

My Learning Curve in Effectively Managing Online English Classes, Taking Attendance, Preventing Cheating and Breakout Rooms

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My Learning Curve in Effectively Managing Online English Classes, Taking Attendance, Preventing Cheating and Breakout Rooms

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Abstract

In the COVID crisis that started in early 2020, teachers throughout Japan suffered from another crisis besides worrying about getting sick. We needed to shift our 1st semester (April, 2020) classes from on campus and in-person to remote and online. We spent several weeks available before the official start of online classes thinking, stressing, and planning how to replace what we did with our in-person classes and adapt to the new online system. This report is a record of the learning curve I went through at Kansai Gaidai College. In the end, I am pleased and relieved to say, I came to feel in control of my new online teaching methods and techniques.

Keywords: Online teaching, ZOOM, Google Forms, attendance, cheating

1. Introduction

I will introduce the tools I used for the online classes in Section 2. In Section 3, I will discuss the activities I usually did in my in-person classes and how each activity was replaced for the online classes. In Section 4, I will introduce activities unique to online classes.

2. The four online tools

For the online classes, I used my PC at home with four online tools, ZOOM, Cloud Campus, Google Forms, and Blackboard. Each was used for different purposes, while students used their PCs and their smartphones with these same tools. I used Excel to keep a record of the quiz and test results from ZOOM, Cloud Campus, and Google Forms.

2a. ZOOM

ZOOM <https://zoom.us/> was the main tool I used to give live online classes, which were

conducted according to the originally scheduled timetables, for 90 minutes per class. Kansai Gaidai supplied teachers with the paid (fully featured) version of ZOOM.

2b. Cloud Campus

Kansai Gaidai College uses Cloud Campus (CC) <https://ccampus.org/learners/Home/>, a cloud-based on-demand viewing platform. CC was mainly used by the students who missed an online class. I uploaded my recorded class meetings and also posted the Microsoft PowerPoint presentation files I used in the class. The students could watch them whenever they wanted to.

2c. Google Forms

Google Forms <https://drive.google.com/drive/my-drive> was used for giving tests, quizzes, writing assignments, and questionnaires.

2d. Blackboard

Blackboard <https://kansai.gaidai.blackboard.com/> is an online platform site supplied by Kansai Gaidai. This was used by the students to download the class materials, such as the class schedule, worksheets, newspaper articles, and textbook audio files that I uploaded to Blackboard.

3. Comparisons between in-person and online teaching

3a. Taking attendance

In my in-person classes with 25-35 students, students sat in assigned seats. It did not take long to find out who was absent from the class. However, online students came into my classes with their names in various styles such as in Kanji or in Romaji, with their family name first or their family name second. A mixed list of names not arranged in any particular order makes it difficult for teachers to keep a record of student attendance. To solve this, I told my students the first thing they had to do every time they logged into my class is “rename themselves,” a function found in the ZOOM settings. They typed their student number first, followed by their family name and personal name in Kanji. I could then see an ordered list of names, which made it so much easier to keep a record of attendance.

After the class meeting was over, I went to “Report” on the web ZOOM portal. There, I found the record of the participants (ZOOM keeps this record for 30 days). I exported this record as an Excel file to my PC. Sorting it out by Excel Data Filter, all the participants are lined up in ascending order by their student number.

3b. Showing PowerPoint presentations and audio video material

In my in-person classes I used paper-based teaching materials including a student textbook and newspaper articles along with a PC and a projector. For my online classes, I prepared worksheets for each chapter from the textbook and made PowerPoint Presentations (PPP) which I showed to the students on the “shared screen” ZOOM function. When teaching with PPP, the “animation” effect is a must-have item because you can project one sentence at a time. This allows students to think of an answer to a question shown on the screen before you let the correct answer pop up in the PPP. This is a more effective teaching technique than showing everything, questions and answers, all at once. Unfortunately, I found the animation effect is not available when the PPP is uploaded into Cloud Campus.

I also played MP3 audio files and MP4 video clips in the ZOOM “shared screen.” While showing something on “shared screen,” you can at the same time see your students and send and receive text messages with one or all students using the “chat” function. This feature proved to be very useful. One time, a student sent me a text message telling me that I had forgotten to activate the sound on a video. This “shared screen” can also be used by students to show their presentations to the class. This feature needs to be activated by the ZOOM host (the teacher) to allow the participants (the students) to show their work to the class.

3c. Feedback

In my in-person classes, I found most Japanese students are not very active in giving verbal feedback to the teacher. One of the great features of online classes, better than regular in-person classes, is the method of getting feedback. The Chat and Poll functions on ZOOM are useful for getting feedback from all of the students during class. The teacher can compose a written poll for each question the teacher wants to ask, providing multiple choice answers. If you want individual opinions or responses from your students, Chat can be used. A student can send a written chat “to everyone” or they can send a chat to the teacher “privately.”

I used chat “privately” for checking students’ comprehensive levels. I could easily check if a student did or did not understand something while not embarrassing them, as might happen during in-person classes. I could find out who was falling behind and decide what to do later on to help improve their comprehension. Sometimes I sent a text using chat to all students to motivate them and make them compete with each other. I asked a written question and the student that sent the correct answer first got some points. This competition motivated students and kept the entire class involved.

3d. Group discussions

I always incorporated group discussions into my in-person class activities. Group discussions are proven to improve students’ critical thinking skills because they get feedback from their classmates (Cooper 1995). I did the same thing with my online class by using the ZOOM “breakout rooms” feature. I arranged 4 or 5 students into each room. They helped one another with whatever topics or questions they were asked to discuss orally. They could all talk at the same time, as if they were physically present together. During the discussion, I keep them notified of how much time was left by sending a text using the chat function. Any student who logged into the scheduled class late was assigned into a room already in progress, or I could reassign a student into a different room, if necessary. I visited each room one by one and checked how they were doing. One flaw in using “breakout rooms” is that once the teacher leaves a room, there is no way to know what the students in that room are doing. With in-person classes, the teacher can of course see how all the groups are doing simultaneously, as they are all in the same classroom.

3e. Giving quizzes

There is a solution to the problem of not knowing if the students are really working seriously or not in a breakout room. I solved this problem by giving a group quiz right after the end of the breakout room discussion. This quiz has to be intended for the group, not for the individual student. If it is for individual students, they are unlikely to exchange ideas with the other group members because they would rather study on their own for the quiz. Consequently, it defeats the purpose of group discussions.

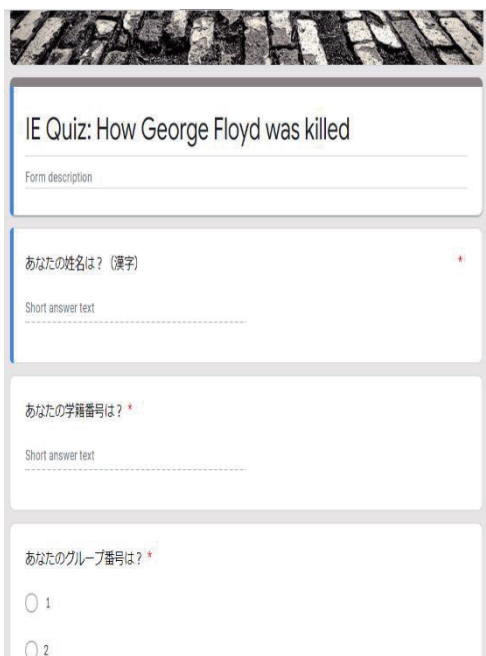
All the students in a breakout room take the same quiz. Each student’s answers are

graded. The total points in the group are the grade each student gets. So, each individual score determines how high or low the total score for the group will be. With this shared responsibility, everybody has to work hard and no one allows anyone else to slack off.

With in-person classes, all you need are sheets of paper with quiz questions on them to hand out and a little arrangement of desks. As these two things are no longer available doing online class, I used “Quiz in Google Forms.” After all the “breakout room” group discussions ended, all the students came back to the teacher in the main ZOOM room and it was time to take the quiz.

I made Google Forms quizzes for the students to take using their smartphone. I presented the QR code on the shared screen. This took the students to the quiz I made (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. A Group Quiz I Made in Google Forms



IE Quiz: How George Floyd was killed.

○Your name ?

○Your student number ?

○Your group number ?

Q.1 Derek Chauvin has been charged with “second-degree murder.” The other officers have been charged with aiding and abetting murder. What is “aiding and abetting murder” ?

殺人ほう助

殺人未遂

暴行殺人

Q.2 What is “Cup Foods” ?

スーパーマーケット

コンビニ

薬局

Q.3 Why did the two Cup Foods employees come to George Floyd sitting in his car?

お釣りを渡すため。

品物を返してもらうため。

忘れ物を渡すため。

Q.4 One employee called the police and what did he say about George Floyd?

怒鳴っている。

酔っている。

暴れている。

Q.5 The police tried to put George Floyd in the police car, but he refused to get in. Why?

何も悪いことをしていないから。

閉所恐怖症だから。

足を怪我していたから。

Q.6 What records does Derek Chauvin have?

マラソンの新記録

苦情記録

無遅刻・無欠勤記録

Q.7 When did Derek Chauvin finally take his knee off George Floyd’s neck?

他の警官が彼にそう言った時。

通行人が彼にそう言った時。

救急隊員が彼にそう言った時。

Before they start the quiz, the students input their name, student number and their group number. This group number is very important. They then answered the multiple-choice questions and “submit” to finish the quiz. Right away the students could see which questions they got correct or incorrect along with their personal test score.

With this immediate feedback, the students don’t have to wonder how they did on the quiz. Moreover, the teacher gets the results of the entire class on the spot and can share them on the shared screen to the class. Sometimes a few students could not scan the QR code with their smartphone, in which case I sent the URL link of that QR code as text using chat to that student.

3f. Giving Tests

For my in-person classes, I gave paper-based tests and collected, graded and returned them to the students. In online classes I used Google Forms to give multiple choice tests, short answer tests, and essay writing tests. The students used their smartphone to take these tests during our ZOOM classes within a limited time.

3g. Cheating

A major concern for online teaching is there is no solid way to observe cheating, as you can easily do in in-person classes. The company ProctorU that provides a service of watching in-person and online test takers says the cheating rate rose above 8 percent during the height of remote testing this year 2020 compared to less than 1 percent before the COVID pandemic (Newton 2020). With no one supervising during online tests, students can potentially ask for help from their friends or family members while taking a test. In extreme cases, a substitute or impostor could take a test instead of the enrolled student. In other words, the possibility for cheating is real in online tests.

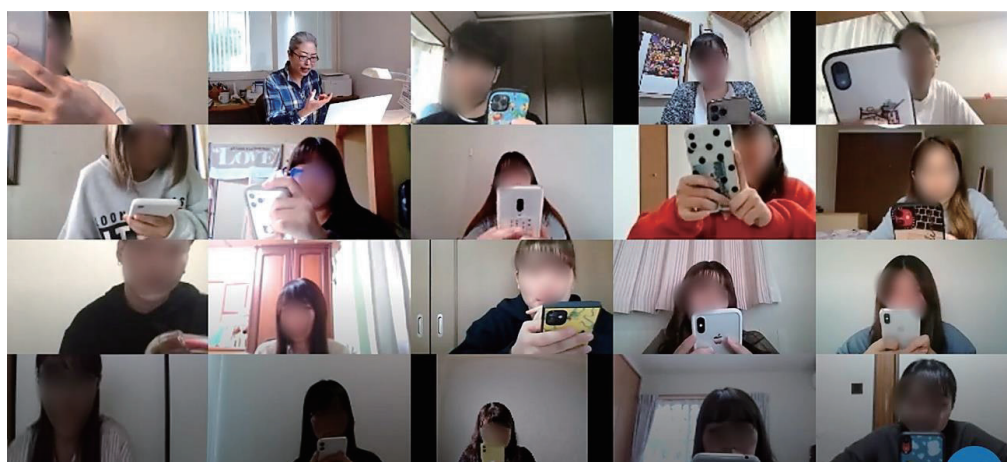
Teachers have two choices: accept the fact as a new norm or come up with something to outsmart cheating students. Although there is some software that monitors to prevent cheating, software alone cannot stop all types of cheating (Newton 2018). One possible solution to cheating is for teachers to give open book tests and make test questions whose answers are derived from knowledge acquired as an outcome of taking the entire course. Answers that are easily found in the class textbook or in other reading material given to the

students should be avoided. However, I found this solution is difficult for my language classes focused on grammar, structure and vocabulary.

Students readily acknowledge that schools are where they are evaluated and that tests and grades influence their motivation to study (Kage 2018). If students realize they can pass without studying for the tests because cheating is so easy to do, their motivation to study will deteriorate. However difficult it would be, I thought I should try my hardest to create an online test which requires studying for it and where cheating can be caught by the teacher.

My students went to a Google Forms test site with their smartphone by scanning the QR code I showed. They took the test on their smartphone during my ZOOM live class meeting within a set time (15-20 minutes). I could see them taking the test on my ZOOM screen (See Figure 2). While taking the test, the students sat in front of their PC camera and did not move around much. If anybody would move their head repeatedly on and off the camera, I would warn them by voice not to do that. The other students could hear the warning as well and it reminded them the teacher was closely watching them. This technique is of course not perfect and some students might have outsmarted me by having something out of my view to help them with the test. For now, this is my best way I could come up with to deter cheating in online class.

Figure 2. Students using smartphones taking a test. Image from my ZOOM screen.



4. A New Online activity: Recording classes

When you teach in-person classes, you do not usually record your class unless you have a very special reason. However, recording is a quick and easy feature of online teaching that can be used by students who had a slow internet connection on the day of the class or other problems. I uploaded my recorded ZOOM classes on my school's Cloud Campus so that the students who were absent could see the lesson later. There are two ways of recording using ZOOM, "record on this computer" and "record on the cloud".

4a. "Record on the cloud"

If you decide to record this way, everything that happens in the main room is recorded. One potential problem using this way is the breakout rooms will not be recorded.

After your class is over, you can go to the ZOOM online portal site where you can watch the video. ZOOM keeps your recording for 30 days. If you want to keep it permanently, you need to download it to your PC. You have the option to send the link of the recorded video file to students who can then stream the video, but only for 30 days. An amazing added feature on the ZOOM portal site is you can edit the video file. As an example, you can cut out the first 10 minutes of the class and another section from the end.

4b. "Record on this computer"

Using this way allows you to record the class directly. After your class is finished, a standard MP4 video will be downloaded to your PC. Using "record on this computer" is host (teacher) focused. It records wherever the teacher goes. Therefore, if you want to record what is happening in a breakout room, like when you are conducting a one-on-one oral test, you should choose record on this computer. This helps you tremendously when later reviewing how each student did on the oral test.

When I gave an oral test, I assigned each student into a different breakout room after notifying them of roughly what time their oral test would start. Each student waited for me to come in his/her room and take a one-on-one oral test. When starting an oral test meeting I had ZOOM set to "record on this computer." It made a recording of what happened in each breakout room, i.e., the conversation exchanged between teacher and student.

5. Discussion & Conclusion:

Tough times bring opportunity

The COVID pandemic left the teachers with no choice but to teach online. Many teachers felt the pressure to change their teaching style and were stressed out. However, perhaps because of this pressure, we all worked intensely and strenuously to learn how to use new tools and how to create new versions of our class lessons. We did this in a relatively short period of time, several weeks at most. In other words, these tough times forced the opportunity upon us to boost our learning curve for online teaching.

As we moved further into the semester, we came across glitches here and there, like how to take attendance and how to conduct tests, which I have talked about, but we usually were able to fix the problems. This continuous cycle of “live and learn” sharpened our learning curve even more. In addition, the sudden and unexpected switch to online class was a wake-up call for not only schools but the entire country. It made Japan realize we are unprepared for the digital society upon us now. It led to the recent creation of the Digital Agency aimed to improve and expand technology in businesses and schools.

There are still concerns that must be addressed for online classes. Students need high speed internet at home to fully participate in virtual classrooms and not be left behind academically. In the time of COVID, students and their families are facing financial difficulties and some might choose not to upgrade their Internet service. As a Washington Post article points out, it is time we consider the Internet a public utility like electricity and government public funding should be available to help all students with the cost of high-speed Internet service (Balingit 2020).

Another concern is “Zoom burnout” stress. People sit in front of computers for hours each day working from home. We need to work harder to process non-spoken language and paying attention to it consumes a lot of brain energy (Jiang 2020). The constant exposure to online meetings and the inability to disconnect from the job or school can cause mental health problems (Martins 2020).

Despite all the concerns and problems dealing with online classes, we can surely say at least,

we teachers and students all have improved our computer skills. As for me, I feel fairly in control of my online teaching, which was unthinkable to me back in early April 2020. In the future, looking back on these days, we might say that this was the decisive moment for teachers and students who have come to see online classes as just another way of learning and teaching, better than in-person in some ways, not as good in others.

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