

Online Japanese Language Learning: UNIMAS Experience

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The global spread of COVID-19 pandemic has led Malaysia to implement The Movement Control Order (MCO) on 18 March 2020. Due to this measure, all of the courses which were taught face to face (F2F) or in a blended manner have been forced to embrace online teaching and learning (T&L) starting from Week 8 of Semester 2, 2019/2020. This sole online teaching approach requires some significant changes to not only the course delivery but also every aspect of teaching and learning. This paper aims to share the adjustments that have been taken to effectively deliver a fully remote Japanese language course as it would be in traditional F2F teaching in UNIMAS.

Overview of PBJ0043 Japanese Language Level 2

PBJ0043 Japanese Language Level 2 is a three-credit comprehensive course that is offered every semester as one of the university elective courses. The course is conducted 3 hours per week for 14 weeks. This course is aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which is an international standard for describing language proficiency where A2 is the level of elementary users. This course aims to develop students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in Japanese at

beginner level. At the end of the course, students are expected to be able to identify simple and basic recurring phrases, infer very short and simple texts, write a series of simple phrases and sentences, and initiate interaction using a series of simple and direct phrases and sentences to communicate on familiar topics.

Marugoto Katsudou and Rikai for Elementary 1(A2) by Japan Foundation (2014) are used as textbooks since the books are aligned with CEFR. PBJ0043 was conducted face-face until week 7. However, due to global spread of COVID-19 which subsequently led to implementation of Movement Control Order in Malaysia, the courses were offered fully online starting from week 8, using synchronous video conferencing software Webex.

Adapting to Online Teaching

Prior to reconstruction of teaching and learning to an online platform, the plan and outline for the course needs to be revisited and studied carefully. Although most of the lecturers have experiences in a

blended approach to teaching and learning, most of them are not ready to face the challenges of conducting full online teaching. This is further complicated by the need to choose suitable online learning tools to effectively deliver the lesson to students which is proven to be difficult in the absence of structured comprehensive guidance. UNIMAS, through the Centre of Applied Learning and Multimedia (CALM) took a progressive initiative by providing academic staff with the necessary know-how through series of talk and sharing sessions to assist lecturers. This is a much-celebrated initiative as teaching and learning using technology must be driven by sound pedagogical strategies (Kohler & Mishra, 2009). CALM also provided lecturers with lists of potential tools including synchronous and asynchronous tools that can be used for teaching and learning that they can explore for their classes via email. The lecturers were encouraged to explore their delivery method, class activities and accessible resources for students.

For instance, after experimenting with several synchronous tools, I prefer to use Webex application to conduct PBJ0043 Japanese Language Level 2 class. This method has been chosen after deliberate consideration of student's readiness for online learning which was concluded by a

survey via google form that collect students information on the access and devices required for online learning such as smartphone, laptop as well as internet connection. All 41 registered student have a computer/laptop and are able to access the university online learning platform. Out of 41 students registered, only one student did not have 3G connection. The student in question was contacted to further gauge her situation and only after the accessibility is ensured that the mode of teaching was decided.

Course Delivery

'Education for all' or 'no one left behind' is the overarching philosophies of teaching and learning. Thus, efforts are taken to ensure each individual student get the required attention depending on their characteristics so that they can adapt fully to remote learning approach.

During normal semester, blended learning approach is applied in teaching and learning. PowerPoint slides are utilised to deliver the syllabus only and the slides are not given to the students. However, for full online class, student version of PowerPoint slides including audio were uploaded to eLEAP or in class WhatsApp group every week before their classes commence. This modification was aimed

to provide more time for students to go through the content for the week. Apart from slides, learning materials such as grammar notes and links for online exercises or learning materials were uploaded to eLEAP. The resources provided are sufficient for the students to acquire the relevant knowledge.

The online synchronous sessions which were done via Webex was divided into two sessions where each session took about 30-40 minutes. This was done to avoid fatigue from using and focusing on a video conferencing application for a long time. Before starting with new lesson, revision for previous lesson were done to check students' understanding so that they are prepared for the new lesson. During class, lecturer will go through the slides and give some explanation regarding new grammar or vocabulary. In-class activities were also conducted to engage students in the process of learning. Between the sessions, students were required to listen to audios and do exercises in the textbooks or slides given.

In our effort to maintain meaningful learning experience for students, the students' use of video camera/webcam was not required. Although there is difficulty to figure out students' understanding, this measure was taken to keep students' internet data usage to the

minimum. Additional time was also provided for students to complete the tasks for the lessons due to possible instability of internet access at students' location.

This online class have created opportunities for students who would like to seek further clarification or passionate learners who value knowledge acquisition by directly engaging them in a close-contact manner akin to learning from YouTube where student can rewind or replay the recording to fully understand the lectures. Furthermore, the students are also reminded that instructors are always open for any questions accelerating further growth. Hence, online class not only addresses the learning needs of students who have decent bandwidth and just want to get it over with, but also those with the enthusiasm and passion to learn.

Assessment

While the learning outcomes were possible to be achieved through full online delivery, the evaluation task needed some minor modifications. There are two types of assessment being implemented for this course: three continuous assessments and one final assessment that focused on the four language skills: listening, reading, writing and speaking. This is summarised in the table 1. Table 1 shows the F2F assessment in normal situations with the allocated marks for each assessment and

also the changes made to each assessment for online teaching. Each assessment is further divided into two or three tests that measure different language skills. Assessment 1 was conducted at week 6, prior to MCO implementation. Therefore, only Assessment 2 and Assessment 3 were modified. During face to face class, tasks that evaluate students' speaking skill were done either individually or in groups. However, during online learning, the task was done individually where the videos

are uploaded on Youtube or shared by giving the link to their cloud storage to the lecturer. As for the listening test, slides that include audio were given to the students in order to avoid problems that arise due to bad internet connectivity. Students were able to listen to audio repeatedly to answer the question without worrying about the connection. For the reading test, MCQ types of questions were used and for writing, the task was given as a home-based assessment.

Table 1

Assessment	Normal Face to Face Week 1-Week 14	Online Week 8-Week 14
Assessment 1 (15%) Week 6	Listening (5%) The audios are played 2/3 times during class Writing (5%) Write given word in Katakana Reading (5%) Write the underlined Kanji in Hiragana	
Assessment 2 (20%) Week 8	Listening (5%) The audios are played 2/3 times during class hour Speaking (15%) Individual oral test Students are required to answer questions, and to ask the instructor several questions based on given topic.	Listening PowerPoint Slides with audio is given to students. The answer must be typed using Katakana or Hiragana in Google Forms Speaking Individual oral test Students are required to submit 3 minutes video on specified topic and upload the video on YouTube or their cloud storage and share the link with the instructor
Assessment 3	Listening (10%)	Listening

(25%) Week 10	The audios are played 2/3 times during class hour Speaking (15%) 3-minutes Group Presentation	PowerPoint Slides with audio is given to students. The answer must be typed using Katakana or Hiragana in Google Forms Speaking Individual oral test Students are required to submit 1- minute speech video on specified topic and upload the video on YouTube or their cloud storage and share the link with the instructor
Final Exam (40%) Week 14	Reading (20%) MCQ and structured questions Writing (20%) Write short essay	Reading (10%) MCQ questions via Google Forms Writing (30%) Students were given 10 days to complete the writing assessment in form of short essay that must be written in about 30 sentences and submit their work in eLEAP

Differences in assessment method between F2F and online

Steps Taken to Mitigate the Challenges

Few steps have been taken to ensure continual engagement with students to help them mitigate the challenges they may face.

Provide Extra Support/Guidance

Extra support and guidance were given to the student by firstly establishing direct contact with students via phone, SMS, WhatsApp, and email. To assure students that their learning experience is not jeopardized in any way due to the pandemic, a clear note that they are free to contact the instructors if they face any problems is included in every

announcement. In terms of learning experience, students are provided with relevant study materials as well as access to opportunities and care services provided by UNIMAS. Additional measure such as getting feedbacks from student on their learning experience is utilised to ensure students are engaged with their studies. Students are given the confidence that they are evaluated fairly by providing clear description of task and marking rubric as well as providing extra guidance online.

Be More Flexible and Provide Alternatives

Flexibility is essential in adapting to the new norm of remote learning as a temporary measure during crisis. Educators should not feel discouraged by these challenges as the spirit may translate to student feeling disadvantaged due to unfulfilled education requirements. A re-evaluation of the syllabus, alternative mode of submission for assessments as well as support through extra guidance and extended deadlines can be employed to mitigate the challenges posed by remote learning. Students are given the flexibility to submit assessments either via email and/or WhatsApp.

Provide Meaningful Learning

Students should engage and feel connected with their studies by putting in a varying amount of effort so that their time is spent meaningfully. Ultimately, it is quality that matters the most although quantity may correlate with quality. Lecturers can facilitate the learning process by improving on several points such as interaction between students as speaking practice is usually more effective in classroom setting.

Conclusion

If there are any positives outcome of this pandemic, it is the unleashing of educator's creativity and swift flexibility

in developing online teaching and learning content despite the complicated challenges posed by COVID-19 global pandemic. Furthermore, the online learning instils discipline in students since they need to work effectively in unstructured environment. It has certainly encouraged us to become more ready and resilient in face of overwhelming changes and obstacles of remote teaching. Thankfully, eLEAP has provided various means to help us in preparing a comprehensive fully online teaching mode such as by providing an easy interface that enables student and lecturers to seamlessly navigate the relevant information, enhancing online learning experience. We hope that our experience and the simple guide that we have shared in this article can help our peers to prepare for their future online teaching and learning activities.

References

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