



Post-Pandemic Innovations in EFL Oral Communication: Bridging Challenges and Opportunities Through Actionable Strategies

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Abstract

This paper investigates the experiences of 54 Japanese EFL university students in online oral communication courses during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting both benefits and challenges. Positive results included improved confidence, fluency, and listening abilities; limitations such as limited participation and fewer speaking chances were highlighted. The results underline the importance of a student-centered curriculum that balances speaking and listening abilities, stimulates motivation, and offers a conducive learning environment. The study recommends including role-plays, real-life communication assignments, and hybrid learning models combining online and in-person formats to handle these challenges. Strategies for skill-building including goal setting, formative feedback, and methodical techniques, improve involvement and speaking ability. Using lessons from the pandemic, this study highlights practical improvements in curriculum design. Through hands-on, real-world activities and group projects, it promotes flexible, inclusive, and participatory teaching strategies, therefore preparing students for global communication issues.

Keywords: speaking, motivation, blended learning, hybrid learning, in-person learning

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 epidemic required a rapid change to online learning, therefore transforming conventional approaches to oral communication in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Online learning has presented difficulties with engagement, interaction, and skill development even while it offers more access and flexibility (Hrastinski, 2019). Citing gains in listening skills, motivation, and structured learning environments (Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008), several students have expressed pleasure with online oral communication classes. Others, on the other hand, have voiced worries about missed chances brought on by poor self-confidence, minimal speaking experience, and less involvement (Chen & Jang, 2010; Rapanta et al., 2020).

Designing successful hybrid or completely online oral communication courses depends on an awareness of these many points of view as educational institutions move to post-pandemic

learning environments (Bower et al., 2015). Examining students' perceptions of online oral communication courses, this study groups their responses into themes of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. It also looks at creative ideas that might help to overcome the difficulties and possibilities of online learning, therefore offering practical suggestions for raising student involvement and communicative competency in EFL settings (Means, Bakia, & Murphy, 2014).

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Online Learning and Development of Oral Communication

Globally, online learning has been embraced more and more with different effects on language acquisition and student participation. Well-designed, structured online learning environments can improve student involvement and comprehension (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). However, Hrastinski (2019) contends that online learning offers special difficulties, especially in encouraging interactive and spontaneous communication.

Rapanta et al. (2020) underline the need for teacher presence in online learning since real-time interaction guarantees active involvement in communication classes. Using interactive technologies including breakout rooms, real-time feedback, and peer conversations can help to keep engagement, according to Martin and Bolliger (2018). Means, Bakia, and Murphy (2014) contend, however, that the success of online learning—especially in language acquisition—is much influenced by student self-motivation.

New studies have explored how post-pandemic adjustments have continued to influence EFL classrooms. For instance, Zhang and Wang (2022) reported that hybrid teaching practices that blend synchronous and asynchronous speaking tasks have enhanced learner flexibility and engagement in university contexts. Lee (2023) also found that AI-enhanced online speaking tasks promoted student autonomy and oral fluency.

2.2 Engagement and Motivation in Online Language Learning

Learning a language depends much on engagement. Darby and Lang (2019) underline that an interesting learning environment can boost motivation in online environments. They further recommend incorporating gamification, interactive debates, and practical applications among several instructional approaches to increase student participation. In their research about the relationship between motivation and online learning, Chen and Jang (2010) argue that students who have well-defined learning goals usually do better in virtual environments.

New studies have highlighted the role of emotional factors such as digital anxiety and Zoom fatigue in limiting student participation. Torres (2023) observed that supportive virtual speaking environments, such as small-group breakout rooms and asynchronous video blogs, significantly improved student confidence and reduced speaking anxiety in Japanese EFL learners. Additionally, Kim and Jeong (2022) reported that gamification techniques like point systems and digital badges improved sustained engagement in online oral English tasks.

Due to the lack of in-person interaction, some students find difficulty with online communication classes even with their advantages. By providing both flexibility and real-time interaction, the blended learning model, which combines online and in-person instruction, might help to close this disparity (Hrastinski, 2019). Supporting this point of view, Bower et al. (2015) argue that hybrid approaches enable students to enjoy the advantages of both learning environments while reducing the negative effects of just online instruction.

3. Methods

3.1 Participants

A survey was conducted among 54 students majoring in English Communication at a university in Japan. Many of these students hope to have careers using their English skills. Of the 54 students, 31 were in their third year and 23 were in their fourth year. The gender breakdown was 28 males and 26 females. As for their levels of English proficiency, there were 2 at the beginner (introductory) level, 18 at the beginner level, 26 at the intermediate level, 4 at the upper intermediate level, 4 at the advanced level (near native), and none at the advanced level (native).

3.2 Survey Process

An online survey was administered using Google Forms to 54 students majoring in English Communication at a university in Japan. The survey aimed to capture students' perceptions of their online oral communication classes. The survey included a combination of multiple-choice, dropdown, Likert-scale, and open-ended questions. It collected demographic details, course information, and students' experiences with online tools, communication ease, satisfaction, confidence in speaking, and perceived loss of speaking opportunities. The survey was piloted internally to ensure clarity and relevance. Students completed the survey voluntarily during the final weeks of the academic semester. All responses were treated confidentially to encourage honest feedback. No personally identifiable information was collected. Participation had no bearing on students' grades or academic evaluation.

3.3 Analytical Methods

A mixed-methods approach was used to analyze survey data. Quantitative responses were processed using descriptive statistics, including frequency counts and percentage distributions, to determine levels of satisfaction across English proficiency groups. Students' satisfaction levels were then categorized into two groups—"satisfied" and "not satisfied." These categories were used to compare trends in learning outcomes and classroom experiences. Qualitative responses from open-ended items were subjected to thematic analysis. Recurring patterns were identified and coded using an inductive approach to reveal insights into students' motivations, frustrations, and suggestions for improvement. To enhance reliability, initial coding was reviewed collaboratively, and discrepancies were discussed and resolved. The findings were triangulated with the quantitative data to draw comprehensive conclusions and to inform actionable recommendations for curriculum design.

3.4 Text Refinement

Text refinement was assisted by the NGSL Profiler's Article Rewriter, ensuring lexical simplification and readability. The authors reviewed and edited all AI-assisted modifications for accuracy to maintain the integrity of the original content.

4. Results and Analysis

Students' satisfaction with their online oral communication classes varied. Half of the high-proficient students were satisfied. They liked the fluency and opportunities for conversation. One student said, "I could converse in English, and it felt nice to use English fluently." The other half were not satisfied. This is the response of one student: "I believed the course could have been better in improving students' communication skills."

Table1. Satisfaction with the communication skills acquired in an online class

	Not satisfied	Satisfied
Low n=20	10(50%)	10(50%)
Mid n=30	13(43%)	17(57%)
High n=4	2(50%)	2(50%)

Mid-proficient students had a higher satisfaction rate, which is 57%. They liked practicing speaking with English speakers, using learned vocabulary, and continuing to learn. This is evident in the response of one student, “When I talked with English speakers, I could speak more smoothly.” However, dissatisfied students struggled with self-initiated communication, grammar accuracy, and the online format’s lack of engagement. One student was frustrated because “I was unable to take action on my own.”

Low-proficient students were divided in their satisfaction. Some valued the flexibility and accessibility of online learning. This is evident in the comment of one student who said, “I feel that the quality of the learning opportunities I was given...was up to me.” Others felt the environment was not good for learning skills as seen in this feedback, “We couldn’t communicate directly and couldn’t hear the real voice.”

Half of the low-proficient students believed they did not miss out on communication skills. They said learning quality depended on individual effort. Others were uncertain. They noted difficulties in direct interaction and real-time communication.

4.1 Perceptions of Satisfied Students

The key themes identified by the students who were satisfied with their online oral communication classes were improvements in listening skills and motivation. Improvements in listening skills mean the enhancements made in students’ understanding of spoken English, such as different English dialects, ways of speech, and meanings in dialogues. Some students who were high-proficient level English speakers were happy with their progress in listening, particularly due to their strong English foundation. These learners actively participated in structured online listening exercises. Mid-proficient students were happy about the exposure to authentic live English conversations and discussions, as well as recorded materials, as this helped improve their comprehension skills. In the same way, low-proficient students also benefited from online learning because of the possibility of listening to recorded lessons repeatedly at their own pace.

Multiple factors influenced students' satisfaction with online oral communication classes, especially regarding the improvement of their listening skills. The availability of recorded lessons proved advantageous for mid- and low-proficient students, facilitating material review at their own pace and enhancing comprehension. Exposure to various accents and speech patterns via digital platforms like Zoom, Skype, and recorded audio enabled students to engage with a diverse array of English speakers, thereby enhancing their listening skills. Live interaction with instructors and peers proved especially beneficial for high-proficient students, facilitating real-time discussions and enhancing their listening and response strategies. Technical issues presented a challenge, particularly for low-proficient students who faced difficulties with internet connectivity, hindering their ability to hear clearly from teachers and classmates. Despite these challenges, structured listening activities and interactive components enhanced student satisfaction across various proficiency levels. Martin and Bolliger (2018) highlighted that enhanced exposure to native speakers and organized online activities may lead to improvements in listening comprehension.

Language acquisition depends much on motivation, particularly in an online context where student involvement can vary. High-proficient students reported great degrees of motivation

since they could actively participate in debates and significant conversations, therefore improving their communication abilities. Online lessons inspired mid-proficient students since they allowed them to concentrate on honing their speaking abilities free from the additional pressure of a physical classroom environment, thus increasing their comfort level of practicing English. Likewise, low-proficient students felt more motivated since the online environment helped them to participate with greater confidence by lowering their nervousness about presenting in front of peers. All things considered, regardless of their proficiency level, the adaptability and disciplined approach of online oral communication training helped to keep students inspired.

Particularly in terms of motivation, several factors helped students to be satisfied with online oral communication courses. Specifically for low-proficient students, a conducive learning environment proved helpful since engaging in online discussions from home helped to lower anxiety and promote more active participation. Maintaining motivation also depended on visual contact; seeing teachers and peers on Zoom fostered interactivity and kept drive. Some mid- and low-proficient students, however, lacked the natural flow of in-person interactions and felt less driven as they missed it. Conversely, as students who observed improvements felt more motivated to participate, a sense of development in speaking and listening abilities raised drive across all proficiency levels. Notwithstanding these advantages, several students—especially mid- and low-proficient students who depended on in-person contacts to remain engaged—reported a lack of classroom energy. While the lack of real-time, in-person communication remained a difficulty, overall elements, including a friendly environment and obvious development, helped to inspire students. These findings confirm Chen and Jang's (2010) assertion that online courses could enable students to practice English outside of the classroom, thereby fostering more self-directed learning.

Students' level of satisfaction is strongly influenced by highly regimented learning environments with a clear lesson plan of activities and ongoing teacher assistance. Students who had more experience at the high proficiency level valued the disciplined approach of online classes since it enabled them to move through courses effortlessly and make the best use of digital technologies. Students at the mid-proficiency level had different experiences; some believed the technical hurdles and demands of being self-learned seemed daunting, while others found the disciplined approach to enable a clear route of learning appealing. Low-proficient students valued the well-organized classroom environments in terms of the clear goals offered since they kept them on track in their education. All things considered, there was value in methodical lesson delivery based on student-proficiency levels. Beyond this, the ability of the learner to adjust to the digital format and control the expectation of self-directed learning will always determine the effectiveness of online learning.

Many factors affect students' level of satisfaction in the online oral communication programs' set learning environment. With students of all levels appreciating a well-organized course with planned discussions, structured presentations, and guided speaking activities, clear organization of courses emerged as a particularly positive element. A regular learning schedule helped low- and mid-proficient students relax; their ease in studying came from the consistent delivery of lessons. For mid- and low-proficient students, the utilization of visual aids and digital tools—that is, PowerPoint presentations, video recording, and interactive slides—was found to be quite helpful in making the lesson accessible and understood. Some high- and mid-proficient students, however, expressed a desire for more impromptu chats since they felt the regimented character of the online courses hampered natural interactions and added to a very stiff environment. The availability of the instructor influenced satisfaction levels; respondents who got regular feedback and help expressed optimism about the learning process, while those who found it difficult to get direct support claimed that the controlled environment was not

helpful. Although some students still experienced challenges with a lack of face-to-face meetings, a well-organized curriculum, together with consistent delivery and resource accessibility resulted in good student evaluations. These results confirm the claim made by Garrison and Vaughan (2008) that many students value a well-organized course of study, therefore helping them to progressively improve their communication abilities.

4.2 Perceptions of Dissatisfied Students

Most students who expressed dissatisfaction with online oral communication classes had several reasons such as lack of engaging or interactive methods. Online classes were, according to many students, not as engaging as face-to-face classes because of the absence of interactive elements and dynamic discussions. An example is high-proficient students, who considered the lessons too passive, with not enough interactive discussions to challenge the fluency with which they learn. Mid-proficient students, however, found themselves unable to engage with such lessons because of the absence of peer contact to make classes feel less boring or lacking in enthusiasm. The same feeling also goes for low-proficient students, who find it hard to stay focused because they are overwhelmed by the online nature of lessons and lack the confidence to participate. In summary, for students across all proficiency levels, limited interactivity and avenues for engagement restricted their learning experience during online oral communication classes.

Many factors, especially the lack of interactive components, contributed to students' dissatisfaction with online oral communication courses. Many students thought that courses were more lecture-based than interactive, therefore restricting their chances for active engagement, thus one-way communication was a frequent problem. Furthermore, adding to discontent was the absence of peer cooperation since students had fewer opportunities to participate in group projects, debates, and interactive discussions, therefore isolating the learning process. The low utilization of interesting digital tools was another important determinant; some students observed that gamification, breakout rooms, and group projects were not used much, therefore lowering the general interaction and engagement of the classes. For many of them, these problems made online learning seem more passive and less interesting. These findings complement those of Rapanta et al. (2020), who discovered that some students thought the online format lacked interesting activities, therefore rendering learning passive and less engaging.

A significant issue at all proficiency levels was the inadequate emphasis on speaking skills in online oral communication courses since instruction frequently prioritized passive abilities like listening and reading over active speaking practice. Students with high proficiency perceived a deficiency in speaking opportunities since the classes prioritized listening exercises and written assignments above interactive dialogue. Mid-proficient students articulated a desire for more structured speaking tasks, such as role-plays or presentations, which they felt to be deficient in the online format. Likewise, students with low proficiency expressed dissatisfaction, perceiving insufficient encouragement to speak, which often resulted in their silence owing to the fear of errors. Overall, students at all skill levels concurred that the absence of specific speaking opportunities hindered their capacity to cultivate fluency and confidence in oral communication.

Another factor that contributed to students' dissatisfaction was the lack of speaking evaluations. In a similar study conducted by Hrastinski's (2019), the findings also showed that students were dissatisfied with the online speaking class because the course focused more on reading and listening instead of speaking, recommending the utilization of regular speaking tests or practice activities to improve speaking skills more effectively.

Many students were dissatisfied with online oral communication classes because of low self-confidence in English. This was made worse by the virtual learning environment. Fear of speaking online was a significant issue, particularly for low-proficient learners. They felt more anxious about speaking online than in a physical classroom. The lack of direct face-to-face interactions made it difficult for students to feel confident. Additionally, limited teacher and peer support contributed to feelings of isolation. Students lacked the immediate feedback and encouragement necessary to build their speaking skills. Another key factor was the minimal availability of low-stakes speaking opportunities. The absence of these made it difficult for students to develop confidence over time. This further reinforced their hesitation to participate. Collectively, these factors made online learning less effective in helping students overcome their anxiety and develop oral communication skills. These results support the findings of Chen and Jang (2010) who indicate that many students reported feeling anxious or hesitant to speak in an online setting. They highlighted the need for confidence-building exercises and supportive feedback.

4.3 Actionable Strategies

To address the challenges in online oral communication classes, this study recommends role-plays, real-life communication tasks, and hybrid learning models that mix online and in-person formats. Strategies such as goal setting, feedback, and structured skill-building can increase engagement and oral proficiency. The following strategies are proposed to improve online oral communication instruction.

One strategy is to increase structured speaking opportunities. This can be done by integrating role-plays, debates, and structured discussion groups into the curriculum. Small-group breakout rooms can encourage peer interaction in a low-pressure environment. Peer teaching methods can help students to take turns leading discussions to build confidence. These approaches provide consistent speaking practice, helping students improve fluency.

Student engagement and motivation can be improved by using gamification techniques such as points, leaderboards, and challenges. These can encourage participation. Goal-setting and self-assessment activities help students track their progress. Collaborative learning projects, such as podcasts and storytelling tasks, make learning more interactive. These strategies can create an engaging learning environment.

To improve nonverbal communication, students should use intonation, pauses, and emphasis. This can compensate for the lack of physical gestures. Turning on cameras and maintaining eye contact can improve online presence. Virtual backgrounds and visual cues can also help. These strategies can help students communicate more effectively, despite the limitations of digital platforms.

Addressing technical issues is crucial. Providing asynchronous resources ensures that students with unstable internet connections can access materials. Teaching basic troubleshooting skills and offering low-bandwidth alternatives can reduce frustration and ensure equal access to learning materials.

Building speaking confidence is also important. Low-stakes speaking activities can help students build confidence before high-stakes assessments. Positive reinforcement and personalized feedback can encourage participation. Self-recorded speech assignments allow students to reflect on their speaking progress. These methods can help students develop confidence in spoken English.

A hybrid learning model can enhance communication. It combines in-person and online sessions to provide structured practice and real-time engagement. A flipped classroom model

can be highly effective. Cross-cultural virtual exchanges can allow students to communicate with peers from different countries. This maximizes student engagement and communication opportunities.

Fostering a supportive online learning environment is essential. Group activities can create a sense of community. Regular check-ins and open forums can provide students with opportunities to share challenges and seek support. Informal discussion spaces, such as virtual lounges and peer chatrooms, can allow students to engage in relaxed English conversations. This can help them feel more comfortable and increase their willingness to participate. These strategies can improve online oral communication instruction to increase student engagement and build confidence.

5. Conclusion

The move to online oral communication classes during the pandemic presented opportunities and challenges for EFL learners. Some students improved their listening skills, motivation, and appreciation for learning. Others had fewer speaking opportunities, low engagement, and confidence-related issues. Student satisfaction with online oral communication courses depended on factors such as access to interactive learning methods, peer collaboration, instructor support, and opportunities for meaningful communication practice.

Structured lessons, recorded materials, and diverse English-speaking environments contributed positively to learning. The lack of interactive methods, an overemphasis on passive skills, and insufficient opportunities for speaking practice hindered students' oral fluency. Additionally, students at all levels expressed concerns about low self-confidence, particularly due to reduced peer interactions and limited real-time feedback from instructors.

This study recommends strategies to bridge the challenges and opportunities in online oral communication. These include role-plays, real-life communication tasks, and hybrid learning models that combine online and in-person instruction. Other strategies include goal setting, feedback, gamification, and structured speaking practice to increase engagement and oral proficiency. Addressing technical issues, building student confidence, and fostering a supportive learning environment are also important.

Hybrid learning offers a promising solution by combining the flexibility of online education with the interactive benefits of in-person communication. The pandemic has shown the importance of adaptable, inclusive, and interactive teaching that supports EFL learners in an online setting and prepares them for real-world communication. These improvements will create a more engaging and effective oral communication curriculum that enhances students' language proficiency and communication confidence.

This study offers several implications for EFL instruction beyond the local university context. The effectiveness of hybrid learning models suggests their broader adoption in universities seeking to balance flexibility with communicative immersion. Schools can integrate structured online speaking opportunities alongside in-person sessions to enhance oral fluency and support students with diverse needs. Second, the use of gamified and goal-oriented tasks can benefit programs aiming to boost student engagement and motivation, particularly in asynchronous environments. Third, training EFL instructors in the use of digital tools, formative feedback strategies, and culturally responsive teaching methods will be critical in sustaining student confidence and participation. Finally, the emphasis on student-centered design—through confidence-building tasks, peer support mechanisms, and learner autonomy—has relevance for international exchange programs, online collaborations, and global classrooms where English is used as a medium of communication. These strategies can enhance communicative

competence and learner resilience in both emergency remote teaching and long-term curriculum reform.

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