooms and has allowed for blended learning to be used in class, whereby students complete part of the classwork at home, the idea of the entire class being taken remotely was a new concept. Throughout the 2020 academic year,

it became noticeable that students were quickly becoming comfortable with taking their classes online. Thus, the author of this research wanted to investigate the students' opinions of remote learning.

Methodology and Context of the Research

The qualitative data was collected through an online survey at the end of the 2021/2022 academic year. This descriptive study will analyse the data and find overall trends on these 4 areas:

1. Overall, students' satisfaction levels with the delivery of their classes online
2. The positives of online learning in and ESL setting
3. The negatives of online learning in an ESL setting
4. Student preferences for future English classes: online, hybrid, or face-to-face?

The data was collected in accordance with the universities' ethical standards.

The Participants

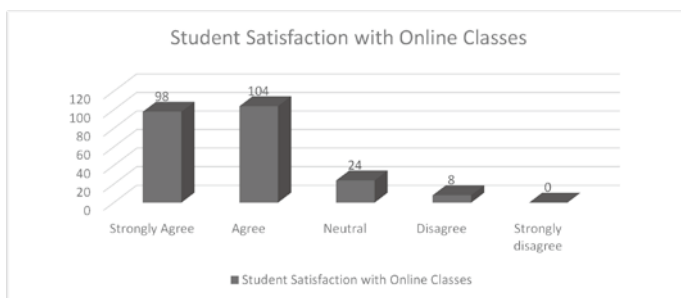
The participants of this survey are from 3 universities in Tokyo, Japan. Overall, 232 students of mixed English proficiency level took part in the study. There was a wide range of students surveyed for this research. Firstly, the students' majors differed, and there were students from IT and engineering major classes, law major classes, and liberal arts major classes. Secondly, the type of English class also varied; writing and speaking.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The results of the student survey are discussed below.

3.1 Students' Overall Satisfaction

Overall, the students at all three universities were satisfied with their online classes. As can be seen in the graph below, 42% (98) strongly agreed with a further 45% (108) agreeing that there were satisfied. 10% (24) of students remained neutral and 3% (8) disagreed. No student strongly disagreed.



This research hypothesized that there would be a noticeable difference between spoken communication classes and writing classes, with a higher percentage of students from the writing class having more satisfaction than the speaking class. Interestingly, there was very little difference and the satisfaction rate is slightly higher in speaking classes than in writing classes.

	Strong Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Speaking	53 (40%)	64 (48%)	15 (11%)	2 (1%)	0	132
Writing	45 (45%)	40 (40%)	9 (9%)	6 (6%)	0	100

On this question, there was little difference between the law students and the IT and Engineering students. It had been expected that there would be a higher satisfaction rate among the IT students, but as can be seen from the table below this was not the case. The highest dissatisfaction came from the Liberal Arts students with only 65% of the respondents being satisfied with online classes compared with over 90% at the other 2 universities.

	Strong Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
IT and Engineering	65 (48.5%)	60 (45%)	9 (6.5%)	0	0	134
Law	22 (50%)	21 (47.5%)	1 (2.5%)	0	0	44
Liberal Arts	12 (23.5%)	21 (41.5%)	10 (19.5%)	8 (15.5%)	0	51

3.2 What were the positives of online learning?

<i>Positive aspects of online learning</i>	<i>Total hits from 232</i>
It gave me more free time because I didn't have to travel to university.	177
I could take classes remotely from a location of my choosing.	103
It reduced my transport costs	97
It improved my health as I had more free time for exercise or sleep	88
It was easy and comfortable to take classes online.	138
It was safer to take classes online because of COVID	110

According to the results of the survey, the greatest advantage of online learning is that it gave students more free time. In Japan, it's common for students to live at home and commute to university by public transport. Over 34% of students have more than a 1-hour commute to university. (Japan Guide Website, 2000) Those students who have an hour commute each way can save over 10 years per week. Students commented;

- I didn't have time to travel and was able to participate in the class with plenty of time.
- Everyone is getting used to the online class and I don't need to go to campus taking 2hours by train.
- It takes me about two hours to go to university, so the online classes have given me more time!
- It takes about 90 minutes to go to university for me. So online class is

very good for me. (Survey, January 2022)

The second most common reason students enjoyed online learning was that it was more comfortable than taking classes online. Students usually took the class from their own home and so, were in a comfortable environment. Some comments students made were;

- I was able to relax at home and take classes.
- Online is more relaxing
- I was able to take the course in my own environment, which made it very easy to take (Survey, January 2022)

It has been documented that anxiety in the ESL classroom can hinder progress in language learning among Japanese learners (Aida; 1994). If students feel more comfortable while taking online classes, then it could potentially increase their language learning. Another student mentioned that “I could ask some questions easily” (Survey, January 2022). One feature of the zoom application is that it allows students to write private messages via chat box, which they could use for asking questions. According to Hammond (2007), an unwillingness to speak out or volunteer to give answers or ask questions can be an aspect of Japanese classrooms. However, online classes provided a way for students to ask questions and give answers without actually speaking out in front of their peers.

Next, as this survey was done during a global pandemic, it's not surprising that many felt one of the benefits of taking classes remotely was that it benefited their health. Online learning eliminated the need for students to commute on busy public transport and take classes, sometimes with over 30 students seated together in a classroom. 88 of the 232 students also felt that by taking classes online, their health benefited from having more free time to exercise and get more sleep. One student mentioned that. “I didn't have to get up early and I got better by sleeping a lot” (Survey, January 2022). Furthermore, another benefit of online learning is that it allowed students to take classes anywhere. Many of the students live outside of the Tokyo area, and so need to

rent accommodation to attend face-to-face classes. However, online classes can be taken from any location with a WIFI connection, so students could attend university while living at home as shown by this student's comment; "Online class can be taken anywhere, and I can study and enjoy English with the online" (Survey, January 2022). Finally, by not commuting to and from the university campus every day, 97 students felt that a pro of online classes was reduced costs. They commented;

- I also feel that this was also a benefit of online classes, as I could cut down on the cost of commuting to school.
- However, online learning was no transport time and money. I think it's a good point. (Survey, January 2022)

3.3 What were the negatives of online learning?

<i>Negative aspects of online learning</i>	<i>Total hits from 232</i>
It was difficult to communicate with my classmates.	103
It was difficult to communicate with my teacher.	53
WIFI problems	89
I often felt lonely taking classes alone	42
I felt that taking online lessons was bad for my health.	16
It was difficult to meet new people	86

The main negative of online learning that students expressed was social. 102 (44%) students felt that online learning hindered their opportunity to communicate with classmates, while another 86 (37%) felt that it was difficult to meet new people. For many, a feature of university life is meeting new people and joining social clubs. Some examples of students' comments are:

- I can't make friends at the online learning. I wanted to communicate with other students
- I don't have friend in university. Spring semester is chance that make friends, so I thought it is good to meet face to face. (Survey, January 2022)

Furthermore, 42 students mentioned that they felt lonely while taking classes alone. Research carried out at Waseda University shows that this is not just an issue for university students, with over 40% of the people surveyed responding that they felt lonely during the pandemic (Stickley and Ueda, 2022, p 3). The second most common difficulty mentioned was regarding technology. Some students expressed that there were times when could not attend classes due to WIFI problems in their homes.

- There was a time when I couldn't attend the class several times because the Wi-Fi in my house wasn't working well.
- Sometimes the Wi-Fi was not working well and I couldn't connect to it, which I think is a bad thing with online classes.
- I couldn't join zoom once because of WIFI problems. (Survey, January 2022)

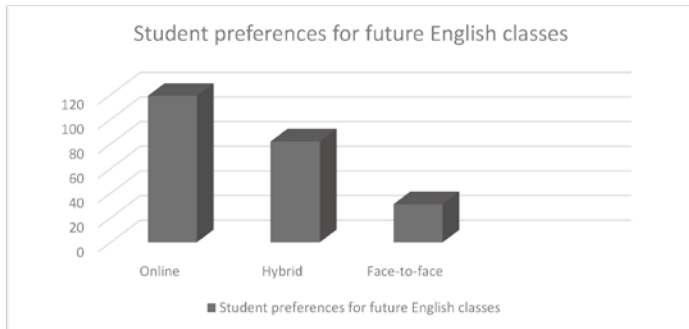
Also, some students had occasional moments when they could not hear their teacher or their classmates. One student reported that: "I have had trouble hearing the audio due to WIFI issues" (Survey, January 2022). While Japan is known as a high-tech country, during the corona pandemic, not only students studied remotely but many of their parents worked from home too. As such, this may have caused problems with WIFI connectivity, as reported by one respondent to the survey; "My father doing your (his) work in the home, so sometimes WIFI was very low speed. (Survey, January 2022)" Thirdly, some students felt that online classes made communication difficult with the teacher. While ease of communication with the teacher is also mentioned above as an advantage, 53 students felt it was a disadvantage. The main tool used for group discussion was breakout rooms on zoom and one student said that "Discussion room made an obstacle to take communication with teacher" (Survey, January 2022). The final negative of online learning that students expressed was health reasons. 16 (7%) of students reported that they had suffered ill health effects due to taking classes remotely. While there has been little research done to date regarding the negative effects of remote learning, there is no doubt students' screen time increased during the pandemic, which may have caused issues like

the 2 students mentioned below

- In fact, my eyes and shoulders are almost broken for length of screen time.
- I had to go to the ophthalmologist because of eyestrain. (Survey, January 2022).

3.4 Student preferences for future English classes: online, hybrid, or face-to-face?

Finally, this study wanted to know student preferences as we move into a post-pandemic world. As can be seen in the graph below, the majority of students either would like to continue online classes or have a hybrid model of online and face-to-face classes. 51.5% (119) responded that they would like to have online classes and a further 35% (82) would like to have a hybrid class. Only a very small minority of students 31/232 (13.5%) wanted a return to all face-to-face classes.



Again, the results in the table below show that there is little between speaking and writing classes, with only 1% separating those who would like to continue online classes. 38% of communication students would like to take a hybrid class with 32% of writing students. Only 10% of students from the speaking class wanted a return to full face-to-face classes while 17% of writing students expressed a return to face-to-face.

	Online	Hybrid	Face-to-face	Total
Speaking	68 (52%)	50 (38%)	14 (10%)	132
Writing	51 (51%)	32 (32%)	17 (17%)	100

However, the percentages vary considerably from each university on this question. The IT and engineering students (69.5%) had the highest rate to continue online learning with the liberal arts students being the lowest (21.5%), while 34% of law students wanted to remain online. The law students were the ones most in favor of hybrid (59%), while 45% of liberal arts students and 22.5% of IT and engineering students wanted to have a combination of online and face-to-face. As you can see, the greatest percentage wanting a return to traditional classes came from liberal arts students (33.5%) while only 7% and 8% of law students and IT and engineering students respectively wanted to return to face-to-face. The main point to note from this is that the overwhelming majority of students across all faculties and class types would like to see some degree of distance learning in the future.

	Online	Hybrid	Face-to-face	Total
IT and Engineering	93 (69.5%)	30 (22.5%)	11 (8%)	134
Law	15 (34%)	26 (59%)	3 (7%)	44
Liberal Arts	11 (21.5%)	23 (45%)	17 (33.5%)	51

Conclusion

There is no doubt that 2020 and 2021 were difficult for both teachers and students. However, the results of this survey suggest that students have become used to online learning and the majority would like to continue to use distance learning to some degree. The majority of students were satisfied with their online classes during 2021, and as such, the majority of students would like to continue online learning full-time or have a hybrid class. However, from the spring semester of 2022, most classes across Japan returned to 100%

face-to-face learning. So, the question needs to be asked whether this was the correct decision or not.

The limitations of this research do need to be mentioned. While this was quite an extensive and valid research, reaching many students across different majors, it must be remembered that it was conducted during a global pandemic. While this research included students, who had experienced both face-to-face lessons and online lessons, some of the students surveyed had only had online lessons at the time of taking the survey. As classes have returned to face-to-face, there is scope for further research with 100% of students who have taken online lessons and face-to-face lessons.

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