INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL SECTION: TEACHING DURING A PANDEMIC

Sam Morris, Jennie Roloff Rothman, James Owens
Kanda University of International Studies

INTRODUCTION: WHY A SPECIAL SECTION?

The pandemic resulting from the novel coronavirus that emerged at the end of 2019 needs little introduction. For universities across the world, concern for safety, coupled with uncertainty surrounding the potential for infections on campuses, caused class cancellations and a move to emergency remote teaching (ERT)[1]. Japan was no exception, and a large number of institutions chose to move their classes online for the entirety of the spring semester[2]. Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS)[3] also opted to make this move.

As a result, KUIS teachers and staff were tasked with moving to a new way of working in a very short space of time. This meant a significant degree of effort and innovation for all involved, and lecturers in the English Language Institute (ELI)[4] at KUIS faced major challenges in the weeks leading up to the start of the spring semester:
   a. understanding the affordances and limitations of online teaching
   b. studying pedagogic theory for online teaching
   c. learning how to use online platforms to deliver classes
   d. adapting teaching methodologies to the online platforms
   e. modifying syllabi and curriculums to fit the new normal
   f. adapting classroom materials to suit online teaching
   g. adapting assessment styles, criteria and materials for courses
   h. learning how to modify interactions with students
   i. learning how to troubleshoot student issues with online platforms

It is no understatement to say that the response required was unprecedented.

In light of the current situation, we felt that there was a need for a special section of *Literacies and Language Education,* entitled *Teaching During a Pandemic* that would serve two important goals: to provide a record of the successes and challenges of the time and how these were negotiated, and to provide support and advice for future remote teaching which may need to be conducted. To achieve these goals, we solicited both descriptive papers, outlining how teaching was performed in the ERT environment, and reflective papers, illustrating the lived experiences of teachers.

We have been overwhelmed by both the quantity and the quality of the responses. In total, 22 papers (11 descriptive, and 11 reflective) are included in this special section, representing the efforts of 40% of the ELI at KUIS. We would like to thank all of the authors for their contributions, for their enthusiasm, and for their support in reviewing and editing papers, which has enabled us to publish this special section swiftly. Despite large workloads and tight

deadlines, the authors have delivered papers which exceed our expectations of what we had hoped to achieve.

Through the descriptive papers we present advice on a variety of important matters relating to teaching during the 2020 pandemic: ideas for moving materials and activities to an online setting (e.g., Alexander; Gill; Yoshida), and for teaching reading and writing skills specifically (e.g., Bower; Lees; Miner, paper 4). Suggestions for community building (e.g., Bonner; Garvey, paper 7; Rose-Wainstock) and for increasing participation (e.g., Hollinshead; Yoder). Through the reflective papers a range of themes emerge: technological limitations and emotional uncertainty (e.g., Beattie; Burke; Dawes; Garvey, paper 12; Mielick), struggles for both new teachers (e.g., Brown; Pemberton & Brown) and experienced teachers (e.g., Burke; Dawes; de Veas, Godin, Sakuda & Roloff Rothman), environmental difficulties (e.g., Alexander; Sykes), the importance of collaboration (e.g., Brown; de Veas, Godin, Sakuda & Roloff Rothman; Pemberton & Brown), reflections on the integration of digital and paper-based learning (e.g., Miner, paper 21), and reflections on interactions in the new normal (e.g., Dawes; Garvey, paper 12; Lynch). The range offered, we believe, is indicative of the complexity of the semester, but also we hope, provides writing of interest to all teachers, whether they be in KUIS, Japan, or beyond.

SUMMARIES OF PAPERS WITHIN THE SPECIAL SECTION

We now detail summaries of the papers contained in the special section.

Section A: Descriptive Papers

The first section of this special section contains 11 descriptive papers detailing how education was delivered during the first few months of ERT during the 2020 pandemic. Broadly speaking, these papers deal with two facets of teaching: *materials and assessment*, and *communities and participation*.

In paper 1, Gill considers the difficulties of moving materials from a synchronous to asynchronous format. Gill describes how, in the process of providing tailored materials for asynchronous learning, it was possible to maintain traditional pedagogic features to generate interest, encourage oral communication and support peer engagement.

Following this, Alexander (paper 2) details the changes made to an end-of-unit presentation activity to adapt to the online setting. Alexander makes the very salient point that the limited working space in students' home environments means that not only must the expectations placed on learners be changed, but also the focus and assessment criteria of presentations. Alexander describes the difficulties facing both students and teachers and offers solutions for practitioners.

Sticking with the theme of presentations, Yoshida's paper (paper 3) considers how a traditional classroom based media project was adapted for ERT. As well as outlining the process of the activity, Yoshida also considers some of the unexpected benefits that came from completing the project in an online form, such as a clearer picture of students' discussion abilities.

The proceeding three papers relate specifically to the teaching of reading and writing. In paper 4, Miner describes how a collaborative Google Doc file can facilitate efficient group work, impromptu feedback, and peer reading opportunities in a writing course. The article gives clear instructions on how such files can be set up and managed.

Lees (paper 5) then gives an outline of reading circles and their benefits in an online reading course. As well as detailing what reading circles are, Lees considers the changes that have to be made for the activity to be conducted successfully in Zoom breakout sessions.

Bower (paper 6) also focuses on reading circles, and explains how they may be employed as an assessment of intensive reading skills. Bower outlines a four-stage process on how the assessment was conducted over 180 minutes of class time, and reflects on the outcomes of the activity.

The second half of our descriptive section contains papers related to learner communities and participation. In paper 7, Garvey outlines three perceived difficulties of online teaching: the inability of students to socialise, the lack of space for informal mingling, and the difficulty for students to comprehend the teacher's speech. As well as describing the impact of these difficulties, Garvey offers a range of solutions and concludes by noting that it is only through a collective effort by all involved that a fruitful learning community can be formed and maintained.

Following this paper, Rose-Wainstock (paper 8) describes a discussion activity that draws on self determination theory to help learners feel more comfortable with each other. Rose-Wainstock outlines the process of the activity, gives examples of the kinds of questions that afford productive discussion, and describes the potential outcomes.

In paper 9, Bonner details how an asynchronous communication tool can be used to support communities inside and outside of Zoom sessions. Bonner details how the LINE OpenChat application was used to establish a backchannel with classes, affording a greater ability to check student understanding, gather feedback and provide informal assessment.

The final two papers in our descriptive section consider two ways that learner participation can be maximised in Zoom breakout groups. Hollinshead (paper 10) describes the *five second rule*, a pragmatic device asking students to count backwards from five during moments of reticence. Hollinshead offers guidance on how to run the activity and explains how it can be employed in the online classroom to encourage risk taking.

In our final descriptive paper, Yoder (paper 11) outlines how group leaders can be used in breakout sessions. After detailing how leaders can facilitate participation, reduce confusion, and encourage autonomy, Yoder reflects on potential improvements to the group leader system that was employed.

Section B: Reflective Papers

In the second section of the special section, 11 reflective papers highlight the lived experiences of teachers during the first teaching semester of 2020.

Garvey (paper 12) opens with a reflection of three difficulties faced in the move to ERT: The lack of opportunities for casual student socialization; the increase of teacher control; and the lack of real-time feedback from students. Garvey observes that the use of synchronous online platforms will be a frustrating place for those who wish to replicate the classroom experience, and therefore both teachers and students may need to reconsider their expectations of online learning.

Following this, Brown (paper 13) offers reflections from a teaching journal on life as a new teacher to both KUIS and the university context. Brown describes the physical and emotional difficulties of the semester, and offers a variety of solutions relating to the modification of the working environment and the quality and quantity of social interactions.

Pemberton and Brown (paper 14) then describe their experiences as new teachers to KUIS, finding that their knowledge of KUIS operations lagged behind their more experienced peers. As a solution, they worked together using a structured collaborative cycle. This process, which involved both synchronous and asynchronous communication, enabled them to successfully navigate the semester. Among the benefits of such collaboration were greater support, reduced workloads, and reduced stress.

In paper 15, Beattie reflects on the difficulties of teaching online with specific relation to teacher talk. Beattie observes that there is naturally an increase in teacher talk time due to, among other things, technical limitations, the difficulty of communicating through body language, and the difficulty of knowing whether students have understood. After suggesting that teachers can reduce talk time by using breakout rooms effectively, Beattie notes that the teacher talk issue will need to be revisited should ERT continue indefinitely.

In paper 16, Burke discusses the difficulties of teaching writing online, suggesting that the move to the Zoom platform, and the limitations placed on the teacher's ability to understand student reactions, led to a fear that teaching would be compromised. Burke was pleasantly surprised however, when students' essays turned out to be of a similar quality to what had been found in the traditional classroom.

In paper 17, Mielick reflects on technological difficulties and the frustration these caused. In particular, Mielick describes how his expectations of students' technological skills were not always met, meaning that a significant amount of time had to be spent resolving technological issues. After discussing these experiences, Mielick offers advice to teachers and reflects on the positive impact of the semester.

In paper 18, Dawes discusses the teacher-student relationship, and reflects on how the divide caused by screens meant that relationship building was more stressful than usual. Dawes discusses a variety of solutions to this problem and suggests that the use of personal examples in class and the introduction of more time for casual conversations have alleviated some

negative emotions.

Lynch begins paper 19 by outlining the dilemma that many teachers faced at the beginning of the semester: how much should be planned in advance of the course beginning? Opting to remain flexible, Lynch reflects on a methodical and student-focused approach to planning, and reminds us that students' feelings on ERT should not be ignored.

In paper 20, de Veas, Sakuda, Godin and Roloff Rothman offer a unique panorama: four different voices reflecting on the teaching of the same course. The authors reflect on how the close working relationship they formed supported them not only through the day-to-day implementation of classes, but also the emotional difficulties that they were facing. The use of four voices allows us to see the breadth of experiences even through similar circumstances.

In paper 21, Miner reflects on the potential benefits of paper journal writing, and how such an activity can be adapted for ERT. Miner notes that paper journaling increases students' opportunities for reflection, gives them a reprieve from screen time, and helps to balance out the distractions of technology. Miner concludes by suggesting there is a need to understand more about the potential benefits of non-digital reading and writing materials in online courses.

In our final paper (paper 22), Sykes reflects on the environmental difficulties that face teachers and students in online classes, such as the need to share working spaces with others. Sykes suggests that an understanding atmosphere can alleviate worries around interruptions during Zoom sessions. Sykes also reminds us of the importance of empathy in consideration of the difficulties facing students, who like teachers, have faced unusual and unfavourable circumstances during the 2020 pandemic.

FOOTNOTES

1. We agree with Hodges et al. (2020) that ERT is qualitatively different from traditional forms of distance learning, and this informed our motivations for this special section.
2. In Japan, the school year runs from April until the following March. The spring semester is the first semester of the school year, and typically runs from the beginning of April until the end of July.
3. KUIS is a medium-sized private university located in Chiba prefecture, just outside Tokyo. The student number is approximately 4000, including graduate students. The university specialises in subjects relating to foreign languages, international relations, and international business.
4. The ELI is a department in KUIS responsible for teaching English language skills to undergraduate students.

REFERENCES

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