

## COVID-19 パンデミック下の教員養成課程におけるオンライン英語レッスン ーパンデミック後のオンライン英語レッスンへの意識向上ー

### Online English Lessons within a Teacher Training Degree During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Developing Awareness for Post-Pandemic Online English Lessons

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This study aimed to improve awareness about experiences and reflections of fourth year undergraduate student teachers who completed their teacher training degrees during the COVID-19 pandemic. For this study, 25 fourth year undergraduate students attending a national university for teacher education in Japan completed a survey in 2023 before graduating. The results showed students appreciated the opportunity to learn and utilize new IT skills in their online English courses. However, they had very mixed views about whether or not online learning was a good experience due to some students noticing uneven development of language skills, a lack of opportunities to interact with peers, and a drop in motivation to study English. A small number of students also believed they had experienced a considerable drop in their understanding of English during the period they took online lessons and students' views about effective tasks for online English learning widely differed. Such points can negatively affect language development and attitudes in online English lessons and create major challenges for the planning of online English lessons.

Key words : online English lessons, pandemic, teacher training degrees, experiences, reflections

#### 1. Introduction

Unlike past graduates, students who graduated in March of 2023 experienced unforeseen challenges while studying for their degrees. Notably, their courses were greatly modified, requiring students to transition from face-to-face to online lessons and later adjust to juggling blended learning lessons within the duration of their degrees. Many abrupt changes were quickly implemented after March 11, 2020, when The World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus declared that the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak to be a global pandemic (WHO, 2022, p.22). On that day, numerous parts of Japan had already experienced restrictions due to state of emergency declarations. In the early months of the pandemic, many changes were implemented, such as compulsory mask-wearing, social distancing, and online learning. Furthermore, for students enrolled in higher education there were cancellations or restrictions to volunteer work, club activities, international exchange programs, and other social events, and for those enrolled in teacher training degrees teaching practice was also affected. In higher education, some adaptations were easier than others, resulting in a mixed range of experiences for students. Hence, this study was designed to improve awareness of Japanese student teachers' experiences

and reflections during the COVID-19 pandemic and identify points worth reconsidering for post-pandemic online English courses within teacher training degrees.

#### 1.2 Previous Studies on University Students During the Pandemic

Throughout the pandemic, there have been many studies published both overseas and in Japan on how university students were impacted. Firstly, there have been various studies that have investigated mental health problems like anxiety, stress, and depression, which increased in university students (Debowska et al., 2022; Seto et al., 2023). In Japan, one study by the National Federation of the University Co-operative Associations (NFUCA, 2021) found that third and fourth year students were more dissatisfied due to less interaction with their peers, loss of income from part-time work, and missed experiences, such as club activities. The well-being of students was of particular concern for instructors and researchers throughout the pandemic.

In addition to mental health, there have been a large number of studies on the effectiveness and satisfaction of online courses while restrictions were in place and later when restrictions had ended. The implementation of online learning and the ability to use ICT skills (Motone, 2022, Uchida, 2021)

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enabled education to continue and proved to be a suitable countermeasure against the spread of COVID-19. Studies have also shown positive progress in university students' abilities to use online video communications technology and learning platforms, such as ZOOM, Moodle, and WebClass (Uchida, 2021). However, it has been pointed out by Motone (2022) that in order to ensure students studying in the post-pandemic period obtain a similar level of ICT skills, a conscious effort to include not only required ICT lessons but also opportunities to develop ICT skills while learning other subjects will be necessary.

In higher education, some aspects of teacher training were particularly challenging during the pandemic, such as teaching practice. However, this aspect of teaching training was only researched to a limited extent during this period. There were some difficulties regarding participation in teaching practices and other practical components of teacher training. In Japan, COVID-19 emergency public health declarations resulted in the sudden cancellation of teaching practices and the introduction of strict guidelines that required temperature checks, hand sanitation, mask usage, and social distancing, which were adjusted as outbreaks of COVID-19 increased and decreased.

Despite that, one area within teacher training that was researched worldwide was English education with studies particularly focusing on the effectiveness of online language learning and alternative approaches to studying abroad, primarily virtual exchange experiences (Kikuchi, 2021). Such experiences have gained popularity during the pandemic, due to cancellations, travel restrictions, or budget cuts due to the pandemic. In an article for the University World News, Ludwig (2022, para. 22) points out that "it has been argued that a virtual experience can spark interest in a foreign country and break down psychological barriers" which could motivate students to participate in study abroad programs in the future. Also, with easier access to online learning in higher education in Japan, there will be more opportunities for students to complete their studies online while studying abroad. Overall, studies like the NFUCA study (2021) have shown that students are hoping to study abroad in the future and according to recent data (MEXT, 2023), the revival of university students studying abroad has begun. Thus, students who were hoping to develop their language skills during the pandemic, now have more opportunities to do so.

For this study, a fourth year class of students specializing in English within their teacher training degrees were chosen because of their unique position of experiencing both pre-pandemic higher education and the transition to post-

pandemic higher education due to the timing of their degrees. These students were able to complete their degrees before COVID-19 was officially declared to no longer be "a public health emergency of international concern" (WHO, 2023, para. 3) by The World Health Organization's (WHO) Director-General, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus in a meeting on May 4th, 2023. By analyzing the experiences and reflections of this group of student teachers, this study aims to provide some suggestions to improve post-pandemic online English courses within teacher training degrees.

## Methodology

### 2.1 Research Questions

This study was guided by three research questions:

1. What were student teachers' experiences and reflections on studying English during the pandemic?
2. What were some of their experiences and reflections about online English learning during the pandemic?
3. What were student teachers' impressions about completing a teaching training course during the COVID-19 pandemic?

### 2.2 Participants

The survey for this study was completed by 25 undergraduate students enrolled in a fourth year English course at a Japanese university for teacher education in 2023. This course consisted of five male and 20 female students and did not include students enrolled from other year levels or remedial students. During the pandemic, it was more difficult for students to take English proficiency tests. However, six students in this survey stated that they had passed the 2nd Grade of Eiken, and six students had passed the Pre-1st Grade of Eiken before graduation. By the end of the fourth year of their studies, 21 students stated that they intended to work as teachers, and out of that group, 14 students indicated that they were entering the teaching profession as elementary school teachers. Out of the remaining students in the study, two students had chosen non-teaching jobs, and two students were still undecided about their future career paths at the time of the survey.

### 2.3 Survey

The survey was written in both Japanese and English and covered studying English, online English courses, English skill development, and teaching practice during the pandemic. The purpose of the survey was outlined at the top of the survey and the instructor explained completion of it was optional and information provided would greatly assist in improving courses at the university. Microsoft Teams was

used to distribute and return the survey.

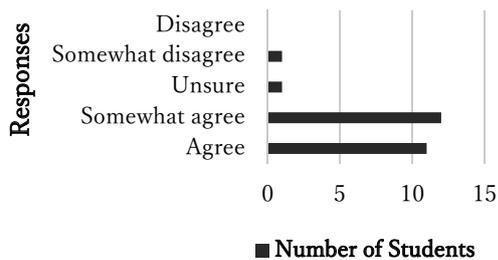
### 2.4 Analysis

There were two types of data from this study, both quantitative and qualitative. Many students wrote detailed comments in English for the open-ended questions within this survey, which were coded and categorized according to guidelines outlined by Saldana (2016). Thematic analysis of the qualitative data was conducted to determine patterns and points of relevance. Also, quantitative results that were mainly obtained from using the Likert scales were tabulated.

### 3. Findings and Discussion

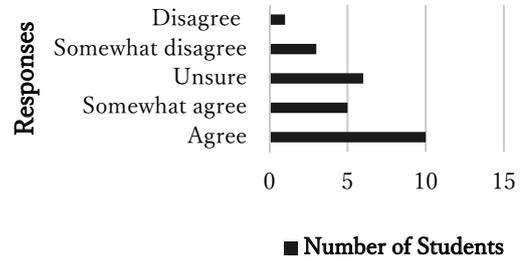
The first research question in this study aimed to better understand student teachers' experiences and reflections on studying English during the pandemic. As shown in the bar graph in Figure 1, most participants agreed or somewhat agreed that they had gained new methods to study English using technology, and 15 respondents positively stated that they had started using translation applications as shown in Figure 2. This result was anticipated considering that the online format of courses required the acquisition of a range of digital competencies at an unprecedented pace during the pandemic. In some cases, the applications may have been introduced to make online English learning more effective or the students may have required the usage of translation applications to effectively complete weekly tasks or understand the content of their courses without the assistance of their peers or instructors. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of clear guidelines regarding the utilization of translation applications within English classes in Japan did create some problems regarding assessment for instructors. Thus, future online English courses need clear guidelines to ensure fair assessment of students' work. On the other hand, translation applications also have the potential to assist struggling learners during synchronous online lessons which

**Figure 1**  
*Discovered New Study Methods to Study English with IT*



Note. N = 25

**Figure 2**  
*Commenced Use of Translation Applications For English Study*



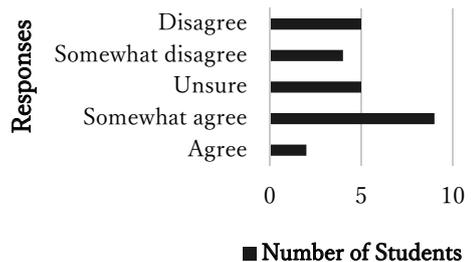
Note. N = 25

should be considered too.

An additional finding was that most students agreed or somewhat agreed that they had studied hard to learn English and did not feel that their overall amount of homework had increased. In fact, some students found online learning to be more time efficient while others commented that the frequency of homework and task types had changed to some extent.

Furthermore, their responses were quite different regarding whether or not they enjoyed studying English during the pandemic compared to studying English pre-pandemic. As can be seen in Figure 3, 11 students agreed or somewhat agreed that they had lost enjoyment in studying English compared to studying pre-pandemic while nine students disagreed or somewhat disagreed, and the remaining five students were undecided. Even though students were not required to explain their response to this question, their comments to other questions suggest that losing their enthusiasm for studying English seemed to relate to several factors, such as motivation, development of language skills, attitudes towards online learning delivery method, and tasks. This result is concerning to some extent if you bear in mind that many of the respondents are likely to teach English at elementary

**Figure 3**  
*Lost Enjoyment for Studying English Compared to Pre-Pandemic*

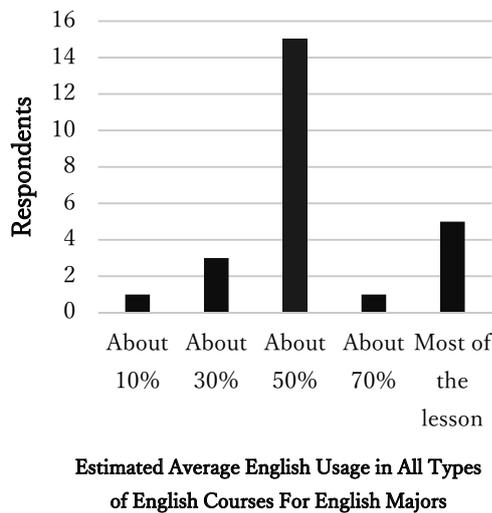


Note. N = 25

school in the future and it remains unclear whether this was a temporary or permanent feeling toward studying English.

The second research question aimed to reveal more about student teachers' experiences and reflections regarding online English lessons. To start with, students were asked to estimate the amount of English that was used in their lessons for their English courses and respondents predicted that their teachers used English for about half of the duration of each lesson which is shown in Figure 4. The discrepancy between the estimated amounts of English usage is possibly influenced by some students focusing on lessons by non-native English-speaking instructors, native English-speaking instructors, or by focusing on language usage in one type of lesson delivery format (online or face-to-face). However, the results suggest that by and large English courses in their teacher training were taught in English for at least half of the duration of each lesson during the pandemic. Preferably, lessons for students majoring in English should strive for a higher standard and provide a positive example of how to teach English using English as much as possible even if the classes are online. Thus, instructors should be encouraged to use mainly English, especially in higher-level online English courses in the future.

**Figure 4**  
*Estimated Average English Usage Within All Types of English Courses For English Majors*

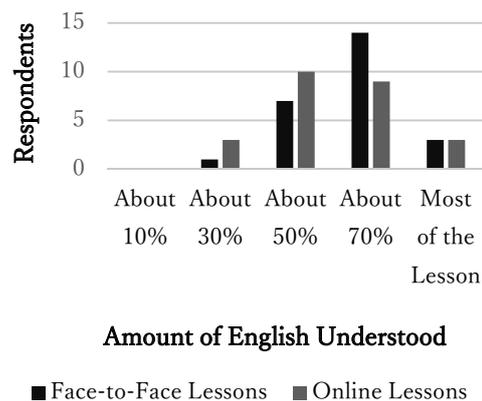


Note. N = 25

Students were also asked to estimate how much they understood English in face-to-face and online lessons. In Figure 5, 17 students estimated that they understood 70% or more of the English in face-to-face lessons but this dropped to 12 students in regards to online lessons. Thus, five students

indicated they had noticed a significant drop of about 20% in their understanding of English when participating in online lessons. This reveals that approximately half of the class was struggling to understand 50% or less of the English used by instructors in online lessons while the other half of the class was understanding at least 70% of the English used in online lessons. In follow-up questions, struggling learners explained that they were aware of this problem and acknowledged that it is difficult to ask questions or negotiate the meaning of content with peers in online lessons. This result suggests that the effectiveness of online English courses might be compromised if students are struggling to listen and comprehend lesson content and strategies to deal with such differences need to be applied. It also highlights the need for instructors to look out for students who are disadvantaged in online lessons due to their language skills. Such students should be encouraged to maintain a positive mindset and use the Chat function or other means to check with the teacher or other students during online lessons. On the other hand, instructors can do several things to support students who struggle with online lessons. For example, instructors can type and/or highlight instructions, incorporate easy-to-follow routines, provide clear examples, organize pair and group tasks, or use a buddy system to maximize understanding of lesson content. Overall, online English lessons do require extra planning and feedback by instructors to support students sufficiently.

**Figure 5**  
*Estimated Extent English was Understood in Face-to-face and Online English Courses*

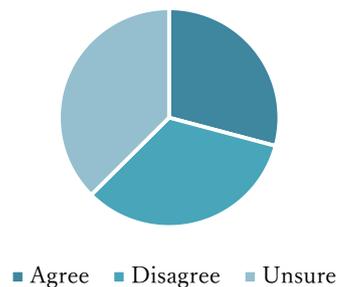


Note. N = 25 for each lesson type.

Students were also asked whether they considered online lessons to be a good experience or not and the results revealed very mixed views as shown in Figure 6. Students almost equally responded that they thought online lessons

for English courses were a positive experience, a negative experience, or were unsure. According to their written responses, students who judged English courses taught online as a good experience, believed that they could help improve their listening skills or regarded such lessons to be important for gaining various skills to teach online lessons in the future. Thus, two considerably different reasons were explained for judging online English courses positively.

**Figure 6**  
*Judged Online Lessons to be a Positive Experience*



Note. N = 25

On the other hand, some of the reasons that students suggested online lessons were problematic for English courses related to technical issues related to video quality and timing, and difficulties in understanding lesson content. Even though students could type in questions using Chat functions in Zoom or Microsoft Teams, students considered it hard to ask questions during lesson time. Also, some students commented that they missed contact with others and wanted to see non-verbal gestures and reactions because they simply preferred face-to-face lessons. Students in this study would have experienced face-to-face English lessons in their first year of university and then had to grapple with unanticipated changes in the delivery of lessons from the second year of their studies.

From their experiences studying English online, students judged some tasks as more effective for online English lessons than others but did not necessarily realize how much some tasks may have been assisting the development of certain language skills. For example, students indicated that they considered listening tasks, such as songs, pronunciation practice, online videos, and oral tasks like reading aloud, discussion, and demonstration lessons as not effective in online lessons, even though they believed their listening skills were the most improved skill from online English lessons. In addition, students perceived mainly writing tasks, such as weekly journal writing tasks, and oral tasks like

discussion and leading interactive shared reading practice as effective, but only a handful of students felt that their writing or speaking skills had improved through online English lessons. Another noticeable point related to the divergent views on judging effective tasks. Six students considered breakout sessions with a very small number of friends to be effective, whereas nine students expressed concerns about the effectiveness of breakout sessions or discussions online. Overall, the students' comments revealed a portion of the class could have quite opposing views when asked to provide examples of effective tasks for online English lessons. If instructors allow students to choose online task types and assessment tasks in some situations, it may be possible to satisfy and motivate students with such opposing views. However, developing awareness about how specific tasks can assist the development of language skills may need to be clarified more in online English lessons.

The third research question aimed to better understand student teachers' impressions about completing a teaching training course during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although students in this study completed a large part of their teacher training degrees online, the vast majority of the respondents asserted that it was not a negative experience for them. Students positively adjusted to online learning by understanding that they may need to know how to teach online lessons in the future and viewed it as a chance to gain various skills, knowledge, and materials to use in their future classrooms. Additionally, although face-to-face lessons were considered to be easier to understand, students still believed they had gained adequate skills to be teachers.

For many students who attend a university that specializes in teacher education a key benefit is the numerous opportunities to practice teaching. For this class, the overwhelming majority indicated that they had sufficient opportunities to practice teaching English and were satisfied. Although according to their comments, the number of lessons greatly varied between each school due to pandemic-related restrictions and spikes in COVID-19 transmission. For one student it was possible to teach 40 English lessons during a junior high school teaching practice, but for another student only four English lessons were possible. Furthermore, some students viewed the teaching practice to be a good opportunity to use English and consequently, they tried to speak English as much as possible which was achievable since teaching practice lessons were primarily face-to-face lessons in Japanese compulsory education throughout the pandemic. Overall, their comments regarding their teaching practices were extremely positive.

## 2.6 Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations to this study. Firstly, students who responded to the survey were limited by the number of students enrolled in the fourth year course at the time of distribution. Although this survey could have been distributed to other universities with teacher training degrees due to time constraints it was limited to one national university of teacher education within Japan. In addition to this, most of the survey respondents were likely to have participated in English online courses involving mixed-mode instruction (blended learning) and synchronous online lessons, but the lesson delivery format was not addressed in this survey. Also, the question regarding English usage would have provided more concise results if the questions on English usage in different lesson delivery format types (online and face-to-face) and instructor types (native English-speaking and non-native English-speaking instructors) were separate.

## 2.7 Conclusion

In the future, more and more English courses are likely to be available via blended learning or hybrid learning to maximize access to education, allow for more diverse study choices, as well as encourage lifelong learning among adults. The results of this study stress the need to consider a few key points in post-pandemic online English lessons in teacher training degrees.

To start with, this study showed that online English courses enabled students to gain new IT skills that were utilized in online English lessons. Thus, encouraging the development of such skills in English is important for students. However, guidelines regarding the use of some AI-powered applications need to be regulated in English departments to ensure the originality of students' assessed work in English. Ideally, writing tasks need to be completed during lesson time without access to the Internet or translation applications for reliable assessment in post-pandemic online English courses.

Secondly, the results indicated that some students struggle more to understand English online than other students, and noticing such students early on is necessary to provide swift intervention to ensure online language learning is a less stressful experience for them. Also, instructors need to be aware of how students may have different opinions regarding the perceived effectiveness of tasks. Some courses may be more suitable for online learning than others and opportunities for students to choose task types and assessment methods may encourage students to focus on particular skills of interest to increase satisfaction and motivation during online courses. However, better explanations of how specific tasks can

improve language skills online may need to be emphasized more.

Last but not least, students' mental health should be considered in online English courses with specific attention to preventing social isolation and increasing motivation. Slightly under a third of students in this survey indicated that motivation to study was a problem during the pandemic, but almost half of the students found that they also struggled due to not having enough opportunities to communicate with their peers and these two points appear to be linked together. Careful course planning of timely interaction, such as direct and meaningful feedback from teachers, motivational content, clear goals, personalized learning, and group/pair work can help maintain good mental health of students and can be applied to online English lessons using Microsoft Teams.

Even though the number of online English lessons has probably peaked in regular courses for higher education, interest in hybrid learning and blended learning is growing in Japan which means instructors should consider students' experiences, reflections, and language development during the COVID-19 pandemic to more effectively implement online English lessons and courses in the future.

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