

Teaching Integrated Skills on Zoom for Japanese EFL Undergraduate Students During the First Semester of COVID19 (Spring 2020) in Japan

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This paper shows how one college EFL instructor taught a course called Integrated Skills remotely via Zoom due to the prevalence of COVID-19 during the spring 2020 semester. After an explanation of the instructor's teaching context and the definition and purpose of Integrated Skills, three phases of how the instructor taught the course are explained: speaking through writing, writing through listening, and writing through reading. This is followed by a reflection of teaching the course for spring 2020 and implications for teachers teaching EFL in other cultural contexts. It is argued that while the three-phase approach for teaching Integrated Skills online was effective as suggested by the instructor's course evaluation and what is documented in literature on effective EFL instruction, college instructors teaching EFL in other cultural contexts need to stay attuned to themselves and their own students to deliver effective online EFL classes.

Introduction

Japan declared a state of emergency in seven of the 47 prefectures on April 7th, 2020, and extended it to all prefectures on April 13th, 2020 (Kodera et al., 2020). Although the state of emergency was withdrawn in May 2020 (Kodera et al., 2020), in order to prevent outburst and control the speed of infections, schools were closed (Tashiro & Shaw, 2020). Numerous colleges across Japan decided to teach the spring semester of 2020 completely online, and many universities decided to continue with online teaching for the fall semester, with some students returning to their hometowns to stay with their families (NHK World-Japan, 2020). While Aliyev's (2017) study of Azerbaijani undergraduate students studying EFL suggests that students are already prepared for EFL using web technologies, when undergraduate students in Japan were examined whether they were ready to learn English online, results showed that they do not have knowledge and command of online tools for educational

purposes despite having a fair command of general online tools for daily life (Mehran et al., 2017). Furthermore, when Ozawa (2020) explored how the characteristics of Japanese EFL university students related to their actual use of ICT in an online English course, results indicated that positive attitudes toward ICT and high self-regulated learning skills did not necessarily predict the learners' use of ICT or the development of their English abilities.

In such a social context, the writer was assigned to teach a course called Integrated Skills remotely for spring 2020. Integrated Skills involve the four major skills of reading, listening, writing, and speaking that compliment each other (Celik, 2019). Devi and Rao (2018) argue that it is impossible to teach the four skills independently, and further argue that they should be taught as a whole, activities should be thoughtful, and classes need to be managed carefully. In addition to the four skills, Oxford (2001) argues that another part of the tapestry is: teachers, learning, setting, and relevant languages. Because Integrated Skills is such a complex tapestry (Oxford, 2001), and every teacher, learner, social context of teaching, and languages used for teaching a foreign language are different, the significance of the paper lies in not only the writer reflecting on his own teaching but also having readers reflect on their teaching. This paper will cover how Integrated Skills was taught for undergraduate students in Japan during the pandemic, document a reflection of teaching, and show implications for teachers teaching EFL for undergraduate students.

How Integrated Skills was Taught in Three Phases: Speaking Through Writing, Writing Through Listening, and Writing Through Reading

The writer taught Integrated Skills for 28 first-year students in two phases: the first phase of having students speak through writing, the second phase of having students write through listening, and the third phase of having students write through reading and listening. First, in order to take individual differences into account (Ozawa, 2019), as the first assignment, the teacher asked students to write about their language-learning history, what Integrated Skills

means to them, their perceived levels of proficiency in terms of the four skills, their goals by the end of the course, what they intend to do with the skills they have acquired during the semester, along with writing something unique about themselves.

The first phase of having students speak through writing had three class sessions out of 13 sessions total. During the beginning of the second session, the teacher asked volunteers to share their responses via Zoom, and the teacher worked on having students combine and summarize the short responses into one cogent paragraph. Ghasemi and Baradaran (2018) argue that summarizing, questioning, predicting, and clarifying are effective when students work collaboratively and the teacher serves as an effective facilitator. Additionally, Kamdideh et al. (2019) argue that summarizing requires vocabulary learned through listening, speaking, and writing. Based on the written responses the teacher obtained from students, the teacher came up with multiple open-ended questions that many students seemed comfortable in sharing more about. For example, because many students mentioned they wanted to be able to communicate with foreigners to make use of the language skills they acquired throughout the course, one open question was: What does it mean to be a foreigner? Suggestions for students to be careful for their writing assignments included: to write a clear topic sentence, to include specific examples, and to be careful of cohesion among sentences. In the first phase, the teacher had students write and summarize open-ended questions regularly. In support of developing a habit of writing, Yüce's (2020) study interviewed eight foreign language college instructors in Turkey on the effectiveness of implementing an online diary for their EFL classes, and interview data suggested the instructors' perceived importance of getting students to write regularly.

The second phase of writing through listening were from the fourth session to the sixth session, which was before the midterm assessment on the seventh session. For the second phase, using TED Talks was a natural choice considering students' written responses and the Japanese transcripts available. Riensumettharadol's (2019) survey of 172 EFL Thai university students found that 38.06 percent of the students were most

interested in phrases used in daily conversation, 25.28 percent favored vocabulary related to academics and standardized tests, and 20.62 percent preferred learning about vocabulary in the workplace. The TED Talks chosen were research and practice based that specialize in each speaker's profession; however, their target audience was not specialists, suggesting that each TED Talk had a mix of academic vocabulary, words used in the workplace, and words used in daily conversation. In preparation for each session, the teacher read through all responses and graded them, and selected three to four exemplar work. During class, the teacher attempted to allocate speaking opportunities for students to talk about their responses to open-ended questions that they had written for their assignments due before class, provided detailed feedback on those selected assignments, developed several points to focus on for improvement for the next assignment, and introduced the next assignment to work on developing their skills.

After a midterm during the seventh session that asked students to use two listening sources to write a paragraph response to an open-ended question, the third and final phase from session eight to session 12 had students integrate reading materials in English to ultimately work on the final assessment during session 13 in which they were asked to respond to an open-ended question using at least one reading source and one listening source. Alghonaim (2018) argues that reading and writing should not be taught separately. Rather, they should be integrated, and the instructor needs to stay attuned to the needs of the writer (Alghonaim, 2018). Based on the written responses of the students and the Zoom interaction during class, the teacher attempted to provide opportunities for students to not only develop their linguistic skills but also build on their identity capital that they already have. According to Aizawa and Heath (2019), while 20 percent of the participants perceived that EFL education could result in the complete loss of Japanese identity and 30 percent of the participants believed that EFL instruction could lead to a reduction in Japanese identity, the majority of the participants believed that EFL education could result in strengthening Japan's national and cultural identity. It was hoped that by covering topics such as

students' personal goals in life and their relationships with others, the students would be able to express themselves effectively not only as a result of acquiring linguistic proficiency in the four skills but also by understanding different ways of thinking through the four skills.

Reflecting on Teaching

Integrated Skills was attempted to balance facilitation of students' writing skills by drawing on their potential with instruction by providing explicit instruction on how to write (Nordin, 2017). Majority of the students in the Integrated Skills course had written positive evaluations with many indicating that while the course was challenging, it motivated them to keep learning, which is an important point, as all the students were first-year students. This point is related to MacWhinnie and Mitchell's (2017) finding that ideal L2 self and L2 learning experience are correlated with lower anxiety level which in turn led to positive learning results. The researchers further noted that those who had a good classroom experience and developed a sense of their future selves were less anxious than those who thought they ought to study (MacWhinnie & Mitchell, 2017). Research suggests that goal setting plays an important role in enhancing intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy for Japanese undergraduate students, and it is advisable that students set specific goals with the help of teachers such as the number of words to read for extensive reading (Mikami, 2020). If the course was a year-long course, it might have been effective to structure the course by having students come up with their own goals for the second semester with the help of the instructor. For example, all students can select their own reading and listening materials to summarize and present for the second semester based on the skills they developed during the first semester.

Implications for Teachers Teaching EFL

Positive course evaluations suggest that applying the three-phase

model for first-year students when students learn English online can be effective. Oxford (2001) points out that if the teacher is creative, a course that emphasizes on one skill may involve multiple skills, suggesting that ideas in the paper can be applied to other courses for EFL. However, as Ozawa (2019) points out, individual differences should be carefully considered in adopting online English courses effectively in higher education settings.

MacWhinnie and Mitchell (2017) make a reasonable suggestion that teachers should ensure an environment for students in which they are not overanxious and unable to learn effectively. Japanese, the majority of the students' first language for the Integrated Skills course, was used to support facilitation of L2 skills, and teachers in other contexts may also choose to use the local language to support L2 instruction. In addition, Sutthinaraphan (2019) argues that for some learners, being taught native-speaker norms are culturally unrealistic. For those teachers teaching in a context that do not have students go abroad as part of their college program for EFL instruction, the approach taken by the writer to introduce TED Talks and readings that focus on the L2 cultural norms may not be applicable. While introducing L2 cultural norms can contribute to the students' expansion of their identity capital, it is important to recognize that some students may be demotivated to learn L2 because it can lead to a loss of their identity (Aizawa & Heath, 2019), suggesting the importance of every teacher being Argus-eyed about his or her students' needs (Alghonaim, 2018) and wants, considering the effect they can have on intrinsic motivation and classroom management.

Conclusion

This paper covered how one instructor teaching EFL, particularly a course called Integrated Skills in Japan at the tertiary level for first-year students has taught the course remotely due to COVID-19 during the semester of spring 2020. Research has suggested that reality is much more complex than policy goals set forth by universities (Turnbull, 2017). It was argued that while the three phase approach of having students speak through writing, write

through listening, and write through reading was effective as suggested by his course evaluation, college instructors teaching EFL in other contexts need to stay attuned to their students and also pay close attention to their own creativity and the resources they have to bring to their own classrooms (Oxford, 2001). Ybarra and Green (2003) claim that computers are not substitutes for effective teaching. While their claim was made around 20 years ago, their claim still holds true today and are important to note particularly during a time when teachers need to rely on computers to support quality learning while keeping a physical distance with the students.

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