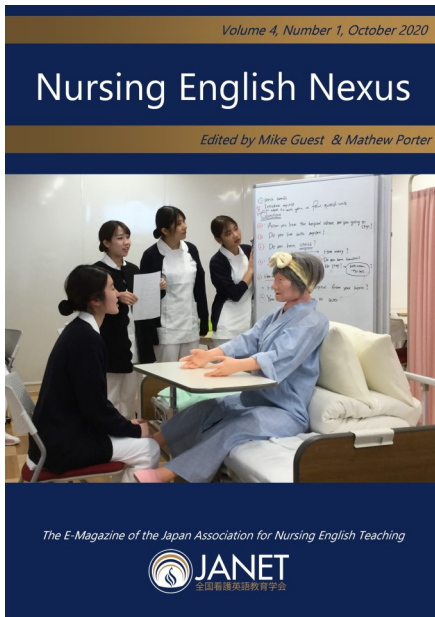


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## Article citation

Mathieson, P., Elfandi, S., Ghashut, R., Hamilton, M., Murray, C., & Bolstad, F. (2020). Nursing English Teacher Reflections on Some of the Novel Challenges Presented by the Novel Coronavirus. *Nursing English Nexus*, 4(1), 5-10.

## Nursing English Nexus

<http://www.janetorg.com/nexus>

ISSN 2433-2305

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## Nursing English Teacher Reflections on Some of the Novel Challenges Presented by the Novel Coronavirus

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The COVID-19 crisis has touched nearly every aspect of our lives. Both individually and collectively, we have all had to change our ways of doing things and adjust to what is still for most an unsettling “new normal”. As language educators, some of the challenges that we have faced – and are still facing – have changed the way that we teach, and may continue to have an effect long after the tumult of 2020 is behind us.

This paper comprises accounts from four teachers teaching a first-year nursing English course at a public medical school in Japan. In early April 2020, in the face of the rapidly escalating public health crisis brought about by COVID-19, our institution decided to switch from face-to-face lessons to an emergency remote teaching (ERT) format. We use the term ‘ERT’ in this paper in order to distinguish between the current pandemic-enforced teaching and learning environment, and more traditional conceptualisations of online teaching (Hodges et al, 2020).

This ERT approach continued until the beginning of June 2020, when our institution switched from a full ERT format to a hybrid format, combining online classes and face-to-face classes. In this hybrid format, students in our course took two classes per week, alternating between online classes and face-to-face classes on a ‘one week on, one week off’ basis. Classes in both online and face-to-face formats were conducted synchronously.

The switch to an ERT format in April 2020 was understandable in the circumstances. However, as with so much else that is related to this coronavirus pandemic, it created an array of challenges for both teachers and students at our

institution. This was especially so because we had only one week to prepare to switch from the usual face-to-face class format to the new ERT format.

In this paper, we attempt to highlight the nature of some of the many challenges faced by teachers and students at our institution in the first semester of 2020. We present accounts from four nursing English teachers about their experiences this year in the areas of (1) technology, (2) lesson planning and class materials, (3) delivering classes in both an ERT format and a hybrid format, and (4) communication between teachers and students.

### New Technology — Sufian Elfandi

Technology is a cornerstone of modern life, and dealing with new technology forms an essential component of our quotidian life. However, the technological difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic challenged both teachers and students alike.

After deciding to move our classes to an ERT format, we had to move quickly in order to prepare for ERT courses. The process started with our English department having to choose the best technology platform to do that. We decided to use the free educational tool Edmodo for the asynchronous coursework and Zoom for the synchronous online classes in both our medical English and nursing English courses. Students were aided in this challenging technology journey by explanatory YouTube videos, which were prepared by teachers and were uploaded to Edmodo. These videos explained how to use the abovementioned platforms, as well as other aspects of our courses.

## Edmodo

From the outset, teachers had to create Edmodo accounts, set up their classes on Edmodo, share class codes through the university email system, and ensure that all of their students had joined the online classes. As for the students, they also had to create new Edmodo accounts, get used to the new platform, and join their online classes.

At the beginning of the semester, each teacher made a ten-minute self-introduction video, as students did not have a chance to meet their teachers in person. First-year nursing students made a short, three-minute self-introduction video so their peers and teachers could learn something about them. This also served as practice for the presentation videos that were part of the first-year nursing course assessment later in the semester.

Because there is a 100-megabyte size limit on videos which are directly uploaded to Edmodo, students were instructed to either compress their videos or to upload them to a personal YouTube channel and share the link with other students via Edmodo. This created tremendous challenges and stress for students and teachers alike, as most students were not familiar with making and uploading videos.

In addition, some of the vocabulary and grammar quizzes were done through Edmodo. Since some students were clearly struggling with the new technology, we had a practice online quiz before the official quizzes started. Nevertheless, the online quizzes continued to pose problems for students and teachers throughout the semester. Some students missed the scheduled time for the quizzes, either because of technological issues with Edmodo or because of slow Internet connections. Since tests are an assessed part of the English course, we made special arrangements (such as online and/or face-to-face re-tests) for those students. While this created more work for the teachers, it helped to ease student stress and anxiety.

## Zoom

Teachers also had to ensure that all students had downloaded the Zoom application and created their own Zoom accounts. There were significant challenges and concerns with setting up and using Zoom as well. Initially, students had various communication difficulties during Zoom sessions because of slow Internet connections, and voice interference from other participants. The latter problem was solved by muting the class and then unmuting individual students or by using the 'whiteboard feature' in Zoom. This feature allows teachers to write on a virtual whiteboard and share the screen with the students in their Zoom class. It enabled teachers to ensure that students got important messages about upcoming classes and coursework and also reinforced teaching points by giving students more than one opportunity to listen to and comprehend what was being taught.

### Lesson Planning, Resources, and Materials — Claire Murray

Because this semester was the first ERT experience for most of our teachers and students, we decided to post all of the class materials before each lesson on Edmodo. This was done to help our students understand how the lessons were structured and with the intention of putting them at ease. It also fitted with the 'flipped classroom' model that our institution has urged all course co-ordinators and teachers to implement. The materials included an outline of that class's activities and homework, plus documents, videos, or website links that would be used in the class. These materials were also saved in folders that all students had access to.

From the teachers' perspective, especially initially, the biggest challenge was the time it took to prepare the materials and lesson outlines. Furthermore, we had to prepare the materials and post them in Edmodo well in advance of the class to give students time to print them out (if

necessary). This task was made easier by the fact that the workload of preparing class materials was able to be divided between the four teachers who usually run concurrent classes based on the same content. Lastly, only materials that were digital could be shared. Some printed documents or photos could not be used unless they were digitised.

Looking from the students' perspective, having to read and understand a 'wall of English' (the lesson outlines) could be intimidating and time-consuming. Furthermore, some students did not have access to a printer in order to print the class materials. As we were using Zoom for the synchronous component of the classes, it could be awkward to use a digital version of the materials at the same time, especially if students had to write on the materials.

However, there were many advantages to online lesson outlines and materials. Posting class activities and homework for lessons increased student autonomy. Students read the outlines and materials before class, and they knew what they were responsible for completing. Furthermore, the materials and lesson outlines were always available for students. This was helpful if students were absent, as it was easy for them to find the lesson information. It was also beneficial for students who were struggling to keep up, as they had the option to use translation software for the materials and lesson information. Another advantage was using digital materials like videos and music without the hassle of setting up the equipment in the classroom.

Teachers used online resources such as Quizlet, Kahoot, YouTube, and surveys. These resources were intended to provide a fun aspect that was otherwise missing from online classes, and students seemed to enjoy them. However, the biggest challenge of these resources was that students were asked to learn how to use many new platforms in English, which was time-consuming and frustrating for the students. This

also meant the teachers had to troubleshoot students' problems which created an additional burden for teachers. Furthermore, some resources were not used as we did not want the students to have to learn yet another online platform.

As it seems classes at our institution will continue to be taught in an ERT format, we intend to include class objectives in the lesson outlines in order to increase student autonomy. Secondly, we also aim to use a platform that allows for shared documents so that students can work on activities together in real time.

### **Delivering Classes in ERT and in Hybrid Formats — Melissa Hamilton**

The pedagogical issues that will be discussed in this section relate in particular to the hybrid ERT and face-to-face class format that was implemented in the latter half of the semester. There were both positive and negative aspects to this hybrid approach.

Beginning with the positive aspects, since these were first-year students, most had never met their classmates before. This meant that the face-to-face portion was of great benefit to the students. They could meet in-person, get to know each other, and develop closer friendships. Conversely, one benefit of the ERT portion was that students were not coming to school every week, so opportunities for exposure to COVID-19 were fewer. Each year group was in a "bubble" and attended campus on different weeks, so there was also less contact with other students even when on campus.

Additionally, students had less homework as part of the face-to-face portion of the course. Typically, ERT or distance learning courses involve many individual homework tasks, activities, and quizzes. However, our hybrid approach meant that tasks could sometimes be completed during class time. We felt that with less homework, student stress could be decreased. This also allowed teachers to check students' work more

easily and correct any common problems or misunderstandings in face-to-face classes.

A final benefit was the increased online and offline contact students had with their teacher. Not only could the students ask questions of their teacher and of each other during class, but they also had the ability to easily contact the teacher online via Edmodo. This allowed students to ask for different kinds of feedback. In fact, under the ERT and hybrid format, we noticed that there seemed to be more online requests for private assistance than was the case for our regular entirely face-to-face class format.

Despite the many positives that emerged, there were, of course, numerous negative aspects of the hybrid teaching approach that was implemented at our institution. The irregularity of the schedule was confusing for both teachers and students. Our institution initially aimed to have first- and second-year students (both medical students and nursing students) receiving face-to-face classes on an alternating 'one week on, one week off' basis. However, while this worked in theory, there were numerous weeks where other events or activities (such as health checks) disrupted this 'week on, week off' schedule. Accordingly, students were sometimes uncertain whether they were supposed to come in or stay home. While this was easily fixed with reminders from the teachers, it was a common problem and contributed to teachers' overall stress levels.

There were other negative aspects which mostly impacted teachers. For one, conducting hybrid lessons during a pandemic was stressful. In face-to-face classes, teachers needed to take into consideration the safety, sanitation, and layout of the classroom. Furthermore, since they needed to account for social distancing, sanitation and safety concerns, the existing class content for face-to-face classes, needed to be significantly adapted. This was time-consuming, and teachers found that there was tension between safety concerns and creating engaging classes. For

instance, pair or group activities that are typical of many language classes often needed to be removed altogether or redesigned. Similarly, any tasks that would normally be repeated with multiple partners to reinforce a skill, grammar structure, or vocabulary point were impractical in our hybrid classes. Students could not switch partners multiple times easily or safely.

### **Changes and Challenges in Teacher-Student Communication — Rima Ghashut**

Effective classroom communication is a crucial component of the teaching process. However, in order for effective classroom communication to occur, teachers must create a classroom environment that actively encourages open communication between teachers and students. This is particularly important during periods of heightened stress and anxiety, as has been the case during the current coronavirus pandemic. Cantor (2020) demonstrated that during difficult times, providing safe and supportive learning environments and focussing on creating strong teacher-student and student-student relationships becomes paramount. Although it is easy in such circumstances to focus effort on the development and delivery of revised academic materials, it is equally important to devote time and energy to developing confidence and trust between teachers and students.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a considerable impact on interpersonal communication between teachers and students, and has changed the way we communicate in many ways. This has affected all aspects-of-both in-class and out-of-class communication, including verbal, non-verbal and written communication. Whereas feedback to and from students is usually immediate in face-to-face classes, the effectiveness of such feedback has become much more difficult to measure in the ERT environment. For example, even simple requests such as asking whether students have questions or whether anything is unclear have

been far more challenging during ERT classes. In many cases, this has made it difficult for teachers to get a sense of how the flow of the learning process is going within classroom.

The lack of out-of-class communication with students has also been a considerable disadvantage of the current format. Whereas students and teachers are usually able to communicate informally in hallways and while eating lunch together, under the restrictions imposed by ERT classes and university guidelines for face-to-face interaction these less formal avenues of communication have been limited. This has meant that students have had few chances to ask questions and confirm their understanding in a low stress environment and teachers have been unable to benefit from the feedback that these opportunities provide.

#### **Direct and indirect classroom communication**

Initially, one of our main concerns was that freshmen students would be significantly disadvantaged by the absence of face-to-face classes. In particular, the potential paucity of opportunities for direct communication between teachers and students was something that teachers were concerned about. For instance, even something as seemingly simple as reading students' facial expressions in order to gauge understanding was made more difficult by the ERT format. This form of communication is important not only between teachers and students but also among the students themselves.

With the shift to ERT classes, both teachers and students had to adapt to new methods of communicating, such as via online platforms like Edmodo. Edmodo has many merits in terms of communication for both teachers and students. Teachers were able to make individual comments on the students' essays, with students being able to reply directly to the teacher with questions or inquiries. From an English language teaching standpoint, an added bonus was the fact that our

students were managing all of these communication tasks in English. Furthermore, students could reach their teachers by sending direct messages through the Edmodo messaging feature. This was particularly beneficial, since our students often find it difficult to reach their teachers outside of class time.

We believe that these methods of communication helped to build a level of trust and connection between teacher and student that may not have been possible prior to this year. Furthermore, the addition of the social media connection between teachers and students also meant that alerts and notifications often appeared, reminding students (and teachers!) about upcoming assignments or tests. This in turn boosted teacher-student communication beyond class time.

#### **Teacher load and student burden**

Any new way of teaching and learning typically comes with both advantages and disadvantages. The initial ERT and then the later hybrid formats caused significant stress for teachers. Teachers had an expanded range of tasks to undertake, including preparing new class materials, marking a wider array of classwork and assignments, as well as having to deal with complex administrative duties. This juggling act was often overwhelming, and it made meeting each individual student's needs difficult.

The communicative burden created by this situation was also challenging for students. Teachers often sent important information and announcements via Edmodo, and this led many students to feel urged to check their computers or phones regularly. This increased level of communicative stress is reflected in one first-year nursing student's feedback to her teacher, as she wrote: "We always have to think about our homework. Homework comes in by email, so I wonder when it will come." Hence the inconvenience of receiving notifications and

emails around the clock cast a shadow of stress and anxiety on both teachers and students.

### Conclusion

Teacher patience, ingenuity, and creativity have been stretched to their limits by the unusual circumstances of this past semester. In a sense, the pandemic created an opportunity to challenge ourselves to create and run engaging and educational ERT, followed by hybrid courses at our institution. However, dealing with new and unfamiliar technology, the stress of preparing a range of new or revised materials in a short space of time, as well as pandemic-related sanitation and safety concerns and teacher-student and student-student communication difficulties, made this semester one of the most challenging we have ever faced.

Looking beyond the frenetic and frustrating environment that has been forced upon us in 2020, there is a sense that, despite all the hardships, our teachers, our students, and our institution as a whole are now better prepared to face whatever educational challenges await us in the future. The nursing English courses at our university have certainly benefitted from the creation of a range of new and improved online materials and formats for delivering lessons, as well as new means to foster and encourage communication and understanding between faculty and students. It is nice to think that, for our institution at least, some positives have emerged from this otherwise calamitous period in our history.

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