

Confronting the pandemic ahead of the West at a junior high school in rural Japan

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After a three-month absence, junior high schools in Fukui, Japan, began classroom learning on June 1, 2020. Since much of the Western world would keep its schools closed throughout the month of June, thus resuming lessons in September, I would like to offer my insights from the perspective of a foreign language teacher working under these conditions prior to the Northern summer holidays. While each teaching subject has taken its own measures to significantly reduce the amount of interaction between students, including the spreading of particles in the air, I can only speak to the initiatives taken by the English department at the junior high school affiliated with the University of Fukui where I teach. English language is among the compulsory subjects taken four times a week by all students from grades seven to nine.

The first significant point of consideration is the school year schedule in Japan. The school year begins in April and ends in March, with a two-week spring vacation in between. When the schools closed March 9th due to the COVID-19 outbreak, it was clear that schools would not reopen before the new school year, so the spring vacation was simply extended. What we didn't know at the time, but later became clear, was that schools could not open from the start of their school year either. No one was really certain when the schools would re-open, so teachers became tasked with maintaining some sort of normalcy in students' lives.

In my 12-years of experience working for the Japanese public-school system, schools have not been equipped with remote learning systems. Prior to COVID-19, many teachers had not experienced, let alone heard of, online learning platforms such as Google Classroom or Zoom. I was within that group of individuals who had previously only interacted with students face-to-face. It is uncommon for public school teachers in Japan to interact with their students outside of school hours, not to mention online. If students are absent, phone calls are made and homework is passed along. We were thus shocked and confused by the idea that students were unable to come to school and yet were expected to study. I sensed that most teachers were hoping that the school closure would quickly pass and that schools would resume as normal.

However, as we now know, that wasn't the case, and nearly seven weeks of classroom learning were lost. During that time, the first initiative was to provide students with two weeks' worth of schoolwork at home. The English Department created an email specifically for students to chat with me in English, videos were created to build students' vocabulary and reading input, and teachers were learning how to reach students remotely. This required significant work from teachers, many of whom were unfamiliar with the technology of creating video lessons, with no professional development offered. Students watched videos and completed their homework, and after two weeks, submitted their work by hand at school. Students came to school on a staggered basis and were required to practice proper social distancing measures, and stay at

school no longer than a few minutes. This was all prior to the initiation of any online learning platform, which had yet to be set up.

A month into the school year it became clear that classroom sessions could not resume, and online learning was introduced. Ensuring all students had access to a safe, quiet environment to study, with access to Wi-Fi and a reliable device, students were required to participate in a scheduled school day remotely from home. If students did not have access to a device, the school loaned them one. This was initiated to allow routine into students' lives. Zoom lessons were one option given to teachers to provide students. Since routine was given priority, students were required to participate synchronously through Zoom. Of the four English lessons a week, one or two of them would be conducted on Zoom. Lessons were recorded, however, only for the benefit of the teacher and their mastery. To my surprise it was decided that access would not be provided to students to view post-lesson. At first, I questioned this, as it seemed counterintuitive to the benefits of Zoom, however, I came to understand through conversations with my colleagues that it may be burdensome to students as they make their own transition to online learning.

Once Zoom lessons began, teachers were asked to be on school campus during those lessons, filming the lessons from the classrooms. The work that teachers were asked to do, in the form of planning and conducting lessons, during the school closure became more and more significant. The demands on the teachers to facilitate and mimic a classroom environment for students was reaching beyond the limits of most teachers' skills, working just as hard if not harder. Students were also stretching their capacities during this time. Therefore, when news broke that the normal five-week summer holiday, one-week autumn break and two-week winter holiday would all be reduced to make up for the loss in classroom time, I was upset at the lack of sympathy for the effort students and teachers were putting in during the school closure. I realized that there seems to be something more significant about being physically present at school where teachers are facilitating students' learning. Penalizing students and teachers because of COVID-19 didn't seem fair.

School boards in Japan are under the jurisdiction of the national Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT); however, they are governed by the local governments. Thus, once it was determined that no new COVID-19 cases were reported in Fukui, remote learning was ceased on June 1, 2020; and junior high public schools in Fukui began classroom learning after a three-month absence. This required both teachers and students to be present at school from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. The majority of junior high schools feed from the community allowing students to either walk or come to school by bicycle. Other schools, particularly senior high schools, initiated reduced and staggered schedules to avoid interaction during commuting hours, since many students rely on public transportation.

While schools have opened, there have been significant changes to the programming. Students are required to handwash throughout the day and use disinfectant whenever possible. Students are also required to bring at least two masks to school and wear one at all times. Social distancing measures have been enforced, and students were initially unable to gather in pairs or groups in the classroom and were discouraged to interact with students in other classes. Assemblies were

videotaped or shown on a live feed through each classroom. School lunch service began on June 1st; however, students were required to stay in their classrooms and face forward at all times. Besides these daily activities, all other school events, including those onsite and offsite that would bring people together in large groups, were cancelled. Since June 1, there has been a loosening of some of these restrictions, such as allowing students to take off their masks during physical education and music lessons. At the start, students were not allowed to sing; however, this has now been deemed acceptable. Also, group and pair work have been green lit. Slowly, the school days are beginning to feel more normal and students and teachers are becoming more comfortable.

Because of the experiences with COVID-19 and the changes in students' learning styles, I believe there were many changes made to my teaching philosophy and pedagogy. Prior to COVID-19, I was used to teaching EFL through content-based learning, which relied heavily on students' presence in the classroom. Throughout the COVID-19 school closure, students were required to participate in more language audio-lingual or direct methods, which required students to do a lot of writing, listening, repeating, and translation work. I realized that those methods, while important in students' learning, do not offer the skills required to produce natural language. Furthermore, students require a lot of effective input in order to produce effective output. I want to use more experiential learning that will significantly improve students' ability to relate to language. Also, I want to remember that language learning should be fun, not inquiry-based, but, rather, task-based and inclusive. Remote learning reminded me that we need individuals to produce language, and the socialness of learning language cannot be forgotten.

As I come to the end of my experience of coping with these changes, I want to highlight a few things that I've learned over the course of the three months schools were closed.

- 1. Remote learning aptitude**

Teachers in Japan need to become familiar with remote learning and be able to implement it easily and quickly. Future extended periods of remote learning should not come as a surprise, but, rather, be embraced.

- 2. Embrace Information and Communications Technology (ICT)**

While technology is synonymous with Japan, it is not always used effectively in classrooms. Teachers need to find ways to connect students to ICT and bring the classroom into the 21st century.

- 3. Student learning**

We need to have more faith in students' ability to learn on their own and to build into the curriculum ways to facilitate *learning to learn*. It is important that students learn to take onus of their own learning with teachers are facilitators.

- 4. Work flexibility**

Workplaces in Japan had to learn quickly to be forgiving with their employees who requested to work remotely from home. However, Japan has a long way to go in creating a working environment that allows for flexibility for everyone.

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