






Attitudes of part-time Japanese university teachers on technology use after emergency remote teaching

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Abstract

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, many Japanese universities made the decision to stop on-campus classes. This generally meant teaching remotely, either synchronously or asynchronously. Online courses are usually planned in advance with a curriculum and materials designed for that mode of teaching. The situation in 2020 was different, most teachers had only a few weeks to adapt their teaching materials and methods for Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). The aim of this research was to investigate the experiences of university teachers during and after the period of ERT and to investigate how we can learn from this experience to avoid what Vegas (2022) refers to as a 'missed opportunity'. This was achieved through an initial pilot survey and five semi-structured follow-up interviews conducted in 2023. The results indicated that despite some reporting high levels of initial anxiety, most teachers adapted, learning new skills and developing their technical expertise, which is now being used in face-to-face classes. As most teachers reported support in the period of ERT as having been uncoordinated – being provided by colleagues rather than through official workshops organized by institutions - this is an area that could be developed in the future.

Keywords: *Emergency Remote Teaching, Higher Education, Online Learning.*

1. Introduction

Technology has had an enormous impact on most aspects of our lives, but prior to COVID-19 it did not appear to have had a major impact on education. Vegas (2022) hypothesized that this might be explained by the theoretical framework presented by Cohen and Ball (1999), which argues that the reason educational reform is usually not effective is the failure to pay enough attention to interactions between the educators and learners. Although this framework was aimed at educational reform in general, it could more specifically be applied to educational technology. Vegas (2022) found that ed-tech interventions are most effective when they incorporate some of the advantages of ed-tech, for example the possibility to increase scale of instruction, enable personalized instruction, expand possibilities for practice, and increase possibilities for engagement. Carefully planned online courses are usually built to incorporate these features, unfortunately in the rush to switch to ERT these factors may initially not have been incorporated (Hodges et al., 2020). However, over the period of ERT, teachers were able to better

incorporate effective ed-tech in their teaching. Unfortunately, what Vegas (2022) found worrying is that in many instances, as schools reopened, educational systems seemed to return to traditional pre-COVID-19 styles of education, leading to a lost opportunity to learn from what had been experienced.

Learning Management Systems (LMS) allow schools to offer classes both asynchronously and synchronously. They can be used to share teaching materials, collect assignments, set tests, and for communicating with students (Dovrat, 2022). During ERT these systems were widely used in Japanese universities in a way they had not been before. Continuing the use of LMS, even in face-to-face classes, allows class materials to be easily accessed by students and updated by teachers. It also allows for easy tracking of submissions and grades by teachers and students (Eto, 2021). Oliveira et al. (2021) found positive and negative perspectives emerged during ERT. Namely, teachers were found to be more available to answer student questions; but teachers and students lacked face-to-face interaction and human contact within class time, largely due to students not turning on their cameras. Oliveira et al. (2021) also found that teachers and students experienced an improved balance between their academic and personal lives due to reduced commuting times and attending conferences online. However, they also reported that teachers admitted to 'burn out' and mental health issues, while students reported that they pretended to attend lectures when they were really doing something else.

By acknowledging the negative and positive aspects of ERT during COVID-19, it is hoped that this research will assist educators in incorporating best practices in online and face-to-face classes in the future, and avoid Vegas's (2022) concerns that schools and universities will revert to pre-pandemic styles of teaching without adopting all that has been learned.

2. Method

2.1. Research method

In 2022 an initial pilot survey ($N=31$) was carried out using Google Forms to understand the experiences of university instructors in Japan during the ERT period (Donnellan et al., 2022). It revealed that part-time lecturers seemed to need the most support because they dealt with multiple LMS, class types, and policies at different institutions. The researchers decided to conduct follow-up semi-structured interviews to further investigate the different challenges and circumstances faced by part-time teachers during ERT.

2.2. Participants

Five part-time teachers who responded to the survey and expressed willingness to be interviewed were selected for follow-up interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and transcribed using Zoom, each one lasting approximately 30 minutes. The researchers then coded the data into themes. Informed consent was obtained from each interviewee at the time of the initial pilot survey and again at the time of the interviews. The results of the qualitative interview data were compared to the initial survey data and analyzed to give clear insights into the types of training and support that is necessary post-ERT.

3. Results

A variety of opinions were shared by the interviewees, but a few of the pertinent recurring themes, those of 'support', 'money', 'work-life balance', and 'skills acquired', are explored below.

3.1 Support

All teachers stated that support from administration was limited and when it was provided it was mostly in Japanese and was not specifically related to language teaching. Most of the teachers stated that Japanese language ability was a problem for them or colleagues. Some coordinators tried to overcome this by interpreting and translating communications into English. Furthermore, all of the teachers interviewed found the written manuals for LMS to either be inadequate or written in Japanese that was very difficult to understand for non-native Japanese speakers. For support, the majority of teachers turned to online tutorials. It may be due to this that most teachers were more positive about LMS such as Google Classroom, Moodle, and Blackboard rather than bespoke LMS made for specific universities with little online support in English. Furthermore, in most cases teachers stated that while their coordinators were not specialists they did try to answer questions, but they felt that the best support came from peers and informal groups formed on social media platforms for those navigating similar issues.

All of the interviewees stated that at some point they actually trained or supported other teachers. Three of the teachers reported being very confident with technology and were asked to run various workshops for other teachers. This was based on the fact that they had used the technology before, even if that knowledge was limited. Indeed, Interviewee 1 commented, “I had used Zoom about 3 times before and was the one doing the training for some people, because I guess 3 times is better than 0 times.” This indicates the inadequate level of knowledge about online teaching at many universities in Japan prior to ERT. Interviewee 5, who was not confident at the beginning of ERT, helped other teachers who were even less confident, saying, “There were a couple of other teachers that were struggling. So, then I was trying to help that teacher [sic] separately.” The implication is that support was very organic, coming from teachers seeing a need and stepping in to support each other. It appears to have been a very community-based approach with Interviewee 3 noting, “The thing I would say is that it was obvious that we were all learning together.” Two of the teachers mentioned receiving and providing psychological support as well as practical advice, as mentioned by Interviewee 4, “I was called for ... less teaching and more psychiatric help.”

3.2 Money

Teachers also commented on the financial cost of ERT. Most teachers received no funding for Wi-Fi or to buy a computer, despite the fact that the majority of students at universities in Japan were given financial support to buy computers (Kyodo News, 2020). One teacher was given ¥100 per online lesson to pay for electricity and another teacher was given a small lump sum to pay for extra materials. This may have helped, but was insufficient for teachers who needed to buy new hardware or upgrade their internet connection. In addition, Interviewee 3 said that they did not use purchasable apps or software because they had no funds to pay for them, stating, “I avoided using almost all the apps I think ... the fact that you don't have money to buy stuff is an issue.”

3.3 Work-life balance

All of the interviewees mentioned positive aspects of ERT, in particular, an improvement in their work-life balance. Two of the interviewees had young children and spoke of the benefits of being able to be at home with their children. Additionally, commuting became unnecessary, allowing greater flexibility with schedules. One of the interviewees commented on how much they loved this, saying they had time to go to Starbucks and see their child off each morning as they started kindergarten.

3.4 Skills acquired

The teachers stated that not only had they gained skills and confidence in using technology, but students did too. This has greatly impacted how post-ERT face-to-face classes are conducted. Students are more computer literate, and university administrations are more accepting of technology in the classroom. Interviewee 3 stated that their university now has a Media Center where teachers can receive advice on how to implement pedagogical ideas. The

use of different LMS at different universities did not seem to cause major issues, which surprisingly contrasts with initial findings in the pilot survey. It is hypothesized that this contrast is due to the fact that those more confident or knowledgeable with technology use for classes stated their willingness to be interviewed on the initial survey. Indeed, all the teachers still use the LMS extensively for testing and assignments post-ERT. Two of them even stated that they have gone paperless, just as they were during the pandemic. Communicating with students has also become much easier. At the beginning of the pandemic many students were using email to communicate with their teacher, but can now use messaging systems that are part of university LMS. Surprisingly most of the teachers in this research spoke very positively about ERT, using words such as “I loved it” or “I loved the challenge.” On the other hand, hybrid classes with students joining both online and in person were very unpopular, with Interviewee 1 stating, “Students could decide 1 minute before class which one they were doing ... just awful, because I had no idea how to get groups sorted and stuff like that. I would never want to do hybrid again.”

4. Discussion

Though it might be assumed that ERT was very stressful, teachers in this research were very positive. Comments about being able to spend more time with their children and not commute were common. Teachers also formed close bonds supporting each other. In addition, though it may have been expected that university administrations would have provided support for teachers, it appears that on the whole there was very little technological or financial support. Teachers joined together forming online groups to teach each other what they knew. Much of this seemed to be people with little knowledge guiding people with even less knowledge. This mutual support among peers was not formalized but, as such, seemed to work effectively. It may have been that university administrators were more focused on students and trying to manage the logistics of updating LMS and Wi-Fi networks, and therefore did not have the resources to devote to teacher training. Results from the initial pilot survey showed that using different LMS at multiple universities caused a problem for the part-time teachers, but they did not cite this as a major obstacle to successful ERT during the interviews. However, only one of the teachers interviewed stated that they were not confident with technology prior to ERT, this may be because teachers interested in technology were more likely to fill in the initial survey and subsequently agree to be interviewed.

5. Conclusions

Although this research seems to indicate that the period of ERT was successful, it is obvious that in the beginning there was a period when universities and part-time teachers were struggling. The fact ERT ended up being fruitful for those in this research seems to be largely due to individual teachers helping each other. In the future, it would be advantageous for universities to build a system for training all teachers and students on effective use of LMS and digital tools. Financial support for part-time teachers was also lacking. This is an ongoing issue as part-time teachers do not receive special funds that allow them to utilize tools they found effective during ERT or think could have a positive impact in their classes post-ERT, possibly leading to more missed opportunities. It is hoped that in the future, universities will find ways to support all teachers so that technology will complement classroom teaching rather than replace it.

Although this research has been informative, in future, it would be useful to investigate the experiences of teachers who were not confident with technology use to find out how they coped during the ERT period.

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