EFL Teachers' Perceptions of the Shift from the Classroom to Online Instruction in Japanese Universities

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify any problems areas that may have hindered online instruction in the Japanese EFL university context during the Covid-19 pandemic. To this end, upon the completion of their spring semesters (i.e., after four months of having administered lessons online), 30 EFL instructors in Japanese universities were asked to rate the seriousness of 17 potential problems and, subsequently, provide comments about these problems. The procedure of this study involved distributing online questionnaires to the participants of this study. Questionnaires were comprised of 24 items, 22 of which were closed-ended and 2 of which were open-ended. Data were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Responses from teachers in this study emphasized two problem areas that were especially serious and in need of reconsideration: time spent checking assignments and time spent preparing. In addition, other problems such as time spent communicating with students, suitability of activities, preparing stimulating activities, time spent teaching, clarity of methods and evaluation, students submitting assignments, and issues with Internet bandwidth were deemed at least somewhat serious and in need of some further attention. The writers discuss the implications of these findings and offer some suggestions for EFL teachers to consider moving forward.

Key Words: Japanese EFL university context; remote learning, teacher perceptions, online instruction, synchronous vis-à-vis asynchronous learning, blended learning, flipped approach

1 Introduction

"When there is no turning back,
then we should concern ourselves only with the best way of moving forward."
– Paulo Coehlo, Brazilian novelist –

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected educational practices around the world in ways that no one really saw coming. Classes were suddenly moved online, and teachers were forced to adapt to the changing environment ad hoc. As this pandemic is a recent phenomenon,

not much is known about the efficacy of online instruction in various settings. One thing for certain, however, is that the importance of online instruction has never been more evident. It is, thus, useful to begin to assess our experiences thus far and to try to learn from them in an effort to improve this situation moving forward. To this end, the writers focus their analysis on the Japanese EFL (i.e., English as a Foreign Language) university context in which they teach. The study described in this paper is a follow-up study to one recently conducted by the writers (Cutrone & Beh, 2021). While the earlier and more comprehensive analysis, which will be discussed in greater detail below, focused primarily on the efficacy of online instruction in this context (from both teachers and students' perspectives), this current study seeks to identify (from the viewpoint of teachers) any problem areas that might hinder effective online instruction moving forward. This current study adheres to the methods of a recent study conducted by Watson (2020) in the Thai EFL university context.

Before we can examine some of the literature pertaining to our topic, it is necessary to define some of the key words used in this paper. First, as defined by the Educational Software developer Top Hat (2020), "*Remote Learning* is where the student and the educator, or information source, are not physically present in a traditional classroom environment. Information is relayed through technology, such as discussion boards, video conferencing, and online assessments." In this paper, the term remote learning and online instruction will be used interchangeably. Moreover, in describing the different modes of learning that can occur in online settings, Top Hat (2020) also defines and differentiates the key terms *Synchronous* and *Asynchronous* learning by explaining that "remote learning can occur synchronously with real-time peer-to-peer interaction and collaboration, or asynchronously, with self-paced learning activities that take place independently of the instructor." Lastly, two further terms that are often mentioned in relation to online instruction are concepts known as *Blended* and *Flipped* approaches to language learning. A blended approach to learning combines online educational materials and opportunities for interaction online with traditional place-based classroom methods (Friesen, 2012). A flipped classroom is a type of blended learning approach in which students are initially introduced to new topics outside of the classroom and then subsequently use the time in the classroom to explore topics in greater depth and create meaningful learning opportunities (Abeysekera & Dawson, 2015).

2 A Review of the Literature

Two studies in particular provided the impetus for this current research: Watson's (2020) survey of how the shift to online teaching during the pandemic was perceived by EFL teachers in a Thai university, and Cutrone and Beh's (2021) examination of the impact of the pandemic on EFL university classes in Japan. The following subsections will provide brief overviews of each study, respectively.

2. 1 An Overview of Watson's (2020) Study

This current study was inspired by the research conducted by Watson (2020) in the Thai EFL university context. Watson surveyed 52 English language teachers about their sudden shift from the classroom to an online setting during the pandemic. This survey involved having teachers rate the seriousness of 17 potential problems on a Likert-scale ranging from 0 (no problems at all) to 3 (serious problems) at two points in time (during the first week of online teaching and several weeks later). Table 1, which presents the mean scores of how serious teachers thought each problem was at the two points of time, shows that none of the problems had a mean rating of high seriousness at either point of time. Furthermore, most areas seemed to improve over time, as teachers gain experienced, with the following areas in particular showing the most noticeable gains: Problem 7: Time spent teaching, Problem 12: Ability to use programs or platforms, and Problem 14: Certainty about platform to use.

Table 1 *Teachers' Ratings of the Seriousness of Problems in Watson's (2020) Study*

	First week of online teaching		*After several weeks*		*Change in ratings*	
Problem	*Mean rating*	*Interpretation*	*Mean rating*	*Interpretation*	*Cohen's d*	*Interpretation*
Problem 1: Time spent checking assignments	1.43	Low	1.30	Low	0.13	No difference
Problem 2: Time spent communicating with students	1.46	Low	1.25	Low	0.19	No difference
Problem 3: Suitability of activities	1.44	Low	1.17	Low	0.29	Small difference
Problem 4: Students understanding content	1.26	Low	1.04	Low	0.25	Small difference
Problem 5: Responses from students	1.21	Low	0.93	Low	0.30	Small difference
Problem 6: Preparing stimulating activities	1.13	Low	0.88	Low	0.29	Small difference
Problem 7: Time spent teaching	1.38	Low	0.86	Low	0.58	Medium difference
Problem 8: Time spent preparing	1.57	Medium	0.85	Low	0.85	Large difference
Problem 9: Clarity of methods and evaluation	1.25	Low	0.85	Low	0.42	Small difference
Problem 10: Arranging online exams	1.01	Low	0.73	None	0.29	Small difference
Problem 11: Students submitting assignments	0.85	Low	0.71	None	0.16	No difference
Problem 12: Ability to use programs or platforms	1.30	Low	0.68	None	0.65	Medium difference
Problem 13: Student absence	0.94	Low	0.68	None	0.29	Small difference
Problem 14: Certainty about platform to use	1.32	Low	0.59	None	0.79	Medium difference
Problem 15: Issues with Internet bandwidth	0.62	None	0.59	None	0.04	No difference
Problem 16: Computer or device issues	0.74	None	0.50	None	0.26	Small difference
Problem 17: Contacting students	0.33	None	0.16	None	0.29	Small difference

As shown in Table 2, Watson categorizes all 17 items into the following three groups: areas which were not really problems, areas where teachers solved initial problems, and areas which remained (at least somewhat) as problems. As it relates to this study, our focus is on the five problems that were not easily solvable. Based on his key word analyses of teachers' responses, Watson groups these items into three further sub-areas: Problem 1: Time spent checking assignments (the keywords are *checking*, *assignments*, *examination*, *aching*, *eyes*), Problem 2: Time spent communicating with students (keywords are *communicate*, *via*, *groups*, *times*), and Problem 3: Suitability of activities, Problem 4: Students understanding content, and Problem 6: Preparing stimulating activities (keywords for these

three areas include *activities*, *understand*, *stimulating*, *interaction*, *give*, *opportunities*, *exercises*, *body* and *presentations*).

Table 2 *Categories of Problem Areas in Online Teaching in Watson's (2020) Study*

Areas which were not really problems	*Areas where teachers solved initial problems*	*Areas which remain as problems*
Problem 10: Arranging online exams	Problem 5: Responses from students	Problem 1: Time spent checking assignments
Problem 11: Students submitting assignments	Problem 7: Time spent teaching	Problem 2: Time spent communicating with students
Problem 13: Student absence	Problem 8: Time spent preparing	Problem 3: Suitability of activities
Problem 15: Issues with Internet bandwidth	Problem 9: Clarity of methods and evaluation	Problem 4: Students understanding content
Problem 16: Computer or device issues	Problem 12: Ability to use programs or platforms	Problem 6: Preparing stimulating activities
Problem 17: Contacting students	Problem 14: Certainty about platform to use	

Regarding Problem 1, which Watson recognizes as the most serious and persistent issue, teachers complained that the considerable amount of time they spent checking students' assignments and how sitting in a chair in front of the computer were becoming detrimental to their health. To deal with these issues, some of the teachers attempted innovations, such as using a performance checklist and having students do more peer evaluation in their classes. Furthermore, concerning Problem 2, the teachers in this study did not offer potential solutions, as they generally accepted that time constraints were generally unavoidable where online instruction was concerned. Lastly, Problems 3, 4 and 6 were similar in they were all directly related to students learning (i.e., suitability of activities, students understanding content, and preparing stimulating activities). To check the suitability of activities, some teachers suggested surveying students regularly throughout their course, Similarly, to check students' understanding, several teachers recommended having students do weekly quizzes and assignments. Finally, to prepare more stimulating activities, a few teachers mentioned that the summer break would provide them some much-needed time to explore what they can do to improve in this area.

2. 2. An Overview of Cutrone and Beh's (2021) Study

As mentioned above, this current study follows a previous study administered by the researchers (Cutrone & Beh, 2021). In the previous study, the researchers surveyed 346 students and 25 EFL teachers in the Japanese EFL university context to determine how online lessons were conducted during the pandemic, and how effective these lessons were (as

perceived by the student and teacher participants). The following subsections will report the findings of this previous study concerning these areas.

2. 2. 1 How did teachers conduct their online classes during the Covid-19 pandemic?

As Figure 1 shows, online classes were split evenly between synchronous and asynchronous modes of instruction: 10 teachers (40%) provided synchronous lessons, 10 teachers (40%) provided asynchronous lessons, and 5 (20%) delivered a mixture of both. 3 of the 5 teachers that used a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous modes of instruction described how they utilized a flipped approach. All 15 teachers who administered synchronous lessons described how they conducted their classes on a video conferencing platform, with ZOOM being named the most often and others mentioned included Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, Cisco WebEx, and Jitsi Meet. Teachers employed a wide range of activities in these lessons, which included providing students with lectures, having them do groupwork, special projects, discussions, presentations, and interactive games. With this in mind however, most of these teachers clarified that their methods and activities, by and large, depended on the course they were teaching as well as the number of students in the class. Generally speaking, smaller class sizes had more interaction and discussion activities than larger classes; speaking and listening classes included more communication and collaboration than reading and writing classes; accordingly, students in reading and writing classes were required to do autonomous tasks more often than the students in speaking and listening classes.

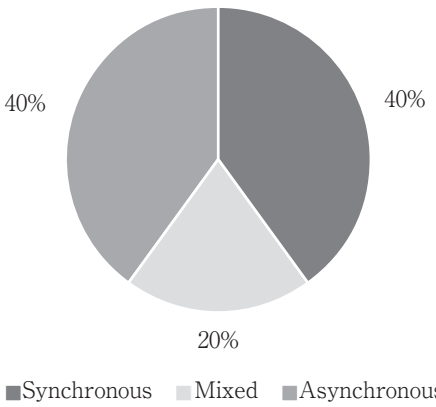

Figure 1. Synchronous versus Asynchronous Modes of Instruction During the Pandemic

Several teachers described how they used specific features of their video conferencing platform to facilitate interaction amongst students. For instance, the Breakout Room func-

tion in ZOOM was found to be especially useful in allowing students to work in small groups; similarly, a few teachers commented that they found the chatting capability in their video conferencing platform quite helpful in that it provided students with a private way to ask the teacher questions during the lesson. Further, a handful of teachers also used ZOOM's polling feature, as well as Google Forms, to get feedback from and/or quiz the students in their classes. Regarding interactive quiz games, a few teachers mentioned that they incorporated educational platforms such as Kahoot and Quizziz to help stimulate their synchronous classes. Kahoot and Quizziz enable teachers to generate multiple-choice quizzes that can be accessed via a web browser or app. From the main computer via screen-sharing feature, the teacher administers the quiz as an educational game, and students are able to compete with each other in real time using their smartphones (or other device) to answer questions. These types of quiz games also have an asynchronous mode, where teachers can assign the quiz via a link; students then have until a certain date to complete the quiz, and results are monitored and shared at the teacher's discretion. With this in mind, regardless of whether they were administering a synchronous or asynchronous quiz, the teachers who used these games mentioned that they were careful to only allow the top scores to be shown to the class because they did not want the students who scored lower to feel embarrassed in any way.

Asynchronous classes essentially consisted of teachers regularly uploading materials on to a Learner Management System (LMS) for students to access in their own time. The majority of teachers used the in-house LMS that their university provided; however, a few teachers opted for some of the popular ones freely available online, such as Google Classroom, Canvas, iTunes U, and Moodle. The materials that teachers uploaded onto their LMS varied greatly. Some teachers simply relied on uploading pre-recorded video lectures. These recordings most often entailed teachers' PowerPoint presentations with voice-over narration, which sometimes included a video box of the teacher speaking in the corner of the screen. Other teachers reported that their asynchronous lessons consisted of uploading a host of other materials, often mixed together in the same lesson, which included reading passages, video links, written instructions, and assignments for students to complete each week. A handful of teachers described how they incorporated discussion boards for students to share ideas, and a few teachers mentioned that they used email as an additional way to stay in contact with students. Finally, three teachers mentioned they used online educational tools such as Padlet and Flipgrid in their asynchronous classes. Padlet is a digital bulletin board where teachers and students can share messages, images, videos and

links to online resources, while Flipgrid is a website that promotes learning and discussion via the creation and sharing of videos within classes.

2. 2. 2 Student and teacher perceptions

Upon providing an overview of how classes were conducted during the pandemic, the next step is to consider how effective these classes were for the teachers and students involved. The majority of participants surveyed in Cutrone and Beh's (2021) study acknowledged that the shift to online teaching was especially difficult at first, but it gradually got better throughout the semester as they became acclimated to this new mode of instruction. Furthermore, while most teachers and students lamented the increased amount of time they had to spend preparing for and keeping up with their classes, they also acknowledged the benefits of not having to commute every day. Many teachers and students mentioned the fact that they were able to develop their digital literacy and technological skills via online instruction as a positive aspect of remote learning. Moreover, several teachers expressed how convenient it was for them to learn students' names (which were clearly shown on students' pictures or video boxes on video conferencing platforms such as ZOOM), as well as to have centralized assessment tools readily available to them in one place online. Further, a handful of teachers recognized the all-important, but sometimes overlooked, fact that their students were kept safe and able to complete their courses during this pandemic as a major positive.

Overall, the data in Cutrone and Beh's (2021) study suggests that teachers were more satisfied with how online classes went than students; in the same way, teachers generally viewed online instruction as a viable alternative to face-to-face learning, while most students did not. That is, the majority of students felt that online instruction should be reserved for emergency situations such as the current pandemic. In addition to their excessive workloads, the most cited issue by both teachers and students was that they missed the human connection of face-to-face settings. Many students, in particular, mentioned that they felt isolated and stressed by the shift to online learning. Several teachers also noticed this and commented on the great potential for student demotivation as a negative aspect of remote learning. Students who may be reticent in face-to-face classes are at risk of all but disappearing in online settings. This was especially evident in asynchronous lessons, where YouTube analytics showed that some students had not been accessing the video links the teachers had been uploading for them.

2. 3 Research Questions

In supplementing the findings of the aforementioned studies described above, this study is designed to answer the following Research Questions (RQ):

> RQ 1: From a teacher's perspective, what were the most serious problems associated with online instruction in the Japanese EFL university context during the Covid-19 pandemic?
>
> RQ 2: How can teachers in this context best deal with serious problems associated with online instruction?

Identifying problem areas and exploring ways to overcome them are an important part of the process of creating more effective online instruction moving forward.

3 Methodology

3. 1 Participants

The study included 30 participants (22 males and 8 females), all of whom were EFL teachers at five universities across Japan. These five universities included a national university, a prefectural university, and three private universities, which ranged in size and location from large universities in urban centers to smaller universities in rural areas. At the start of the study, 13 teachers were in their 40s, 9 were in their 30s, 6 were in their 50s, and 2 were in their 60s. 10 teacher respondents were Americans, 8 were Japanese, 7 were Canadian, and the remaining 5 were British, Australian, Malaysian, Romanian, and Kazakhs respectively. All participants were given clear explanations and instructions regarding this study and their role in it. The participants in this study constituted an opportunistic sample in that the researchers sought participants by soliciting teachers from the target population that were easily accessible to them and willing to participate in the study.

To provide further context, it is necessary to take a closer look at the parameters surrounding the teaching situation during the pandemic. First, in gathering demographic and contextual information from participants in this study, the teachers reaffirmed that most, if not all, of their classes were indeed taught online during the pandemic (27 teachers taught all their classes online, while 3 taught in a blended environment); additionally, the majority of teachers reported having little to no experience with online instruction when the shift to

online instruction occurred. In terms of the types of EFL courses teachers taught online during the pandemic, there was a great deal of variation, which included various levels of course and titles involving Reading, Writing, General English, English Grammar, English Fluency, English Communication, Discussion, Public Speaking, Study Abroad Preparation, Business English, Advanced English, TOEIC/TOEFL/IELTS Preparation, Seminars, Cross-Cultural Communication, and Thesis Supervision.

3. 2 Procedure and data collection methods

The procedure of this study simply involved distributing online questionnaires to potential participants of this study. The questionnaire, which was created using Google Forms, was comprised of 24 questions, 22 of which were closed-ended and 2 of which were open-ended (see Appendix 1). The closed-ended questions consisted of 4 multiple-choice questions (ranging from two to seven options) and 18 Likert-scale questions (measuring attitudes and perceptions on a scale ranging from 1 to 7). The first 6 items of this questionnaire, which included 5 closed-ended questions and 1 open-ended question, were designed to collect demographic information on each teacher, which included information about their gender, age, nationality, types of classes they were teaching, how these classes were conducted, and their level of experience with online instruction. The remaining 18 items functioned to gather data directly related to the topic of study. The final open-ended question, and the 17 Likert scale items that preceded it, were all specifically related to problems that instructors might have encountered in their online teaching environment. These 17 Likert scale items were taken and adapted from a recent study conducted by Watson (2020). The questionnaire used in this study took approximately 10 minutes for teachers to complete.

Data produced in this study were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Due to the small sample size used in this study, it was not prudent to apply inferential statistics to the quantitative data produced; descriptive statistics using JASP (2020) software were used, however, to present some of the salient features and trends found in the data. The qualitative data derived from the teachers' responses to the final open-ended question were examined for any patterns that existed in the answers. To this end, the researchers first conducted a key word analysis (using AntConc software; see Anthony, 2019) to help them group together like-minded responses. When words and expressions were deemed to convey similar ideas and concepts (and there were at least three instances of such similar responses), the researchers grouped them together. Due to the breadth of the responses in this study, the researchers will not discuss the data sets that had less than three responses

pertaining to a particular idea.

4 Results

4. 1 Identifying serious problems associated with online instruction

Table 3 reports the following statistics: the mean scores and standard deviations (SD) pertaining to teachers' ratings of the seriousness of problems associated with online instruction on a Likert-scale ranging from 1 (not serious at all) to 7 (extremely serious), and the minimum and maximum scores for each category. Additionally, Table 3 demonstrates which of these problems are interpreted as High seriousness (mean scores greater than 5), Medium seriousness (mean scores between 4 and 5), and Low seriousness (mean scores lower than 4). Accordingly, Problem 1: Time spent checking assignments (mean = 5.71) and Problem 8: Time spent preparing (mean = 5.97) were the only two problem areas that were seen as extremely serious issues that needed to be dealt with immediately.

Further, Problem 2: Time spent communicating with students (mean = 4.81), Problem 3: Suitability of activities (mean = 4.29), Problem 6: Preparing stimulating activities (mean = 4.84), Problem 7: Time spent teaching (mean = 4.19), Problem 9: Clarity of methods and

Table 3 *Ratings of Seriousness of Problems in this Study*

Problem	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	Interpretation
Problem 1: Time spent checking assignments	5.71	1.19	2	7	High
Problem 2: Time spent communicating with students	4.81	1.62	2	7	Medium
Problem 3: Suitability of activities	4.29	1.44	1	7	Medium
Problem 4: Students understanding content	3.72	1.51	2	6	Low
Problem 5: Responses from students	3.71	1.47	2	7	Low
Problem 6: Preparing stimulating activities	4.84	1.57	1	7	Medium
Problem 7: Time spent teaching	4.19	1.76	1	7	Medium
Problem 8: Time spent preparing	5.97	1.33	2	7	High
Problem 9: Clarity of methods and evaluation	4.25	1.65	1	7	Medium
Problem 10: Arranging online exams	3.26	2.14	1	7	Low
Problem 11: Students submitting assignments	4	1.67	1	7	Medium
Problem 12: Ability to use programs or platforms	3.65	1.89	1	7	Low
Problem 13: Student absence	3.19	1.58	1	6	Low
Problem 14: Certainty about platform to use	3.68	1.74	1	7	Low
Problem 15: Issues with Internet bandwidth	4.48	1.86	1	7	Medium
Problem 16: Computer or device issues	3.29	1.1	1	7	Low
Problem 17: Contacting students	3.19	1.68	1	7	Low

evaluation (mean = 4.25), Problem 11: Students submitting assignments (mean = 4), and Problem 15: Issues with Internet bandwidth (mean = 4.48) were thought to be at least somewhat serious and in need of some attention moving forward. Lastly, Problem 4: Students understanding content (mean = 3.72), Problem 5: Responses from students (mean = 3.71), Problem 10: Arranging online exams (mean = 3.26), Problem 12: Ability to use programs or platforms (mean = 3.65), Problem 13: Student absence (mean = 3.19), Problem 14: Certainty about platform to use (mean = 3.68), Problem 16: Computer or device issues (mean = 3.29), and Problem 17: Contacting students (mean = 3.19) were not rated as serious problems and, thus, do not seem to require a great deal of contemplation at the current time.

4.2 Teachers' comments and suggestions

In answer to the final question of the questionnaire, which asked teachers to provide comments on the problem areas they found serious, several themes emerged. First, most teachers mentioned that online instruction was more difficult than face-to-face instruction and required a great deal more time to prepare for and subsequently administer. The following responses provide details of this:

> Teacher A: Well, it was tough from a time standpoint to be honest. Even before I could start teaching students the actual subject content, I had to learn myself how to use online educational tools and then teach my students how to use these tools. Some students were resistant to this from the start and this only added to the challenge.

> Teacher B: I had never taught online before, so I spent a great deal of time researching methods and preparing lessons that I thought would work in this environment.

> Teacher C: I spent a lot more time preparing lessons. It was also very time consuming having to track down students that were not keeping up.

> Teacher D: For me, the main issues were how much time I spent preparing lessons and checking students' assignments.

> Teacher E: To monitor whether students were keeping up with their classes, I gave weekly homework assignments. I realize now that this was probably a mistake be-

cause students complained about it, and it created much more work for myself. It became increasingly difficult to keep up with marking all these assignments and providing the kind of feedback I wanted to.

In the last excerpt, Teacher E touches upon the trial and error nature of their experiences with online instruction. In the same way, the following statements show how a number of teachers were able to learn from their experiences.

Teacher F: I was quite lost at first and spent a lot of time getting ready for my classes, but things gradually got better as I started to get used to teaching online and realized what it entailed.

Teacher G: Once the university I work at realized that the pandemic wasn't going away any time soon, they started to roll out online training workshops and such. This was helpful; however, I wish the training was initiated much sooner and went beyond the basics of how to use an LMS or videoconferencing platform and more into exploring effective methods to be used in online classes.

Teacher H: Learning from previous mistakes, I ultimately started to develop strategies to save time. The main thing I did was to give less homework and try to focus more on the in-class stuff that was happening in real-time, which is what students seemed to want anyways.

Teacher I: I had been recording and uploading my lectures online for the first half the semester, but once I got used to using ZOOM, I just did my classes in real-time because it took up less time overall.

In the last two excerpts, Teachers H and I alluded to the fact that their experiences led them to ultimately choosing to provide synchronous lessons over asynchronous lessons to help save time. Other teachers mentioned that they, too, shifted from teaching asynchronously to synchronously more often, but they did so to create more opportunities for interaction with and among their students, as follows:

Teacher J: Once I got feedback from the students that on-demand lessons resulted in

feelings of isolation and demotivation, I switched almost exclusively to doing real-time lessons on ZOOM to create more interactive opportunities in class.

Teacher K: I tended to do real-time classes more and more as the semester progressed. The main reasons were to give students a chance to see their friends and ask me questions which I could immediately answer for them.

Teacher L: I found ZOOM's chat and breakout room features were very helpful in giving students more chances to communicate privately with me and with their classmates.

Moreover, a few teachers mentioned how they dealt with Internet bandwidth issues in their synchronous lessons, as follows:

Teacher M: At times when the videos started to get choppy or freeze up altogether, I would ask students to turn off their cameras and this usually did the trick; we were able to proceed with just the audio.

Teacher N: To deal with potential Internet connection issues, I asked students to have a back-up plan, such as having a smart phone with alternative connection ready to use just in case.

Lastly, while teachers rated *clarity of methods and evaluation* as somewhat of a serious problem, no participant provided any specific details or suggestions on how to deal with this.

5 Summary and Implications

In summarizing the findings of this study, RQs 1 and 2 are answered in succession below.

RQ 1: From a teacher's perspective, what were the most serious problems associated with online instruction in the Japanese EFL university context during the Covid-19 pandemic?

From the data produced by teachers' ratings, it was clear that the most serious issues asso-

ciated with online instruction involved the time constraints teachers were experiencing, which was consistent with the findings of Watson's (2020) survey of EFL teachers in the Thai university context. In particular, teachers in this current study lamented the enormous amount of time required to prepare online lessons and check students' assignments. Relative to the extensive preparation required of online classes, preparing suitable and stimulating activities were sub-areas that teachers thought were somewhat serious. Moreover, in addition to spending a great deal of time checking students' assignments, teachers reported other issues related directly to aspects of their classes, such as the time they spent teaching and the ability to adapt methods of evaluation to suit an online environment.

Concerning clarity of methods and evaluation, as the writers mentioned above, teachers did not give any specific details about this; however, it may have been that teachers were simply used to giving written tests in class and now had to come up with new and innovative ways to teach and evaluate their students. While no teacher expressed concerns about online tests being conducive to student cheating, some may have adapted their online tests to safeguard against this risk. A number of teachers in Cutrone and Beh's (2021) study mentioned that they had great success using Google Form and/or other online educational tools to give their students timed quizzes and/or tests synchronously. In this way, with a bit ingenuity, the writers believe that this issue is easily solvable, as there exist many ways for teachers to evaluate their students in online classes. Similar to face-to-face classes, the method of evaluation should, by and large, reflect the class that is being taught. Hence, presentations (done synchronously or asynchronously) would be an ideal evaluation method in a public speaking class (among others); observing students (synchronously) performing a task while communicating in a small group in a ZOOM breakout room would be an ideal evaluation method in a discussion or communication class; oral tests and interviews (done synchronously) would be an ideal evaluation method for smaller groups, such as seminar classes and/or thesis supervision sessions; and writing assignments (submitted asynchronously) would, undoubtedly, be a suitable evaluation method in any writing class.

Further, other areas that were also somewhat concerning to teachers included students submitting assignments, issues with Internet bandwidth, and the time they spent communicating with their students. Regarding the latter however, it is interesting to note that the teachers in this study and those in Watson's (2020) previous study appear to have contrasting views on how time spent communicating with students was an issue. That is, most teachers in this study seemed to view it as a problem that teachers could not communicate with their students enough and, thus, looked for ways to increase contact with their

students; however, in Watson's (2020) study, teachers generally commented that they thought that the time they spent communicating with students was excessive and hoped it could be cut down, as follows:

> Teacher A: Every day I have to check my e-mail, Edmodo and MS Teams and then I have to check on the few students I have not heard from so that they can be on track with their work.
>
> Teacher B: Students contact me during all times of day and night (but not after midnight). I have asked students to contact me during normal work hours. (p. 12)

Clearly, the sentiments echoed in these excerpts run contrary to the responses of Teachers J, K, and L in Section 4.2 above, who felt they needed to create more opportunities for students to interact with them as well as each other. This may point to some cultural differences regarding Thai and Japanese students' learning attitudes and motivation to study.

RQ 2: How can teachers in this context best deal with serious problems associated with online instruction?

Many of the problems mentioned above can be alleviated simply by teachers having more training and experience in conducting online lessons. In other words, it stands to reason that once teachers gain experience and develop more effective methods for teaching online, they will require less time to prepare their lessons and will be better able to deal with the problems that can arise. However, for teacher development to truly occur where online instruction is concerned, it is necessary for tertiary institutions in Japan and teachers alike to both be dedicated to this end. First, tertiary institutions would be well advised to keep abreast of the latest trends in educational technology and provide teachers with continuing opportunities for development in this area. Such training should go well beyond simply how to navigate an LMS or videoconferencing platform; rather, it should allow teachers to explore effective pedagogical methods and approaches to online instruction just as they would do for their face-to-face classes. Further, to maximize the quality of their online classes, as well as to maintain teachers' health and enthusiasm, university administrations also need to monitor their teachers' workloads and carefully consider how much they can really handle at any given point in time.

Second, with more time, resources, and support dedicated to online instruction, it is incumbent upon teachers to continue to look for ways to develop in this area on their own as well. In addition to extensive and consistent training, teachers can make significant strides by learning through trial and error during the semester, as well by sharing their experiences with other teachers and researching this topic and exploring new methods on their own in their off months. Further, in an effort to deliver more suitable, effective and stimulating online lessons, teachers would be wise to survey their students from time to time to see how their methods are being received. Ultimately, the students should always be the focal point of online lessons just as they would be in a face-to-face setting, and it is imperative that teachers be willing to adapt their teaching practices to best facilitate their students' learning.

In providing more specific and practical advice, the writers recommend that teachers try to conduct online lessons that mimic face-to-face lessons as closely as possible. To this end, synchronous lessons are likely to be more effective than asynchronous lessons in this context for a myriad of reasons. First, mirroring face-to-face lessons, synchronous lessons allow for more interaction with and amongst students in class. Social connections and real-time communication are thought to help motivate students and afford them the opportunity to get immediate feedback from their teachers (Cutrone & Beh, 2014). Second, real-time lessons are what students are used to and have come to expect. Asynchronous lessons give students more autonomy and, thus, require a great deal more self-discipline (Stern, 2004). Students who are only familiar with traditional teacher-led classes may have trouble meeting the additional demands of this mode of instruction. Third, it is far easier for teachers to monitor their students' participation in synchronous lessons; students who may be reticent and passive in synchronous classes run the risk of disappearing completely in their online asynchronous classes (Shea, 2017).

Additionally, in an attempt to monitor students' progress in courses taught asynchronously, teachers often supplement their uploaded materials with weekly assignments that students do independently, which teachers subsequently check and provide feedback for. Besides the fact that many students felt that the amount of homework given in their online asynchronous classes was rather excessive (Cutrone & Beh ,2021), assigning too many homework assignments also creates a burden on teachers, who then have to spend a great deal of time checking assignments and providing feedback. Synchronous classes tend to rely more on what students do in class, which is more in line with what students want (and expect) and less of a burden on teachers' marking workload; in asynchronous classes, the

line between classwork and homework is often blurred and yet another area in which students seem to be somewhat confused and disenchanted.

Thus, when giving homework in online settings, teachers have to weigh a number of factors, such as their students' workload as well as their own, and consider carefully how much homework is really necessary. With this in mind, it should also be noted that students' failure to submit assignments was identified as somewhat of a problem in this study. Nonetheless, when homework is given, it makes sense for teachers to consider a flipped approach, which involves having students preview content and do non-communicative tasks as homework (asynchronously) before a lesson and then practice and apply what they learned in discussion, task-based activities, and projects with their classmates (synchronously) during class (Abeysekera & Dawson, 2015). In this way, the fact that the homework task helps prepare students for what they will do in class (publicly) may serve to motivate them to do their homework. Further, to reduce the consumption of Internet data, a teacher using a flipped approach may consider lessening the amount the of time in a synchronous class to allow for more time for students to do their homework asynchronously. In other words, what might be covered in a ninety-minute face to face class could be covered in sixty minutes synchronously and thirty minutes asynchronously.

Lastly, issues with Internet bandwidth were identified as a problem area in this study. Although such issues can negatively affect both synchronous and asynchronous modes of instruction, the impact on synchronous lessons, which are time sensitive, is greater, as a student could conceivably lose their Internet connection in the middle of a lesson and miss out on some important information. Some teachers in this study experienced this and were able to solve the problem immediately by asking class participants to turn off their cameras. While it might not have been ideal without video, the students were able to stay connected and the class was able to resume with audio only. Reacting quickly and solving problems through trial and error is sometimes necessary; however, perhaps the best thing that teachers and students can do is to try to prevent such issues from ever happening. To this end, teachers need to make sure that students have the necessary equipment and are subscribed to the highest speed Internet connection available (Strable, 2020). Wi-Fi Internet connections and the mobility they offer are certainly convenient; however, teachers and students would be better off connecting to the Internet via an Ethernet cable if possible because it is faster and provides greater reliability and security (Hoffman, 2017). Further, if class participants have no choice but to use a Wi-Fi connection, they should be sure to use the password option to keep their connection private, ensure that the router has a strong

signal, and sit in close proximity to their router while their classes are going on.

Additionally, as the University of Washington (2020) advises students, the following strategies may also be helpful in dealing with low bandwidth issues: users should turn off programs and apps they are not actively using, limit the number of devices connected to the Internet during lessons, install an ad-blocker to block ads, animations, and videos that hog bandwidth, etc. However, when bandwidth issues persist, it would be wise for teachers and students to have some sort of back-up plan in place. For instance, as one student described in Cutrone and Beh's (2021) earlier study, when they were suddenly disconnected from a synchronous class due to bandwidth issues in their home, they were able to re-enter the class minutes later using their smart phone's Internet connection. As many university students in Japan would seem to have smart phones, which provide an alternative means to connect to the Internet via their cellular service provider, this may be a potential solution for emergency situations. Nonetheless, when the bandwidth issues cannot be solved in a timely fashion in synchronous classes for whatever reason, teachers can simply provide students with notes and information on the day's lecture asynchronously. In short, with some quick thinking and/or some degree of preparation, many of the bandwidth issues that students and teachers experience can be mitigated.

6 Conclusion

In building upon the recent work of Cutrone and Beh (2021) and Watson (2020), this present research contributes to our understanding of English Language Teaching (ELT) during the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, this study was able to identify some of the more serious issues that may have hampered online instruction in the Japanese EFL university context during the pandemic; as a result, the researchers were able to explore ways to potentially resolve these problems moving forward. While this is certainly a good start, much more work needs to be done to complete the picture in this area. This study was useful in providing a teacher's perspective; however, clearly, it is necessary to also consider the feelings of students moving forward. In Cutrone and Beh's (2021) previous study, there seemed to exist a large gap between how teachers and students viewed their online classes during the pandemic. Teachers were generally satisfied with their online classes, while students were not; and teachers believed online instruction to be a viable alternative to face-to-face learning, whereas students did not. Bridging this gap between teachers and students is necessary to improve this situation. To this end, it would be useful for future studies to delve fur-

ther into student motivation in online settings, as the writers feel that this is truly the key attribute that determines success. Much has been written over the years about how Japanese EFL university students seem to lack motivation, at times, in their face-to-face classes (Cutrone & Beh, 2014; Helgesen, 1993; McVeigh, 2002; Moritishi, 2009; Sugimoto, 1997); thus, an issue which already exists in face-to-face classes appears to be exacerbated in online settings. Undoubtedly, motivated students who apply themselves diligently will be successful in any format, if the course is well designed. Further, while this study has focused specifically on Japanese learners and the field of EFL, it would be quite interesting for future research to also examine and compare how the shift online has affected other learners and other subject areas.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

The following link provides access to the online questionnaire used in this study:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdDRS0b5hiXnzSLSQ4038OEo4TuTtycOz_3ktyRQL9bnEDbtw/viewform?usp=sf_link