

Conducting English Conversation Classes during COVID-19: Challenges and Perspectives

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Introduction

Since the emergence of COVID-19, we have been forced to live within a restrictive environment. Without doubt the pandemic has put us into communication crisis, keeping us from seeing each other face to face. Strict restrictions on movements across nations shifted the form of fundamental communicative activities into online spaces. Thanks to the advancement of technology, numerous electronical tools have played a vital role to help people communicate with each other. In the field of education, a rapid shift to online learning challenged us to tackle this unprecedented, difficult situation. However, educational circumstances are critically severe in poor countries (United Nations, 2020). Although there is a significant gap between developed countries and developing ones, most nations have been making a concerted effort to face this reality.

In Japan, many universities promptly took advantage of online learning. Preeti Oza defines online learning by illustrating with several examples (Oza, 2022). As Oza points out, there is not a fixed definition concerning online learning. In a broad sense, online learning covers distance learning. However, the online learning approach that we have temporally adopted is an alternative method for full-time students who study on campus. In this paper, online learning refers to an internet-based educational style that connects students through an electronical platform. In addition, online learning has two types: real-time online

learning and on-demand online learning.

First, this paper overviews English conversation classes conducted prior to COVID-19, illustrating practical class activities such as role playing and free conversation. Second, I review positive and negative aspects of online learning, giving an example of English conversation lessons at college. Third, I examine the results of a simple questionnaire survey conducted in June 2022. Based on those results as well as the current situation we face today, I foresee a future educational trend. Finally, I will explore an approach to a new trend of English education at the college level during the pandemic. Examining how English conversation classes are conducted during the pandemic would help create better lessons for instructors who experience and share the same circumstance worldwide.

English Lessons prior to COVID-19

So far, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has continuously reformed the English curriculum. Recently, English education in Japan has undergone a significant change. For example, grammar-based curricula that have traditionally been adopted have tended to be replaced by communicative ones, meaning that more communicative competence would be required. Hence, a variety of English lessons are included in the programs of the university curriculum. Students are given more chances to choose attractive alternatives from among the curricula.

Before the pandemic, English conversation classes had been conducted without paying attention to physical distance. There were not any particular restrictions for class activities. The author was in charge of a variety of English classes at several universities in Tokyo. The number of enrolled students was a minimum of 14 and a maximum of 30. In English conversation lessons, a Learner-Centered Teaching method was adopted in order to make the whole

class as vibrant as possible. Maryellen Weimer gives us the concept of Learner-Centered Teaching, indicating crucial features that construct the theory (Weimer, 2013). The method mainly stresses the participation of each student and puts the responsibility for learning on students. Under the learner-centered atmosphere, students need to be personally active during class, or they will fall behind the others. So, they begin to feel a responsibility to be a part of the class as a whole. Therefore, there is the possibility to transform students from passive to more active participants.

A group discussion, for example, is one of the effective features that allows students to express themselves in the classroom. The goal of the task is to give students opportunities to practice thinking within a small group. By dividing the students into several groups, the instructor encourages them to speak more frankly. Students are encouraged to find answers by exchanging ideas with one another. Although some students are reluctant to work in class activities, they are more likely to give their opinions in the context of a discussion, which certainly allows students to facilitate their communication with each other. Every time, leader is appointed to move the discussion forward. He/She has a responsibility to stimulate the discussion. Each member needs to exchange his/her ideas to complete their task. It is important for the instructor to give background information about the topic.

After the discussion, each group has to give a short presentation in front of the other students by using an Over Head Camera (OHC). The combination of oral expression and visual expression is very effective, and helps make the whole class more active and fulfilling. The instructor should ask follow-up questions related to the findings presented by each group, at the end, summarizing the whole discussion after hearing each one of the presentations. To create more communicative atmosphere, students are given as many occasions as possible to speak English. Personally, I often speak only English throughout a class session, asking questions in English and requiring that students answer in English, even

though their answer may not be perfect. They are expected to speak English as much as they can. Recently, many English terms have been adopted into Japanese. To give an example, words like agenda, compliance, and consensus have become widely accepted among Japanese people. These words are often used not only by business people but also by the younger generation, too. However, when students pronounce these words, they often pronounce them with a strong Japanese accent. It is the instructor's responsibility to check their pronunciation and correct it so it will sound right.

Enhancing the four skills of reading, listening, writing, and speaking is essential for mastering English. Japan is relatively known for placing less emphasis on speaking skills. In order to promote speaking skills, I mainly employ two major exercises: role playing and free conversation. Role playing is one of the important methods for improving communication skills, because it encourages students to take part in class activities as a full participant. A pair of students work together following the parameters of an assigned conversation. When they finish the conversation, they switch the roles and continue the exercise. Changing partners would help make the whole class more energetic and thrilling. It would also brighten up the atmosphere by allowing students to talk with a number of classmates and giving the students an opportunity to do peer-teaching: checking each one's pronunciation, intonation, and accent. In pairs, students become aware of their responsibility to complete the mission. They are expected to become more skillful in speaking English depending on various situations. For example, here is the beginning part of a conversation between Mary and Tim.

Mary: Hi, Tim.

Tim : Hi, Mary. What's up? You have a long face.

Mary: I'm worried about my future career.

Tim : Oh, no. You're kidding! We are still sophomores. We have two more

years to go.

Mary: Why are you so optimistic, Tim? You know, we have only two years left and we have so many things to do for our job hunting.

Tim : I'm afraid I don't agree with you. We still have a lot of time.

Before starting the role playing activity, the instructor is expected to explain the context of the conversation. For example, the question “What’s up?” is a casual greeting used among people with a close relationship. The expression “long face” sounds unfamiliar for non-native English speakers. It means a sad and unhappy facial expression. The verb “kid” means saying something as a joke. In this way, students grasp the whole content of the conversation and they can enrich their English vocabulary. As you can see, Mary and Tom are sophomores. Mary is apprehensive about her future career, while on the other hand, Tim does not seem to worry about job hunting. Mary feels upset while in contrast to her, Tim seems laid back. In role playing exercises, reading aloud from the textbook is not enough. Participants have to exercise putting themselves into each character’s position. Therefore, if they always have to perform as a real figure that first appeared in the textbook, then they will be more motivated by performing lively role playing exercises. Thus, role playing is an effective way to increase the opportunities for students to speak English as much as possible.

After role playing comes free conversation. Basically, free conversation is literally free, but it follows a certain rule. Before starting the exercise, a worksheet is handed out to each student (Figure 1). Participants are allowed to walk around the classroom to find a partner. Then, a pair of students start a conversation guided by the start-up questions that are displayed on the screen. If necessary, a partner is allowed to ask a question about the reason that the other student gives. If they want to, partners can keep talking with each other. When they finish a conversation, they switch roles and take the opposite side of the conversation. When they finish both sides, they fill in the worksheet and they

have to find a new partner. The practice is set for about 15 minutes total and participants are expected to talk with at least 5 students. Here is the procedure for a conversation exercise. Each participant has a mission to ask and answer the following questions.

Figure 1

Conversation Sheet			
(Name _____)			
	Name	Question 1	Question 2
1		<input type="checkbox"/> big <input type="checkbox"/> small	<input type="checkbox"/> Salary <input type="checkbox"/> Self-satisfaction <input type="checkbox"/> Social contribution <input type="checkbox"/> Working hours <input type="checkbox"/> Location
2		<input type="checkbox"/> big <input type="checkbox"/> small	<input type="checkbox"/> Salary <input type="checkbox"/> Self-satisfaction <input type="checkbox"/> Social contribution <input type="checkbox"/> Working hours <input type="checkbox"/> Location
3		<input type="checkbox"/> big <input type="checkbox"/> small	<input type="checkbox"/> Salary <input type="checkbox"/> Self-satisfaction <input type="checkbox"/> Social contribution <input type="checkbox"/> Working hours <input type="checkbox"/> Location
4		<input type="checkbox"/> big <input type="checkbox"/> small	<input type="checkbox"/> Salary <input type="checkbox"/> Self-satisfaction <input type="checkbox"/> Social contribution <input type="checkbox"/> Working hours <input type="checkbox"/> Location
5		<input type="checkbox"/> big <input type="checkbox"/> small	<input type="checkbox"/> Salary <input type="checkbox"/> Self-satisfaction <input type="checkbox"/> Social contribution <input type="checkbox"/> Working hours <input type="checkbox"/> Location
6		<input type="checkbox"/> big <input type="checkbox"/> small	<input type="checkbox"/> Salary <input type="checkbox"/> Self-satisfaction <input type="checkbox"/> Social contribution <input type="checkbox"/> Working hours <input type="checkbox"/> Location
7		<input type="checkbox"/> big <input type="checkbox"/> small	<input type="checkbox"/> Salary <input type="checkbox"/> Self-satisfaction <input type="checkbox"/> Social contribution <input type="checkbox"/> Working hours <input type="checkbox"/> Location
8		<input type="checkbox"/> big <input type="checkbox"/> small	<input type="checkbox"/> Salary <input type="checkbox"/> Self-satisfaction <input type="checkbox"/> Social contribution <input type="checkbox"/> Working hours <input type="checkbox"/> Location

Question 1

Student A: Which do you like better, working at a big company or a small one?

Student B: I like a [1] company, because ().

[big / small]

Student A: Additional question that is related to the answer given by Student B

Student B: ().

Question 2

Student A: What is the most important condition for when you get a job?

Student B: [2] is the most important condition for me, because ().

[Salary / Self-satisfaction / Social contribution / Working hours / Location]

Student A: Additional question that is related to the answer given by Student B

Student B: ().

For the first question, participants must choose big or small then give a reason concisely. For the next question, they must choose one item out of the five alternatives: Salary, Self-satisfaction, Social contribution, Working hours, and Location. Then they have to give a simple reason that is relevant to the chosen item.

Here are examples of anticipated reasons for each alternative item:

Question 1

big

Because I want to work with many people.

Because there will be various opportunities for working.

small

Because I want to focus on my own work.

Because I feel comfortable working in a small group.

Question 2

Salary

Because I want to be rich.

Because I want to earn a lot of money.

Self-satisfaction

Because I want to brush up my special skills.

Because I want to pursue my personal goal.

Social contribution

Because I want to make the world a better place.

Because I want to help people in need.

Working hours

Because I want to spend with my family after work.

Because I prefer to spend more time on my hobby.

Location

Because I want to live in Tokyo.

Because I prefer to work in my hometown.

All these reasons are examples; however, they are clearly logical and relevant to the chosen item. Students should be careful not to make their answers illogical. For example, if one student chooses “Working hours,” but then he/she answers that “Because I want to be the president of the company,” it sounds irrelevant because “Working hours” does not fit the reason that he/she chose. The student should have chosen the “Self-satisfaction” item if he/she wants to express the goal of becoming the president. If a partner feels strange or uncertain about the reason given, he/she can point it out. However, a majority of students, in fact, show some hesitation to point out the imperfect reason. They tend to prioritize the procedure of the conversation rather than checking about the partner’s uncertain reason. Basically, it is the instructors’ duty to modify illogical answers to encourage them to be logical as possible. In addition, some participants may take the assignment so seriously that they seem to be pressured to find answers and reasons. Students are recommended to take part in the exercise relying on their developing intuition about English.

It is noteworthy to emphasize that the classroom atmosphere becomes most lively while the students perform the free conversation exercise. This learner-

centered conversational practice is a typical embodiment conducted in real space. Some students are actively finding a partner, others seem to wait for someone to come by and address them. As students are allowed to move around the classroom, it seems adventurous for them to complete their mission within a limited time. That is an advantage of having face-to-face communication developed in a “real” classroom. During this time of the pandemic, several exercises have strictly been refrained due to keeping a physical distance.

English Education under the Pandemic

The Japanese government declared the first state of emergency on April 7, 2020. From then, strict movement restrictions were in force until the end of May. College education was no exception. As the academic year begins in April in Japan, staff at universities were awfully pressed to prepare for an alternative way to start the new academic year. Almost all events were cancelled. First year students entered the university without attending the entrance ceremony. Those new comers seemed to be embraced with more anxiety rather than expectations.

The inflow of people across the borders is high profile and was severely restricted. As Japan strengthened its border measures, international students were restricted from coming to study in Japan. For many universities in Japan, the pandemic has cast a shadow over international programs and activities. Although these events were scheduled, almost all of them were cancelled or postponed. On campus, Japanese students had fewer chances to meet with international students, exchanging their ideas and thoughts. Selective subjects that were open to both Japanese and international students were provided only for the Japanese. Japanese students who wanted to study abroad unexpectedly end up having to cancel their plans or change their schedules. As a result, students got less activated and missed an opportunity for broadening their horizons.

As physical in-person interaction was refrained from, instructors were

guided to choose another way for communication. Many universities adopted online learning as an alternative approach. It seems, however, the rapid move to online learning put both instructors and students into confusion. Without any accurate manuals, instructors had a hard time exploring better ways for managing classes in a difficult situation. Both instructors and students faced a new method in an unaccustomed way.

Regarding English conversation lessons, the practical exercises such as role playing and free conversation mentioned above are originally designed to be implemented in the classroom. It might be possible to do them by using a platform in online space. However, face-to-face communication is a fundamental human behavior to which people are naturally accustomed and share. Under restrictions in place due to COVID-19, college education in Japan has primarily been conducted in two ways: real-time online learning and on-demand online learning. Real-time online learning is conducted by using a platform such as Cisco Webex, Google Meet, or Zoom. Students are required to access the platform at the appointed time and participate in a lesson as if they were in a classroom. On the other hand, on-demand online learning is conducted through an information technological tool by which students watch or listen to recorded materials and then submit an essay or answer quizzes given by the instructor. The positive aspect of on-demand online learning is time and space flexibility. It is basically advantageous because students are allowed to have room for completing an assigned task. In a broader sense, they are almost free from being subject to restrictions. Students freely gain access to the platform whenever they want and they can review the recorded materials at any time. It is convenient for them to learn at their own pace. On the other hand, the negative aspect that is often pointed out is that some students are prone to procrastinate with tasks and tend to miss meeting their deadlines. Consequently, they are pressured to complete the piled-up tasks and some of them give up taking the course. Instructors need to take care of those students so they do not become

underachievers.

In terms of English education, English conversation classes are usually conducted via real-time online learning. As these exercises require oral communication, conducting this type of class online in real time is recommended. Using Breakout Rooms in Zoom enables class activities such as role playing and free conversation to be used effectively. It is a useful feature that allows an instructor to assign students to work in pairs. As an instructor quickly moves between Breakout Rooms, easily monitoring each pair, and giving tips to boost their conversation. So far, using this approach has gone almost as well as in-person classes concerning role playing practice. When it comes to free conversation practice, some pairs of students have a lively conversation so that they feel a little frustrated when their conversation is shut down because of time limitations. On the other hand, others do not have initiate extra conversation, and they keep silent until the next partner is appointed. In addition, although it depends on the number of enrolled students, at least a few minutes are required for setting up pairs on Breakout Rooms.

It is stressful for instructors to conduct the online class without looking at students' faces. Requiring the camera depends on the size of classes. Students are allowed to install a virtual background if they like. If there is a class with a relatively small number of students, it would be viable for them to keep their cameras on. A virtual classroom becomes more vibrant as students appear on the screen. Thus, it is highly recommended that students keep their camera on during the class to be full participants. Hence, cooperation and perseverance are required to make online learning more effective and productive. In addition, stability of the network needs to be maintained. In the early stages of real-time online learning, some students happened to be disconnected due to the unstable network conditions. This is one of the problems that must be solved by any means necessary to have effective online learning.

Unfortunately, face-to-face lessons in the classroom were not completely

conducted during the whole 2020 academic year. The situation put students into isolation without in-person contact with their classmates. They just met each other in a virtual space with a lot of regulations. Yoko Maekawa examines how the sudden shift to online learning affects students, considering their emotional well-being (Maekawa, 2021). From the view point of mental health, some students became ill because of the rapid shift. Those students need to be mentally cared for and instructors must pay supportive attention to those students. They feel so stressed and restrained that they can hardly adjust themselves to the new environment and they have a hard time with taking lessons. In the end, some students feel driven into a corner, losing their motivation for studying. What is worse, they might take a leave of absence and even they leave college altogether without having a concrete reason. In order to prevent this worst case scenario, instructors have to be more careful than before about managing classes. In addition, instructors are required to deal with feedback. Sometimes it takes a great deal of time to answer emails from the students. On the stage of online learning, email or other electronic message tools are the main means for students to get in touch with their instructor.

Whether online learning is a temporary alternative method or a useful method which can fulfill the demand for multiple learning approaches remains to be determined. As we have been living through an experimental period, it is critical that we ask ourselves what is the best solution for the present educational situation. In the early stages of the emergency, online learning was just implemented as alternative method, however, it has become prevalent at many universities, turning out to be a stimulating, sustainable, and substantial tool for this new trend. In some universities in Japan, instructors can choose a learning style depending on the size of the class. Some instructors choose to employ a combination of on-demand learning and real-time online learning. Although there are still aspects that need to be improved, it is practically possible to teach English online.

Questionnaire Survey

A questionnaire survey was targeted to college students who take the author’s English classes at Seijo University and Musashi University. Both universities are located in Tokyo. The survey was conducted in June 2022 when lessons in the classroom were already restarted. The aim of the survey was to grasp students’ perceptions about English lessons during COVID-19. The questionnaire is composed of two questions: Question 1, Which would be preferable for you during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic? and Question 2, Do you prefer continuing Zoom online lessons after Covid-19 is stamped out? The questionnaire was passed out in the classroom and a total of 73 students (freshperson: 16, sophomore: 53, junior: 3, senior: 1) answered the questions. The survey is a small one but it gives us a clue for coping with a new trend that we face today.

For the first question, the answer “Combination of lessons in the sanitized classroom and online lesson by using Zoom” received the most favor among respondents (Figure 2). It is supposed that students have already gotten used

Figure 2

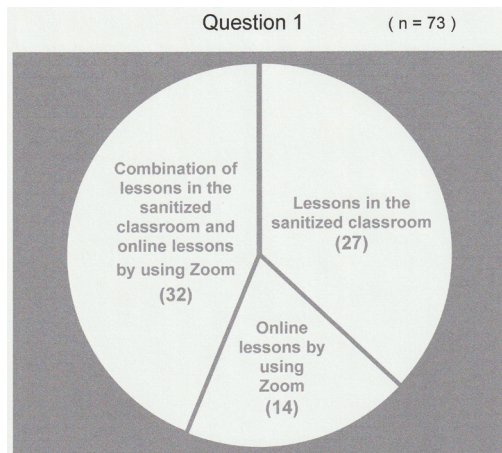
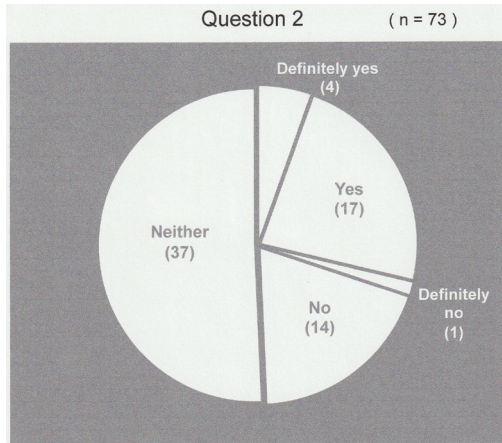


Figure 3



to taking classes using this kind of combined learning style. For the second question, more than a quarter of respondents favored a continuous use of Zoom online learning, which leaves more room for further discussions. On the other hand, about 20% of respondents do not welcome Zoom online learning. It is anticipated that they expect things go back normal, attending lessons in the classroom. Almost half of respondents answered “neither.” Those respondents must feel uncertain about which educational style will be used in the future (Figure 3). Students seem to struggle through unpredictable conditions, adjusting themselves to the guidelines provided by their university. As we still live under unstable circumstances, it is certainly difficult to visualize the future. It is noteworthy that the survey shows a certain number of students favored online lesson after the pandemic. As we have multiple choices in education, we should be highly motivated to enhance our capability to provide online lesson tools to meet the demands of those students that prefer them. As of June 2022, the results show that lessons in the classroom are relatively favored by students.

There are various opinions written in the optional comment field. For instance, some students are still hesitant to go to campus, because they feel

fearful about possible infection. On the other hand, other students claim that they definitely prefer to take lessons in person in a classroom. Still others claim that they do not want to bring their personal computer to campus because they have to attend both face-to-face lessons and real-time online learning on campus on the same day.

Perspective for the Next Stage

During the campus shutdown, instructors had a hard time conducting online lessons and preparing new materials within a very limited time. A certain number of instructors claim that a little more time is needed to develop their teaching materials to fit online lessons. Although guidelines were handed out, it was true that a certain number of instructors, especially part-time lecturers, struggled to deal with the unprecedented task. It is recommended that workshops or seminars for instructors be held to manage effective online learning. Sharing information and exchanging opinions would surely reinforce a set of skills for online learning. Now is the time for a structural reformation in order to match the new trend. As Ali Erarslan asserts, redesigning the English language teachers' education programs is required (Erarslan, 2021).

As of April 2022, a majority of universities in Japan have reopened their campuses and the students have gone back to the classroom. Each university formulated guidelines which emphasize sanitization and ventilation in order to protect against COVID-19. To give an example, acrylic partitions are installed on the desks to prevent droplet transmission, which enables face-to-face lessons in the classroom. Regular ventilation is also mandatory even in winter. Basically, universities require students to check their body temperature and sanitize their hands before entering the campus. The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare disseminates information about the "Three Cs": closed spaces, crowded places, and close-contact settings. The ministry repeatedly calls attention to the fact

that the risk of occurrence of clusters is high when the “Three Cs” overlap. We must keep these principles in mind as we live in this next stage, being aware of maintaining physical distance.

In face-to-face communication, people can naturally get a quick response. Facial expressions are a key factor that positively or negatively affects communication. Wearing a mask is mandatory in the classroom makes it a little bit difficult to recognize each other facial emotions. A conventional mask completely blocks the mouth and makes it difficult to see facial expressions clearly. Some universities encourage instructors to wear transparent masks so as to elicit better communication. English lessons, especially English conversation lessons, are different from other subjects because it requires face-to-face communication. Keeping physical distance is quite difficult when it comes to having discussions because students tend to get closer when their discussion heats up. Instructors need to nudge students to maintain their awareness of physical distance.

Though face-to-face learning in the classroom is encouraged, it is still difficult to carry it out perfectly because of these exceptional reasons. A student who has an underlying health condition is able to join the classes through an online platform. Therefore, HyFlex courses are provided to meet the demand. These courses are designed to focus on these four elements: learner choice, equivalence, reusability, and accessibility (Beatty, ed., 2019). In HyFlex courses, instructors have to pay attention to both the students in the classroom and those in the virtual space. It is imperative for instructors, whether young or seasoned, to be more skillful in handling technological materials. The time has come for instructors to cope with a new standard teaching method. There have been a lot of trial-and-error endeavors related to English education. Needless to say, improving the basic qualifications of instructors is just as important as the online curriculum and teaching methods used. At the same time, it is no exaggeration to say that English competence is obviously one of the crucial factors for

instructors for creating a better lecture that fits the new standard. Though we have been guided to refrain from in-person communication during the time of the pandemic, the world has already become connected by the Internet, which enables us to interact with each other.

As mentioned above, a large number of universities have broadly adopted online learning and they plan to put it into practical use. Online learning has another potential to develop learning autonomy, which will enable students to manage their own learning schedules. Some students are dramatically motivated to keep up with classes, feeling independent and responsible for studying. They are self-reliant in accomplishing each assignment without supervision. Therefore, we need to meliorate online learning to be a more tailored method that fits learners. Instructors urgently need to be more mobilized to help students become capable of adjusting themselves to this new trend. We have to cope with the difficult situation by taking every advantage of various educational tools as well as promoting basic class activities that have practically been developed in the classroom.

Conclusion

In many aspects, we feel stressful under the restrictions caused by COVID-19. The pandemic provides a valuable insight into the field of not only English learning but also various other subjects affected by the emergency. The abrupt shift to online learning led to a lot of challenges that had to be addressed. This paper offers only one example that one Japanese instructor personally experienced during the pandemic. For further research, more inclusively quantitative investigation will be required to grasp the overall situation that we face today. Under these unstable circumstances, no one knows for sure how such an abrupt transition will affect education. Some educators suggest the combination of face-to-face learning and online learning will be the result.

Others put more stress on traditional face-to-face learning. Anyway, instructors need to be more flexible in organizing classes. It is probably foreseeable that online education would become more prevalent even on a daily basis. Also, online education seems quite plausible based on the policy for promoting multiple learning. With the exponential advancement of learning technology, we are stimulated to adjust ourselves to what is called “new normal.” However, many further discussions for envisioning new forms of education are required. Based on the situations we faced, embraced, and shared during the pandemic period, vigorous discussions are expected to create better English lessons. As there is no perfect one-fits-all method, we are always challenged to keep groping for a better way for both instructors and students.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

Q1. Which would be preferable for you during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic?

- Lessons in the sanitized classroom
- Online lessons by using Zoom
- Combination of lessons in the sanitized classroom and online lessons by using Zoom

Q2. Do you prefer continuing Zoom online lessons after Covid-19 is stamped out?

- Definitely yes
- Yes
- Definitely no
- No
- Neither

If you have any comments, please feel free to write down.

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Thank you for your cooperation.

