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Redesigning an EAP Course During a Pandemic

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This paper discusses how a traditional face-to-face content-driven English for academic purposes (EAP) course for first-year Japanese university students was transformed into a virtual one during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers discuss the pedagogical strategies (e.g., flipped learning, project-based learning) and ICT tools that were integrated into the online EAP course. The paper also examines the student participants' (n=98) adjustment to emergency remote teaching (ERT) as well as the psychosocial frustrations and dissatisfaction that can germinate within virtual learning environments. The researchers share the key lessons that were learned from ERT during the COVID-19 pandemic and how this knowledge can help English as an international language (EIL) educators expand their professional horizons in our current 'new normal' era.

本論文は、COVID-19 パンデミックの際、日本の大学1年生を対象とした従来の対面式コンテンツ主導型学術英語（EAP）コースが、どのようにバーチャルコースに転換されたかを明らかにするものである。研究者は、オンライン EAP コースに組み込まれた教育戦略（反転学習、プロジェクト学習など）と ICT ツールについて論じている。また、学生参加者（n=98）の緊急遠隔授業（ERT）への適応や、バーチャルな学習環境で芽生える心理社会的なフラストレーションや不満についても考察している。研究者らは、COVID-19 パンデミック時の ERT から学んだ重要な教訓を共有し、この知識が、現在の「新たな常態」の時代において、国際語としての英語（EIL）教育者が専門家としての視野を広げるためにどのように役立つかを述べる。

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented disruptive force that undermined the education of millions of Japanese students (Obe & Okutsu, 2020) and forced numerous English as an international language (EIL) educators to revamp courses and adopt new online pedagogical practices. During the early stages of the pandemic, EIL teachers had to familiarize themselves with various technological tools such as video conferencing platforms (e.g., Zoom) and learning management systems (LMSs), as well as develop both synchronous and asynchronous instructional materials in order to provide English language learners (ELLs) with emergency remote lessons. According to Hodges et al. (2020), emergency remote teaching (ERT) is not “a robust educational ecosystem” but rather a makeshift measure that can provide students with didactic support during an emergency or crisis situation (para. 13). The turmoil created by the COVID-19 pandemic not only compelled EIL educators to overcome significant obstacles, it also underscored the importance of ongoing teacher-directed professional development, collegial collaboration, and critical self-reflection.

This paper highlights research which formed the basis of a poster presentation that was delivered at the 2023 Sojo University Teaching and Learning Forum. The researchers discuss how a traditional face-to-face content-driven English for academic purposes (EAP) course was transformed into a virtual one as well as the teaching challenges they experienced and lasting benefits that emerged from this period of uncertainty. The following research question guided this study:

How was a traditional content-driven EAP course for first-year Japanese university students redesigned into an online course during the COVID-19 pandemic?

In the first section, we review the relevant academic literature and introduce the EAP course featured in this study. Attention then shifts to the pedagogical interventions which were implemented to foster a collaborative and active online learning environment. In the final part of the paper, we discuss the key lessons that were learned from ERT during the COVID-19 pandemic and how this knowledge can help EIL educators enhance their professional competencies in our current 'new normal' era.

Literature Review

Online Learning: The Benefits and Barriers

The technology-enhanced learning (TEL) field is awash with acronyms as well as closely related terms such as e-learning, distance education, web-based instruction, distributed learning, and e-tutoring that are often used interchangeably with online learning (Singh & Thurman, 2019). For the last three decades, researchers have produced a wide array of online learning studies and generated dozens of different definitions. For the purposes of this study, Wong's (2023) comprehensive definition of online learning has been adopted as it aligns well with our research context. According to Wong (2023), online learning is:

[...] education that takes place over the internet synchronously and/or asynchronously and does not take place in a traditional classroom. It can be in the form of online videos, online learning materials, face-to-face meeting sessions, interactive online questions, quizzes and practices. (p. 435)

Synchronous learning environments (e.g., a Zoom class) are those in which the students and instructor are in the same virtual place in real time; whereas there is an interactional time-lag in asynchronous contexts (e.g., email, discussion forum) which enables students to study and respond to comments at their own pace (Greenhow et al., 2022). The continuous development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has made online learning more widely accessible for higher education students in every part of the globe.

A review of the relevant academic literature suggests that there are several significant advantages of online learning. Perhaps the most often cited benefits are flexibility and convenience. Students can access digital study materials whenever and wherever they like and learn at their own pace (Panigrahi et al., 2018). Almahasees et al. (2021) reported that the 280 Jordanian university students they researched saved money (e.g., commuting expenses) as well as enhanced their self-discipline and time management skills by taking online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas, the Chinese university ELLs in Barnhart et al.'s (2022) study felt that their reading, listening, and pronunciation skills improved by learning online. In a typical virtual course, ELLs have more time to respond to questions and can develop their writing skills through various discussion forum activities (Bailey & Lee, 2020). Likewise, students can foster their autonomous learning skills (Wong, 2023) by studying online and reticent students may find participating in a virtual lesson to be easier than a traditional face-to-face one (Tsui & Tavares, 2021).

At the other end of the educational continuum, there are a number of notable challenges for both students and teachers in an online learning context that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Coman et al. (2020) reported that the 762 Romanian university students they researched were easily distracted and lost focus during their virtual classes. According to Barnhart et al. (2022), 79% of the 504 university ELLs in their study were drowsy and/or fell asleep during online English lessons. Likewise, Barrot et al. (2021) claimed that noisy distractions at home, coupled with an inappropriate place to study, were significant hurdles that Filipino university students needed to overcome during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Cheung (2021) identified problematic group interactions, unequal participation, and negative emotions (e.g., anger, anxiety) that arose in an online EIL class

she researched, especially during unsupervised breakout room activities. If students lack confidence or distrust their classmates, they may be hesitant to participate in an online class which can lead to feelings of isolation and alienation (Szopinski & Bachnik, 2022).

According to Hagedorn et al. (2022), psychosocial frustrations and feelings of dissatisfaction with the virtual learning process prevented many of the American university students in their large-scale study from having a positive educational experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. On a similar note, Barrot et al. (2021) reported that the pandemic lockdown resulted in many of Filipino university students experiencing stress, anxiety, and depression due to various educational experiences (e.g., internships, study abroad programs) being eliminated and having less meaningful interactions with their classmates and teachers. Many educators discovered that academic dishonesty can be a formidable foe in virtual classrooms (Chiang et al., 2021) and it takes a lot longer to prepare an online course than a traditional face-to-face one (Szopinski & Bachnik, 2022). Another source of frustration for some teachers is students who are unable to resolve problematic ICT issues (Cheung, 2021). Finally, instructors can also experience physical discomfort such as eye strain and cervical stiffness from sitting for extended periods in front of a PC (Stoian et al., 2022).

Digital Literacy in the Japanese Education System

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, most Japanese universities were slow to implement online education initiatives even though online learning was prevalent in many parts of the world (Kim, 2021). To an outsider, this might seem a little surprising, especially since Japan is considered to be a technologically advanced nation and digital technologies are deeply entrenched in many people's personal and professional lives. As noted by Marceau (2019) and Mehran et al. (2017), many Japanese university students have low levels of digital literacy and are not always enthusiastic users of ICTs in their scholastic endeavors. This is a view supported by a number of other studies (e.g., Allen, 2021; Cote & Milliner, 2017; Toland, 2023) conducted in a Japanese higher education context. Mizukoshi (2017) argued that the growing popularity of digital devices, coupled with a sharp decline in PC usage, has resulted in an "invisible illiteracy" in Japan. Several researchers (e.g., Mizukoshi, 2017; Paterson, 2017) have noted that international and domestic companies are often surprised to learn that many newly graduated Japanese university students are unable to use different types of office PC productivity software. Anecdotally speaking, there were a number of Japanese university administrators who erroneously assumed that 'digital native' students would be able to make the transition to an online learning environment in the early stages of the pandemic relatively easy without becoming tangled up in problematic ICT issues due to the omnipresence of technology (e.g., smartphones) in their lives. However, Scull et al. (2020) reminded us that just because students have grown up with advanced ICTs it "does not mean that they naturally know how to study in online spaces" (p. 6). Likewise, Kirschner and De Bruyckere (2017) argued that digital natives are illusionary creatures who do not exist even though certain "educational gurus" would have us believe otherwise (p. 136). The COVID-19 pandemic also shone a critical spotlight on the digital divide that exists in Japanese universities (Gougeon & Cross, 2021) and the public school system (Isha & Wibawarta, 2023).

Research Design and Methodology

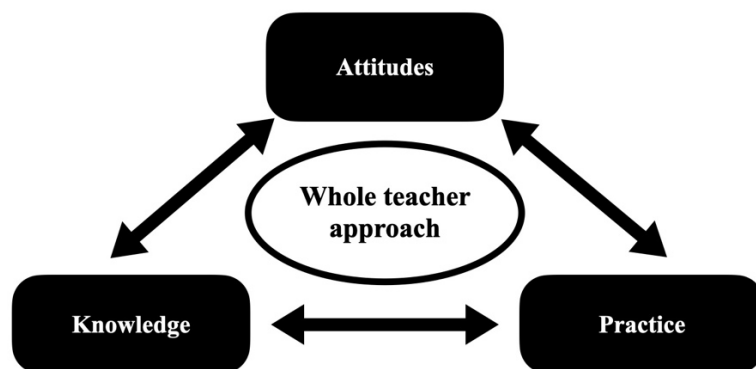
The Whole Teacher Approach: A Conceptual Framework

Over the years, the problematic issue of teacher isolationism and need for ongoing high-quality in-service professional development (PD) have been recurring themes in the academic literature. The traditional teacher-development approach, which often centers around one-shot face-to-face conferences and workshops, can be "fragmented, disconnected, and irrelevant" to what takes place inside a classroom (Lieberman & Pointer-Mace, 2017, p. 77). In response to these shortcomings, Chen and McCray (2012) developed the Whole Teacher (WT) conceptual framework for in-service PD. The WT theoretical model, which is grounded in the earlier work of Chen and Chang (2006), underscores the importance of promoting all areas of teacher development, especially attitudes, knowledge, and practice (see Figure 1).

Chen and McCray (2012) argued that these three strands are interconnected and a WT PD program must be (a) multidimensional, (b) integrated, (c) developmental, and (d) contextualized (p. 19). The researchers claimed that the WT conceptual framework can result in higher quality teaching and positive student outcomes as it “promotes multiple ways of learning, doing, and succeeding” (p. 21).

Figure 1

Whole teacher approach (Adapted from Chen & McCray, 2012)



We believe that the interconnected elements in the WT conceptual framework (Chen & McCray, 2012) can serve as a valuable prism from which to view our ERT practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, we concur with Trust and Whalen’s (2021) contention that the WT approach can help educators examine their “experiences and learning holistically and uncover the complexity and dynamics of a multifaceted profession” (p. 148).

Academic English A Course: Background

The Academic English A (AEA) course was established in the Department of British and American Studies (*Eibei* in Japanese) to accommodate Nanzan University’s shift from a semester system to a quarter system. Most EAP courses are content-driven so ELLs are required to learn a wide range of items such as critical thinking strategies, presentation skills, researching techniques, note-taking, and referencing systems (Ruegg & Williams, 2018). The AEA program focuses on cultivating these competencies in conjunction with other important twenty-first century skills such as communication, collaboration, creativity, digital literacy, and intercultural awareness. The AEA course is mandatory for all first-year students as it will help prepare them to study abroad and later write an English thesis during their final year of university. During each seven-week quarter, ELLs are required to attend 14 100-minute lessons. Thus, there are a total of 56 100-minute lessons or 90 hours of instructional time throughout an academic year. Shortly before the 2018 academic year commenced, the researchers and another colleague established the following curricular goals for the AEA course:

1. Facilitate the transition from a passive learning style which is commonplace in many high school classrooms to a more active one.
2. Help students develop and manage their thought processes.
3. Encourage tolerance and a willingness to share ideas.
4. Build students’ confidence as English users.
5. Foster a supportive atmosphere amongst peers. (Cripps et al., 2018, p. 47)

The AEA course was constructed on a project-based learning (PBL) and flipped learning (FL) foundation as this two-pronged pedagogical approach encourages students to use English in authentic communicative situations and harnesses their twenty-first century skills (Bell, 2010; Mehring, 2015). In an earlier study, Hedge (1993) described a project as “an extended task which usually integrates language skills work through a number of activities”

(p. 276). More recently, the Buck Institute for Education (2019) defined PBL as a “teaching method in which students learn actively by engaging in real-world and personally meaningful projects” (para. 1). According to Chang and Lin (2019), FL is a combination of “asynchronous learning via out-of-class multimedia lectures and synchronous learning through in-class student-centered activities” (p. 193). Before each lesson, AEA students are assigned certain tasks (e.g., watch a TED Talk) which helps them to prepare for various in-class discussion activities with their classmates. Chen and Hwang (2020) have argued that repeated exposure to digital materials can help students have a better grasp of course content. Thus, the students’ ability to pause, rewind, and replay instructional videos may have been beneficial. Western-oriented commercially produced textbooks and digital resources can often be culturally inappropriate (Bori, 2018; Kumaravadivelu, 2016) and fail to foster Japanese university ELLs’ critical thinking skills. Therefore, the AEA team created their own in-house textbooks. Instructors have a fair amount of autonomy in the AEA course and can select activities that are suited to their students’ learning needs and their own teaching styles.

Research Site and Participants

Our research was conducted at a private university in Japan and on the video conferencing platform Zoom. The sample was drawn from six AEA classes which were taught by three instructors. The lead researcher was responsible for three classes; whereas the teaching duties for the rest of the classes were split between two other instructors. A full-time *Eibei* faculty member taught the AEA course during the first two quarters before handing over the reins to a part-time teacher for quarters three and four. The secondary researcher developed the AEA program and coordinated the online course during the COVID-19 pandemic. From these six classes, all students (n=150) were invited to participate in the study. Ninety-eight students completed the pre-course questionnaire for a response rate of 65.3%. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 22 (M=18.93). Seventy-two (73.5%) of the participants are female and 26 (26.5%) are male. The majority (97.9%) of the participants identified as Japanese. Overall, most of the students in this study had a stronger willingness to communicate in English compared to their peers in other departments. Many *Eibei* students want to improve their second language (L2) skills as they will partake in a study abroad program as some point during their university career.

The researchers and two instructors who taught the AEA course are experienced EIL educators who have a combined 97 years teaching experience (M=24.25) and have worked with Japanese university students for a combined total of 85.5 years (M=21.38). Both researchers and one of the instructors identified their ICT proficiency level as ‘advanced’ and were comfortable using a TEL approach in their classes. The other instructor, who reported that he had a ‘basic’ ICT proficiency level, was not confident integrating TEL initiatives into his lessons and found the prospect of teaching online to be quite daunting. Participation in this research project was voluntary and no incentives were provided. The researchers adhered to ethical research practices to minimize any negative repercussions to the participants and followed the ethical guidelines established by their university’s research office. Pseudonyms are used in this study to protect the participants’ identity.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers adopted a qualitative case study methodological approach for this research undertaking as it meshed well with our critical realist ontological and epistemological perspectives. Critical realism-inspired research seeks to understand “tendencies in phenomena that have been observed or experienced (e.g., events, effects)” (Haigh et al., 2019, p. 3). In addition, this philosophical orientation is valuable in a TEL research context as it can help to counterbalance technological determinism and socio-cultural determinism (Allen et al., 2013). According to Simons (2009), a case study is “an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme, or system in a ‘real life’ context” (p. 21).

The data for this study were collected over a 12-month period from March 2020 to March 2021. The primary sources of data that were used in this research are: (a) pre-course

questionnaire, (b) post-course questionnaire, (c) focus group interview, and (d) online classroom observations. The AEA pre-course questionnaire and post-course questionnaire (see Appendix A) each comprised of 12 questions and a total of 21-items. These research instruments were translated into Japanese by a qualified translator and her work was cross-checked by a Japanese professor with bilingual proficiency. The online surveys included these three sections: (a) demographics, (b) multiple choice questions, and (c) open-ended questions. The majority of the open-ended responses were written in Japanese and translated into English by a qualified translator. The student participants used a 6-point Likert scale to record their answers and could select from the following: 1 (strongly agree), 2 (agree), 3 (somewhat agree), 4 (somewhat disagree), 5 (disagree), and 6 (strongly disagree). A 6-point Likert scale was used in this study as many Japanese respondents have a tendency to choose neutral middle ground options on questionnaires (Onodera, 2014). The pre-course online survey was completed by 98 participants with a response rate of 65.3%. Seventy-five students completed the post-course questionnaire with a response rate of 50%. From the lead researcher's three classes, 70 students were invited to participate in an online focus group interview outside of class time. Three participants agreed to assist with a response rate of 4.3%. This low response rate may be attributed to the fact that many participants were suffering from "Zoom fatigue" (Nesher Shoshan & Wehrt, 2022) and were recruited at the end of the academic year which is an extremely busy period for most first-year students. The virtual focus group interview was recorded and lasted 53.5 minutes. The student-generated data, classroom observations, and reflections from the instructor meetings were housed and scrutinized in NVivo 12 for Mac, a qualitative software package. A thematic analysis, which Clarke and Braun (2017) defined as a "method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data," was conducted to code our multifaceted dataset (p. 297).

Research Findings and Discussion

Pedagogical Interventions

In this section, the following research question is explored: 'How was a traditional content-driven EAP course for first-year Japanese university students redesigned into an online course during the COVID-19 pandemic?' Here, we discuss the four pedagogical strategies we implemented to foster a collaborative and active virtual learning environment.

Strategy One: Conduct a Needs Analysis

The uncertainty and turmoil generated by the COVID-19 pandemic delayed the start of the 2020 academic year by two weeks. This postponement provided the researchers with a short window of opportunity to conduct a needs analysis with the 150 first-year students in the AEA program. More specifically, we were able to identify knowledge and skills gaps which enabled us to prepare appropriate instructional materials for the revamped online AEA course. In addition, the pandemic created a tremendous amount of stress for numerous Japanese families (Shibusawa et al., 2021) so we wanted to have a better understanding of the students' emotional mindsets and feelings about studying online. The pre-course questionnaire revealed that 92.8% (n=90) of the students had never used the video conferencing platform Zoom and only 43.8% (n=43) were familiar with LMSs such as Moodle or Blackboard. We discovered that 95.8% (n=93) of the participants were using a PC as their main study tool, whereas only 4.2% (n=4) planned on accessing course materials with a digital device. To assess the participants' ICT abilities and perceptions of online learning we examined both the numeric data and open-ended responses from the pre-course survey. Table 1 highlights the numeric data which focuses on the students' comfort level using ICTs. The item nonresponses are not included in the tables. In this section, the data for the 'uncomfortable' and 'very uncomfortable' responses have been combined as have the 'comfortable' and 'very comfortable' categories in order to make it easier to understand. Prior to starting the online AEA course, 35.1% of the participants stated that they were uncomfortable or very uncomfortable utilizing technology for scholastic purposes. This

finding aligns with other research (e.g., Cote & Milliner, 2017; Toland, 2023) which shows that many first-year Japanese university students have low levels of digital literacy.

Table 1

Comfort level using ICTs: Questionnaire data

1) How comfortable are you using ICTs in your studies?

Survey	Uncomfortable / Very Uncomfortable	OK (neutral)	Comfortable / Very Comfortable
Pre-course questionnaire	35.1% (n=34)	49.5% (n=48)	15.4% (n=15)

Several participants were also concerned about potential problematic ICT issues. For example, Mio wrote: “*The Wi-Fi at my house is not very good and I’m using an old PC. There is a possibility that I can’t join my online classes.*” Likewise, Hiro stated: “*Sometimes there is a time lag when I use my camera. This will make it hard to get to know my classmates. My voice might sound awkward if I don’t have a strong [Wi-Fi] connection.*” Ayaka expressed a similar concern: “*I need to buy a new PC. Looking through a small smartphone screen to communicate with others is new and uncomfortable.*” At first glance, these comments were a little bit surprising as the study was conducted at a private university where the socioeconomic status of students is often assumed to be high. However, they demonstrate that there was indeed a gap between the digital ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’ and echoes the findings of previous studies which claimed that the digital divide is a serious problem in all sectors of the Japanese education system (Gougeon & Cross, 2021; Isha & Wibawarta, 2023).

Table 2 showcases the numeric data which examines the students’ comfort level learning in an online course. Even though the participants in this study are digital natives, 58.2% reported that they would be uncomfortable or very uncomfortable studying in a virtual classroom. This finding was not surprising as our own classroom observations over the years challenge the deeply entrenched ‘digital native’ narrative (Kirschner & de Bruyckere, 2017). Furthermore, we support Scull et al.’s (2020) contention that twenty-first century students do not naturally know how to study in an online environment even though they grew up in a technologically-saturated world. Perhaps the greatest concern that the ELLs in our study had falls under the umbrella of social and emotional learning.

Table 2

Comfort level learning online: Questionnaire data

2) How comfortable are you learning in an online environment instead of a face-to-face classroom?

Survey	Uncomfortable / Very Uncomfortable	OK (neutral)	Comfortable / Very Comfortable
Pre-course questionnaire	58.2% (n=57)	32.6% (n=32)	9.2% (n=9)

Table 3 below highlights the participants comfort level regarding getting to know their peers in an online course. Over half (51%) indicated that they would be uncomfortable or very uncomfortable getting to know their classmates in a virtual class. The open-ended questionnaire responses shed more light on this important area. Miki noted the following: “*It will be hard to make friends and communicate with classmates on Zoom. We are not able to meet for lunch or talk in person outside of our lessons.*” Likewise, Aika noted: “*I want to*

join a club activity and meet new friends. I'm sometimes shy so I want to talk face-to-face [...] it's more practical for me." Whereas Jun wrote:

I think we can't see all of the students at a glance. It will be hard to recognize faces and names if students don't turn on their cameras. When I send a chat message, it's difficult for me to type quickly. I want to get to know many students. I think it's easier in a regular class.

The data that emerged from the pre-course questionnaire were extremely helpful and enabled us to establish certain guidelines and practices before the AEA course commenced. For example, the students were required to turn on their cameras for all breakout room activities and access the online class from their university accounts so that their names were clearly visible. We also anticipated that some students would have connectivity problems, so all of the instructional materials were uploaded to the university's LMS before each class and a short summary was posted immediately after each lesson.

Table 3

Comfort level getting to know my peers in a virtual class: Questionnaire data

3) How comfortable are you getting to know your classmates in an online environment?

Survey	Uncomfortable / Very Uncomfortable	OK (neutral)	Comfortable / Very Comfortable
Pre-course questionnaire	51% (n=50)	32.7% (n=32)	16.3% (n=16)

The post-course questionnaire Likert-scale items and open-ended responses we received were also very illuminating, especially regarding the psychosocial tension that can germinate within an online learning environment (Hagedorn et al., 2022). Jun's response to the question 'How can the online AEA course be improved?' perhaps best captures this sentiment:

Online classes are difficult. I don't want to take anymore online classes next year. Even, though I'm a college student I feel very lonely. I can't go to the school so I have never used the library. Why are adults working at the university and students can't attend? Isn't this a university for students? Other universities are doing more face-to-face classes so I don't understand why we can't take face-to-face classes. You are a tuition thief— give me back my tuition! Students are not your ATMs. This lost year will never come back. Please take some responsibility and try to take care of your students.

During the focus group interview, Aya commented, "I was excited to start my university life. I did not have any opportunities to interact with my classmates in person so I was disappointed. I hope to have real classes in this university as soon as possible." While Mio stated, "My family lives in a small house. My younger brothers are loud and would sometimes bother me so I wanted to go to the school." As highlighted in Table 4, 20.3% of the participants did not have a comfortable environment (e.g., a quiet room) to study online.

Table 4

Comfort level in my home study environment: Questionnaire data

4) How comfortable is your home study environment (e.g., a quiet room to complete your homework)?

Survey	Uncomfortable / Very Uncomfortable	OK (neutral)	Comfortable / Very Comfortable
Post-course questionnaire	20.3% (n=15)	44.6% (n=34)	35.1% (n=27)

Both the post-course questionnaire data and informal feedback we received echoed previous studies (e.g., Szopinski & Bachnik, 2022) which reported that students can become isolated and alienated in a virtual learning environment. In addition, we discovered that the restrictions caused by COVID-19 generated a certain amount discomfoting psychosocial friction which prevented some students from having a positive online educational experience. This finding supports the research of Cheung (2021) and Hagedorn et al. (2022). We also concur with the scholarly work of other researchers (e.g., Barrot et al., 2021) who claimed that noisy distractions and an inappropriate place to study can impede students' progress in an online class.

Strategy Two: Create a Course Website and YouTube Channel

The researchers decided to create an AEA course website and YouTube channel to keep the students engaged and help them learn more effectively. Throughout the AEA course, we posted important notices (e.g., how to order the textbooks), useful study links, homework assignments, and short blogs on the website. The researchers also used the Powtoon video maker software to make explainer videos for the AEA course (see Figure 2). We were cognizant that our ELLs had different learning styles, and many would find the explainer videos beneficial as they had the ability pause, rewind, and replay the digital content multiple times.

Figure 2

AEA course YouTube channel: Explainer video and QR code



The following explainer videos were uploaded to the AEA YouTube channel:

1. WebClass: How can I send a message with an attachment?
2. How to send your English teacher a formal email.
3. Zoom class icebreaker activity: My personal flag.
4. How to format academic English writing assignments with MS Word.
5. PDF fundamentals: Exporting MS Word and PowerPoint documents as PDFs & compressing a PDF file size.

The AEA course YouTube channel and website generated a number of positive comments. For example, one viewer left this comment: “*It is a great video to follow what to do next on [sic] online classes. Easy, simple, and clear. Thanks for sharing it.*” Both the written and informal feedback we received from the student participants supported Chen and Hwang’s (2020) claim that repeated exposure to digital materials can enable ELLs to have a better understanding of the course content.

Strategy Three: Use Virtual Icebreakers

The researchers believe that it is imperative for EIL educators to establish a calm and peaceful atmosphere so that ELLs will feel comfortable and secure participating in class. Therefore, the instructors utilized several different virtual icebreaker tasks during the first four lessons to encourage students to interact with one another and introduce them to the PBL approach that underpins the AEA course. A case in point concerns a ‘personal flag’ mingling activity that the lead researcher integrated into his classes. The students were required to put six high-resolution images that represent themselves onto a PowerPoint slide. Next, the ELLs made several short mini-presentations in different breakout rooms and asked each of the presenters questions. Lastly, the students completed an ‘all about me’ information sheet which contained an assortment of interesting facts (e.g., dream job) and a description of their personal flag. This document and the PowerPoint slides were saved as a PDF file and emailed to their instructor. All of the students’ work was then combined into a ‘class album’ and uploaded to the university’s LMS. This mingling activity, which included both synchronous and asynchronous elements, helped the AEA students break the ice, learn more about their classmates, and develop ICT skills (e.g., how to reduce the size of a PDF file).

Prior to the start of the online course, the instructors brainstormed a number of activities and projects which we hoped would keep the ELLs engaged. The researchers were cognizant that the majority of the first-year ELLs in the AEA program had never taken an online class so they might become easily distracted and lose focus during a lesson. Our classroom observations and student-generated data, namely the post-course questionnaire and focus group interview, confirmed this hypothesis. Table 5 shows that 40.5% of the participants ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’ that they had better focus and participation in an online lesson compared to a traditional face-to-face one. When the ‘somewhat disagreed’ data is combined, the figure jumps to 68.9%. During the focus group interview, Mio commented: “*I’m taking lots of [online] classes and I have too much homework. I’m tired ... if a class is boring I sometimes check my smartphone.*” Our findings support the scholarly work of other researchers (e.g., Barnhard et al., 2022; Coman et al., 2020) who reported that students’ focus can wane during virtual lessons.

Table 5

Attention and participation in Zoom lessons: Questionnaire data

- 5) Compared to traditional face-to-face classes, my attention and participation increased in the Zoom lessons.

Survey	Agree / Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree / Strongly Disagree
Post-course questionnaire	16.2% (n=12)	14.9% (n=11)	28.4% (n=21)	40.5% (n=30)

Strategy Four: Don’t ‘Put a Square Peg in a Round Hole’ – Make Curricular Revisions

It is impossible for an effective face-to-face EAP course to seamlessly migrate into an online environment without significant revisions. In fact, it is analogous to trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. Before the virtual AEA course commenced, the researchers made several curricular changes in the hope that it would smooth the ELLs transition to an unfamiliar style of learning. First, we reduced the number of writing assignments and replaced a collaborative

digital storytelling project with an individual e-learning portfolio assignment. While creating a multimodal video can develop several important twenty-first century skills, many ELLs find it to be a time-consuming and frustrating process, especially if they encounter problematic ICT issues and lazy partners (Oskoz & Elola, 2016; Toland, 2023). The e-learning portfolio project, which was more flexible and straightforward, can cultivate ELLs' self-regulated learning, writing skills, motivation, critical thinking, and creativity (Lam, 2020; Lee, 2018; Yastibas & Yastibas, 2015). Next, we modified the poster and PechaKucha presentation formats to better suit an online environment. We did not allow the students to do their presentations with the Zoom screenshare function out of concern that it might become a glorified reading exercise. Instead, the presenters used paper slides and posters so that they could talk directly to the camera. This intervention helped our ELLs develop important presentation skills such as eye contact, gestures, posture, intonation, and timing.

The third curricular revision revolved around reducing the students' weekly screen time. As noted earlier in the paper, AEA students are required to take two 90-minute lessons per week. However, the researchers were concerned about adverse impact of information overload so the time of each online lesson was reduced by 20 minutes. The American Psychological Association (2023) defines 'information overload' as the "state that occurs when the amount or intensity of information exceeds the individual's processing capacity, leading to anxiety, poor decision making, and other undesirable consequences" (para. 1). During quarters three and four, the AEA course coordinator implemented a more flexible schedule as many ELLs were suffering from 'Zoom fatigue' (Nesher Shoshan & Wehrt, 2022). More specifically, the students could study asynchronously during the second weekly lesson. The instructors were still online to consult with students and have an informal chat. Dr. Brian Wind, a psychology professor at Vanderbilt University, described 'Zoom fatigue' in the following manner: "When we're on Zoom, the brain has to work overtime to process information. It isn't picking up the social cues it's used to identifying. This places stress on the mind and uses up a lot of energy" (Padilla, 2022, para. 3). The student-generated data from the post-course questionnaire and focus group interviews indicates that 'Zoom fatigue' was a serious problem with the students in our study. As highlighted in Table 6, 61.6% of the participants were spending five hours or more online each weekday; whereas only 6.9% reported being digitally connected for three hours or less. This shows that the majority of students spent a significant portion of each weekday online and this may have contributed to 'Zoom fatigue'. As Aya noted during her focus group interview: "*We had to take lots of online classes. It takes more effort to concentrate and it's much easier to get distracted. I had too much screen time and blue light so that was a problem.*"

Table 6

Time spent online during a typical weekday: Questionnaire data

- 6) How much time do you normally spend online during a typical weekday? (Note: please include the time you are in a Zoom class, doing homework, gaming, texting/emailing, watching YouTube, and using SNS platforms).

Survey	From 1 hour up to 3 hours	From 3 hours up to 5 hours	From 5 hours up to 7 hours	7 hours or more
Post-course questionnaire	6.9% (n=5)	31.5% (n=24)	30.1% (n=23)	31.5% (n=23)

COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons Learned

The WT approach (Chen & McCray, 2012) is a valuable conceptual lens from which to view our ERT experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, the AEA instructors felt a great deal of trepidation and frustration at the sudden shift to an online learning environment. The discomfiting friction that was generated during the early stages of the pandemic served as a type of fuel which propelled us to develop each of the three domains in Chen and McCray's (2012) WT theoretical framework, namely our attitudes, practices, and knowledge.

By integrating a variety of different ICT tools (e.g., explainer videos) and finding creative solutions (e.g., virtual PechaKucha presentations) to problematic curricular issues, the researchers expanded their professional horizons. Likewise, the instructors' attitudes shifted as they became more attuned and empathetic toward the mental health struggles and frustrations that many of the AEA students faced during the pandemic lockdown. The first key lesson learned is that EIL educators must be flexible and adaptable. By engaging in ongoing critical self-reflection, teachers can become more aware of the undercurrents in their virtual classes and make the appropriate changes. Next, the "less is more" principle is a beacon of sound pedagogy during any ERT situation. The researchers adhered to the KISS (keep it short and simple) principle whenever they delivered instructions and were cognizant of the adverse impact that information overload and 'Zoom fatigue' can have on the learning process.

The third lesson that emerged is the importance of the following mantra: "Don't put the technology before the pedagogy." Instructors should expect certain problems (e.g., connectivity issues) in virtual learning environments and plan accordingly. Furthermore, teachers should prepare alternative activities because some students may be using antiquated technology which can create a gulf in access to digital technology between the 'haves' and 'have nots'. There is a tendency in many educational circles to propagate the myth of the digital native's inherent technological acumen. Educators must stop believing in the digital native narrative and instead teach students effective virtual study practices. The final lesson learned is that ongoing teacher-directed professional development and collegial collaboration are crucial. Lortie (1975) famously described teaching as the "egg carton profession" because educators are frequently sequestered in their own individual classrooms and do not regularly interact with colleagues. The organic information sharing sessions and impromptu mini-workshops that occurred before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic were inspiring and helped many teachers break through their egg cartons of isolationism. While the pandemic was an undeniably disruptive and stressful event for most people, the turmoil it generated fostered EIL educators' digital skills and professional growth.

Conclusion

Final Thoughts

This qualitative case study examined how a face-to-face content-driven EAP program for first-year Japanese students was redesigned into a virtual one during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers discussed four pedagogical interventions that they made and the technological tools which were integrated into the revamped online course. This paper also explored the student participants' adjustment to ERT as well as the challenges they experienced studying online. Our findings revealed that psychosocial frustrations (e.g., loneliness), problematic ICT issues, distractions in the home study environment, information overload, and 'Zoom fatigue' can have an adverse impact on the learning process in an online course. There were also a number of important lessons learned during the pandemic that EIL educators can use to expand their professional horizons in our current 'new normal' era. Perhaps the most valuable one is that learning online is not something that comes naturally for most Japanese university students, in spite of the omnipresence of digital technologies in their lives. Our research challenges the deeply entrenched digital native narrative and supports Kirshner and De Bruyckere's (2017) contention that digital natives are illusionary creatures. Teachers must put careful consideration into cultivating an effective virtual learning environment and avoid falling into the trap of putting the technology before the pedagogy.

Limitations

There are several noteworthy limitations to this study. First, the research was conducted at a private university whereby the socioeconomic status of the students can be quite different from that of ELLs who attend public institutions. In addition, the majority (73.5%) of the student participants in this study are female. It was difficult to recruit focus group participants so only one interview was conducted with three students. Furthermore, the voices of these

three participants might not be representative of the rest of the students in the AEA program. Clearly, the research would have been more reliable if students from each of the six classes were included in several focus group sessions. Finally, the lead researcher investigated his own students which can create problematic issues related to power and influence (Cresswell, 2014) and personal bias (Burns, 2005). Ethical research practices were followed to minimize these issues. Future research in this area should include a better gender balance and students from a wider range of socioeconomic backgrounds.

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Appendix A

Post-course Questionnaire: Academic English A Students (translated from Japanese)

Post-course Online Learning Survey: First-year students

This research project aims to establish a supportive and effective online learning environment for first-year students who are taking the Academic English A (AEA) course. All information collected in this questionnaire will be treated confidentially. Thank you very much for your time and cooperation!

Part #1: Background Information

1) What is your gender?

- (a) female
- (b) male
- (c) rather not say

2) What is your age?

- (a) 18 years old
- (b) 19 years old
- (c) 20 years old
- (d) 21 years old
- (e) over 21 years old

3) What is your nationality?

- (a) Japanese
- (b) other (please specify: _____)
- (c) rather not say

4) Courses taken this year (check all that apply)

- AEA1 AEA2 AEA3 AEA4

5) Which personal electronic device was your main study tool in the AEA course?

- (a) Smartphone
- (b) Tablet (e.g., iPad)
- (c) Personal computer
- (d) Other (e.g., gaming console)

- 6) How much time do you normally spend online during a typical weekday? (Note: please include the time you are in a Zoom classroom, doing homework, gaming, texting/emailing, watching YouTube, and using SNS platforms).
- (a) Less than 1 hour
 - (b) From 1 hour up to 2 hours
 - (c) From 2 hours up to 3 hours
 - (d) From 3 hours up to 4 hours
 - (e) From 4 hours up to 5 hours
 - (f) From 5 hours up to 6 hours
 - (g) From 6 hours up to 7 hours
 - (h) 7 hours or more

Part #2: Multiple Choice Questions

7) To what extent do you agree with each of the statements below? Check the circle that best corresponds to your experience in the AEA course.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree

- A) I completed all of the assigned work before each of the online lessons.
- B) The speed of the Zoom platform was very fast and smooth.
- C) I did not experience any ICT problems joining or remaining in a Zoom class.
- D) The ‘Breakout Room’ activities helped me to get to know my classmates.
- E) I enjoyed communicating with my classmates in a ‘Breakout Room’.
- F) During the ‘Breakout Room’ activities, my classmates and I spoke in English the majority of the time (note: Japanese was rarely used).
- G) It is easier for an instructor to observe students and provide them with assistance in a ‘Breakout Room’ than it is in a face-to-face classroom.
- H) It was difficult to share my screen in a ‘Breakout Room’.
- I) It is more difficult to do a presentation in a ‘Breakout Room’ than it is in a face-to-face classroom.
- J) Compared to traditional face-to-face classes, my attention and participation increased in the Zoom lessons.
- K) Using the Zoom platform enabled me to learn effectively.

L) I preferred having 2 online classes (i.e., AEA1 & AEA2) a week instead of just one online lesson (i.e., AEA3 & AEA4).

8) To what extent do you agree with each of the statements below? Check the circle that best corresponds to your experience in the AEA course.

Item	Very Uncomfortable	Uncomfortable	OK (neutral)	Comfortable	Very Comfortable
A) My ability to use Zoom.					
B) My ability to use WebClass (Learning Management System).					
C) My ability to communicate in real time (e.g., Zoom chat).					
D) My ability to communicate asynchronously (e.g., email).					
E) My ability to use ICT (information & communication technology).					
F) Learning in an online environment instead of a face-to-face classroom					
G) My home study environment (e.g., a quiet room to complete my homework)					
H) Self-studying (e.g., watching instructional videos, working on activities in the AEA textbook)					
I) Getting to know my classmates in an online environment.					

Part #3: Open-ended Questions

Please answer the questions below by writing your opinion in as much detail as possible (Japanese is OK).

9) What were the **challenges** of taking the AEA course online instead of in a face-to-face classroom? (Example: less communication time with classmates)

10) What were the **benefits** of taking an online academic English course? (Example: learn new ICT skills)

11) How could the online AEA course be **improved**?

12) If you have any other comments, please write them here.

The AEA team greatly appreciates your feedback. Thanks again for your assistance!

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