

Students' Attitudes Towards Online Learning During COVID-19

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Abstract

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many educational facilities were forced to move their classes and lectures to online platforms. The institutions were not prepared for such a transition and the online teaching-learning process evolved gradually and was cumbersome. Teachers had to move from a space in which they had years of experience to the unknown and challenging world of online, remote correspondence, and socially distanced teaching, and students too found themselves out of their comfort zone and had to adapt and reorganize their daily lives to enable an online learning environment that is achievable, motivational, and manageable to their needs. This study, therefore, was conducted to find out students' attitudes, behaviour, and self-motivation towards learning online during the 2020 academic year. Japanese students at a university in Hiroshima were asked to respond to a questionnaire asking about their opinion on different aspects of online education during the ongoing pandemic. Responses from 140 students were received, and although the students felt that they learn better in physical classrooms (65.9%) than through an online platform the findings also identified three underlying components that were a concern for the students: engaged learning, agency, and assessment. Overall, students appreciated the software and online study materials being used to support online education, however, they felt that online education is stressful and affecting their health and social life. As this pandemic has led to a widespread adoption of online education the lessons we learn now will be helpful in the future.

1. Introduction

In the Spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced most universities around the world to shut down their campuses indefinitely and move their educational activities to online platforms. This had a serious impact on students, instructors, and educational organizations around the world (Mailizar, Almanthari, Maulina, & Bruce, 2020). The universities were not prepared for such a transition and their online teaching / learning process only gradually evolved. As it is unknown when this pandemic will disappear fully, educational institutions around the world decided to use already available technical

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resources to create an online learning environment for students of all academic fields (Kaur, 2020).

The unforeseen transition to online learning became a test of administrative and logistical ability (Wu, 2020), in which numerous academic institutions principally focused on the transfer of educational content to the digital world and specifically to online teaching and other delivery methods. Consequently, it made us realise that there was a lack of resources in academic institutions and that there was social marginalization of students, where inadequate access and availability of the internet coupled the lack of the latest technology affected organizational responsiveness and students' capacity to participate in digital learning (Zhong, 2020). Nevertheless, there has been a lot of advances in educational technology in the last few decades with the arrival of massive open online courses (MOOCs) and online Learning Management Systems (LMSs), such as Google Classroom, Moodle, Microsoft Teams, Zoom etc., which have proved to be massively valuable during this pandemic (Chatterjee & Chakraborty, 2020; Dhawan, 2020). Moreover, it was challenging for universities to plan their educational activities in an online space as both professors and students faced a wide range of technical, logistical, financial, and social problems (Lassoued, Alhendawi, & Bashitialshaer, 2020; Peters et al., 2020).

The consequent nationwide lockdown – known in Japan as the ‘State of Emergency’ – that was imposed in order to contain the pandemic has created mental health issues for many students who are suffering from stress and anxiety (Cao et al., 2020). Such psychological issues often hinder students from adapting to online education, and, significantly, not all students have equal access to and knowledge of digital technologies. Also, in terms of learning agency, students need to be active participants in their learning. Learners only have a sense of “agency” when they feel that they are in control of the things that happen around them and when they feel they can influence events. This is an important sense for learners to develop.

This study is solely focused on a private university in Hiroshima which offers undergraduate tertiary education in various departments, such as science, humanities, and languages. The university decided to postpone the start of the 2020 academic year as the Japanese Government enforced a ‘State of Emergency’ in April of that year. As the academic programs of the university are based on intense classroom activities, it was difficult to move all these academic activities online immediately. Moreover, there was a presumption that the situation might stabilize shortly and that the campuses could be reopened

within weeks. As a temporary measure, teachers recommended students to use MOOCs or online LMSs to enable their studies to continue. In the meantime, the university reviewed and revised its teaching and learning process and decided that all academic activities were to be moved onto online platforms. The teachers and students of the university gradually adapted to the system. Most teachers used Google Classroom to dispense course information and material related to their courses, and delivered live lectures through Google Meet. The teachers delivered lectures using their own computers either at home or in their office at work and often enhanced their lessons with various online resources.

The aim of this study, therefore, is to find out students' attitudes towards learning online during the 2020 academic year. Specifically, the study not only wanted to examine students' behaviour and satisfaction towards doing online learning classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also wanted to investigate students' self-motivation, learner agency, and self-efficacy in terms of their belief in their capacity to perform behaviors necessary to produce specific performance accomplishments. Importantly, the findings of this study could potentially help other teachers and educators with issues they are facing in their own classroom situations.

2. Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic forced a number of institutions to suddenly adjust their working practices and adopt new technologies. In most instances, these institutions did not get enough time to consider how the adoption of these new technologies should be introduced and implemented into their existing format (Carroll & Conboy, 2020). Universities around the world were no exception and Bao (2020) described how universities were having to rapidly move from classroom-based education to online education because of the quickly spreading pandemic. Other researchers have tried to understand the viewpoint of students on online education during the COVID-19 pandemic using empirical studies in the USA (Patricia, 2020), India (Mishra, Gupta, & Shree, 2020), China (Cao, 2020), and Serbia (Bojovic, Bojovic, Vujosevic, & Suh, 2020).

Before the pandemic, there were already wide-ranging models and platforms for online education in place in many countries, such as Moodle, blended learning, and a basic form of Google classroom, however, it was evident that no university was ready for a com-

plete shift to total online education (Mishra et al., 2020). University educators are now delivering course content through various platforms. Such platforms include online educational platforms, videoconferencing software, and social media (Patricia, 2020). Online educational platforms, such as Google Classroom, Moodle, and Blackboard, allow university educators to share materials, notes, and multimedia resources related to their courses with students. The online educational platforms also allow students to complete and submit assignments and for teachers to keep track of the progress of their students. Videoconferencing tools, like Google Meet, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams, help in organizing online lectures and discussion sessions. Such tools typically support course materials using PowerPoint presentations and other screen sharing features that some universities were circulating through their websites and their own learning organisation systems (Chatterjee & Chakraborty, 2020).

Empirical studies have discovered that students believe that they can learn better in physical classrooms than through online education (Bojovic et al., 2020), and that students miss the help they receive from their friends and peers in the physical classroom, and also their access to other resources, such as the library and research centers (Patricia, 2020). Nevertheless, students felt that online education helped them to continue their study during the pandemic (Mishra et al., 2020). Universities are now beginning to use state-of-the-art strategies to ensure that there is continuity of education for their students (Zhu & Liu, 2020).

There appears to be a lack of research on how efficiently students can interact with their university teachers and their peers through the various online tools and how effective online assessment methods are. So far, there are only a few researchers who have investigated these issues. For example, Patricia (2020) reported that students prefer face-to-face interaction with professors and Bojovic et al. (2020) reported that many teachers lack confidence with online assessment techniques.

In terms of students' attitude to online learning, previous studies have found that satisfied students appear to be engaged, motivated and responsive, they contribute to an effective learning climate, and achieve higher levels of work (Dziuban, Moskal, Thompson, & Kramer, 2015). Discontented or ambivalent students contribute to a situation in which instructors appear to have much more difficulty facilitating effective learning situations.

A number of instructional approaches that can be used in an online format have been found to be beneficial to learner agency development. Among them are project-based

language learning, inquiry-based language learning, task-based language teaching and phenomenon-based language learning (Li, 2020). All these methods allow learners to engage with real-world issues and meaningful reading and writing activities through a series of learning tasks that have an authentic intention and therefore promote students' autonomy and agency in the learning process. (Li, Sun & Jee, 2018).

Although there are different theoretical methods used to explain student motivation and engagement, a study by Albert Bandura (1989) proposes that there are self-efficacy beliefs, which are an essential cognitive variable that influence motivation, self-regulation and, in particular, student engagement. In his theory, he states that "people are likely to engage in activities to the extent that they perceive themselves to be competent at those activities, therefore having important implications for motivation and inspiration" (Bandura, 1989).

Moreover, online classes are difficult for students who are conventional learners, and the usual classroom socialization and peer interaction can be compromised and missing in online learning. Students only communicate with their peers digitally and never see them in person, and therefore the real-time sharing of ideas, knowledge and information is somewhat missing from the online learning world (Patricia, 2020).

3. Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore students' attitudes, behaviour, self-motivation, and learner agency towards learning online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Japanese students at Hiroshima Shudo University were asked to respond to a questionnaire asking about their opinion on different aspects of online education during the ongoing pandemic. The questionnaire was conducted twice, once at the end of the Spring semester of 2020, in which the students did all their classes online using Google Classroom and web-conferencing platform Google Meet, and then at the end of the Fall semester when classes resumed to face-to-face (from September 2020). Both questionnaires consisted of the same set of questions. Respondents were comprised of nine different classes taught by the author, and consisted of an equal measure of both 1st and 2nd year students, although there were a couple of re-takers in their 3rd and 4th year. Responses from 140 students were received on the first questionnaire (online classes) and 125 students on the second questionnaire (face-to-face classes). Allowing for this difference in the number of respondents the data

was calculated as a percentage.

The questionnaires were conducted on Google Classroom (Google forms) and comprised of ten questions that were set to determine student's attitudes and feelings towards having their classes either online or face-to-face. The questions asked are as follows:

1. How useful was it to use the course textbook online / face-to-face?
2. How clearly did the instructor explain the course material?
3. Was the speed with which your instructor presented the material too fast or too slow?
4. How easy or difficult was it for you to do classes online / face-to-face?
5. Would you like to continue online classes next semester or do face-to-face?
6. How well did your teacher answer student's questions?
7. How comfortable was it for you to say your opinion in your class or group?
8. Was it easy or difficult to motivate yourself to do online / face-to-face classes?
9. Overall, were you satisfied with this course?
10. Do you have any comments about this course?

All the respondents of the questionnaires were students enrolled in courses that were all English language related courses. In the questionnaire, respondents were asked to read the questions and to mark their answers on a 5-point Likert scale (see Tables 1–9 below), except for Question 5, which asked to choose between one of two options (online or face-to-face), and Question 10, which required a written answer. The data was then analyzed with the Statistica 13.3 (StatSoft, Inc., Tulsa, OK) statistical software. $P < .05$ was considered statistically significant.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of the questionnaire (rounded and as a percentage) can be seen below in tables 1–9. In Table 1, a significant majority of respondents made it known that using the course textbook was very useful for both online and face-to-face classes. It is to be noted that many of the exercises and questions written in the textbooks were transcribed and transferred onto a Google form available for students to access via their Google Classroom page. Students were able to submit their answers on the forms which could then be marked and returned to the them with a grade or score by their instructor. Also, many publishers are now producing and uploading their textbooks online, and have incorporated

Table 1 How useful was it to use the course textbook online / face-to-face?

Question 1	Online	Face-to-Face
1 Not useful	0	0
2	2.1	0.8
3	10.7	13.6
4	36.4	33.6
5 Very useful	50.8	52

Table 2 How clearly did the instructor explain the course material?

	Online	Face-to-Face
1 Not clearly	0	0
2	1	1
3	3.5	10.4
4	32.1	20
5 Very clearly	63.5	68.8

numerous online activities and exercises.

Some students are don't like change and view online explanations and instruction negatively (Roval & Jordan, 2004). These students may not be comfortable with technology and much prefer sitting in a classroom taking notes than sitting at a computer absorbing information. On the other hand, many students prefer to take their lessons online as there is more flexibility in when they can choose to study, complete assignments, and listen to lectures. Therefore, it is important for instructors to explicitly explain the course materials and assignments so that students can clearly understand all the tasks they need to complete. Table 2 reveals that the respondents felt that they were able to listen to their instructor explain the course materials clearly, indicating that it is important for students to be able to clearly understand course materials especially when studying online and alone.

As all the classes were language related, the presentation of the course materials has to be at a speed and rate that fits with the particular level of the student so that they can fully understand what they are required to do. Moreover, it is easy for students to switch off and lose motivation if they can't keep up with the pace of the lesson. However, when studying online, students can work and study at their own pace quite often in the comfort of their homes rather than in the confines of the physical classroom (Patricia, 2020).

It is evident that in Table 3, students were satisfied with the speed of the presented course materials as 67.1% of online students thought the speed of the presented materials

Table 3 Was the speed with which your instructor presented the material too fast or too slow?

	Online	Face-to-Face
1 Too fast	1	0
2	12.8	4.8
3	67.1	72
4	10	11.2
5 Too slow	2.1	12

Table 4 How easy or difficult was it for you to do classes online / face-to-face?

	Online	Face-to-Face
1 It was easy	11.4	9.2
2	27.8	31.9
3	31.4	31
4	20.7	17.6
5 It was difficult	8.5	10

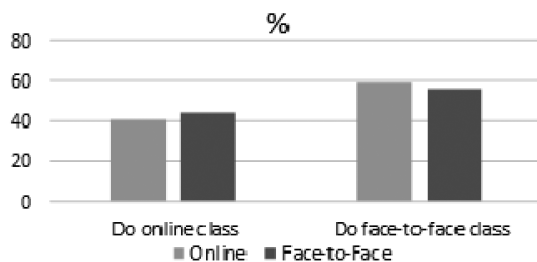
was just right, as well as 72% of face-to-face respondents. This further indicates that the speed in which the lesson is conducted is important for effectively understanding the content because if the lesson is too quick students will find learning difficult, tend to switch off, and become demotivated, contrastively, if the speed of the lesson is too slow students will become frustrated, distracted, and dissatisfied with their learning outcomes.

Table 4 illustrates that the majority of respondents in the online group rated online learning as moderately easy or fairly easy (31.4% and 27.8% respectively). It was a similar result for the face-to-face group (31% and 31.9%). As such, there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups ($P = .46$).

The students had a mixed opinion about online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. As shown in Table 5, there was a significant difference between respondents wanting to do classes face-to-face (59.3%) than online (40.7%) ($p > .05$). This indicates that students are not sold on the idea of doing totally online classes and this was reinforced in the comments question (Question 10), in which one student responded “I don’t like online classes”, and another student wrote “I am looking forward to this class being face-to-face”.

Table 6, shows how students were, overall, very satisfied with how their instructor answered and dealt with their questions. It is important that instructors answer all stu-

Table 5 Would you like to continue doing online classes next semester or do face-to-face?



	Online	Face-to-Face
Do online class	40.7	44
Do face-to-face class	59.3	56

Table 6 How well did your teacher answer student's questions?

	Online	Face-to-Face
1 Not at all well	0	0.8
2	3.5	0
3	10	9.6
4	22.8	28
5 Very well	63.5	61.6

dent's questions appropriately and effectively so that the student not only better understand a particular situation or problem, but can also feel encouraged and thus more motivated. Further, it can also help expand student thinking, increase student investment in the content, cultivate curiosity, and engage students on a deeper and more personal level.

One of the challenges of doing pair/group work or discussion classes is the matter of expressing your opinion on an online platform. This not only tested the instructor in his/her technological knowledge and competence regarding setting up break-out rooms or the equivalent group forums online, but also tested the students' confidence, ability, and assertiveness. Table 7 shows that compared to face-to-face classes, in which students felt comfortable (25.6%), reasonably comfortable (36%), and very comfortable (34.4%), in expressing their opinions, students who were doing the classes online felt slightly less comfortable in which only 18.8% of respondents felt it was very comfortable and 1.4% felt it was not comfortable for them (0.8% in the face-to-face group). According to Carroll and

Table 7 How comfortable was it for you to say your opinion in your class or group?

	Online	Face-to-Face
1 Not comfortable	1.4	0.8
2	7.1	4
3	39.2	25.6
4	34.2	36
5 Very comfortable	18.8	34.4

Conboy (2020), expressing yourself in an online environment can be difficult, awkward, and sometimes stressful for some people as they argue that an online environment can appear to be daunting and unfamiliar territory. Moreover, there were other factors that posed a challenge for students as they often had problems with their internet connection and also technological issues especially in terms of their microphones (or lack of), speakers making a feedback sound or an echo, and other various hardware problems. Experiencing these kinds of problems is not only frustrating for students especially when they cannot participate in activities, but can also lead to lower motivation for some students.

In their study of student motivation on online learners, Esra and Çiğdem (2021) have stated that there are various elements that are suggested to interact with online learning motivation in an effort to address the problems of attrition and participation. They further explain that online learners experience lower levels of motivation especially when they skip classes or do not participate in the activities. Similarly, De Barba et al. (2016) found that motivation acts as a mediator between inherent motivation and participation. Moreover, they argue that “an online learning environment should cater for motivation and participation as situational interest is contextual and depends on how much activities and content are able to keep students’ attention” (De Barba et al., 2016). This could be a factor in this study, in which more students in the online group felt that it was more difficult to motivate themselves in online classes (9.8%) compared to face-to-face classes (4%) (shown in Table 8). In the comments section (Question 10) one student mentioned that it was difficult and frustrating for them to keep up with different online systems that each teacher uses, as some teachers prefer to use Google Meet, some may use Zoom, and each often has a very different way of organizing their Google Classroom or Zoom session, which invariably lead to confusion among students. Whilst there is difficulty staying motivated for students, some have also felt that the course workload has become drastically

Table 8 Was it easy or difficult to motivate yourself to do online / face-to-face classes?

	Online	Face-to-Face
1 Easy	8.2	29.1
2	28.6	34.4
3	39.2	25.6
4	14.2	6.9
5 Difficult	9.8	4

Table 9 Overall, were you satisfied with this course?

	Online	Face-to-Face
1 Not satisfied	1	1
2	3.5	1.6
3	10.7	4
4	30.7	24.5
5 Very satisfied	54.2	69.6

increased, as one student commented “There are a lot of work and activities, and sometimes it’s also a lot harder to understand the information, which make it take even longer,”

In Question 10 of the questionnaire (Do you have any comments about this course?) students were free to write down any comments, problems, or concerns about their online or face-to-face class experiences. There were some very interesting and mixed responses that were received and some that are worthy of mention. Several students were concerned about their grading and assessment of the course as they had missed the first introductory and course guidance class, in which this was explained to the extent of the instructor’s perceived mandate at the time. Regarding this question, it should be worth pointing out that the instructor himself was not totally sure about how some of the components of the course would be assessed as he himself was going into uncharted waters. Some other students were anxious about the social side of their learning in which studying alone away from their peers and classmates was troubling for them and they thus felt that their learning agency was being taken away. The issue of learning agency came up in several other comments by other students as it seems that they are concerned about their power to act for themselves in the online environment. As such, a number of instructional approaches that can be used in an online format have been found to be beneficial to learner agency development. Among them are project-based language learning, inquiry-

based language learning, task-based language teaching and phenomenon-based language learning (Li, 2020). It should be suggested that all these approaches engage language learners with real-world topics and meaningful reading and writing activities through a series of learning tasks that have an authentic purpose which therefore encourages students to have autonomy and agency in the learning process.

On a more positive note, some students felt that their online learning experience gave them more new and exciting materials for their learning, especially with the aid of video and music, which can be easily incorporated into an online lesson. One student commented that the experience of this online class was nothing but positive, in which they thought the course outline and online components were extremely useful and helpful, and the homework, quizzes, and test were reasonable.

5. Conclusion

Online education has been around for many years, such as with the use of Moodle, blended learning, and flipped classrooms etc., but since the pandemic it became an essential element of learning. Learner agency in this new learning environment is becoming increasingly important as learners of all ages now need to find more ways to take control of their own learning process. This study was conducted to find out students' attitudes, behaviour, and self-motivation towards learning online during the 2020 academic year. Japanese students at a university in Hiroshima were asked to respond to a questionnaire asking about their opinion on different aspects of online education during the ongoing pandemic. Responses from 140 students were received, and although the students felt that they learn better in physical classrooms (65.9%) than through an online platform the findings also identified three underlying components that were a concern for the students: engaged learning, learner agency, and assessment. Overall, students appreciated the software and online study materials being used to support online education, however, they felt that online education is stressful and affecting their health and social life. As this pandemic has led to a widespread adoption of online education, the lessons we learn now will be helpful in the future.

Based on the findings of this study, it can be proposed that there should be a different way of thinking about language teaching that promotes agency throughout the learning and assessment process whether online, offline or Hybrid/HyFlex. This alternative per-

spective enables language teachers to move beyond just providing linguistic input and focus on promoting meaningful interaction in the classroom, developing learner identity and engagement, and engaging students in the assessment process. Moreover, there is a stronger need for academic organizations to be more progressive and improve their curriculum to further incorporate these new modes of learning. The use of new instructional methods and strategies should be of the utmost importance.

There are limitations of this study, however, which are centered around the nature of the sample group, the student skills and abilities, and student familiarity with online instruction. Notably, because this was a convenience, non-probability sample, the independent variables were not in line with real-world accuracy. Also, student aptitude, intelligence, and ability levels were not taken into consideration when extricating out comparison groups.

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