



Conventional Education vs. Remote Education - "Just Put it Online?" A Report from Japan

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Abstract

The recent Covid-19 pandemic has forced educational institutions around the world to take measures to protect their students and teaching staff while ensuring the continuity and quality of their instructional process. Despite Japan's image of a technologically progressive country, with a generally proactive approach in the face of natural disasters, the country lacks the preparedness for addressing the complex issues of teaching remotely, especially during extraordinary circumstances. The paper draws from the author's experience teaching English for TOEIC for one semester to Japanese freshmen enrolled in a private business university using remote teaching. It discusses the concept of Emergency Remote Teaching and the different challenges it poses compared to face-to-face teaching, such as the cultural specificities of a Japanese ESL classroom. The study suggests several strategies to motivate students and maintain a high student participation rate. The conclusion it reaches is that simply transitioning classroom teaching methods to the online medium is not as facile as it is generally assumed, but implies a sustained effort, proactiveness, and careful consideration of the factors that make teaching and learning successful and fulfilling experiences for teachers and students.

Keywords: Teaching English for TOEIC, online education, Japanese classroom interactions.

1. Introduction

The Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) is one of the most important tools to assess Japanese university students' English skills and it has increasingly been used by many companies as an instrument to inform HR decisions regarding "hiring, promotion, and training of employees in international businesses" [1]. As major Japanese companies are seeking to keep up with the fast pace of globalization, universities are called upon to equip students with the skills sought after by businesses [2].

At Nagoya University of Commerce and Business (NUCB), the TOEIC IP test (paper) is administered three times a year (June, September and December) to all English majors and to Business majors taking English elective courses. Up to 2020, TOEIC preparation was incorporated in the English Fundamentals course or was offered as an elective to senior years or non-English majors. In April 2020 a new course named "TOEIC Progress" was introduced to the Faculty of Foreign Studies (FFS). The course is offered for a full academic year (four terms), and it is taught once a week in two consecutive sessions of 100 minutes each. TOEIC Progress A (entry level, with a TOEIC score target of 500) is offered to all first year students in the FFS. Five TOEIC Progress A classes were offered with sizes of up to 29 students/class. Due to the covid-19 crisis, the academic year 2020 (which in Japan starts in April) debuted online, and all the courses, which had been originally devised for face-to-face teaching, were transferred online and were delivered synchronously using an online conferencing tool.

The present paper seeks to answer two questions. First, is conventional education transferrable online? Second, what are issues and challenges that the teacher should be aware of when attempting to transfer face-to-face TOEIC education to online teaching?

2. Online education transferability - pros and cons

2.1. Pros

Considered convenient and attractive for a variety of reasons, online education has been hailed as having a positive impact on learner motivation and outcomes by transporting the students to a new cognitive environment, and promoting active engagement of students in learning [3]. Some authors have found no significant difference between classroom-based instruction and distance learning [4],



[5]. In the same vein, Surry & Ensminger consider that it's the method of instruction, not the delivery medium which causes changes in achievement [6].

2.2. Cons

Mechlenbacher et al. have found several differences between conventional instruction and online learning [7]. Online learning is more isolating and self-directed, and more intrinsically motivating than conventional learning, which is more interactive and more extrinsically motivating. Huang points out that using technology to interact, even if face to face and in real time, is de-humanizing and conducive to isolation [8]. Regarding social dynamics, face-to-face instruction is more suitable for non-verbal communication, in which the teachers can sense the atmosphere and decide to change their approach. In an online environment it is difficult for teachers to discern whether the students are following the class or understand the explanations, or are doing other things while appearing to listen to the teacher's explanation. The classroom, with its design aimed specifically at learning, is relatively distraction-free, and has a more study-conducive atmosphere. Bernard et al. caution that distance education "should not be an electronic copy of the paper-based material", and point out that although effective distance learning depends on "pedagogical excellence", appropriate tools should be developed and deployed [9]. Discussing the concept of Emergency Remote Teaching, which has been globally used during the coronavirus pandemic crisis, Hodges et al. point out that it is "a temporary shift of instructional delivery to alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. It involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended or hybrid courses" [10]. They also add that in absence of careful preparation and training (which usually takes six to nine months prior to the course being offered), and under the pressure of "getting it online", such solutions cannot be expected to yield high teaching outcomes, as a successful course does not depend on teaching alone, but it also relies on a plethora of co-curricular and extra-curricular supports and interactions that assist the process of learning.

3. The Japanese EFL conventional classroom

The highly formal and conservative nature of student interactions in the Japanese EFL classroom is an important issue which is worth mentioning here. Japanese classroom atmosphere has been found to be largely different from that of other countries. Students usually will only talk when called upon, are less assertive and less responsive. They are more group conscious, prefer group activities and are less likely to request clarification and more wary of making mistakes because they fear embarrassment in front of the group [11]. They prefer communicative approaches when studying English, and like to be engaged and encouraged to participate actively [12]. As a matter of fact, some of these cultural particularities have been the most challenging issues which the author has encountered in her short online teaching experience.

4. Teaching for TOEIC online - strategies and outcomes

The author, who had no previous experience of online teaching, was assigned to teach three of the five classes of the TOEIC Progress A course, averaging 25 students/class. The sessions were conducted once a week, and the class was 200 minutes long, with a 20 minute break. Below are the materials and strategies the teacher used as well as the expected outcomes. At the end of each term, course evaluations were conducted by the university, in which the students were encouraged to express their opinions and suggestions for course improvement. Students' suggestions at the end of Term 1 addressed issues such as teaching TOEIC strategies, using English as the language of instruction, providing ampler time for individual tasks, and increasing the duration and frequency of collaborative tasks in breakout rooms. In Term 2, the author adapted the course to address the students' concerns and criticisms (the changes are italicized). The course evaluation conducted upon the conclusion of Term 2 yielded improved results and more positive comments from students.



	Term 1 (online)	Term 2 (online)
Learning Management System: Google Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syllabus posting • Announcements • Communication • Weekly Vocabulary quiz • Home/ in-class assignments • Review material • Extra study resources • Final exam submission 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syllabus posting • Announcements • Communication • Weekly Vocabulary quiz • Home/ in-class assignments • Review material • Extra study resources • Final exam submission
Teaching Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course Textbook, Audio files (online) <p>Additional:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocabulary book • TOEIC practice app • Videos (Voice Of America Learning English, YouTube music videos) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course Textbook, Audio files (online) <p>Additional:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocabulary book • TOEIC practice app • Videos (Voice Of America Learning English, YouTube music videos, <i>short TED talks</i>)
Language	English & Japanese	<i>Mostly English</i>
Method	Teacher centered, occasional group/pair work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher centered, group/ pair work activity (<i>10-15 minutes/each activity</i>), followed by classroom dialogues and/ or presentations. • <i>Adapting & scaffolding difficult listening parts (Part 4 and 5)</i>
Communication & Collaborative strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research of companies and discussion using questions modelled in the textbook • Group/pair work identifying mistakes in sentences and correcting them • Part 2 Question/ Response practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pair/group discussions on given topics corresponding to the textbook units (Companies & Organizations, Work Routines, Travel & Entertainment, etc.) • Research and class presentations in pairs
Learning Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Familiarization with TOEIC and question types • Learn to recognize and use the grammatical structures used to describe photographs (Part 1) • Intensive listening for perception & comprehension (Part 2) • Word categories • Use of prepositions, prepositional verbs (Part 5 &6) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Balanced listening, reading, and speaking, input & output</i> • <i>Learning about TOEIC test-taking strategies</i> • <i>Learn to recognize distractors in listening parts</i> • <i>Develop speed in problem solving</i> • <i>Finding clues in context; scanning and skimming (Part 6 & 7)</i>

Table 1. Online TOEIC - Methods, strategies and outcomes.

Conclusion

Teaching for TOEIC can be a challenging feat even in normal, face-to-face situations. It is, however, erroneous to assume that the proved and tested methods which were successful in a physical classroom would be equally well-received in a virtual learning environment. Online education is a challenging experience for teachers and students due to its novelty, versatility, and potential for quality learning outcomes. Notwithstanding the current situation, and irrespective of the medium of instruction,



teachers should aim for high quality education by empowering and motivating students through active and collaborative learning activities and tasks.

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