

Students' Attitudes and Preferences towards Online English Classes

Iori Oba

要約

クラスルーム研究 (Classroom Study) において、対面の教室で第二言語・外国語を学ぶ学習者や教師を研究の対象とすることは伝統的な手法であった。しかしながら、2020年のCOVID-19によるパンデミック中、対面型クラスをほとんど見かけなくなり、第二言語・外国語を学ぶ教室でさえもオンラインによる授業が主流となったのである。では、学習者や教師が実際には対面しないオンラインの教室で学習者は有効に第二言語や外国語を学ぶことはできるのだろうか。本研究はパンデミック中にオンラインの教室で英語を学んだ経験がある79名の大学生を対象にアンケート調査を行い、日本人英語学習者のオンライン授業に対する傾向と学習態度を調べた。その結果、ほとんどの被験者がオンラインによる英語の授業は効果的であったと答え、オンライン授業に対して肯定的な態度であるということが分かった。しかしながら、英語の四技能（リーディング、リスニング、ライティング、スピーキング）をオンライン授業で学習することに対して、学習者はリスニングやリーディング技能を学ぶことには肯定的な態度であったが、スピーキングやライティング技能が向上したと答えた学生は少数であり、否定的であった。このことは、オンライン教室でのインプットを与える活動（リスニング等）に比べて、アウトプットを促す活動（スピーキング等）は学習者がその効果を感じ難いことを示唆しているだろう。これらの研究結果から、将来のオンライン授業では学習者のアウトプットを促す活動をする時、教室内で活発なやり取りがある状態（interactive）を維持する工夫が必要であると考えられる。

Keywords: Foreign Language Learners, Online Language Learning, COVID-19 Pandemic, Students' Thoughts, Questionnaires

Introduction

Since 2020, teachers undertaking second language (L2) classes have struggled to teach students during the COVID-19 pandemic. This may be because teachers were required to conduct online language classes. This is the first time that L2 teachers, learners, and researchers faced the unprecedented havoc that occurred in the twenty-first century. Therefore, it is true that we have been in the middle of discovering a better strategy for teaching and learning languages online. The findings of the present study will provide support not only for language teachers who have been undertaking online classes but also for teachers who have looked back on their teaching during the pandemic.

Even before the pandemic, several studies focused on advanced language learning using online lessons, audio visual materials, and learning applications. Further, most studies only investigated the efficiencies of advanced language learning. However, studies focusing on learners' internal factors, such as learners' attitudes, motivations, and beliefs, are limited. One study emphasizing learners' internal factors in online learning is that of Zhang, Liu, Gao, & Lee (2024), who examined learners' enjoyment and emotion regulation in online collaborative learning. In their study, Chinese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners participated in online collaborative English writing sessions. The results indicated that participants managed their emotional climate in the online sessions using three types of regulation: self-regulation, co-regulation, and socially shared regulation. Jiang and Zhou (2024) drew attention to the important role of learners' internal aspects, questioning how learner readiness relates to motivation, engagement, attitude, and support in flipped online learning. They conducted a survey with 11 university students learning English in China and concluded that two factors moderated the impact of learners' readiness: learner attitudes and environmental support. A study by Cabangcala, Alieto, Estigoy, De Los Santos, and Torres (2021) assumed that two factors played a crucial role in conveying online learning successfully: learners' attitudes and technological competence. The study demonstrated that students' attitudes towards online learning could be key to obtaining technological competence and that

learners' attitudes towards online learning were significantly related to technological competence. Herguner, Son, Herguner Son, and Donmez (2020) also investigated the effects of learners' positive attitudes towards online learning. Data were collected from 306 Turkish students from six universities to examine the impact of learners' attitudes on online learning readiness. The results indicated that a positive attitude can lead to students' well-motivated behavior, and can directly affect readiness for online learning. In the second language acquisition (SLA) field, learners' attitudes were not topics that simply emerged. From the early times, several studies have indicated the crucial role of learners' attitudes towards language learning. Krashen (1988) explains that there are two important attitudinal factors.

Attitudinal factors that relate to second language acquisition will be those that perform one or both of two functions. First, they will be factors that encourage intake... Second, attitudinal factors relating to acquisition will be those that enable the performer to utilize the language heard for acquisition. (21)

From the perspective of the studies mentioned above, learners' attitudes are considered to play a role in successful online learning. However, studies focusing on learners' internal factors, such as learners' attitudes, motivations, and beliefs, are limited compared to studies investigating the efficiencies of online learning. In addition, a number of studies concerning learners' attitudes towards online learning have focused on investigating the relationships between learners' attitudes and language learning itself, though it is important to distinguish learners' attitudes according to their language skills, namely reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Further, language learners will have individual preferences for various language skills. For example, some students may prefer writing to reading, whereas others may prefer reading to writing online. As such, individual preferences may also influence the results of studies on learners' attitudes towards online language learning.

Consequently, this study focuses on the following research questions.

1. Do students think online English classes are effective in improving their English skills (speaking, writing, reading, and listening) and developing

- their English knowledge (vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar)?
2. Which language skills do they believe are most likely to improve?
 3. Which aspects of language knowledge do they believe are most likely to develop?
 4. Which language skills do they believe are least likely to improve?
 5. Which aspects of language knowledge do they believe are least likely to develop?

Methods

Questionnaires were administered to 79 university students in Kanagawa Prefecture, Japan. The data were gathered between December 2021 and July 2022 after emergency remote teaching. The participants were sophomore, junior, and senior university students whose subject majors were not English (most participants belonged to the Department of Economics) but were taking basic English courses at the university. At university, students whose major subjects were not English had to take basic English courses before they graduated, in order to learn the fundamentals of listening, speaking, writing, and reading. Students taking basic English courses were categorized into medium-sized classes (approximately 30 students) according to their English proficiency levels. As students from an advanced class were excluded from this study, all participants had scores below 500 on the TOEIC test. The participants had the experience of taking online English language classes (including watching lecture footage and participating in videoconferencing lectures through Zoom) provided by the university during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants' online learning contexts were different because teachers undertaking classes could choose which online tools to use at the university. For example, some students took online classes using lecture footage, others took online classes using the Zoom application, and others experienced both types. To determine the students' preferences and attitudes towards online language learning, participants were asked to answer the following questions (written and answered in Japanese) using Microsoft Forms during class time:

1. According to your experience, do you think that online -English learning

is effective to improve your English skills or develop your English knowledge?

2. If the answer for the first question is "yes," which language skill is most likely to improve through online learning? Choose one or more of the following options: reading, listening, speaking, or writing.
3. If the answer to the first research question is "yes," which language knowledge is most likely to develop through online learning? Choose one or more options: vocabulary, pronunciation, or grammar.
4. If the answer for the first question is "no," which language skill is most unlikely to improve through online learning? Choose one or more of the following options: reading, listening, speaking, or writing.
5. If the answer for the first question is "no," which language knowledge is most unlikely to develop through online learning? Choose one or more options: vocabulary, pronunciation, or grammar.

Students who participated in this study were required to choose one or more options to answer the questions; for some questions, they were required to write the answers in sentences. Responses to each question were collected and calculated using a computer system.

Results

The total number of student responses to the first question is presented in Table 1. The percentage of students who commented that online language learning was effective was 78% (62), indicating that most students had positive perceptions towards online language learning.

Table 1. Students' Answers for the First Question

Students' Answers for Q1	Yes	No
Total	62	17

However, 22% (n = 17) of the students did not confirm the positive effects of online language learning.

Table 2 displays the students' answers to the second question: Which

language skill is most likely to improve through online learning? The number of participants who answered the questionnaires was 79, but 62 students who answered ‘yes’ to the first question proceeded to the second question. Students could then choose one or more categories from among the four skill types. The most frequent category was reading skills (40%), indicating that students could learn to read English effectively through online learning. The second-most preferred category was listening skills (34%), while speaking skills showed the lowest preference (9%).

Table 2. Students’ Answers for the Second Question

Language Skill	Reading Skill	Speaking Skill	Listening Skill	Writing Skill
Total	39	9	33	17

The students’ answers to the third question are shown in Table 3: Which aspect of language knowledge is most likely to develop through online learning? According to the students’ responses, English grammar was the most preferred category for learning through online classes, at 60% (49). The second-highest category among the other categories was vocabulary (30%) (25), while the lowest was the category of pronunciation (10%) (8).

Table 3. Students’ Answers for the Third Question

Language Knowledge	Grammar	Pronunciation	Vocabulary
Total	49	8	25

Although Tables 2 and 3 demonstrate the students’ preferences who thought online learning was effective, respondents who answered that online learning was ineffective (22%) were excluded from questions 2 and 3. Tables 4 and 5 present the ideas of respondents who commented that online learning was ineffective. Table 4 shows the answers from students who experienced negative impacts towards online classes and proceeded to the fourth question: Which language skill is most unlikely to improve through

online learning? Most respondents who answered that online learning was an ineffective way to learn English had difficulties in improving their speaking skills online, followed by reading, writing, and listening skills.

Table 4. Students' Answers for the Fourth Question

Language Skill	Reading Skill	Speaking Skill	Listening Skill	Writing Skill
Total	4	10	1	2

In addition to Table 4, Table 5 illustrates the students' responses with a negative image of online learning. The respondents' answers to the fifth question are shown in Table 5: Which language knowledge is most unlikely to develop through online learning? Students who experienced a negative impact towards online learning seemed to have difficulty in acquiring English pronunciation (44%) through online learning. However, grammar and vocabulary recorded the same percentages (28%) (7).

Table 5. Students' Answers for the Fifth Question

Language Knowledge	Grammar	Pronunciation	Vocabulary
Total	7	11	7

Discussion

The first question addressed the effectiveness of online language learning from students' perspectives. The first question was answered positively by respondents (78% answered that online language learning was effective). This result was unexpected because, second- or foreign -language learning has traditionally been delivered in a face-to-face classroom environment, and we believe that it provides learners with opportunities to impose themselves in more interactive ways. Several early studies emphasized the importance of conversational interaction in second language acquisition (Doughty & Varela, 1993; Long, 1996).

Most respondents in this study stated that online language learning was

effective, although it sometimes had limitations in terms of being interactive. If which is the case, what satisfies them? According to the questionnaire responses, some participants wrote about the advantages of taking online classes: “I watched lecture videos repeatedly if I had difficulty understanding the targeted language items” and “I felt relaxed when I took online language classes in the rooms.” From the students’ perspective, the advantages of using online materials may facilitate language learning. Krashen (1988) explained the negative impact of learners’ emotional aspects. If a learner’s affective filter is high, it would be a less ideal environment for the learner to acquire the language. Unexpectedly, some students commented on their anxiety in face-to-face classrooms. More students may feel anxious or uncomfortable during face-to-face language learning than we think; therefore, it may be time to revalue students’ internal issues and anxiety. Concerning the students’ impact on online language learning, most answered that it was effective in learning English. In contrast, a few students responded that online learning did not facilitate language learning (22% answered that online language learning was ineffective). In such cases, these perspectives must be examined. Some respondents who expressed a negative impact of online language learning shared common ideas: they were not satisfied with the less interactive lectures. One student commented, “I could not feel the passion expressed by the teacher in the online environment.” Another student wrote, “Although I had an interactive online class using Zoom, it was more difficult for me to ask the teacher questions than to ask questions in a face-to-face class’.” It seemed that the students who had positive attitudes towards online classes considered them a tool to develop their English skills, so they integrated online classes into self-studying. However, students with a negative impression of online classes were not satisfied with the classes because they thought that online lectures should be more like typical face-to-face lectures.

The second question concerned students’ language skill preferences: Which language skills are more likely to develop? The result showed that reading and listening skills were more likely to develop but writing and speaking skills were less likely to develop. Since the writing and speaking

categories recorded a low rate, it is possible that not all participants answering the second question had experience taking online writing or speaking lessons, or both, in the university. Hence, to develop findings for the second question, the fifth question should be considered simultaneously. In question five, 59% of the respondents who had negative attitudes towards online learning demonstrated that speaking skills were most unlikely to develop. According to the results, only a few students believed that online learning could help them develop their output skills. Swain (1998) emphasized that learners develop their second language ability not only by receiving input but also by perceiving and using target features. Language learners require output practices when acquiring the target language, although the results of this study revealed students' difficulties in developing their output skills through online classes. By contrast, more than half of the respondents who answered that online learning was effective indicated that they could develop skills that received inputs, such as reading and listening skills. Some students shared a common comment: they could watch the lecture video repeatedly, so it was effective in obtaining much input. It might be true that online classes provide students with sufficient input, although they may not provide enough opportunities to produce the targeted language. Krashen (1994) defined the input hypothesis as the acquisition of language by understanding messages, including comprehensible inputs. However, according to the output hypothesis of Swain (1998), receiving input is not sufficient to acquire language; we also need to practice using the targeted language. This study showed that learning a language through online classes may not be sufficient to cover output activities; thus, teachers teaching a language online may need to reconsider how they approach output activities.

The third question was asked to reveal students' preferences for language categories (grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary) that they could learn effectively through online classes. This result was significant because 60% of the respondents answered that they could effectively learn English grammar online. The fact that adult learners acquire languages differently from children has been discussed in earlier studies (Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978; Patkowski, 1980; Johnson & Newport, 1989). The results of this study

(participants thought that they learned grammatical aspects effectively through the online environment) could be explained by these studies, considering the differences between child and adult learners mentioned above. After the end of the critical period, adults might not learn languages by accessing their innate capacities, but they learn languages by using general learning abilities. In this study, the participants might have depended more on their general learning abilities, which enabled them to learn grammatical aspects effectively. Regarding the third question, most respondents answered that they had learned English grammar effectively, although other aspects (vocabulary and pronunciation) were recorded at low rates. Thus, the question was, why did the participants not think that they had learned English vocabulary and pronunciation effectively through online classes? Some students reported inconsistent comments regarding pronunciation learning. A major benefit of online learning is that students can review lecture videos based on their comprehension levels. It is possible that students reviewed the lecture videos and imitated the teachers' pronunciation of English if they wanted to. As mentioned in the discussion of the second question, forcing learners to perform output activities might not be as effective as input activities in online classes. This was perhaps because the teachers could not confirm whether all the students were engaged in pronunciation training on computer screens. Solutions to negative attitudes towards output activities should be considered in future studies. Finally, in addressing vocabulary learning through online classes, this study recorded respondents' low rates and pronunciation (only 25 students perceived that they had learned vocabulary successfully). Previous studies have focused on vocabulary learning using audio visual materials (Peters & Webb, 2018). Some of the earlier studies have found that learners can increase their vocabulary knowledge by viewing TV programs. However, according to the results of this study, only a few respondents reported positive attitudes of online learning towards vocabulary learning. The reason might be that some of the online classes proceeded using audio visual materials, such as lecture video clips, but not all the classes were conveyed by those materials (some teachers used more interactive methods using the Zoom application).

Another explanation can be derived from the questionnaires answered by the participants in this study. Some learners shared common facts: in online classes, learners were more hesitant to ask teachers' questions directly. One student described their difficulty in learning vocabularies online as "managing a time schedule was one of the problems during the online class. I did not have enough time to take notes, so I remembered fewer English vocabularies or idioms than in face-to-face classes." According to the students' thoughts mentioned above, the key to discovering learners' negative attitudes towards learning vocabulary might come from learners' difficulty in keeping up with teachers' speed. Therefore, teachers should pay more attention to taking sufficient time for students to confirm whether they can follow each step in class.

In this study, the results showed that 78% of the participants reported a positive impact of online learning, although 22% commented that online learning was ineffective. Questions four and five addressed the students' negative impacts on online learning because those questions were answered by only 22% of the students who thought that online learning was ineffective. The fourth question asked which language skills were most unlikely to improve through online learning, and the fifth question asked which language knowledge was most unlikely to develop through online learning. Students who had a negative impact on online learning responded that their speaking skills were the least unlikely to develop, and that their pronunciation was the least knowledge to learn through online classes. Even in the group with a positive perception of online learning, a few students answered that they had improved their speaking skills and had the opportunity to learn English pronunciation. According to the comments written by students who had a negative image of online learning, they did not perceive their online classes as communicative or interactive, even though they wanted to take more communicative and interactive lessons. For example, some students provided the common comment as "simply, I had less opportunities to speak English in the online classes." Another respondent said, "in a particular situation of the online classes, my beginner English proficiency caused a communication disruption with the native

teacher.” Thus, the lack of interaction might have led to the respondents not preferring to improve their speaking skills or learn English pronunciation through online learning. Long (1983) stated in the original version of the interaction hypothesis that, for second -language learners, a modified interaction uttered by an interlocutor made the input comprehensible; therefore, modified interaction was necessary for language acquisition. In his revised version of the hypothesis in 1996, he argues that interlocutors should negotiate meaning when communication is difficult. Negotiation is essential for developing a learner’s second language. However, in online classrooms as well as in this study, it was not easy for teachers to interact with each student in the class, even though the teacher conveyed the class using interactive Internet tools, such as the Zoom application. Teachers’ difficulties in interaction also influenced the results of this study. Thus, in online classes aiming to produce learner output, such as speaking classes, teachers should provide more opportunities for learners to interact with teachers and students. In this case, creating a compact class with a smaller number of students or reconsidering an activity that can generate more interaction in online classrooms is recommended.

Conclusion

This study focuses on students’ inner thoughts and preferences towards their online learning. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face classrooms were common places for students to learn secondary and foreign languages. However, online learning has replaced face-to-face learning as the major way to take language classes worldwide just after the pandemic started. Historically, scholars in the classroom study field have conducted research in face-to-face classrooms, but online language classrooms were not considered an ordinary place to conduct research. This study investigates the rapid spread of online learning as a new type of language class. The first surprising finding of this study was that most participants had positive attitudes towards online learning, although online classes were not ordinary for them to learn English before the pandemic. The participants in this study were asked to fill questions concerning online learning, and most responded that online

learning was effective. The second finding was that respondents preferred to develop their reading skills and learn grammar through online classes. The respondents thought that online learning was especially effective in engaging in input activities. The third finding was that students who had both negative and positive attitudes towards online learning responded that they did not prefer using online learning to develop speaking skills and pronunciation of English. In other words, it is difficult for learners to practice output activities online. Hence, it can be concluded that from the students' point of view, online learning was a preferable method for accessing the inputs, but not for performing their outputs. This might be because both teachers and students face difficulties in making the classes communicative and interactive, like face-to-face class environments. According to this finding, teachers should focus more on giving students opportunities to interact with their teachers and facilitating their output in an online learning environment.

Limitations

In this study, two types of participants were included: (a) participants who took online classes using the Zoom application, and (b) participants who took online classes using lecture video clips. Future research should consider the differences between online learning using interactive applications, such as Zoom, and the one using video clips. Even though the majority of classroom studies have conducted research in face-to-face classes containing teachers and students, this study investigates students and teachers participating in online classes. Thus, some of the results of this study cannot be compared with those of most previous classroom studies. More research concerning online learning will have to be conducted soon to determine common patterns and evidence for a new type of language learning. It should also be noted that the participants in this study were not distinguished by their English proficiency levels. There is a possibility that participants' preferences and perceptions towards online learning would differ according to their language proficiency levels; therefore, in future studies, participants' proficiency levels should be considered.

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