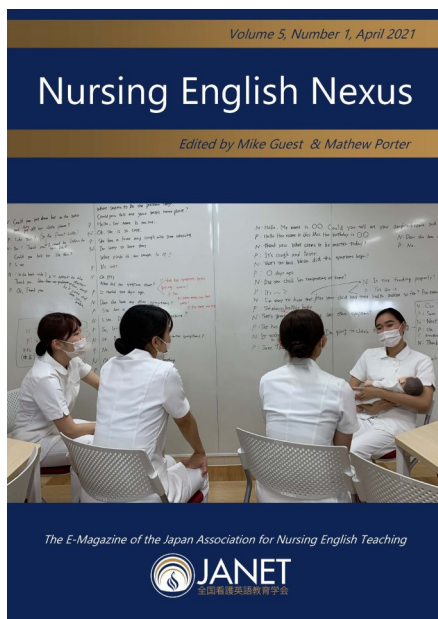


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Standing in the shoes of Japanese nursing students during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract: *The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all aspects of our lives in 2020. Social distancing and remote working are two of the many features of the "new normal". As a result, academic institutions, instructors, and students have been asked to switch to the digital world. The present study aimed to assess and evaluate the difficulties faced by first-year Japanese nursing students at Nara Medical University during the first year of this pandemic. Twenty-one first year students were surveyed over the course of the spring semester in 2020. Results showed that 81% preferred studying on campus, mainly because of a lack of communication with their friends and teachers, the distractions they experienced, and the difficulty they had concentrating at home, while technical issues were the least reported reason for their preferences. Nineteen percent stated a preference for online teaching, with saving money, commuting time, and the autonomy obtained while studying from home given as the main reasons for this preference. While 2020 was a difficult and challenging year for both teachers and students alike, it was also a time full of new skills learned, helping everyone prepare for future online experiences.*

Keywords: Japanese nursing students, remote teaching, distance education, COVID-19

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic, urging people to follow many preventive measures, one of these being social distancing. The Red Cross (2020) defines social distancing as, "staying home, avoiding gathering in groups, staying out of crowded places, and keeping at least 6 feet away from others". The worldwide implementation of social distancing measures has resulted in the suspension of classes for more than 850 million students across the globe (Chen et al., 2020). Universities globally have closed their campuses in order to follow the social distancing measures, and distance learning has been recommended to cope with the new pandemic prevention measures (Toquero, 2020).

This unexpected change during the COVID-19 pandemic has become a measure of organizational agility (Wu, 2020), as the top priority for many universities and academic institutions was to transfer their curriculum and classes to the digital world within a limited time. Japan was no exception; the Japanese government declared a state of emergency on April 7, 2020. This led to the interruption of original teaching plans for

many Japanese universities. Universities in Japan were therefore forced to start offering online courses to students without sufficient time to prepare or adjust existing teaching plans. Likewise, teachers at Nara Medical University (NMU) were given less than a week's notice between being ordered to go online and commence online classes.

At NMU, the first two months of the spring semester were taught remotely, while the final two months of the course were conducted in an alternating style, one week face-to-face and the following week online. Thus, we used two digital tools to conduct the online classes: Zoom and Edmodo. Zoom was used for real-time online lessons. It allows users to have an online meeting with up to 100 participants at the same time. Among its many features is the ability to divide participants into different breakout rooms and a whiteboard feature which allows the host to type important messages and announcements and share them with other participants. In addition, the host has the ability to mute selected participants. On the other hand, Edmodo is an online platform used to create virtual online

classes that students can join using a specific code. With Edmodo, teachers can create and correct assignments and quizzes and post important announcements for the students. Through Edmodo, students were able to send and receive messages to and from their teacher or other students. Edmodo was also used to host videos and lessons for asynchronous teaching and other course resources.

Based on these circumstances, in this exploratory study we chose to investigate the online learning challenges faced by first-year NMU nursing students both at the beginning of and throughout the spring semester.

Method

First-year nursing students at NMU have two compulsory English courses: Communicative English I in the spring and Communicative English II in the autumn. Each course has 4 sections. This study was conducted in one out of four sections of the spring 2020 course. It involved twenty-one out of a total of eighty-five first-year nursing students.

During the first semester of the English course, students were asked to answer an essay question as a part of their in-class activity. This question was used to teach students how to answer a similar essay question on their final exam, following the format of introduction, body, and conclusion.

At the beginning of the semester, students were asked the following question: "During the last month, students around the world have been forced to study at home rather than school. Do you think studying at home is better than studying at school? Why or why not?" Students were encouraged to answer the question giving two or more reasons to support their responses. Students were given feedback on their responses during the course of the semester, and they were informed that their responses would also be used anonymously for this research.

At the end of the semester, students were

asked to give feedback on the course: "Have you faced any difficulties with the online classes?" And, if yes: "How could online classes be improved?" Students were asked to fill in this survey outside of class, using Edmodo. They were informed again that their responses would be used for possible improvement of the online courses as well as anonymously for this research.

The responses were collected between May 2020 and July 2020. Students' responses were subjected to inductive content analysis. They were classified into different categories and coded accordingly by the principal investigator and then discussed with the other author.

Results

Twenty-one students participated in this study, 20 female and one male. All of the students were Japanese.

Essay question

The response rate was (100%). Seventeen students (81%) reported that they prefer studying at the university campus, while 4 students (19%) reported they prefer studying from home.

Among the responses from the seventeen students who preferred to study at school, we identified four categories. The largest category was "lack of communication with friends" (16/17), followed by "lack of communication with the teacher" (12/17), then "distraction and lack of concentration" (10/17), and finally "technical issues" (3/17) (Figure 1).

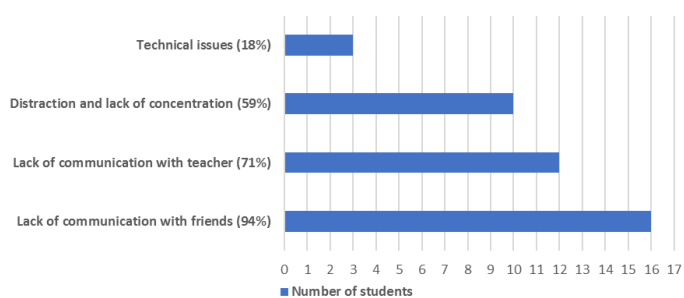
We recognized three categories in the responses of the four students who preferred studying from home. The principal two categories were autonomy and the absence of commuting time (3/4). This was followed by accessibility of reaching the class teacher (1/4) (Figure 2).

End of semester survey

The response rate was (100%). Thirteen out of the twenty-one students (62%) complained about technical issues with their devices or a weak,

Figure 1

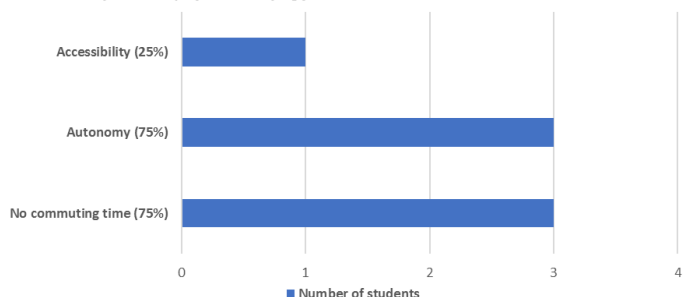
Difficulties faced by students who preferred studying on campus



Multiple responses were allowed

Figure 2

Reasons why students preferred studying from home



Multiple responses were allowed

unstable internet connection. Seven students (33%) reported difficulties making friends. Five students (24%) mentioned feeling nervous, overwhelmed, and had difficulties getting used to the online classes at the beginning of the semester. Two students (10%) did not mention facing any issues. Not being able to express their opinion during online classes was reported by one student (5%) (Figure 3).

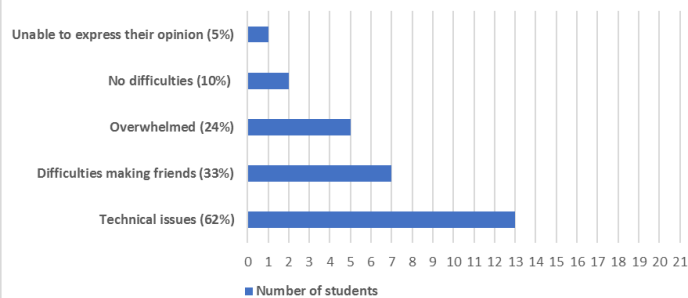
General feedback for improving the online class was received from 3 students. Two students reported that it was good to mute other students in Zoom; hence the teacher could be heard clearly. One student suggested having no more than two students in each breakout room. The remaining students did not report any ways to improve the online classes.

Discussion

Most of the students preferred studying at school (81%). This was expected, as they are freshman students, just graduated from high school, and eager to experience the life of college students. On the other hand, it was also surprising, since they were in the middle of the COVID-19

Figure 3

Difficulties faced during the semester



Multiple responses were allowed

pandemic, with health and government authorities asking citizens to work/study remotely.

Students who preferred to study on campus

The majority of students (n=17) claimed to prefer studying at the university campus. The reasons expressed are discussed in greater detail below.

Friends. When students communicate asynchronously with their fellow students only digitally and not in person, the real-time sharing of ideas, knowledge, and information is missing (Britt, 2006). Perhaps as a result of this, sixteen out of the seventeen students reported that it was difficult making friends while studying remotely. This is compounded by a lack of interaction between students outside of class time, as well as the interruption of all university club activities, which is the usual place and time for Japanese students to make new friends and interact with their seniors. Some students mentioned the lack of motivation, support, and encouragement from their friends and peers while studying at home in comparison to studying at the university. Among the comments expressed were: *"If we study with our friends, then we would probably have a more combative spirit, we would make more effort to study."* *"When I study with my friends, we can discuss and share our opinions together, as well as, we can improve our communication skills."* *"I can study harder when I am with my friends, for example, if I have difficulties understanding something, I can ask them for help."*

With the declaration of a national state of emergency, it was difficult for students to meet

and study together. Using online applications/websites for studying was a new experience for most of them. Despite teachers suggesting students arrange online meetings/study sessions outside of class-time for them to study together, no students reported doing this.

Difficulties in communicating with the class teacher. The lack of proper interaction with the instructor is a major concern associated with online learning (Zhong, 2020). Our study also found this to be true at NMU, as twelve students reported that it was not easy to communicate with their class teacher through Zoom. Some of them had difficulties asking the teacher questions during the online class, and if they wanted to ask questions outside of class time, they had to send an e-mail or a private message through Edmodo.

This response time may be seen as an obstacle to communication with their teacher, as was expressed by these students: *"If I have a question, I can immediately ask the teacher in a face-to-face class."* *"If I have a question, I have to write it to the teacher and send it as an e-mail, because it is difficult to ask the teacher in Zoom."*

We believe that these difficulties are due to several reasons. Japanese students tend to be shy in face-to-face classes, so asking their teacher a question via Zoom might be even more stressful as they need to do it in front of all the other class members. Another reason might be because all students are muted during the class time, therefore they might find it difficult to un-mute themselves and disrupt the flow of the class. To combat this, we suggest that teachers introduce a useful tool in the Zoom application/website, which might be unknown to the students. This is the 'raise the hand' feature, where students can virtually raise their hand, and the teacher will be notified. The teacher can then unmute the student, assist them with their questions, and actively encourage them to ask more questions during online classes.

Distractions and lack of motivation. Ten

students thought it was difficult to concentrate during online classes. They were distracted by many factors, such as smartphones, television, magazines, comics, and other family members. They reported that: *"In school, you cannot use your smartphone in class."* *"In school, I tend not to be lazy. The time in which I study at school is decided and preset, so I can concentrate on the classes and learn efficiently."*

We had expected that this would be the most challenging aspect of online classes for students. It is difficult for the teachers to influence and control this factor, so students have to maintain it independently. Interestingly, one of the students described this challenge as an 'enemy'. In the student's own words:

"At home, there are many things which stop us from studying, such as comic books, magazines, games, and snacks. They are enemies when we are studying. However, there is nothing which interrupts our studying at school, so we can concentrate on studying."

Technical issues. At the beginning of the semester, only three students reported suffering from issues related to technology. We had expected more students to report this issue, as we believed that some students might have weak or unstable internet connections, might not possess a smartphone or a personal computer, and some might not be familiar with using online technologies for study. The university offered rooms with free, stable internet connections and laptops for the students in need, but it was not requested by any of the students surveyed. One student reported difficulties hearing the teacher because of the unstable internet connection: *"Sometimes, during online classes it is difficult to listen to the teacher and other students, because of bad internet connection or the noise."*

Another student stated that it was problematic to use the laptop for a long time: *"I am not used to taking online classes, it is stressful*

for me to be in front of the computer for a long time”.

Students who preferred studying online from home

The reasons stated by these students (n=4) for their preference are described below.

Commuting distance and time. For three students (75%), one of the main reasons for preferring studying at home was the time spent traveling from home to the university and vice versa. One student mentioned that not being required to wake up early in the morning to be at the university on time was a big advantage: *“I can wake up late, and I feel less fatigue when I do not have to commute to the university.”*

On the other hand, another student mentioned that she used the time saved commuting to the university both to study and for her hobbies: *“In my case, I can save two hours every day. I can devote that time to study or for my hobbies.”* Saving time not going to and coming back from the university was a major advantage for both teachers and students. It led to more time for pre-class preparation, more studying time for the students, and more post-class time for the teachers to finalize their daily duties.

Autonomy. Three students mentioned that having the autonomy to control their schedule for studying and not having a fixed study time was an advantage for them. One of those students reported that they have to follow a preset schedule in school, even if they do not feel motivated: *“I can study at my own pace when I am motivated to do so.”* Another student mentioned that it is good to take a nap between classes: *“If you are tired, you can take a nap, and after that, you would focus more on your classes.”*

Giving autonomy to the students is a double-edged sword. On one side, giving students freedom and independence has been shown to improve their creativity, and it is associated with intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2002). When

students are intrinsically motivated, student classroom activity is consistent with their needs and preferences. As a result, students show strong motivation and active engagement, and are involved in meaningful learning (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991; Reeve, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, at this young age, students might need a certain level of supervision and guidance. This point was clearly expressed by one of the students who was not in favor of the autonomy she received: *“Because you can decide the time to study by yourself, you may not be able to determine when is the study and when is the free time.”*

Accessibility. Only one student thought that having a method to reach the teacher outside of the class time was convenient, while this was not considered to be an advantage by three out of four students from the group who preferred studying on campus. These students claimed that the difficulties faced because of lack of direct communication with the teacher in class outweighed the merits of having accessibility and a means of communicating outside of the university. It is worth mentioning that this also increased the teachers' workload, as the teachers had to reply to students' questions and inquiries and help them with their difficulties whenever necessitated.

Follow-up survey

At the end of the semester, all students, regardless of their study location preference, were asked to fill out a semi-structured survey. They were asked to report any difficulties or challenges faced during the spring semester and if they had any suggestions on how to improve their online study experience. For more than half of the students, technical problems were the main issue.

This was notably higher than the total reported at the beginning of the semester, when only three students claimed to suffer from technical issues.

This might be due to multiple reasons. First, with the semester's progress, more and more universities changed to online teaching, causing more pressure on internet providers and online platforms (Edmodo, Zoom). Another reason might be that students at the beginning of the semester were not familiar with this new teaching method, and as time passed, they started noticing technology-related issues that they had overlooked to begin with.

In the final survey, only seven students reported that having difficulties making friends was one of their main challenges. This was an improvement over the thirteen students who reported this at the beginning of the semester. This decrease may be attributed to the change in the attendance method implemented by the university: after the end of the national state of emergency, students were allowed to attend face-to-face classes every other week. This helped students to meet in person and interact. Moreover, five students had difficulties adapting to the online classes at the beginning of the semester. These difficulties may be ascribed to having to adjust to a new teaching method.

Despite the teacher asking students to remain after class if they needed any help, wanted to ask questions, or express their opinions freely, one student reported to be still suffering from difficulties expressing an opinion with the teacher and other students during the online sessions. This might best be attributed to individual learner differences, as the other students reported having no such difficulties.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the lives of billions of people around the globe. Governments have implemented multiple measures to curb the spread of this pandemic. The largest of these was social distancing, and as a result, remote working and online teaching were imposed on university students and university teachers both in Japan

and around the world.

Around 80% of the students in our survey preferred studying on campus. The need to make new friends and the lack of communication with the teachers and their peers were cited as the students' main concerns, followed by a lack of concentration and motivation when studying from home, while technical issues were reported by only a few students. On the other hand, for 20% of the students, studying from home was their preferred way of learning. Saving time and money on commuting and the degree of autonomy associated with taking online classes were the main reasons given for this preference, followed by the accessibility of the teachers through the digital tools (Edmodo, Zoom) employed.

In contrast, according to the end of semester survey results, technical problems were indicated by the students as being the main issue, while difficulties making and communicating with friends improved slightly over the course of the year. Interestingly, only one student reported specific difficulties expressing an opinion during online classes.

The 2020 academic year was unusual and difficult for both teachers and students alike. At the same time, it was a year full of new experiences and many new skills were acquired, hopefully making any future online teaching an easier and more fruitful experience.

Limitations

This study's major limitation is its small sample size: we cannot be sure that it reflects the challenges faced by all students in our university, as this was one class out of a total of four. However, we believe that that it is an accurate reflection of the experience of the students we surveyed and, as such, may be of use in understanding the types of challenges and benefits that students experience during online lessons. The second limitation is that students'

opinions were followed up after one semester only. We hope that, in future studies, we and/or other researchers will be able to include a larger sample size across a longer timeframe.

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