Student and Teacher Perceptions of Online Language Learning

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The results of a mixed-methods study are reported and discussed in this research paper. Two hundred-seventy students and 30 teachers at a private university in Japan completed a 20-item questionnaire on perceptions of changes to students' English proficiency, interaction skills, and technical and organizational skills during an online learning period. The teachers were asked how their students' abilities had changed after the online study period. In the qualitative half of the study, ten students and five teachers were asked to expand on their answers to the questionnaire and answer follow-up questions in ten-minute interviews. The results revealed differences between groups of students, based on the duration of online experience. The results also illustrated the differences between student and teacher groups' perceptions about the online learning experience. Several areas could be explored in resumed face-to-face classes, in terms of educational direction, and mixing elements of online and face-to-face learning.

研究論文では混合手法を用いた研究の結果を報告し、考察する。日本の私立大学で、270人の学生と30人の教師を対象とし、オンライン学習期間中の学生の英語力、対話スキル、技術及び組織スキルへの認識に関する20項目の質問の回答を得た。教師には、オンライン学習期間後の学生の能力の変化について尋ねた。研究の質的側面では、10人の学生と5人の教師に質問への回答の幅を広げるために、10分間のインタビューで更なる質問に回答してもらった。その結果、オンライン経験の期間に基づいて、学生グループ間で違いが明らかになった。また、オンライン学習体験に関する学生と教師グループ間の認識の違いが示された。教育方針やオンラインと対面学習の要素を組み合わせた面で、対面授業再開時にいくつかの領域が探究される可能性がある。

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a rapid implementation of online learning curriculums around the world, altering the traditional educational landscape. By July 2020, some degree of online learning had been set up for 84% of higher education institutions in Japan (MEXT, 2020). The shift was met with challenges, as students and educators navigated hurdles and adjusted to remote instruction in their own ways. While language skill abilities seem to have changed, classroom interaction skills, technical skills, and organizational skills also seem to have been affected. Despite the obstacles, this rapid adaptation fostered innovation, encouraging the integration of digital tools and collaborative learning methods into current curriculums. Ultimately, this transformation not only safeguarded education but also initiated discussions on effectively incorporating the skills acquired by students and educators moving forward from online learning into face-to-face settings.

Literature Review

The role of online language learning in learning curriculums has been debated at great length (Tao & Gao, 2022). The topic has been covered from the perspective of the teacher (Anugrah, 2022) and the student (Kohnke & Jarvis, 2023). Reviewing both aspects allows for a broader understanding of the issues.

Miyoshi, Pan, and Hu (2022) posited that a variety of online education formats, such as live, on-demand, and hybrid classes, could result in students acquiring appropriate knowledge and skills, and investigated which formats would best help students acquire learning outcomes. A 15-item questionnaire (n = 2,587) was administered to over 30 private universities across Japan. The questionnaire covered student attitudes towards online learning related to future occupations, logical written composition skills and clear speaking skills, foreign language skills, the ability to think analytically and critically, and the ability to identify problems and think of solutions. They found that the knowledge and skills acquired differed depending on the type of online learning. Teachers and

curriculum designers can tailor their online classes to cater to the needs of specific groups of students. As the authors studied online learning in general, further studies were called for that would shed light on the more specific needs of different groups of students in online, as well as face-to-face, classroom environments.

In contrast, Lee (2022) examined 20 Korean college students' thoughts about online language learning. The goal of the mixed-method study was to identify factors that would improve the quality of online education from a student's point-of-view. The study included a 20-item questionnaire, interviews, student reflection papers, and the instructor's field notes. The results illustrated that overall students felt that online learning was inferior to face-to-face classes. However, students noted that online learning could include a better level of customization, teacher's feedback, student interaction, and a more customized task design. The study calls for more research into what aspects of online learning could be adapted to face-to-face language learning environments. The authors also note that using a mixed-methods approach would allow for multiple perspectives.

Pudelek's 2022 study focused on students' perceptions of online learning tools and platforms. A 15-item questionnaire administered to 38 university students at a Japanese university inquired about the usefulness of Google Classrooms, Zoom, and LMS platforms for receiving instructions, submitting assignments, communicating with teachers, and holding group discussions. The results showed that one-third of the students surveyed would prefer to take classes face to face, mostly for the interaction. Another third would prefer hybrid classes. The discussion focused on the most beneficial online platforms that could be used for acquiring technological and language skills. In addition, the author discussed aspects of online platforms and applications that could be useful in face-to-face classes.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how different groups of students and teachers perceived changes in students' abilities during the online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study addresses the calls for more holistic research into student and teacher perceptions of online language learning, and additionally, illustrates how aspects of online learning could be adapted to face-to-face settings. Four research questions were derived from the gaps in the literature:

RQ1. What significant relationships exist among student perceptions of English Language Skills, Classroom Interaction Skills, and Technical/Organizational Skills of Japanese university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students?

RQ2. What significant differences exist in student perceptions of English Language Skills, Classroom Interaction Skills, and Technical/Organizational Skills between two groups of Japanese university EFL students that experienced different durations of online English language learning courses?

RQ3. Are there significant differences between students' and teachers' rating of students' perceptions of English Language Skills, Classroom Interaction Skills, and Technical/Organizational Skills?

RQ4. Will interviews with students and teachers corroborate the questionnaire responses?

Methodology

Participants

A total of 270 participants were students from a variety of majors at a private university in Japan. Ninety-three of the participants were first-year students, while 101 were second-year students and 76 were third-year students. Students were enrolled in required or elective English courses. The students self-reported their English language proficiency level as basic (n = 72), intermediate (n = 113), and advanced (n = 85), corresponding to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) levels A1, B1, and C1, respectively. While 151 of the participants had studied online for a period of one year during the COVID-19, the remaining 119 students had studied online for two years. Students with less than one year of consecutive online learning were not included in this study. In addition, 30 teachers participated in the study, each of whom had taught online classes during the COVID pandemic at the same private university in Japan.

Materials

Questionnaire

A 20-item Japanese/English questionnaire was administered to 270 students and 30 teachers in the final week of July 2022, one semester after the university resumed face-to-face classes. A questionnaire was used to better understand learners' perspectives and values on an issue (Dornyei & Taguchi, 2009). Part A of the questionnaire covered basic information, including year of university, self-assessment of English language ability, and duration of consecutive online language study. Part B included the prompt: "How did your online language classes (due to the Covid pandemic) affect your ability in the following skills?"

This same questionnaire was altered for teachers. Part A asked only about the number of language classes that were taught online each semester. The teacher prompt in Part B was altered to "How did online language classes affect your students' abilities in the following skills?

Twenty items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from Decreased, Decreased a little, Unchanged, Increased a little, to Increased. Based on the results of a previous pilot questionnaire, the 20 items were designed to tap into four hypothesized constructs: English Language Skills, Classroom Interaction Skills, Technical Skills, and Organizational Skills. All items on the questionnaire were written by the author and appeared in the questionnaire in a randomized order. The questionnaire was administered on paper (see Appendix 1).

Interviews

Interviews have been found to be a useful qualitative tool in triangulating data obtained from quantitative methods (Mackey, 2020). The questionnaire findings were meant to be corroborated by information obtained from a series of 10-minute interviews with 10 students (5 from the one-year duration group and 5 from the two-year duration group) and 5 teachers. Participants answered nine questions in English or Japanese (see Appendix 2). Japanese responses were transcribed by a Japanese university EFL teacher.

Ethical Considerations

A detachable informed consent form was attached to the questionnaire, which participants signed and submitted separately. The form explained the purpose of the study to the participants. It also outlined that the questionnaire was: anonymous, optional, to be completed outside of class, and did not affect the students' grades in any way. Permission for conducting this study was granted by the university.

Data Analysis

Questionnaire

The Rasch rating scale model (Andrich, 1978) was used primarily to confirm that the questionnaire items used to measure English Language Skills, Classroom Interaction Skills, Technical Skills, and Organizational Skills fit the Rasch model and formed the hypothesized constructs. In addition, the Rasch rating scale model was employed to demonstrate the validity and reliability of the questionnaire items.

A Rasch principal components analysis was undertaken on the four hypothesized constructs. The dimensionality of the 20 items was checked to determine the order of the construct analysis. It was hypothesized that the 20 items were not unidimensional, and this was confirmed with the large amount of unexplained variance (14.3%) and eigenvalue (6.6) in the first residual contrast.

The infit MNSQ and outfit MNSQ statistics were inspected. Infit MNSQ is an inlier-sensitive statistic that can detect unexpected responses of persons whose ability is closer to the item's difficulty level. In contrast, outfit MNSQ is outlier-sensitive and can overfit for responses that are more orderly than expected, or underfit for correct guesses on difficult items or mistakes on easy items. As MNSQ statistics are context-dependent, a formula developed by Pollitt and Hutchinson (1987) specified a range of plus or minus two standard deviations of the infit and outfit MNSQ statistics. This formula was considered most appropriate for this study.

Fifteen misfitting student responses were deleted. Item 4, *Multi-tasking in English*, and Item 16, *Ability to think critically*, displayed the worst fits (Infit MNSQ = 1.64; Outfit MNSQ = 1.63 and Infit MNSQ = 1.58; Outfit MNSQ = 1.61, respectively). Both items were subsequently deleted.

The dimensionality of the remaining 18 items was checked again to determine the order of the construct analysis. The large amount of unexplained variance (14.3%) confirmed that the remaining 18 items were not unidimensional. This is important to note as it indicates that there is not just one single trait present, but rather a number of distinct variables being measured. Both the Rasch item reliability and separation statistics were excellent at .99 and 8.57, respectively. The Rasch person reliability and separation estimates were good at .83 and 2.18, respectively.

Six of the seven items designed to measure the English Language Skills construct showed the strongest residual loadings and were removed and analyzed separately. The process was repeated with the remaining 14 items, which also resulted in a large unexplained variance (7.6%). Six of the Classroom Interaction Skill items showed the strongest contrast, and they were analyzed separately. This process was repeated again. Five of the six remaining items loaded together in a combined new construct that was labeled Technical and Organizational Skills. Item 19, *Overall English ability*, did not load strongly with any of the constructs, and was ultimately deleted, leaving 17 items in the analysis. The findings of the principal components analysis are summarized in Table 1. In the table, the figures in brackets indicate the strength of the item loading, or how well the items fit the construct.

Table 1

Summary of Rasch Principal Components Analysis Constructs and Item Loading

English Language Skills (ES)	Classroom Interaction Skills (IS)	Technical/Organizational Skills (TOS)
14. English grammar (0.58)	2. with partners (0.72) **	13. Using applications in English (0.54) *
7. Listening in English (0.52)	8. Working with groups (0.70)	11. Message/email others in English (0.52)
10. Speaking in English (0.52) **	12. Answering questions (0.53)	18. Typing in English (0.51)
17. English vocabulary (0.52)	5. Asking questions (0.51)	6. Managing time in English tasks (0.41) **
1. Reading in English (0.50) *	20. Following instructions (0.49)	9. Being organized in English tasks (0.40)
3. Writing in English (0.45)	15. Working on your own (0.48) *	

Note. * easiest item to agree with; ** most difficult item to agree with

Results

Research Question 1

The first research question examined whether significant relationships exist among student perceptions of English Language Skills, Classroom Interaction Skills, and Technical/Organizational Skills of Japanese university EFL students. Statistically significant, low to medium correlations were found among all three affective variables (Cohen, 1988). A significant relationship was found between English Language Skills and Classroom Interaction Skills (r = .49, p< .01), and Technical/Organizational Skills (r = .21, p< .05). Additionally, a significant relationship was found between Classroom Interaction Skills and Technical/Organizational Skills (r = .32, p< .05).

Research Questions 2 and 3

Research question 2 investigated whether there would be significant differences in student perceptions of English Language Skills, Classroom Interaction Skills, and Technical/Organizational Skills between two groups of Japanese university EFL students that experienced different durations of online English language courses. The first group of students completed online classes for one year (n = 151), while the second group of students finished two years of online classes (n = 119). Research Question 3 assessed whether the same significant differences in perceptions would also be found between the student groups and the teacher group (n = 30).

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to examine the relationship of the three affective dependent among the three groups of participants (n = 300) participants. Before undertaking the MANOVA, it was determined that the nine assumptions for testing multivariate normality, equality of covariance matrices, linearity, homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices, absence of multicollinearity, independence, random sampling, continuous dependent variables, and absence of outliers were met.

The MANOVA yielded a significant, but moderate effect, Wilk's lambda = .68, $F(2, 297) = 4.52$, $p < .001$, partial eta-squared = .12. Follow-up analyses using univariate ANOVAs with Bonferroni adjustments revealed that there were significant differences among the groups.

Research Question 2

Follow-up pairwise comparisons using a Bonferroni adjustment revealed differences between the two student groups for one of the dependent variables: Classroom Interaction Skills ($F(2, 267) = 6.48$, $p < .05$). The one-year duration group reported significantly higher levels of Classroom Interaction Skills compared to the two-year duration group ($p < .05$). No other significant differences were found between the two groups.

Research Question 3

Follow-up pairwise comparisons using a Bonferroni adjustment revealed differences between the teacher group and the groups of students for two of the dependent variables: English Language Skills ($F(2, 297) = 7.12$, $p < .01$) and Classroom Interaction Skills ($F(2, 297) = 3.89$, $p < .05$). The teacher group reported significantly lower perceptions of students' levels of English Language Skills ($p < .01$), and Classroom Interaction Skills ($p < .05$) than either of the student groups. No other significant differences were found among the groups for Technical/Organizational Skills.

Research Question 4

Research question 4, which was qualitative in nature, assessed whether interviews might be able to corroborate learners' questionnaire responses (Mackey, 2020). Common themes were not pre-conceived but derived from the participants' responses, providing a more accurate representation of student perceptions (Cresswell & Poth, 2017). Comments were categorized into common themes and are summarized in the table below.

Table 2

Summary of Interview Responses by Group and Theme

Theme	One-year Duration Group	Two-year Duration Group	Teacher Group
Duration	• Interesting for the most part (4) • Wasted a lot of time (4) • Boring near the end of the semesters (3)	• Class times moved very slowly (4) • Interesting at first, but got boring quickly (4) • Prefer face-to-face (3)	• Online classes were novel at first (4) • Standardized lessons became inconsistent among Ts (3)
English Language Skills	• Speaking ability decreased (4) • Skills in listening and reading improved (3) • Technical problems made speaking a problem (3)	• Only reading skills improved (5) • Speaking skills decreased sharply (5)	• Speaking and grammar skills lagged (4) • Ss don't realize they are behind (3) • Ss read more (3) • Listening improved (3)
Interaction Skills	• Ps sometimes had cameras and mics turned off (4) • Ps were just going through the motions (3) • Some group members had no interaction (4) • Technical problems made interaction unnatural (3) • Ss were reluctant to answer questions (3)	• No typical class bond (3) • Ps often had cameras and mics turned off (4) • Some Ss did not participate (4) • Improved at working on my own (4) • Ps were not enthusiastic (3) • Technical problems (3) • No one wanted to ask or answer questions (3)	• Ss got used to not participating with partners and groups (4) • Ss seemed reluctant to answer questions (4) • Ss worked well independently (4) • Ss did not want to stand out in any way online (3) • Ss messaged Ts after class with questions (3)
Tech. and Org. Skills	• Learned a lot about computers and applications (4) • Feel more confident about using computers and applications in future assignments (2)	• Technical abilities improved (5) • Useful for future assignments (5) • Technical problems made speaking a problem in class (4) • I was not ready to take charge of my own schedule/ learning (3)	• Ss improved their abilities in being able to download, complete, and submit assignments online (5) • Ss seem comfortable with the tech aspect (4) • Time management is problematic for Ss (3) • Time management and organization seems related to Ss level and duration (2)

Theme	One-year Duration Group	Two-year Duration Group	Teacher Group
Adjusting to face-to-face classes	• Happy to return to the classroom (4) • Masks are a problem in communication (3) • Ts didn't seem to know students as well (2)	• Covid seating and masks make communication confusing (3) • Less time for teacher feedback (3)	• Masks were/ continue to be a problem in communication (4) • Most Ss prefer having face-to-face classes, despite the obvious conveniences (4) • Classroom COVID seating was not an ideal communication setting (3)
Ideas Moving Forward	• Feel more confident about using computers and applications in future assignments (2) • More time for reviewing material that should have been covered already (2)	• Ts should communicate more about students' overall progress (2) • Some Ss might be better with the option of hybrid classes (2)	• Use Ss' strong points in curriculum (4) • Needs analysis of Ss' weak points (2) • Find ways for Ss to better track their progress (3) • Review of standards is necessary (2)

Note. Ss = students, Ts = teachers, Ps = Partners, (Number) = denotes frequency of comments.

Several common patterns emerged from the interview data. The two groups of students seemed to realize that their English Language Skills had stagnated to some degree, but the teacher group seemed more aware of this than the students. All groups also seemed to recognize the decrease in Classroom Interaction Skills, but this was especially true of the two-year duration group. All groups seem to notice the students' strengths in Technical Skills compared with pre-pandemic levels and several participants commented that these skills could be incorporated into the current face-to-face classes. Most participants commented that the longer they studied online, the less interesting classes became. Although all students and teachers that were interviewed preferred returning to face-to-face classes, a few mentioned an interest in having the option to attend hybrid classes. Most participants seemed to realize that a general review of goals and standards is necessary in the current face-to-face classes, as students' abilities had progressed at different rates during their online studies.

Discussion

The objective was to research how different groups of students and teachers viewed changes in students' abilities during the online classes. First, the results illustrated statistically significant correlations between English Language Skills, Classroom Interaction Skills, and Technical/Organizational Skills. The strongest correlation was between English Language Skills and Classroom Interaction Skills. The results illustrate how online language learning is affected by not only language ability, but also classroom interaction and technical and organizational skills. The findings are important as they provide a common baseline for comparisons between the three different groups of participants in the study.

Second, the results demonstrated that the group of students with one year of online study rated their Classroom Interaction Skills significantly higher than those in the two-year duration group. This finding was corroborated by comments made in the interviews. While students with one year of online study commented that they were interested in the novelty of the online experience, the two-year duration group reported an aversion to classroom interaction, in part, due to boredom with the online format. Language learning suffered as a result. Although the one-year duration group rated their abilities in all three affective variables somewhat higher than the group with two years of online study, the differences in English Classroom Skills and Technical/Organizational Skills were not significant. There were also some interview comments from the two-year duration group saying that they were aware that their abilities were not improving.

Third, the results showed that the teacher group rated the students' abilities in different ways. While their perceptions of students' English Language Skills and Classroom Interaction Skills were rated significantly lower than either of the student groups, there were no significant differences among the groups in Technical/ Organizational Skills. Those findings were echoed in the comments made by teachers about students' abilities. They commented that students were overestimating their abilities in their English Language Skills and Classroom Interaction Skills. Only after

face-to-face classes resumed, did they start to notice that their abilities had declined. This was also documented in the interview comments made by the students, particularly in the two-year duration group. Teachers noted that their own abilities in adapting to the online format may have contributed to the students' lack of interest. They explained that their lack of experience in preparing suitable online materials may be partly responsible for the decline in abilities. Finally, there were some comments that online assignments allowed more opportunities for personal, specific feedback, supporting the findings of Lee (2022), although it is not clear from student comments whether the feedback was incorporated or not.

Limitations

Three important limitations to the study should be mentioned. First, self-reported data risks the chance of over- or under-reporting, due to a number of external factors. Second, the statistical results should be viewed with caution due to the relatively low number of teachers (n = 30) compared to the number of students in the study. Finally, a 5-point Likert scale was used in the questionnaire. In hindsight, the use of a 6-point Likert scale would have been a better way to curb the student tendency to choose the middle option in questionnaires (Busch, 1993).

Pedagogical Implications

Based on the results of this study, teachers can build on students' strengths acquired during online classes to enhance current face-to-face settings in several ways. Initially, integrating familiar technology used in online classes can elevate classroom activities, and create a more interactive learning environment. For example, incorporating online assignments, alongside traditional classroom settings, can provide a unique learning experience. In addition, using individualized and self-directed approaches found in online classes allows teachers in face-to-face settings to address specific student needs more effectively, confirming the research of Miyoshi, Pan, and Hu (2022). Moreover, a wide array of digital resources can now be integrated into face-to-face teaching. Finally, teachers can explore ways to give quicker, more effective feedback during in-person classes, as noted by students in this study. One example might be students receiving feedback directly after completing a presentation.

In contrast, focusing on areas for improvement, based on students' and teachers' online class experiences, can enhance the quality of students' face-to-face classes. First, nurturing communication skills remains pivotal to language learning. In addition, the results of this study demonstrate that emphasizing verbal interaction is needed for a more holistic educational experience. Including classroom activities that require interaction can counter the lack of classroom interaction noted by the participants in online classes. Moreover, developing tasks and activities that support learner autonomy, self-discipline, and time management skills can spark a sense of learner self-efficacy, where students take ownership of their learning in face-to-face settings. Finally, harnessing the flexibility that was required in online learning could prove to be a powerful tool in catering to diverse learning styles and environments in face-to-face learning.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine how different groups of students and teachers perceived changes in students' abilities during the online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of the questionnaire highlighted significant correlations between English Language Skills, Classroom Interaction Skills, and Technical/Organizational Skills. It also demonstrated that teachers rated students' abilities in English Language Skills and Classroom Interaction Skills significantly lower than that of the students. Furthermore, it revealed that students who had online classes for one year rated their Classroom Interaction Skills significantly higher than students who had online classes for two years. Explanations of possible reasons were explored in follow-up interviews.

Over time, the lack of variation in the online class format became a demotivating factor, and language learning suffered as a result. Finally, this study outlined strong evidence of students' strengths and weaknesses. Now that teachers and students have returned to face-to face settings, students and teachers can take stock of what was successfully learned and what still needs to be improved. Echoing the findings of Pudelek's 2022 study, incorporating successful aspects of the online experience, such as integrating familiar technology, using more individualized approaches, in addition to providing more direct feedback, will ensure that some of the lessons learned online can still be used in the return to face-to-face learning.

Bio Data

Ferg Hann has lived in Tokyo for the last eight years and teaches at Tokai University. He has also taught in the U.A.E., Egypt, and South Korea.

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Appendix 1

Student Questionnaire (English version)

A. Basic information (circle the best answer)

Age: 18 19 20 21 22+

Year of university: 1 2 3 4

Since the beginning of the Covid pandemic (04/20), how many years did you study online?

0 .5 years 1 year 1.5 years 2 years 2.5 years

What is the overall level of your English language ability?

Basic Intermediate Advanced

B. Since the beginning of the Covid Pandemic, how has your ability of the following skills changed in your English language classes?

	Decreased	Decreased a little	Unchanged	Increased a little	Increased
1. Reading in English					
2. Ability to work together with a partner in English					
3. Writing in English					
4. Multi-tasking in English					
5. Ability to ask questions in class in English					
6. Ability to manage your time well in English classes					
7. Listening in English					
8. Ability to work together with a group in English					
9. Ability to be organized in English tasks					

10. Speaking in English					
11. Ability to message/email other people in English					
12. Ability to answer questions in class in English					
13. Ability to use computer applications in English					
14. English grammar					
15. Ability to work on your own in English					
16. Ability to think critically in English tasks					
17. English Vocabulary					
18. Ability to type in English					
19. Your overall ability in English					
20. Ability to follow instructions in English					

Appendix 2

Interviews

10-minute interviews with 10 students (5 from the one-year duration group and 5 from the two-year duration group) and 5 teachers. Participants answered nine questions in English or Japanese (see Appendix 1). Japanese responses were transcribed by a Japanese university EFL teacher:

1. What were your impressions of studying your courses online?
2. How did your English language skills change during your online study?
3. How did your classroom interaction skills change during your online study?
4. How did your technical skills change during your online study?
5. How did your organizational skills change during your online study?
6. What were the advantages and disadvantages of studying online?
7. How did you feel about returning to face-to-face classes?
8. What ideas/skills did you learn during your online study that could be used in our face-to-face classes?
9. Is there anything else you would like to add about the topic of online or face-to-face classes?