

Necessity is the mother of invention: Facilitating learner interaction in university English courses during the COVID-19 pandemic

James HOBBS

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Abstract

In spring 2020 Iwate Medical University bucked the trend for moving classes online until further notice, determining that face-to-face lessons could continue during the COVID-19 pandemic as long as there were no confirmed or suspected cases among students, and provided prescribed infection countermeasures were adhered to. These measures included social distancing, not calling on students to speak up in class, and not encouraging spoken interaction between students. While such measures create little or no disruption for teachers accustomed to delivering one-way lectures to students who listen in silence, they pose significant challenges for English teachers whose classrooms are usually buzzing with interaction and collaborative groupwork. However, while the challenge was not easy to overcome, it proved to be the catalyst for discovering effective ways to exploit a range of online tools for study and communication, including *LINE*, *Flipgrid*, *Quizlet*, *Nearpod* and *Zoom*. While the original intention was to use such tools as a stopgap until normal classes could resume, they in fact opened the door to a range of positive changes in teaching practices that will continue to be implemented after the return to normal.

1. Introduction

Although Japan is renowned worldwide for being at the forefront of technological advances, and boasts one of the world's fastest mobile networks, the pre-COVID education sector was slow to embrace the digital age (Poole, 2010). Even today, blackboards and chalk predominate up to high school, and while almost all new university entrants possess a smartphone, many have little experience of using a computer (Wang, Iwata, & Jarrell, 2018). Indeed, I am regularly shocked at how students who can easily perform a startling array of tasks on their hand-held devices can be stumped by a simple task such as attaching a file to an email, or sending that email to multiple recipients. In recent years most Japanese universities have made an online learning management system (LMS) available for use, perhaps feeling pressure to satisfy the Ministry of Education,

Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) that action is being taken to comply with its vision of the role of IT in education (MEXT, 2011). However, in many institutions these platforms were little used by teaching faculty before the pandemic (Murakami, 2016).

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 prompted a rapid and dramatic change. Many university teachers in Japan were hastily dragged kicking and screaming into the digital age, as universities throughout the country prepared to shift classes online until further notice. Like many teachers, I found myself attending a hastily-arranged FD session on how to use the videoconferencing platform Zoom Meetings (Zoom Video Communications, San Jose, U.S.), and investigating how to make more effective use of WebClass (Data Pacific [Japan], Ltd., Tokyo, Japan), my institution's LMS of choice. However, as the weeks passed by without a single case of COVID reported in Iwate, the spectre of online classes began to fade, and the focus turned to the infection countermeasures to be implemented in face-to-face classes. In addition to obvious measures such as keeping windows open, running fans, and keeping hands sanitized, directives at my institution included the following:

- Students should be socially distanced in class.
- Teachers should refrain from calling on students to speak up in front of the whole class.
- Pairwork and groupwork should be avoided.
- Students should not share microphones, or pass objects hand to hand.

The prevailing wisdom seemed to be that face-to-face classes, whatever the sacrifices involved, were still preferable to online classes, but as an English teacher I saw little cause to celebrate being “saved” from online classes in this way. While online classes could allow students ample opportunities to speak and engage in conversation-based collaborative tasks, the prospect of face-to-face classes under the mandated restrictions raised an obvious and significant question: How can students possibly acquire effective English communication skills in a class where they are not supposed to speak, and not supposed to interact with their classmates? However, forced out of my teaching comfort zone, I was soon to find that various resources were available that could not only provide students with opportunities to speak without any COVID-related risks, but in many cases facilitate even more speaking opportunities and group activities than had been offered in pre-COVID face-to-face classes. In the remainder of this paper I discuss the merits of various resources newly incorporated into classes since April 2020, and speculate on how they may continue to play a significant role in my post-COVID teaching practice.

2. Classes and specific challenges

I will focus mainly on the course English Speaking and Listening (ESL). Courses with this same title are taught as 28-week courses to first-year students of medicine and dentistry, and as 14-week courses to first-year students of pharmacy and nursing, with specific content tailored to the needs of each class. The course materials focus on Internet-based videos on health-related topics such as *diet*, *stress*, and *exercise*, and are designed to promote active discussion among students. In a normal year with no COVID-related restrictions, some common features of the courses are as follows:

- Course materials are given to students at the beginning of each semester as an A4-sized booklet of 32-40 pages.
- Weekly lessons include a significant focus on pairwork and groupwork, in which students exchange opinions, compare answers, or work collaboratively on creative tasks.

Necessity is the mother of invention: Facilitating learner interaction in university English courses during the COVID-19 pandemic

- The small group size (10-24 students) creates an environment in which teachers can easily interact directly with students to elicit answers, opinions, and so on.
- Once (for 14-week courses) or twice (for 28-week courses) students each deliver a prepared 4-minute presentation in front of the class.
- Students are regularly asked to deliver shorter presentations of 1-2 minutes, either in groups or in front of the whole class.

The restrictions imposed from April 2020 made these established norms either impossible or impractical to implement. To begin with, I was reluctant to spend many hours printing and binding several hundred booklets while there remained the distinct possibility that teaching would be moved online before students even arrived on campus to collect them. Of much greater concern, though, was how to plug the enormous gap that would be created by the effective ban on speaking in class. In this regard, the fact that all ESL courses involve multiple teachers was to prove critical. With two full-time teachers and four part-time teachers involved, it was possible to share ideas and perspectives in ways that benefited everyone. In particular, the part-time teachers, who had already begun teaching online at other institutions, were able to direct my attention to some extremely valuable resources.

By the end of academic 2020 all teachers had settled into a system of class management and lesson organization which, while still less efficient than in a normal, unrestricted class, allowed for far more speaking and student interaction that had first been envisioned in April 2020. The resources that made this possible, and each's specific role, are discussed below.

3. Solutions

3.1 Provision of course materials—WebClass

In April 2020 the course materials were for the first time not provided in printed form, but instead made available for download in MS Word and PDF format on WebClass. Students were given the choice of either printing out their own copy to bring to class, or using a large-screen tablet or computer that enables them to add handwritten text with a smart pen. Displaying the materials only on a smartphone screen was not permitted, as such screens are too small to write on, and too small for the teacher to easily see exactly what a student is doing.

I did this with much trepidation, expecting to have many students turn up on day 1 with no materials, or only a smartphone. My fears proved unfounded. Some students came with a neatly bound full set of course materials, some with an electronic device and smart pen. Almost none arrived unprepared, and the only technical problems concerned page spacing and alignment appearing differently on some students' devices than on mine. I am now in my fourth consecutive semester of download-only class materials, and the system is continuing to function almost seamlessly. It is quite clear that there is no strong case for preferring a printed booklet to downloadable materials, and this is thus the first of several pandemic-inspired changes that will be part of my own new normal after the pandemic has ended.

3.2 Short messages both during and outside class—LINE OpenChat

LINE (LINE Corporation, Tokyo, Japan) is a freeware instant communications app available for smartphones, tablets and PCs. It is the communications app of choice among young Japanese, with usage in the 10-20 age group reported to be over 95% in 2019 (Yahoo News, 2020). The OpenChat feature allows users to join a group chat—typically through a QR code provided by the teacher—without having to add the teacher

or any other members of the chat as a LINE contact, and without granting access to their own personal LINE profile or any other personal information. Users simply input a name and choose a profile photo from a set of generic icons within the app. In this way the teacher and all students in a group can share instant messages with each other without providing any personal details other than their name. At the time of writing I have encountered only one student who was not already a LINE user (because they did not possess a smartphone), and no students have objected to joining the designated OpenChat for their group.

The original motivation for this was to create a written forum to replace the typical spoken exchanges that take place in the classroom: brainstorming ideas, eliciting answers to questions, and so on. While inevitably slower than spoken interaction, this at least facilitates a degree of authentic real-time interaction during classes, and is far preferable to the alternative of the teacher simply posing questions, and then giving the answers without eliciting any feedback from students.

However, it soon became clear that OpenChat is also the perfect tool for sharing administrative messages with students. Reminders about homework tasks, sharing online links, notification of cancellations or room changes, and so on: Such information is much more easily shared on OpenChat than through WebClass messages or printed notices, and is seen much sooner by students.

In short, OpenChat is a valuable and flexible resource that would almost certainly not have come to my attention were it not for the pandemic, but that is now here to stay in my classes.

3.3 *Short oral presentations and speaking tasks—Flipgrid*

Flipgrid (Flipgrid, Inc., Wilmington, DE, U.S.) is a freeware app for smartphone or tablet, that can also be accessed through a web browser. With it, users post video responses to tasks set by the teacher. Videos can be recorded directly within the app, or pre-recorded video files can be uploaded. The “Group Lead” (teacher) controls when videos are viewable, and by whom. If permitted by the teacher, students are able to view each other’s videos, and can respond by *liking* them or with a video or text comment. While the use of Flipgrid is not restricted to language teaching, it has been praised as a very useful tool for facilitating interaction among language learners (Chien, 2021; Edwards & Lane, 2021; Petersen, Townsend, & Onaka, 2020).

In the first semester of academic 2020 I used WebClass for video tasks, but its limitations soon became apparent:

- Students cannot record video directly in WebClass, only upload a video file. A significant minority of students struggled to (1) create an uploadable video file, or (2) upload that file to WebClass. For every 20 or so submissions I usually received at least one file containing no data.
- The fact that videos are not recorded in-app creates compatibility issues. Sometimes I was not able to view a submitted video on my computer, and there were significant differences between students in terms of picture and sound quality.
- Videos cannot be viewed directly within WebClass, but must be downloaded and prepared for viewing offline. This creates a lot of time-consuming extra work for the teacher.
- As videos cannot be viewed within WebClass, there is no easy way to facilitate video or text responses.

I was initially reluctant to use Flipgrid because it requires individual logins and downloading the Flipgrid app (if using smartphone or tablet), not to mention the time and effort required to learn how to use it. This seemed like it would be a burden for both students and teachers, but in fact was extremely simple. Creating student logins is a straightforward process, and after this is done the teacher can print out individual login cards

Necessity is the mother of invention: Facilitating learner interaction in university English courses during the COVID-19 pandemic with QR codes to give to each student. This QR code directs students to the downloadable app. After installing the app students input the user ID on their card, and the login process is complete. As with most smartphone apps, login details are thereafter not required unless a long time has elapsed since the app was last used.

Using the app to record and upload a video is so intuitive that no tutorials are required, and providing a detailed explanation here would frankly be a waste of words. Indeed, the interface's similarity to that of existing social networking platforms makes it especially easy for students to master. Once the teacher "activates" uploaded videos to make them visible to all group members, they appear in a neat grid with thumbnail photos of the students who uploaded them, and the procedure for adding video or text comments on a video is essentially the same as that on SNS platforms such as Facebook. The one concern is with students' privacy: It is important to make clear to students that other group members will be able to freely view their videos once they are activated, and I do not force any student to show their face. Students who do not want to show their face have the option of wearing a mask, or instead focusing the camera on other objects relevant to their speech.

Although Flipgrid was adopted as a substitute for live in-class presentations, it in fact has several advantages over a live presentation format:

- Both teachers and students can keep a record of performance.
- Teachers do not have to evaluate speeches in real-time, but can watch them and prepare feedback in advance.
- Learners can see themselves presenting and have the option to correct or improve their speeches before uploading.
- As speeches do not have to be shown one-by-one during lessons, time can be used more efficiently. Rather than spending up to an hour playing 20 2-minute speeches in class, teachers can instead instruct learners to watch and comment on the videos for homework. Alternatively, students can choose 3-5 videos to watch in class on their own smartphone. (Be sure to tell them to bring earbuds to class!) I now often do this as a warmup task in the first 10 minutes of class.
- Tasks such as reading a text aloud to practice rhythm and intonation can also easily be performed on Flipgrid, with the videos kept hidden from other students. This is another kind of task that cannot be implemented efficiently in a live class.

Fligrd, then, is another resource that would probably not have attracted my attention were it not for the pandemic, but that vastly expands the list of possibilities for engaging students in both speaking and listening tasks.

3.4 Vocabulary practice—Quizlet

Quizlet (Quizlet, San Francisco, U.S.) is a learning tool that can be accessed through either a web browser or mobile app. The teacher inputs a list of words or terms and accompanying definitions, after which the software automatically generates a set of activities to practice spelling and matching terms with definitions, and also creates a set of on-screen flashcards. It can be used for self-study, or in *Quizlet Live* mode, in which students compete against each other in teams. While it is limited in both scope and purpose, small-scale studies have claimed it both enhances vocabulary learning and is positively received by students (Barr, 2016; Dizon, 2016; Sanosi, 2018). For teachers, a significant attraction is that the software itself does the donkey work of actually creating questions, which would take considerable time to replicate on a platform such as WebClass. The game-like appearance is also more engaging and visually appealing than vocabulary practice activities

created on WebClass. While Quizlet is easiest to use through the Quizlet app, setting this up can be a burden for students, and if Quizlet is not a central part of a course it is quicker and easier to give students a QR code and/or URL to access study sets directly through a web browser. As COVID-19 has drastically reduced the amount of time that can be used for in-class speaking activities, Quizlet has become not just a useful self-study resource, but also a go-to resource when an engaging, low-stress consolidation activity is needed for the last 10 minutes of class.

3.5 Comment boards and opinion exchanges—Nearpod

Nearpod (Nearpod, Miami, U.S.) is a flexible tool accessible through a web browser or mobile app that allows teachers to create interactive presentations incorporating PowerPoint slides, YouTube videos, and other media. Its range and flexibility make it easy to tailor content to a specific purpose. Students can access a Nearpod lesson simply by visiting the Nearpod website on a PC or mobile device and inputting a code given by the teacher. Among its more useful features in a silent class is the “collaboration board” feature, which allows answers, ideas or opinions typed by students to be displayed in real-time both on the main classroom screen and on each student’s device. The main advantage over LINE OpenChat is that 10 or more sentence-length comments can easily be displayed together, and do not soon get pushed off the screen by new incoming comments. It is also easy to conduct instant surveys and display the results on screen. For an entertaining review of material, the “Time to Climb” function allows teachers to make quizzes in which students compete against each other, scoring more points the faster they answer a question correctly. The ability to show PowerPoint slides on Nearpod also provides an option for students to view slides on their own devices, which in some cases may be more convenient than constantly craning their necks to see the main classroom screen. The 40MB data limit on the free version limits the extent to which teachers can exploit Nearpod’s features before hitting a paywall, but even the free version is a useful supplementary resource. In summary, Nearpod is a welcome addition to a teacher’s repertoire, but not a game changer unless you are teaching remotely.

3.6 Recorded pair dialogues and PowerPoint presentations—ZOOM

Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, San Jose, U.S.) is a video teleconferencing software program that should need no introduction. It has become the platform of choice for facilitating remote teaching at many institutions. However, as on-campus teaching has continued throughout the pandemic at my institution, its use has been largely limited to (1) brief periods of online teaching while the risk of infection was considered to be particularly high, and (2) broadcasting live lectures to two or more classrooms simultaneously. However, given that both teachers and students had been given basic training in how to use Zoom, I was keen to discover ways in which it could enhance my classroom-based teaching.

First, using Zoom is one of the simplest ways to record a PowerPoint presentation in which the speaker’s face can also be seen as a thumbnail. The speaker simply uses a free account to open a one-person Zoom meeting, and records themselves giving a PowerPoint presentation to an imaginary audience, much as they might in an actual online conference. The file can then be submitted to the teacher directly, or uploaded to Flipgrid, as preferred.

Second, Zoom provides a way to perform and record a two-speaker dialogue (for example, a doctor-patient dialogue) without students actually meeting. Of course, there will be no need for this after all COVID restrictions are lifted, but for as long as social distancing is required, this offers an acceptable substitute for

Necessity is the mother of invention: Facilitating learner interaction in university English courses during the COVID-19 pandemic traditional roleplay activities.

4. Conclusion

In March 2020 there was no telling exactly how the COVID-19 situation would unfold. While we all talked about hopefully getting back to normal within a few months, we perhaps instinctively knew that the pandemic was unlikely to end so quickly. At the time of writing there is still no guarantee that the next academic year (2022) will see a return to normal, unrestricted classroom interaction. However, whatever 2022 brings, I will be far better equipped to deal with it than in March 2020, and the range of online resources now at my command are evidence that it is not always a bad thing when events conspire to disrupt familiar routines. To say that I am grateful for the pandemic would be an outrage, especially considering the many millions who have died or suffered greatly because of COVID-19. But there is no denying that I have become a better, more informed, and more versatile teacher because of it, and that thus even the darkest of clouds can have a silver lining.

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