An Exploratory Study of an Online English Class Taught Under the COVID-19 Pandemic. Student and Teacher Perspectives of a Bespoke Online Class, Created to Increase Learner Motivation, Collaboration, and Independent Learning.

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Abstract

With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, English teachers across the world were faced with the prospect of teaching their classes online, many for the first time. This in turn led to the challenge of adapting or creating courses for the online environment without the benefit of experience to fall back on.

This research paper describes a piece of action research exploring the reactions of a group of Japanese university students to a *bespoke* online course. The course was designed specifically to work in the online learning environment and was produced with the aim of increasing students' motivation, their ability to collaborate and to learn independently. A more *traditional*, textbook-based course was also taught online to the same group of students and so opinions were canvassed on this as well. This course was taught in largely the same manner that it would have been in a regular, bricks-and-mortar classroom. Although this is more of an exploratory study than a piece of comparative research, comparisons between the two courses have been made where relevant.

Students were surveyed at the beginning and the end of the course to determine the extent to which they enjoyed each course, their perception of the ability to collaborate, to learn English, their motivation, time spent in front of a screen and several other factors. Alongside this. the teacher as an active participant observed and also reported his findings to provide additional qualitative context to the observations and experiences of the students.

Students indicated a clear preference for the online bespoke course. It was evident from their qualitative feedback that they enjoyed making the presentations and learning presentation skills, having a lot of chance to speak English, and developing topic-specific and complex vocabulary. They also found the online course to be both collaborative and motivating. However, at the same time there was an overall consensus that this new course resulted in less English being learned, compared to the traditional course.

Introduction

The Coronavirus pandemic arrived in Japan during the middle of January 2020 and, although it was several months before case numbers began to rise in earnest, many universities including the author's moved all classes online for the first half of the academic year (April to August). Online learning had not typically been used in Japanese university education prior to the pandemic so this represented a significant challenge for teachers and students. As case numbers continued to rise, a decision was made for many classes to remain online for the second half of the academic year (September to January), including the two classes subject to this study. This research builds upon the author's previous early exploration of online teaching during the Coronavirus pandemic (Legge, 2021).

The author tentatively established in his earlier research some value in using the online teaching environment as both a starting point and a key feature of lesson planning and creation, as opposed to merely adapting more traditional offline resources. In particular, it showed the benefits of a more collaborative online learning approach. As a result, a decision was made to explore these ideas further as a piece of action research. The author was responsible for teaching the same group of students two courses per week and so a plan was made to convert one of the two classes into a more bespoke online offering, using the lessons learned in the previous research to create a new semester-long course.

The other class was to be taught in a more "traditional" way. Primarily, this course continued to use the textbook and attempted to closely approximate the physical classroom environment online. In this context, *traditional* equates to a class taught broadly in accordance with the Presentation, Practice Production (PPP) method, a lesson format often used in the CELTA (Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) training method (Howard 2010) under which the author was trained. Harmer (2001 p82) referred to the PPP method as the "*main default model for teaching new language forms*".

Given the relative success of the more bespoke online approach I had previously implemented (Legge 2021) it was tempting to change both courses. There were two reasons why a decision was made not to do so. Firstly, the positive response from this approach seen in the first research note was based on one isolated class and, thus, the evidence to support the change was limited. It was decided that changing an entire online teaching approach on the basis of such limited experience seemed overly risky and so a more cautious bespoke/traditional course split was decided upon. It was also considered that having two different types of course might add some much-needed variety.

Secondly, there was still a large amount of IELTS material and practice to cover and following the textbook represented an efficient, predictable, and 'safe' way in which to do this, even though it was feared that classes might become less collaborative and less interesting, especially towards the end of the semester. Although previous experience had suggested that students

might not necessarily enjoy these classes as much, there was the reassurance that they would at least be exposed to the elements of the test and chances to practice them in sufficient quantity. It was therefore decided that one of the courses would continue to be taught in a more 'traditional' way.

Japanese Students

It goes without saying that there is no such thing as a standard *Japanese* student and that each has his/her own attributes and approach to learning. Nevertheless, it is worth acknowledging the perception by some that Japanese students, or at least those that have had a "typical" Japanese education, may not be well versed in critical or reflective thinking (Suzuki 2002). Swan and Smith (2001) for example have observed that "'*What do you think of…?' discussions can be full of long and painful silences.*" (p. 309). Whilst some, such as Holliday (2005), might argue that these viewpoints can be reductionist, culturist or even colonialist in nature, it has certainly been the author's observation that these described traits, although certainly not universal, are often evident in students written and spoken activities in class.

Japanese students are also mostly used to a classroom environment in which the teacher dominates, with students themselves taking a much more passive role, answering questions when asked but otherwise acting as note-takers. Swan and Smith (2001 p.309) argue that an English learning environment based on communication and collaboration may make students feel uncomfortable, at least initially.

The magnitude of the task of learning a foreign language is generally considered to be greater the more distant（lexically, grammatically, culturally, functionally）it is from the native language of the user（Corder 1979）. Since the English language and the Japanese language are distant from one another, it is widely accepted that Japanese students find English to be difficult to learn（Swan and Smith, 2001 p.296）.

Another challenge is that, despite the almost ubiquitous mantra of English teachers in Japan towards their students that it is *"ok to make mistakes"*, many still find the prospect of saying something incorrect or irregular to be more embarrassing than saying nothing at all. As a result, silent students are a recurring issue（Swan and Smith, 2001 p. 309）. It has been my experience that students can be slowly encouraged out of a reticence to speak and contribute to classes, but this takes time and requires an open and collaborative atmosphere in the classroom to be created, built on mutual respect and trust.

Literature Review

Defining Online Study

There is a rapidly growing corpus of literature pertaining to online study, notably since the onset of the global pandemic, and it would be remiss of this paper to seek to cover all elements of it in detail. At the same time, the term *online learning* is a broad one and, especially given the massive increase in classes taking place online under the pandemic, seems increas-

ingly insufficient to explain the broad gamut of approaches that individual educators have taken to it.

As a result, it is perhaps helpful to break down the concept of online learning a little further. A useful starting point is to look at the main types of online learning. Ryan (2001) opted to categorize online learning into three distinct areas: asynchronous independent study, asynchronous interactive study, and simultaneous/synchronous interactive study. Online Zoom classes, as featured in this study, would be classed as synchronous and interactive, since students take part at a pre-determined time and study in pairs or small groups.

A New Environment, Stress, and Isolation

Despite their differences, both classes in this paper represented a relatively new way of learning for teachers and students. Typically, university classes in Japan are offered synchronously and in-person (Jung & Suzuki 2006) and attendance in class is both recorded and credited in students' grades. In these classes, the teacher often plays the predominant role and students learn passively, a feature which it has been argued is "preferred by many [Japanese] learners" (Jung, Kudo and Choi 2012 p. 3).

Stress may result from a lack of familiarity with technical tools. Al-Fudail & Meller (2008) termed this type of stress "techno-stress" and intimated that it could apply to both students and teachers alike. However, since both students and the teacher had had at least one semester of learning online

through the Zoom platform, it is possible that this stress would have been mitigated by experience.

Brown (1996) wrote about the impact that physical distance can have on students and how it can lead to learner isolation in his study of off-campus students who dropped out of further education. Hara (2000) discussed this learner isolation in terms of frustration and confusion stemming from a perceived inability to communicate with faculty members, confusion over instructions or a difficulty in finding information about courses.

Screen Time

It is evident that the move to online teaching under the pandemic resulted in a huge increase in the amount of time spent Japanese university students were spending in front of a screen. It is often stated that spending too much time in front of a screen can lead to increased stress amongst students (Ge et al. 2020). An increase in screen time has also been shown to create additional health risks such as poor sleep (Lissak, 2018) and greater progression of myopia (Wong et al., 2021).

Collaboration

In my previous research note (Legge, 2021), the characterization put forward by Dillenbourg and Schneider (1995) of group work falling into two distinct categories, *collaborative* and *cooperative* was discussed. Collaborative learning involves students actively working together on a task, each

contributing towards a shared goal. Cooperative learning on the other hand involves the splitting up of tasks between students and, to a certain extent, students working to achieve their share independently.

There are numerous benefits of a collaborative environment for students. Henri and Rigault (1996) argued that it leads to greater student autonomy since students can ask each other for help as opposed to relying on the teacher. Pressley & McCormick (1995) similarly concluded that collaboration results in more verbal interaction amongst students, especially where the teacher takes less of an active role in the lesson.

Richardson and Swan (2003 p. 69) argue that the online environment can indeed be instrumental in this as it enables the teacher to take a step back more easily and act as a facilitator, allowing the students to take charge of their own learning. This gives students the opportunity to work more closely together and develop stronger bonds as a result. Bray, Aoki & Dlugosh (2008) found this to be of particular importance to Japanese distance learners.

Despite the clear benefits of a collaborative environment, Jung, Kudo & Choi (2012) raised the issue that an expectation to collaborate can also be stressful, particularly in an online environment where it may be more difficult to ascertain that co-collaborators are doing their fair share of the task. Equally, they argued that this may be exacerbated by the notion that interpersonal relationships develop more slowly online, and students may take longer to trust each other.

Motivation

In Legge's previous research note (2021), motivation was discussed through the framework of Dörnyei and Otto's Process Model of L2 Motivation (1998) and this model was instrumental in some ways in the design of the online bespoke course.

The first stage, the Preactional Phase, involved the setting of goals and Dean et al. (2012) suggest that doing so is important in ensuring that students can stay motivated and invested in their learning. The Actional Phase of Dörnyei and Otto's model requires tasks and subtasks to be generated in pursuit of the intentions and goals of the teacher and students. In this case, it comprised the adoption of a presentations-based model and a decision on which seven topics to include.

The Postactional Phase was represented by the evaluation of students and the creation of plans for students and teachers in the future. In practice this is difficult to carry out at the end of an online course, particularly if there are restrictions on end-of-semester examinations (Legge 2021). However, if *Postactional* can be taken to refer to evaluation and planning after individual activities and tasks (as opposed to at the end of the whole course) its relevance to an online course such as this can be seen. In fact, by undertaking evaluation and planning as the course takes place, it is possible to make changes that benefit both teacher and students in the remainder of the course.

Independent Learning and Research

Price et al. (2017) argue the importance of independent learning, especially in the development of online courses

"Online course development, particularly in the asynchronous mode, should epitomize independent learning, which should include opportunities for feedback, review, and reflection—all of which should resonate with the purpose." (p94)

Further to this, efforts were made to incorporate feedback, review, and reflection specifically into the online bespoke course as, without these, it is very difficult for students to learn independently. Shearer (2003) also argued that learner autonomy takes on a bigger role in online classes than would be the case in the traditional classroom.

One of the ways to increase learner autonomy is to require students to undertake tasks they perceived of as "difficult" or, rather, more difficult than they have perhaps been used to. This can be achieved through choosing topics of which students have little or no experience, in turn fostering a greater requirement for independent learning and research. Far from stifling students, it has been shown that the more complex topics can in fact enable students to perform better. (Locke and Latham, 1984).

Research Questions

There are three research questions that this paper seeks to address:

1) How did students perceive the two classes, in particular the bespoke online class?

2) How did I perceive the two classes, in particular the bespoke online class??

3) How can this feedback be used to inform future online teaching?

Research Method

The research took place over the course of a 15-week university semester. It was decided that data would be collected from students to be considered alongside my own observations as their teacher and the course creator.

I was responsible for two classes on consecutive days with the same group of students. These students were a group of Japanese undergraduates participating in a study abroad preparation program. All were studying for and planning to take the IELTS Academic English test. Both classes cover all four IELTS Academic skills and the same textbook is used for each.

The data from students came in the manner of two questionnaires. One was given to students towards the beginning of the course (Week 4) and the other just before the end (Week 14). The purpose of this was to get a snapshot of students' impressions at the start and to attempt to see how/if

this changed over time. This was particularly of interest given the author's previous study of motivation and the difficulty in measuring it as an evolving construct (Legge & Wagner, 2019)

Google Forms was utilised due to its simplicity and students' familiarity with the Google suite of tools in general. Google Forms is also often used by my university as a tool for canvassing opinions, preferences, and availability so it was deemed to be a good option. The questions were written in Japanese and checked and clarified with the kind help of a bilingual colleague. Although English classes were all-English, since the goal of the survey was to establish students' perspectives and canvass opinion, it was felt that conducting the questionnaire in their native language was likely to produce more reliable responses and reduce the amount of time taken to complete the survey.

Since I wanted to get survey responses from as many students as possible while, at the same time, not adding to their already heavy administrative burden, a decision was made that students would complete the questionnaires during class time. This necessitated a short and simple survey with 15 questions. Only the first question (*Which course did you prefer?*) asked students for additional qualitative clarification in the form of 5 sub questions.

While it would have been useful to ask additional qualitative questions throughout the survey, this would have resulted in the questionnaires taking up an excessive amount of class time and it was deemed to be unfair

on students. While taking the time to reflect on the courses in this way is likely a useful exercise in students' overall awareness about their English ability in general (Legge & Wagner, 2019), it was felt that students would not necessarily see completing the questionnaires as helping them with their IELTS preparation. As such, a short, streamlined questionnaire was developed, front-loading the qualitative, more time-consuming questions in order to avoid students getting bored or frustrated as the questionnaire wore on.

It is however worth pointing out that qualitative feedback in this research was not limited to the questionnaire responses of students. One of the benefits of conducting action research in this way is that it allowed me to closely observe the students, to talk to them and to draw conclusions as the course progressed. Every opportunity was taken to do this, and this qualitative feedback has been incorporated into the Teacher's Perspectives.

The Two Classes

Both classes were delivered using the Zoom videoconferencing application. Zoom was chosen for several reasons including but not limited to students' familiarity with it, its wide range of features, its ability to be used on different devices and the ability to use it free of charge.

Classes were 90 minutes each and took place at the same time on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. The same nine students were enrolled in each class. All were first year university students with an English level of between A2 and

B2 on the CEFR scale. All had been selected for and belonged to the university study abroad preparation program but were members of various departments (International Relations, Business, Economics and Social Studies).

It was decided that the Tuesday class[1] would follow the more traditional format, using the Cambridge University Press textbook, *Complete IELTS 4.0-5.0*. It would be classified as simultaneous/synchronous interactive study since it took place live in a virtual classroom using the Zoom videoconferencing application. The lessons would usually begin with a brief introduction to the topic, followed by some speaking practice in Breakout Rooms. This would often involve discussing pictures or asking and answering basic questions in pairs or small groups with the teacher monitoring by moving from room to room.

Having introduced the topic and practiced any relevant vocabulary, students would undertake Listening, Reading or Writing-centred activities, once again in pairs or small groups in breakout rooms. The teacher would advise on techniques, give feedback, and check answers. There would always be additional speaking questions related to the topic and the teacher would monitor this practice in breakout rooms, giving feedback and error correction in these rooms and feedback to the whole group on frequently occurring errors in the main room. Homework would be longer sets of Reading or Listening questions or full Writing tasks.

The Wednesday class[2] would take a completely different approach. Based on the findings of the previous research note (Legge, 2021), I sought to de-

velop a course based around what I perceived to be the positive and negative attributes of the online environment. It was felt that if I could dovetail the course as closely as possible with these observations, the students would get a more bespoke online experience instead of a course that had simply been adapted.

As a result, I tried to design a course that would introduce more independent or self-directed learning, more collaboration and more independent research. It was decided that a presentation-led format would achieve these objectives, whilst at the same time helping students to develop the necessary IELTS skills of Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking. This course would be synchronous in parts, but it also had elements of asynchronous independent study (students preparing their presentations by themselves) and asynchronous interactive study (students preparing their presentations together).

Students were required to deliver seven presentations, one every two weeks. On the other interim weeks, the presentation topic would be introduced, pairs or groups would be set, and students would be given an opportunity to ask questions before beginning to prepare by themselves and to conclude their preparation for homework. Zoom sessions would be held during these weeks although they would typically be short, taking only 15 or 20 minutes of the allotted 90-minute session. Students were given a great deal of autonomy as to how they wished to prepare for the presentation the following week. Some elected to continue using Zoom. Others preferred to use the social messaging application, Line. Others preferred to log off, work independently and then to reconvene later in the week.

The presentations would be 5-7 minutes in length and would be followed by a Question-and-Answer section of about the same length. Although questions were to be asked predominantly by the students themselves, the teacher would also ask questions of each group or pair. Homework for preparation weeks was simply to prepare and produce a PowerPoint for the upcoming presentation. For presentation weeks, homework took the form of an individual reflection on the presentation with three sections – 1) What I/we did well 2) What I/we did not so well 3) What I/we need to improve. These were submitted to the teacher each week and comments and feedback were given.

Although the planned IELTS textbook was no longer used for the Wednesday course explicitly, that is not to say that either it or IELTS preparation skills were disregarded. In reality, quite the opposite is true. Presentation topics were expressly chosen to give students a chance to develop vocabulary and language often encountered in the IELTS test. Furthermore, an emphasis was made on students presenting and analysing opinions and ideas in a logical manner. Extensive time was dedicated to Question and Answers at the end of presentations, representing an approximation of the IELTS speaking test.

In other words, the presentations course was designed to build not only students' language ability across all four IELTS Academic Test skills (Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking) but also their academic skills of research and presentation. Although IELTS was frequently referenced by the teacher, its relevance was usually implicit in tasks, especially when compared to

the other traditional IELTS class. Nevertheless, the core purpose of this course remained to prepare students for the IELTS test to help them to get a qualifying score to study abroad. As a result, the presentation topics were chosen specifically to facilitate this. Details can be seen in the table below:

Table 1

Online Bespoke Course Presentation Topics

Topic	Target IELTS Sections	Target IELTS Skills
1. *A Japanese Prefecture*	Speaking Task 1, Speaking Task 2	Description, selecting details, presenting an overall picture concisely
2. *The US Presidential Election*	Speaking Task 3, Reading	Vocabulary about politics, governments, initiatives, taking key messages from complex texts
3. *An Analysis of the Coronavirus Response of a Country*	Writing Task 1, Speaking Task 3, Reading	Examination and interpretation of data, giving opinions on the efficacy of initiatives, taking key messages from complex texts
4. *A Unique, Interesting or Inspiring YouTube Channel*	Speaking Task 2	Providing a detailed, informative, and interesting account of something you personally like
5. *A Social Problem and Solution in Japan*	Writing Task 2, Speaking Task 3	Discursive essay preparation, logical argument and reasoning, critically examining one's own culture/society
6. *Sales Pitch*	Speaking	Expressive language, persuasive language, tone, emphasis
7. *If our Class were the Government*	Speaking, Writing	Hypothetical situation training, conditionals, vocabulary about politics, governments, initiatives (Review of Topic 2)

Ethics

Permission to be part of the study was sought from students before the first questionnaires were given out and it was made clear that they were free to withdraw at any stage of the process under the BERA *Right to Withdraw* guidelines (BERA 2011 p6).

Students' names were not used and questionnaires were submitted anonymously. The students' English ability was deemed to be of a high enough level that this could be explained to them in English. Students were invited to ask questions after this explanation although none were asked.

Although the questionnaires were submitted digitally through Google Forms, physical printed copies were made for the purpose of easier analysis and annotation. These were only seen by the author and did not include any name or student data. These will be securely disposed of on publication of this research paper.

Results and Analysis

Since an identical questionnaire was given to the students early in the course (Week 4) and at the end of the course (Week 14), the results for both are displayed below side by side. The questionnaire responses compiled below basically fall into three different types. As previously mentioned, the first type, Question 1, comprised an overall preference indication with five follow up questions (denoted in this paper as i/ii/iii/iv/v and provided in full below) to offer further qualitative insight. This will be discussed below under the subheading Section A.

Subsequently, Questions 2 to 6 once again asked students to indicate a course preference, but this type of question did not ask for additional qualitative clarification. These questions will be discussed below under the subheading Section B. In the final type of questions (Questions 7 to 15) stu-

dents were asked to respond to statements on a Likert scale. These scores were then converted into averages for ease of comparison. These will be discussed below under the subheading Section C.

Teacher observations and perceptions are included under several of the sections below. In most cases the students' responses closely resemble what I observed as their teacher and thus for brevity I have not included additional commentary from my observations in such cases unless I feel there is something particularly worth highlighting. However, there are several areas in which my impressions and those of the students diverge, sometimes considerably. In such cases I have endeavoured to offer a plausible explanation. In doing so I have been conscious of a desire to avoid speaking for students or second-guessing them but rather, to offer an alternative perception. As their teacher, this is based on an interpretive constructive perspective and must therefore be considered through the lens of my own background and experiences (Creswell 2003).

Section A

Table 2

Q1. Which course did you prefer? (*n=9*)

	Week 4	Week 14
TRADITIONAL	2	2
ONLINE BESPOKE	3	6
BOTH THE SAME	4	1

Week 4

Initially, there appears to have been little difference in students' course preferences, with a relatively even split across all three possible responses at the Week 4 mark. Further context for these figures can be found in the students' responses to the follow-up questions attached to Question 1. These questions were as follows (translated from the Japanese)

i) Why do/did you prefer [TRADITIONAL/ONLINE BESPOKE/ BOTH THE SAME]?

ii) What do/did you like about the [TRADITIONAL] course?

iii) What do/did you not like about the [TRADITIONAL] course?

iv) What do/did you like about the [ONLINE BESPOKE] course?

v) What do/did you not like about the [ONLINE BESPOKE] course?

The two students who preferred the traditional course did so for different reasons. One felt that it enabled him/her to specifically study towards the IELTS test whereas the other found that the preparation time for the presentations course took too long. Interestingly, one of the students who preferred the online bespoke course also mentioned that preparation took a considerable amount of time but that the ability to research and learn about new things by him/herself was fun. Another who preferred the online course said that presentations were a good way to study English and learn about the topics themselves at the same time (プレゼンテーションは英語の勉強にもなるし，それぞれの分野についても勉強できるから). The final

students to prefer the online bespoke course felt that it offered greater opportunity to practice speaking（*SPEAKING のほうが比較的得意だから*）

A variety of different responses were offered to Question ii. Several referred to the opportunity the course gave for building interpersonal relationships through speaking exercises. Of these, one mentioned sharing ideas and opinions（クラスメイトと答えを確認し合うったり，意見を交換することが好きです），others spoke about the importance of speaking together in groups（一番好きなのはグループの英語の会話です）. Interestingly, specific references were made to friends or friendship（ブレイクアウトルームで友人と英語で会話しているとき）. Despite it being a more explicitly IELTS course, only one student referred to IELTS in his/her answer（IELTS の問題を取り扱っているため，IELTS のテストのコツをつかむことができるので，その点がいいと思う）.

Six of the nine students claimed either not to have anything they disliked about the traditional course at this stage, or at least nothing specific（特にありません）. Of the others, one student said that he/she did not like Speaking and another said the same about Writing. No additional detail was given in either case. The remaining student said that he/she did not like Reading but only because of a perception that he/she was not good at it compared to other students and this made him/her feel bad for inconveniencing the rest of the group（リーディング，ただ単に苦手だからです。グループワークの時もリーディングは人よりできないから，答え合わせにならなくて申し訳ない気持ちになる）.

Students who liked the online bespoke course at this stage did so for a number of reasons. Some simply liked giving or practicing presentations（プレゼンを積極的にできるところが好きです）while others enjoyed collaborating with other students（他の生徒と共同作業で取り組むことができるため，楽しい）. One student spoke of the ability to use difficult vocabulary and natural English as well as how much feedback from the teacher was valued（発表の瞬間脳がフル回転している感覚が好きです。自然と文を喋っていたり難しい単語を使えた時も嬉しくなります。あとは，フィードバックでトムが褒めてくれるから頑張って良かったと思います）.

A similar number of students claimed to have no specific elements of the online bespoke course that they disliked（好きじゃないパートはありません）. Those who expressed dislikes framed them mainly in terms of the amount of time required for preparation outside of class（自分の予定なので仕方ないけれど，忙しい週はどうしても睡眠を削って課題をしなければいけないところです）. One final student referred to his/her own weakness, Q&A, being a source of displeasure（質疑応答が苦手なので好きではありません）.

Week 14

By the end of the course, preferences appeared to have shifted quite considerably with two thirds preferring the online bespoke course. The reasons for this preference were once again somewhat varied. Two mentioned that the course gave them a good opportunity to learn new vocabulary（知らない単語や知らない情報を知れるからです），（プレゼンテーションを英語で作ることで，そのトピックに関する新しいボキャブラリーが増えるため，楽しさを感じ

ました）, one mentioned that he/she liked the course because he/she likes speaking（スピーキングが好きだから）and two mentioned enjoying making presentations（プレゼンのスライドを作ることが好きだから）. Finally, and perhaps most interestingly or all, two students made specific reference to being able to apply the presentation skills they had learned in other lessons（プレゼンテーションをすることが楽しく, 準備をするときにほかの授業のプレゼンでも使えそうな技を知れたりしてためになっていることが実感しやすいから）, （自分で調べて, 自分で資料をまとめ, 発表するというやり方が, ほかの授業でプレゼンをやるときにも役立つから）.

The two students who preferred the traditional course both referred to its perceived relevance to their study abroad aims. One framed this in terms of the IELTS test saying it helped them to prepare for it（テストについてよく学べるため）whereas the other spoke of the course giving them the skills they would need to study abroad（留学についてのスキルアップができるから）.

In the responses to Question ii, students once again gave a wide variety of responses. Many referred to being able to practice Listening, Reading, or Speaking（no students mentioned Writing）although it is not clear whether this was in the specific context of IELTS or in English learning more generally. Two made specific reference to learning through the textbook（教科書を通して, 様々な物事を知ることができる事）, （教科書の問題について, クラスメイトと答えを共有し話し合うこと）, the latter in the context of being able to do so through speaking to other students. This collaboration with classmates was mentioned by another student who also wrote not only about enjoying speaking together but also the opportunity this presented for cul-

tural/social exchange（スピーキングの練習では，クラスメイトとと英語で話す機会があるので，クラスメイトと交流できる部分は好きです）.

Once again, a number of students failed to point out anything they specifically disliked about the traditional course. Of those who did so, three gave skill or IELTS section-based responses（Writing, Writing Task 2, Speaking）. There were two detailed responses, one of which referred to the student feeling like he/she did not have enough vocabulary to perform well in the class（語彙が足りなくて困ることがある）. The final student made reference to the difficulty in speaking online, although it is not immediately clear from their response as to whether this is referring to the student themselves or the structure and format of the course（オンラインでの講義だったので，発言したいときに出来なかった点です）.

The answers to what the students liked about the presentations course can be broadly split into four categories. Three of the students wrote about enjoying preparing for and doing the presentations（プレゼンをすること）. Two mentioned the ability to acquire new vocabulary（新しい難しい単語が学べること）. Three said that the course gave them an opportunity to learn about things they didn't know before（ペアになった人と，協力しながら作製しているうちに，今まで知らなかったことを知ることができること），which seems in this context to refer to content more than language. One student said that the course enabled him/her to see everyone's individuality（みんなの個性が見られること），suggesting an appreciation for the ability to be creative in the online bespoke course.

By the end of the course, more students were able to identify something specific that they didn't like about the online course, although 4 students did not. There were 2 students who suggested that the topics were heavy or difficult（プレゼンの課題が重たい課題だった時の準備）, necessitating a lot of preparation time. Another did not enjoy researching the presentations（プレゼンテーションの内容を調べること）while another found that there was too much technical topic-specific vocabulary（専門用語が多い時に, あまり理解できずに終わるところ）. Finally, one student found it difficult to contribute to the Q&A sessions as the group size was large（プレゼンテーションの後のディスカッションで, もう少し少人数の方が発言しやすい）. It is not clear if this is due to apprehension about speaking in front of a larger group or due to the sharing the speaking time with a greater number of students.

Teacher Perspective: The students' response to the main question reflects my observations in both Week 4 and Week 14. It was clear in the beginning that students were unfamiliar with the format of the online bespoke course, and many were new to giving presentations at all. It is therefore unsurprising that there would be quite a wide split of opinion about which course was preferable. By the end of the courses, the students did appear to be more positive and engaged in the online bespoke course. They were evidently researching the topics in depth and showed enthusiasm towards what they were presenting.

As far as the qualitative follow-up questions were concerned, it was interesting to hear that students had found the opportunity to make friends and collaborate in the traditional course to such a degree. I had certainly un-

derestimated the extent to which this would be possible in the traditional course. From observing interactions in breakout rooms, I would suggest that the tasks being undertaken were best described as cooperative as opposed to collaborative in many instances, especially towards the end of the course. Of course, it was only possible to be in one breakout room at a time and it is plausible that the presence of the teacher had an impact on what happened in breakout rooms.

I also witnessed students using new vocabulary throughout the online bespoke course, which was then reused subsequently both in this course and outside of it. This vocabulary was often high level, technical and topic specific. This was further supported by my observation and feedback from students, both during the course and in their questionnaire responses, that many of these topics were things that students were learning about for the first time.

Finally, the comments made by students about preparation time and the amount of homework are both representative of what I witnessed. Students were evidently putting in a great deal of work at home to prepare their presentation slides and the presentations themselves. It was apparent from an early stage that I had underestimated just how much time this would take them. Nevertheless, I did not observe any evidence of students getting fed up and putting in less effort as the course wore on. If anything, I would say the opposite was true. Students' presentations improved, they were longer, there was more evidence of students using notes as opposed to reading, there was more technical and complex vocabulary used and students' individuality was more evident towards the end of the course.

Section B

Table 3

Q2. Which course offered more Self-Directed Learning? (*n=9*)

	Week 4	Week 14
TRADITIONAL	5	4
ONLINE BESPOKE	2	4
BOTH THE SAME	2	1

Once again there is a moderate shift in perspective from the beginning of the course where a majority of students felt that the traditional textbook-based course offered more self-directed learning to the end where there is more of an even split. Since one of the purposes of offering the online be-spoke option was to increase self-directed learning, this would appear to be a positive development.

However, it should be noted that any conclusions one might draw from this would be somewhat rudimentary at best. Partly there is an issue of nomen-clature in that both the term *Self-Directed Learning* in English and the approximation 自己管理的学習 (*jikokanritekigakushu*) in Japanese, both of which were used in Question 2, may mean different things to different students or indeed nothing at all.

There are also limitations to how much simple ternary student responses can reveal about students' perceptions. This is borne out in the comparison with almost identical Likert-Scale question asked subsequently (Question 13). The somewhat contradictory nature of this pair of responses neces-

sitates additional caution in inferring any conclusions in this regard. Were it to have been practically possible, further qualitative investigation of the initial findings here would have been beneficial.

Teacher Perspective: I found the results here to be quite surprising. My understanding of self-directed learning is that it involves students having greater autonomy and control over what and how they want to study. There is no doubt in my mind that students had greater freedom to pursue their own ideas and themes in the online bespoke course compared with the traditional textbook course and this is what I observed. It might be that students equate self-directed learning to be giving one's opinions and ideas, in which case the opinion and idea based IELTS Speaking and Writing questions in the textbook might have given them a narrow (and perhaps comfortable) framework in which to do that.

Table 4

Q3. Which course offered more Student Collaboration? (n=9)

	Week 4	**Week 14**
TRADITIONAL	1	2
ONLINE BESPOKE	7	6
BOTH THE SAME	1	1

Another aim of the introduction of the online bespoke program was to build greater student collaboration into the online experience. As such it is reassuring to see a large degree of consensus as to the more collaborative nature of the online bespoke course both at the beginning and at the end.

Teacher's Perspective: It was evident from watching students' presentations that they many had worked closely with their partner and in an effective manner. Students talked about problem solving together in some of their homework tasks and how they helped each other. Presentations were often delivered smoothly, suggesting that students had thought carefully about how presentation time was to be split amongst them and which student would take on which role.

Table 5

Q4. Which course motivated you more?（n=9）

	Week 4	Week 14
TRADITIONAL	3	3
ONLINE BESPOKE	5	5
BOTH THE SAME	1	1

Both at the beginning and at the end of the course, a small majority of the students felt more motivated by the online bespoke course.

Teacher's Perspective: Students seemed to be more positive and engaged in the online course throughout the semester. It was evident how much time and effort they were putting into their presentations, in many cases beyond what had been asked of them. Although motivation is difficult to observe or measure, students certainly seemed to be motivated by the presentations course in particular.

Table 6

Q5. Which course helped you improve your English more? (*n=9*)

	Week 4	Week 14
TRADITIONAL	3	7
ONLINE BESPOKE	3	0
BOTH THE SAME	3	2

Despite a perfectly even split at the beginning of the course, the shift in perception that had occurred by the end of the course is particularly striking. Not one student felt that the online bespoke course offered the most English improvement. Indeed, the vast majority felt that the traditional course did so.

Given that, at the same time, 6 out of the 9 students claimed to prefer the online bespoke course, it is hard not to draw the conclusion that, for students, improving English was not the number one priority, at least in terms of what they liked and disliked.

Teacher Perspective: This is an area where my observations and those of the students diverge significantly. I witnessed students in the online bespoke course producing language at a much higher level than in the traditional course. Much of this vocabulary was used subsequently in speaking and writing activities outside the presentations course. Students also spoke considerably more on average in the presentations course.

One possible explanation for this divergent opinion is that students perceived the textbook course to fit better with their own concept of learning. Certain-

ly, a course with a textbook where exercises are completed and checked, and where steady progress is made through the pages is a practice that they are familiar with. It is also one that in most cases has represented the vast majority of their language learning to date. Therefore, if my contention that students learned more English (or at least as much) in the presentations course is in any way correct, it is clear that there is a significant perception gap between teacher and students. It is important that students feel like they are learning and so any future attempts to follow a nonstandard course design in future must also be able to demonstrate this to students.

Table 7

Q6. Which course helped you to get to know your classmates better? (n=9)

	Week 4	Week 14
TRADITIONAL	2	1
ONLINE BESPOKE	4	6
BOTH THE SAME	3	2

The answers to this question would appear to indicate a strong perception that the online bespoke offering allowed students more opportunity to get to know each other, at least by the end of the course. It is perhaps the case, however, that the distinction between responses in Week 14 is not quite as evident as it might originally appear. The data in this question is in fact contradicted in students' responses to Question 14 so it would be remiss to seek to draw conclusions on the basis of this question alone.

Teacher's Perspective: Students on the online bespoke course spent more time working together in smaller groups. This extended time together

likely allowed them to get to know each other better. Groups were assigned in such a way that students worked with different partners each week.

Section C

For this section average scores were created by multiplying the number of responses by a numerical representation of each possible answer. These numbers represented a score on a scale from 1 ("Completely Disagree") up to 5 ("Strongly Agree"). A higher number thus equates to stronger agreement with the statement.

Table 8

Q7. I spent too long in front of my computer screen (n=9)

	Week 4	Week 14
TRADITIONAL	3.44	3.0
ONLINE BESPOKE	3.22	3.78

Student responses were all towards the middle of the scale for this question suggesting that they did not feel particularly strongly either way. It does appear that students felt the traditional course had more screen time in the beginning of the course but that the roles were reversed by the end. One of the reasons for this could have been the increasing complexity of topics in the online bespoke course, perhaps necessitating more research and preparation time in front of the screen. At the same time, it should be noted that neither change is particularly large so, although the students' preferences have switched, both courses appear to have had similar amounts of screen time.

Teacher Perspective: Given that one of the aims of the online bespoke course was to reduce screen time, it is disappointing to see that students perceived this course as failing to meet that objective. In fact, it was also my observation that students were clearly spending a lot of time preparing their PowerPoint presentations and collaborating remotely, so it is unsurprising to see the students reporting in this way. A change of approach is needed in future if screen time is to be reduced.

Table 9

Q8. There was too much homework（n=9）

	Week 4	Week 14
TRADITIONAL	2.78	2.56
ONLINE BESPOKE	2.56	2.89

Again, student responses suggest a reversal in perceptions about the amount of homework for each course, although once again the changes are very slight and certainly could be due to natural response variation. If indeed there is a change, one reason for this could be a perceived increase in the complexity of the presentation topics as the course progressed.

Table 10

Q9. The teacher talked too much（n=9）

	Week 4	Week 14
TRADITIONAL	1.33	2.22
ONLINE BESPOKE	1.44	2.33

Figures for both courses were very low, at least at the beginning of the course. This is perhaps indicative of a student-centred learning environ-

ment where the teacher acts as a facilitator and allows students space to be creative and collaborate. It is interesting to see that students also had this perception of the traditional course. There was quite a large increase in perceptions of the teacher talking too much by the end of the course, although students still disagreed with the statement in general.

Teacher perspective: Whilst the response averages remain low, it was disconcerting to see a growing perception of the teacher talking too much in both courses. This might have been due to materials and content becoming more complex and perhaps requiring more teacher input, or possibly learner fatigue in some students resulting in a more passive approach to learning.

Table 11

Q10. There was enough speaking practice time（n=9）

	Week 4	Week 14
TRADITIONAL	4.33	4.22
ONLINE BESPOKE	4.67	4.11

Students on the whole were very strongly in agreement that the classes provided them with enough speaking practice and, although agreement did drop slightly over the course of the semester, it remained high throughout.

Teacher Perspective: I don't believe there to have been any less speaking practice time offered to students in either course at the end compared to the beginning. One possible explanation for this small fall in agreement in Week 14 is that the materials and content of both courses became more difficult as the course progressed. For some of the weaker students, it may

have been the case that they found the course content too difficult towards the end and thus were less able to engage with it, reducing their speaking time as a result.

Table 12

Q11. The course was boring（n=9）

	Week 4	Week 14
TRADITIONAL	1.44	1.56
ONLINE BESPOKE	1.44	1.56

Equally the students evidently did not find the courses to be boring and this perception remained until the end of the semester.

Table 13

Q12. The course gave me a chance to think creatively（n=9）

	Week 4	Week 14
TRADITIONAL	3.67	4.11
ONLINE BESPOKE	4.67	4.44

Both courses evidently gave students plenty of opportunity to be creative, with the online bespoke course scoring particularly highly in the beginning, perhaps because the high level of independence given was new to some students. It is interesting that, while the perception of the online bespoke course remained relatively constant, there was a noticeable increase in students' perception of creative possibility in the traditional course.

Teacher's Perspective: One reason for this might have been students becoming more comfortable with the types of question in the IELTS test, in

particular in the Speaking and Writing sections, allowing them greater ability to share and develop their own ideas and opinions.

Table 14

Q13. The course gave me lots of self-directed learning（n=9）

	Week 4	**Week 14**
TRADITIONAL	3.89	3.44
ONLINE BESPOKE	4.22	3.89

There was strong agreement in Week 4 that the courses offered plenty of opportunity for self-directed learning and this remained strong until the end of the course, although both figures fell. It is worth noting that the figures for Week 4 somewhat contradict the responses given to Question 2, intimating that care should be given not to draw too specific conclusions. One might, however, tentatively suggest that there both courses seemed to have plenty of self-directed learning for students. The qualitative responses to Question 1 also gave evidence to support this assertion.

Teacher's Perspective: Like the students, I also found more evidence of self-directed learning in the online bespoke course. Students had a large deal of autonomy and control over how to approach each topic and what elements of it to focus on. At the same time, I am surprised to students reporting a relatively large amount of self-directed learning in the textbook course. My impression was that students tended to be confined to quite linear exercises and activities with less room for autonomy and creativity. It is comforting to see that students still found opportunities for self-directed learning in spite of this.

Table 15

Q14. The course allowed me to get to know my classmates（*n=9*）

	Week 4	Week 14
TRADITIONAL	3.78	4.0
ONLINE BESPOKE	3.78	3.67

The data here somewhat contradicts data given elsewhere. The relatively weaker status of the online bespoke course in Week 14 is at odds with the responses to Question 6.

Teacher's Perspective: I would have expected students to report that the online bespoke course offered more chances to get to know their classmates, as was the case in their responses to Question 6. Certainly, they spent more time working in smaller groups in the presentations course. While the inconsistency in the data illustrates some of the limitations of using a relatively simple questionnaire, it does seem clear that students were in general agreement that both courses gave a good opportunity to get to know classmates. This was also borne out in some of the qualitative responses to Question 1.

Table 16

Q15. The course was fun（*n=9*）

	Week 4	Week 14
TRADITIONAL	3.89	3.89
ONLINE BESPOKE	4.33	3.67

Students clearly felt that both courses were fun at the beginning of the course and this perception remained throughout. Nevertheless, it is worth

noting that there was a considerable fall in the perception that the online bespoke course was fun, to the extent that it was considered to be very slightly less fun than the traditional course at the end of the semester.

Teacher's Perspective: For the presentations course, it is very possible that the presentation topics had an impact on the perception of fun. The first presentation topic, "A Japanese Prefecture" was a simple and light-hearted introduction to the lesson format and the fact that prefecture choices were generated at random introduced an interesting element of chance. The second topic (which took place just before questionnaires were distributed) The US Presidential Election was one of huge importance and interest. Furthermore, given their ages and the infrequency of US presidential elections coupled with an absence of political education in schools, it was likely the first time that many of the students had considered such a topic. Of course, it is also possible that the novelty of giving presentations wore off somewhat as the semester continued.

Limitations

Given the limited time available to dedicate to data collection from students, it seems clear that a wider corpus of qualitative data would have been desirable. From a positivist standpoint, it is clear that the number of students is too low to extrapolate sweeping or broad conclusions since there is not the range of responses that might be obtained from a larger group. There are also contradictions and inconsistencies in responses, which is to be expected with a small number of participants and from surveys taken weeks

apart. Nevertheless, the combination of students' responses and teacher observation do allow, I believe, for some interesting and illuminating ideas and theories to be explored and my role as an active participant researcher enabled me to observe actions and interactions that will shape my online teaching in the future.

At the same time, it is admittedly difficult to ascertain how much of a role the *bespoke* element of the Wednesday course plays. Though the course materials and design were chosen to fit with the teacher's understanding of the limitations and benefits of the online medium of instruction, it is of course possible that students simply preferred or disliked the course because it was a presentations course. Again, it is perhaps the more qualitative responses of students and the observations of the teacher that must be turned to in order to determine the likelihood of this. At the very least, it has been possible to develop a better understanding of what students did and did not like about the courses and this can bring about real, meaningful improvements to courses I design and/or teach in the future. To that end, the research has been of considerable value.

Conclusion

In response to the first research question, *How did students perceive the two classes, in particular the bespoke online class?*, it should be noted first of all that students preferred the online bespoke course. Students said that they were able to learn about topics that they had not considered before and to refine their presentation skills in the process. It introduced them to

complex, new, topic-specific vocabulary. Students also claimed that the online bespoke course in particular gave them a lot of opportunity to collaborate.

There was broad agreement that both courses allowed students plenty of opportunity to speak English and that they were enjoyable. Both courses gave students an opportunity to be creative and for self-directed learning. However, it was also evident that both courses resulted in too much time spent sitting in front of a screen.

Further to this, specific comments were made about the high amount of preparation and homework required for the presentations course, which evidently made some students enjoy it less. It is regrettable in many respects that some students felt additionally burdened in this way. Finally, the almost universal perception amongst students was that they were able to improve their English more in the traditional course, although this view is at odds with my own perception of the students.

The second research question explores how I perceive the two classes, once again with the focus being on the bespoke online offering. In principle, most of what I observed fits with the views expressed by students. I witnessed students in the online bespoke course using new vocabulary, collaborating, and vastly improving their presentation skills and performance in the Q&A sessions. In fact, I was consistently surprised by the high degree to which students engaged with their topics, conducted research and the levels of creativity and individuality that I witnessed in

their presentations. Further to this, it seemed that students were developing closer bonds with one another through collaborating together each week.

There was a downside to this - it was clear to me as the online bespoke course progressed how much work students were having to put into these presentations, especially as the topics became more difficult. It was clear that reducing the amount of screen time students experienced was not achieved in any way by the course redesign. In truth, regrettably, it appears that the new style course increased the amount of time in front of a computer.

As previously mentioned, there was one area where students' perceptions and my own diverged considerably. This was in the fact that students felt that they improved their English less in the online bespoke course when compared to the traditional option. This was not my impression at all. In fact, I witnessed a large increase in many students' vocabulary deriving from the presentations course. This new vocabulary was not simply seen in the presentations themselves but also in the Q&A sessions and, crucially, outside of the presentations class. This vocabulary was often topic-specific and complex.

I would also frequently hear students using this vocabulary and expressions learned in the presentation classes in the traditional class on Tuesdays and I would see even more examples of this in students' essays. Students' ability to answer IELTS Speaking Part 3 questions also improved markedly

in many cases, and it is my contention that the more complex material students were engaging with in the presentations course played a role in this.

The question is therefore why there is such a consensus amongst students that the traditional course enabled them to better improve their English. It is distinctly possible that the issue is in fact one of perception. Since the traditional course follows the style and approach that students are used to and uses a textbook, it may well be that there is a perception that this is solid, reliable proper learning. It may then follow that the online-bespoke course with a focus on research and delivering presentations seems to be lighter on English language content, at last in explicit terms.

The third research question asks how this feedback from students could be used to inform future online teaching and perhaps this issue of perception is a good place to start. Certainly, if I am to continue teaching parts of the IELTS English syllabus through another medium such as presentations, the English learning component within that must be made more explicitly clear to students. It is not enough for students to simply enjoy the course – they have to also feel like they are learning.

It does appear that more consideration should also be given to the amount of screen time students encounter, especially where that screen time occurs outside the classroom as homework. Although it is good in some respects for students to spend a lot of time studying and learning together, too much screen time and homework can be detrimental in a number of ways. Doing the presentation preparation under stricter time

controls in class would have been one way to achieve that, although doing so would have been at the expense of learner autonomy.

While independent learning was evidently experienced and observed by students on both courses, the presentations course did indeed give students more opportunity to be in charge of their own learning. Students were able to show their individuality and interests through how they approached topics. Their creativity was evident through their presentation slides and the manner in which they approached each presentation. Students showed a capacity to research, digest and present topics which they were learning about for the first time, without being explicitly told what to do by their teacher. Efforts should be made to retain this independent learning in future courses, wherever possible.

Finally, it seems clear that the ability to get to know other students and collaborate is widely valued amongst students and, thus, any future courses would do well to incorporate collaborative elements wherever possible. It is also evident that students in this context appreciate the chance to practice speaking and using English together and the ability to do so creatively and in partnership with others. These collaborative features should be maintained and expanded upon in future courses.

Notes

1) For the Tuesday class, the terms *traditional class* and *textbook class* will be used interchangeably.

2) For the Wednesday class, the terms *online bespoke class* and *presentations class* will be used interchangeably.

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