Original Paper

An Investigation on Student Perspectives on Online Learning

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Abstract

While there was a short reprieve with the Corona Virus in 2021, the new Omicron strain could potentially rewind the clock back to 2019. What important lessons were learnt in these past two years, and are there benefits to online learning beyond virus prevention? The author examined perspectives and experiences on what it was like learning remotely as a university student. Surveys and one on one interviews were conducted on a target demographic of students. The research had surprisingly mixed results both positive and negative. When asked which style of learning students preferred, there was a three-way split between online, face-to-face, and a blend of both. Although many students and teachers are quick to assume that face-to-face learning allows young people to enjoy a more "normal" university life – the results indicate that there are cases where learning online should have serious consideration.

Keywords

Online learning, face-to-face, blended learning, tech literacy

1. Introduction

Even before Covid-19, online learning has had an accelerating rate of adoption for some time. Research suggests that there are no detrimental impacts on student performance from a mix of online and face-to-face (blended) education compared to exclusive face-to-face learning (Olitsky & Cosgrove, 2014; Bowen et al., 2014). Exclusively online education however, shows different results. In one study on "Massive Online Open Courses" (MOOCs), consistently low completion rates and student persistence was reported (Reich & Ruipérez-Valiente, 2019). It should be noted however, that MOOCs are designed as self-enrolled courses and vary significantly in nature to university or compulsory education. Another paper by Bettinger et al., also found evidence to suggest taking online courses as a replacement for in-person – reduces student performance and progress (2017). Students were less likely to remain enrolled in online courses.

The research on online language learning is still in an infant stage but currently shows more promising results. Nurieva and Garaeva found students' attendance in Zoom-based language lessons was higher than that of face-to-face lessons (2020). A majority of students surveyed also found breakout rooms difficult at first, but eventually, they became an "essential platform for collaborative learning" (Bamidele, 2021). The pandemic also has forced educators to rethink their methods of teaching – research has found positive results from embracing process-oriented pedagogies through integration with online technologies (Cheung, 2021).

Research Questions

1) What were student impressions of online English classes compared to face-to-face classes?

2) What parts of online learning (if any) proved to be more effective than face-to-face learning?

3) Should remote learning continue, what should be improved or changed?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The researcher made the decision to focus specifically on only one demographic of students – 2nd-year students all enrolled in the same major taught at a municipal university. This was done to dictate some level of control with student experiences. All second-year students had face-to-face classes in their 1st-year and online classes in their 2nd-year. Students of this major share many of the same classes and, in the case with English – are taught using the same curriculum and syllabus but with different instructors.

2.2 Design

All communication, surveys, and interviews with students were conducted in Japanese. The researcher believed that this would be the best method to collect the most responses from students as well as the most "authentic" data.

An online survey was created using Microsoft Forms and distributed to all 2nd-year students during the spring vacation. The survey used 4-point Likert scale style questions with the neutral/midpoint option omitted, thus consisting of variations of strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. Survey participants tend to choose a midpoint option as a "dumping ground" for answers they are unsure or uncertain about (Nadler et al., 2015). By eliminating the midpoint answer, survey respondents are forced to choose either a disagreement or agreement option (Chyung et al., 2017). For some questions, respondents were asked to explain or give reasons for their answers. The survey was written in Japanese and reviewed by a Japanese colleague as well as a university ethics committee beforehand. Before answering questions in the survey and interviews, students were given a Japanese informed consent form confirming students agreed that their answers would be used for the research purpose of this paper.

44 students answered the survey, and the average completion time was five minutes and 36 seconds. At the end of the survey, students who were willing to further explain and discuss their answers were

invited to a Zoom interview with the author in Japanese. Willing students were contacted by e-mail and provided a Japanese consent form that explained how their answers would be used and their privacy respected. Six students agreed to an interview, and the average duration for the interviews was approximately 25 minutes; each interview was recorded and saved. After the interviews were conducted, the author made notes of key points that were discussed. Upon completing all six interviews, the author listened to them again and made note of any points that were missed from the first sessions.

3. Result

For the purposes of this paper, interviewees' names have been changed with aliases. ¥

3.1 Student Impressions of Online Learning

Table 1. When You Started Learning Online, What Were Your Impressions of Remote Learning Compared to Face-to-Face Learning?

Response	% of Responses
Much better	9%
Somewhat better	28%
Somewhat worse	53%
Much Worse	9%

Table 2. After one Year of Learning Online, What Were Your Impressions of Remote Learning Compared to Face-to-Face Learning?

Response	% of Responses
Much better	7%
Somewhat better	35%
Somewhat worse	56%
Much Worse	2%

The results from both questions were fairly consistent. Only four students changed their impressions after one full year of remote learning. Most students commented that a big reason they felt using Zoom for classes was worse was because of issues with communicating with other students and understanding their teachers. Some other responses included:

"I felt like I was learning passively rather than participating in the class."

"It was difficult for me to feel the atmosphere of an English class, where communication is essential."

"It was physically difficult."

"My concentration level was much lower than in face-to-face classes."

"It was difficult to take the course or talk to other students when the internet condition was poor."

19

The students who felt online learning was better brought up expected reasons such as getting more time to sleep, not having to physically go to classes, and having more free time. But there were also some unexpected reasons:

"I feel more relaxed and less tense than in a face-to-face class."

"You can communicate with many random people in breakout rooms."

"I really liked that I could immediately look up things I didn't understand."

It is interesting to consider students who feel "more relaxed" in an online classroom. As young people, there are many types of social pressures they feel being in a room with their peers. This pressure is further exacerbated when studying a second language (Burden, 2004).

3.2 Communicating Online

Table 3. Compared to Face-to-Face Classes, How Did You Feel about Communication in an Online Class?

Response	% of Responses
Much better	0%
Somewhat better	5%
Somewhat worse	79%
Much Worse	9%

Most students found communicating online difficult and worse than in a face-to-face class. Of the 5% that answered "somewhat better", the only reasons they wrote were that it was "smoother" and "easier." With regards to communication being worse, three of the interviewees gave very detailed answers on this topic:

Ayane: Discussion was very difficult. For the first few classes, people used their cameras in discussions, but after a few lessons, no one had them on. When you can't see your partner's face, it is very difficult to talk to them, especially in a second language. Also, sometimes I just wouldn't get a response from my partner. I didn't know if they were listening or if I had some connection or microphone problems. So I was always checking (my settings); it was incredibly stressful.

Author: Why do you think people stopped using their cameras?

Ayane: I guess it was just embarrassing. Some of my friends overslept and didn't put on their makeup, so they didn't want to turn on their cameras. Sometimes in the main session, only a few people had their cameras on, so it felt like everyone was watching just those people.

Author: Do you think if there was a rule to always have your camera on during class, this would help communication?

Ayane: Hmm, I'm not so sure, because I think always having your face on the screen is stressful. I think only for the breakout sessions would be ok.

Another interviewee had a similar experience with Zoom and cameras.

Riku: I learned a lot about how important body language is with studying English. When I was in a breakout room with a partner who didn't have their camera on, communicating was very difficult.

A third interviewee talked about the time lag.

Honomi: I often didn't know when to speak. Because of the time lag, sometimes we would speak at the same time, so I would wait for my partner to finish often. This really made discussions difficult.

Author: More difficult than in person?

Honomi: Yes, I think a lot of the time I was waiting for people to finish talking. But then they would move to another topic, and I didn't get a chance to talk. Sometimes other people would be waiting too, so some discussions were really slow, and I couldn't get "active" in them.

In comparison to Table 2, the results of Table 3 are a cause for concern. Despite an overwhelmingly negative outlook on online communication, 42% of students still found remote learning better than face-to-face classes. A few reasons are possible here: students didn't consider communication an important part of their classes, the other benefits of online learning outweighed the difficulty in communication, or the students were indifferent to English in general and favored the convenience of attending classes from home.

The researcher personally feels that communicating online follows very different rules and mannerisms than a face-to-face conversation or discussion. Issues with time lag in communication can be alleviated by introducing roles to students – having an assigned group leader, scribe, or even a questioner, so each student has clear responsibilities for communicative tasks. Likewise, using reactions or typing in the chat box can still create a "heated" discussion.

3.3 Group Work

Table 4. Compared to Face-to-Face Classes, How Did You Feel about Group Work in an Online Class?

Response	% of Responses
Much easier	5%
Somewhat easier	26%
Somewhat difficult	30%
Much more difficult	40%

All the interviewees cited similar difficulties with communication as being a big factor in group work. One student had more to say on this topic:

Matsuo: Members were very unresponsive with group work. There were big delays in communication; sometimes I would send an e-mail and wait a week for a reply.

Author: Why do you think that is?

Matsuo: I'm not sure. I think meeting face-to-face really helps get organized and let people know what needs to be done. It didn't feel as serious doing it online.

Author: You said that it would take a long time to get replies from group members. Do you think students were busy with other things?

Matsuo: Yes, I think this was a part of it. Sometimes we had to have meetings starting at 12:00 a.m. because no other time could work for everyone. It was really difficult.

Author: That's surprising to hear; my impression was that students have more free time with remote learning.

Matsuo: Generally, I think most students had more free time, but the problem was that none of our schedules matched like they did in our 1st-year. Some students had more part-time work, and others had other responsibilities since they were living with their families.

Another student thought that there were benefits to doing online group work:

Honomi: Sharing documents online, editing, and adding comments made things really easy for group work. We could tell each other what needed to be done without needing any meetings.

Author: Do you think this is easier than working together face-to-face?

Honomi: In some ways, I think it would have been more fun. But it's really easy to work as a group with shared documents.

Anecdotally speaking, a "silver lining" of the pandemic has been the rapid adoption of online technology in many different facets of education. Had remote learning never been thrust on universities, it is questionable how many teachers would have taught their classes how to use functions such as cloud document sharing and editing mentioned by Honomi.

3.4 Teacher Support

Table 5. Compared to Face-to-Face Classes, How Do You Feel about Teacher Support in an Online Class?

Response	% of Responses
Much better	19%
Somewhat better	40%
Somewhat worse	33%
Much Worse	9%

Given all the previously mentioned difficulties with communication, it was surprising to see a slight majority that felt teacher support was better during online lessons.

Ayane: Our teacher would take questions via Zoom chat. I found this very useful because it was much easier than in a face-to-face class.

Author: Could you explain how you would ask questions using the Zoom chat?

Ayane: Sometimes the teacher would give us time to work by ourselves. If we had a problem, we could send them a private message and sometimes they would reply as a message or talk to the whole class about it.

Author: Why did you think this was easier?

Ayane: In a face-to-face class, sometimes, there was a bit of pressure if I wanted to ask a question. It also felt like I was stopping the lesson.

Speaking to colleagues, there were considerable differences in how instructors approached student support. Some instructors used the traditional institution e-mail account setup on Microsoft Outlook at their work office. Others channeled most of their information to their class Learning Management System (LMS), which was also useful for quick messages to and from students via smartphone. Since the researcher shifted a lot of class material to "on-demand" content, this freed up a lot of class time for student support.

3.5 Student Wellbeing

Table 6. Compared to Face-to-Face Classes, How Did you Physically Feel after Online Classes?

Response	% of Responses
Not tired at all	2%
Not really tired	35%
Tired	56%
Much more tired	7%

Table 7. Compared to Face-to-Face Classes, Did You Feel any Stress with Online Classes?

Response	% of Responses
None at all	0%
I felt a little stress	37%
I felt some stress	53%
I felt a lot of stress	9%

All six students who were interviewed took classes the same way—they used a notebook computer and either a work desk and chair or a low desk with a floor cushion. They all initially felt a lot of discomfort and fatigue from using a computer all day but eventually got used to it. Three students used blue light reducing glasses or monitor film and claimed they felt less tired. Although students initially were not well prepared for remote learning, they learnt to adapt with many small changes. It could be said that universities should spend time educating students on basic computer ergonomics.

One student preferred online because of her physical condition:

Ami: I guess I'm not like other students, but I sometimes get very bad stomach aches and have to leave class. In an online class, I don't have to worry so much about this.

Two students felt that their stress levels were about the same as in face-to-face classes.

Matsuo: I think both styles of learning have different good and bad points. If you add them up, they're about the same.

Honomi: With online classes, I can get more sleep and free time, but with face-to-face classes I can see my friends more often. So, I think in terms of stress, they're about the same.

It is important to note that as second year students, all the participants had an opportunity to attend face-to-face classes in 2018. It could be said that they were all able to enjoy a "normal" introduction to university, and since they were adjusted to campus life, remote learning did not have such a stressful impact on their overall experience. The same cannot be said for first year students who have only had a remote experience.

3.6 Student Preferences

Table 8. Looking back on the Year 2020, which Style of Learning do You Think Is Best Suited for You?

Response	% of Responses
Online	28%
Face-to-face	33%
Blend of both styles	40%

Given all the data and responses, it could easily be assumed that a majority of students did not acclimatize or fit well with learning online. Despite this, the responses for Table 8 were fairly surprising. As mentioned before from Tables 2 and 3, it is possible that students simply found the other benefits from remote learning far too advantageous.

In addition to all the advantages and disadvantages, all the interviewees had a lot to say about their preferred style of learning.

Honomi: As a 3rd year student, we will have less classes, and some of us will start doing internships. Online classes would be much better. It gives us more flexibility with our schedules, and commuting to university for just one class feels like a waste of time.

Riku: I would be happy with only our English classes being face-to-face and everything else online. In English classes communication is a big part of our studies, but for lecture classes, they were actually easier online. If I am sitting far from the board, it is very difficult to read the slides or what the teacher is writing. I never had that problem with online classes. I could even take a screenshot of important information.

Yoshihiro: A big problem for me was that the teachers couldn't read the room. Since everyone had their cameras off, the teacher couldn't tell if students understood the lesson or not, so the teacher would just keep teaching. And since I couldn't see the other students, I didn't know if other students didn't understand the class, so I didn't want to disturb the class.

Author: Did you ever have this same problem with face-to-face classes?

Yoshihiro: No, because it was very easy to ask the person sitting next to me if they also didn't understand something. I couldn't do that in Zoom, sometimes I tried typing something to my friend in chat, but I'm not fast (at typing), so by the time I sent the message, the teacher was already talking about something else.

Ami: I felt that I could concentrate more in an online class. For example, in a face-to-face class, I have to sit and listen the whole time. With an online class, if I'm feeling tired, I could stand up, stretch my legs and even eat a snack—I could never do that in a classroom.

Author: So all this freedom made studying easier for you?

Ami: Yes, I felt like I could use my time more effectively. I could do things like cut my nails during class.

The interviewees responses indicate that there are very mixed impressions of remote learning. Much of which could be contributed to discrepancies in teaching styles and lesson content. Even before the pandemic it could be said that efficacy in language learning was subject to immeasurable variables. Remote teaching in comparison is still in its' infancy, and there is still much to learn about the most effective ways to deliver classes online.

3.7 Research Limitations

The University has 174 students enrolled in the Global Management program. Of those, only 44 students (25%) replied to the survey. A larger representation of the student population would have been desirable. The survey was sent to students' university e-mail addresses during the spring vacation, so it is plausible to assume many students simply did not read the e-mail.

The interviews were conducted by the author—a non-native speaker of Japanese. Although there were no breakdowns in communication, it can be said that perhaps students had to change their answers because they were not speaking to a native speaker.

The author was an instructor for one class of 2nd-year students; it is possible some of those students did not want to participate in the research, knowing that their answers and feedback would be read by their instructor.

4. Discussion

It is true that a majority of students were thrust into online learning in 2019, but the same is also true for teachers and educators. The experience of an online classroom is inherently different, and the same materials and techniques from a face-to-face class don't necessarily adapt well in an online environment. Teachers should be open to shifting to on-demand or "flipped" content for lesson materials with little or no student interaction. Students have a much easier time absorbing information

25

at their own pace, and the ability to replay, pause or learn at their own convenience is incredibly valuable—especially when learning a second language. Likewise, teachers need to be aware of the technological literacy that compounds with their students' language literacy. At the start of the pandemic, many students were just starting to learn how to use their computers. Giving instructions for homework submission, setting up an LMS, or document sharing in English, compounds two literacy hurdles. Zoom lessons need to be more open for students to interact with their teachers. Rules need to be established for break-out rooms such as having cameras on, giving students discussion roles, and having post-reporting activities such as summarizing points on the class's online learning management system.

Finally, the results indicate that there are some students that reciprocate well with online learning. Be it a personality, lifestyle, or learning trait – some students simply prefer the online experience. Remote classes also provide reprieve for situations where student accessibility would be concerned. Neurodiversity, financial issues, time, or living constraints could all be addressed by providing an online option for university students. Looking forward, the pandemic unveiled an opportunity for education to suit learners of different spectrums. Educators and university administrators should consider the benefits of online learning—even in a post-Covid world.

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