

Emergency Remote Teaching

—From Challenges to Improvements—

Michael STOCKWELL*

This is a reflection of the early challenges that teachers experienced in shifting from a planned face-to-face classroom teaching situation to a new remote online, synchronous language program during a pandemic that the world had not experienced in several generations. This paper will demonstrate that while mistakes were made during this disruptive period, and while a great deal of time and effort was expended in developing the program the end results have been an improvement in the language program that will be carried over to future years. From these early challenges, lessons were learned that would eventually lead to substantial improvements in pedagogy, classroom management, and authentic learning opportunities in 21st-century skills for both teachers and students.

Background

The story begins in early February 2020 when it became increasingly apparent that the beginning of the semester would be delayed. At this time, we were not overly concerned with how to teach remotely or researching learning management systems. From previous experience with other threats like SARS, there was the opinion that the most likely scenario would be a delay in the start of classes with the semester pushed into the middle of August. This would be inconvenient but doable.

However, colleagues from other universities were reporting that their universities were preparing for distant teaching for at least the first few weeks of the spring semester. We decided to prepare for what at the time was the worst-case situation. The Communicative English Program (CEP) team surveyed different Management Learning Systems to prepare for the possibility that we would teach our students off campus. We were at square one as evident by the lack of even a name to call this kind of teaching environment. It was around this time that we started to become familiar with some of the terms that would be common in the years that followed. Such terms as synchronous and asynchronous teaching, on-demand teaching, and emergency remote teaching. The CEP team struggled to find ways to teach our students that would be best for them, and which we could provide.

We narrowed the choice of LMS down to three alternatives. They were Google Classroom, a

* *School of Cross-Cultural Studies, Department of Foreign Studies*

Weebly-based website solution, and Microsoft Teams. Each LMS or website solution had advantages and disadvantages, however, after careful consideration, the CEP Team decided on the Microsoft Teams application. The main considerations for selecting Teams were:

1. Students had access to the software as part of Sugiyama University site licence.
2. In the first semester, students in the first year study the main applications of Microsoft Office 365.
3. Microsoft Office 365 is predominantly used in the private sector in Japan. Teams also has a significant market penetration in the Japanese business community.
4. The security level of the Teams application is also robust.

From that point, our effort went towards using Teams as the foundation for delivering our 69 synchronous classes in the Communicative English Program. The problem facing the CEP Team was that none of the full-time faculty had experience using Teams in an academic context. As we moved into learning the application, we started using Teams application for our program's internal communication. This extended into daily electronic messaging as well online, remote meetings. In March, the university decided on using Google Classroom as the main LMS, and the CEP classes were allowed to continue using Teams. The CEP Team also decided that we would use one main suite and not a hybrid of different applications. Discussion on this decision will follow in the section on lessons learned.

The initial challenges

The following section will detail some of the early challenges that the CEP team faced as we rushed to prepare for Emergency Remote Teaching. This term was quickly adopted throughout Japan as all levels of educational institutions prepared to teach remotely. The term is appropriate because most educators were not satisfied with the quality of the solution. However, we knew we were under the threat of the pandemic, and we had to do the best we could under the considerable limitations at the time.

a. Bootstrapping the technology

The first and greatest concern was that we were going to have to train students on how to use Teams while using the target application. We were very much trying to pull ourselves, students, as well as part-time teachers, up by the bootstraps. This common expression is appropriate in our situation in the sense of one of the original ways the term was used in the computer industry. An early citation for *bootstrapping* comes from the proceedings of the institute of radio engineers in 1953, where it referred to “loading a small amount of code which was then used to progressively load more complex code until the machine was ready for use.” This was exactly what we were trying to do. Regarding Teams, we started with basic tasks and move progressively to more complicated activities that would allow us to mirror the teaching environment of a foreign language classroom. To achieve this goal, we faced other daunting obstacles.

b. Initial research led us in the wrong direction

In 2018, the CEP Team started a student inventory exercise to allow the teachers in the program to obtain background information on students before we started the semester. Initially, the inventory was geared towards gauging students' attitudes and motivation toward learning English. However, there was also a part of the inventory that was adapted to ask questions about the technology that students had available to them. It also asked students to assess their ability to use these devices and software. This led us down the wrong path in our initial preparation for emergency remote teaching.

The picture we received from the inventory was that desktop / laptops were generally speaking not available to the majority of students. The primary source of technology was going to be smartphones. The number of iPhones of various models and ages was extremely high, however not universal for our incoming students. This was the beginning of one of our first mistakes in preparing for emergency remote teaching.

As we rushed to prepare tutorials, we spent a great deal of time preparing screen captures of our smartphones as well as for desktops. We also used different operating systems when needed. This more than doubled the work spent on giving support for students to use the basic features of Teams. All the while, we needed Teams to deliver and for students to use these tutorials.

Also, there was concern regarding students' mobile phone data plans. Teachers were concerned that one or two class activities could take up a significant portion of the monthly bandwidth that students had available to them. With daily classes from Monday to Friday, it was possible that students would not be able to participate in class activities after the first week due to a reduction in the speed of transmission of data and costs. The CEP team of teachers decided to gear our choice of software and tutorials on how to use them towards mobile devices. With a keen concern on the bandwidth demands placed on these mobile devices.

After the first week in May, we found that instead of using their mobile phones as their primary devices students were using laptop and desktop computers. Also, they were connected to home fiber optic linked internet connections with unlimited data plans. This was a problem because we limited our options in preparing software choices for our classes. In addition, we were reluctant in the beginning to have students download and upload large files and to use high bandwidth services using audio and video.

c. Technology problems

Right from the beginning of teaching remotely, we found three broad problem areas.

1. Students had trouble with their hardware. They were not aware of how to use laptops or desktops. Students had proficiency in using apps like Line on their smartphones, but limited experience using email or office-like apps on non-mobile devices.
2. Students had trouble with their internet connections. Either they were overloaded in the house or neighbourhood or had outdated connections. Students also did not know how to reset or restart their connections. Students were often dropping out of the class because of poor connectivity.
3. They lacked basic experience troubleshooting computer problems. For example, students

had to be contacted through classmates' Line apps to close applications down and restart their computers. Also, understandably students had trouble explaining what trouble they were experiencing.

4. Students had significant limitations on their hardware. Students were not able to operate the version of Teams that we were using in the CEP.
5. Student and teacher fatigue from taking part in three or more classes in a day while staring at a computer screen for the first time in their life.

The primary problem we had with implementing the online program in the beginning stages is that we didn't have the opportunity to do any in-person classes, on campus, to show students how to use their computers and the needed applications. Teams interface is rather unique and has a steep learning curve compared to other software that teachers and students would have experienced. This made it very difficult and slow going the first few weeks. This was compounded by classes being taught by teachers who had different levels of experience using this software.

Teachers also struggled with the Teams application as we were also learning other platforms like Google Classroom. Some of our adjunct faculty were using four or more platforms. Our students were also facing similar challenges in their other classes. At a minimum, they were using two LMS and two or more online teleconferencing applications like Teams, Zoom, Flip.com, and Google Classroom.

d. Socialization of our classrooms

Initial efforts were also negatively impacted by missteps in providing the environment for socialization within our classroom in the emergency remote context. In this paper, socialization refers to "people being able to mingle and establish connections on one or more levels. They speak with to one another; share ideas and information and confirm the connections made through an agreed upon means." (Irwin & Berge, 2006).

Without the opportunity to bring students together to meet each other face to face, we were required to attempt this while bootstrapping technology. This left us with a serious dilemma with which to tackle. Should we first focus on the technology skills, or the socialization needs of the classroom. In Stockwell (2017), Hubbard argues that students need to have technology skills scaffolded and given continued support during class. In the second year of the pandemic, this was possible as we started the spring semester face-to-face and were able to provide classroom support. Students were also able to help each other and call on the teacher when having technical problems. This kind of attention was difficult to provide in the first year when the classes were completely taught remotely.

Initially, in normal classroom contexts the first week of classes, we spent time with ice-breaker activities and mini-projects that encouraged small group collaboration and cooperation. However, we were constrained by computer problems, and a great deal of time troubleshooting these issues. Students were also reluctant to stay online with their video active. Several students complained about feeling anxious about this. The CEP team was directed to reduce the time students would

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have their video engaged during class time. Also, using Teams it was difficult to have small groups meet online with the Teams app. However, when students were in small groups, camera were typically off. Therefore, for several reasons, we had trouble with getting students to communicate with each other during class time.

The lesson learned is that socialization needs to be set by the teacher by developing the class culture. In hindsight we should have had cameras on, and microphones ready to interact in the classroom from the very beginning. By the fall semester, we also decided to use Zoom in all the classes. Zoom had substantial advantages with the ability to use breakout rooms and to monitor activity. The change to cameras-on rule and the opportunity to easily transfer to breakout rooms greatly improved the learning environment of the class. In the second year of the pandemic when we returned to the classroom interaction was much better. There are two primary reasons for this. First, students had four or five classes together to know each other. Secondly, our cameras-on, microphones ready greatly improved the class culture to actively participate in the synchronous classes.

In reflection, my biggest regret was prioritizing developing students proficiency with the required technology to the determinant of their socializing needs. By focusing first on the socialization aspect, we might have set a culture that was more inclusive and collaborative. In the second year of the pandemic, we were able to focus on this aspect from the beginning.

By the middle of the spring term, the atmosphere of the CEP classes started to be more like a language class. Many of the regular class activities that were developed over the years returned. It was during this time, we were not only able to make the classes mimic our normal face-to-face classes we began to improve important aspects of the class. The classes became to be more interactive as we were able to achieve a higher degree of blending of the best of face-to-face classes with educational-oriented technology. The final section will highlight some of the areas we were able to improve the program through blended learning.

Within the CEP, it was a long-term goal to have a greater portion of our curriculum following a blended learning approach. However, in previous years before the pandemic, we were only successful to a small degree by initiating a program-wide website. The limitation on adding a greater portion of blended learning was due to three key points.

1. Lack of a robust Wi-Fi system in the classrooms
2. No policy requiring students to bring a device to class.
3. The need to train teachers on the technology necessary for blended classes.

However, it was clear there was a need for some kind of LMS. This became apparent as the English Film Festival developed and we started handling mp4 files that were greater than 5 gigabytes. Also, we needed a system to handle all the data for assembling the EFF program. Therefore, when the disruption started from the pandemic it afforded us in the CEP the opportunity to implement a blended learning environment as we started with Emergency Remote teaching.

A benefit of moving towards blended learning environment was the increase in output by students. During a typical class held face-to-face students have limited opportunities for output. The

CEP program with its inherent student-centered approach does offer opportunities for output. However, it is still limited to pair-work and small group discussion. It is more difficult to give classes with 16 or more students each sufficient during a class. However, with blended learning and applications such as Flip we were able to greatly increase the amount of output each student was able to contribute to the class.

Tasks that were done previously independently were now being done and shared by using these apps that allowed the recording of both video and audio. The apps' ease of use made it straightforward to integrate into the program. Also, files were maintained and shared on the application's website. Students were able to upload and share their output with their teacher and classmates in a secure environment. Equally important, students were able to move data to the app's cloud thus freeing their devices. The amount of output in a class would quickly reach well into the hundreds of hours during the semester as students would watch and comment on classmates' contributions.

The benefits of increased output for learning a foreign language is discussed in Swain and Lapkin (1995) Comprehensible Output hypothesis. Swain states that by increasing output students can notice gaps in their linguistic ability. Students can see what they have mastered, partial knowledge or not capable of communicating. By noticing the gaps in what and how they use the target language, learners are able to develop their linguistic ability. Secondly, Swain continues that output allows learners to test out how they think about language learning. Swain refers to this as hypothesis testing. Lastly, there is a meta-linguistic function where learners can reflect on the content that they have previously learned and by trying to apply this knowledge to support their language acquisition.

Another benefit of blended learning in the CEP classrooms was how this output was generated compared to the face-to-face classroom. In the normal classroom, students seldom have time to language plan. However, with blended learning, students are given as much time as they need to produce the product for the task. This has an enormous benefit according to Ellis (2003), Ellis argues, that "when learners know what they are going to talk or write about they have more processing space available for formulating the language needed to express their ideas with the result that the quantity of the output will be enhanced and also fluency and complexity."

Another benefit for our students in the CEP is that the stress to provide language output can be reduced by giving students more time to language plan and having multiple attempts to produce an output product. One problem in the output hypothesis argued is that forced output which often occurs in the classrooms can raise the affective filter (Krashen, 1983) which is detrimental to language acquisition. Stress, anxiety, or shyness can hamper language acquisition by blocking comprehensible output. By giving students more time to formulate their output, a chance to rehearse, and make multiple attempts further enhances language acquisition. These multiple attempts at producing the product would also likely fit in with Swains' metalinguistic function that helps enhance language acquisition.

Another pedagogical benefit was that with a blended learning approach students were able to download the classroom materials and preview or review on-demand. Students were able to prepare

for classes that were challenging for them. In the first year of the Communicative Grammar class, students were able to download the material that was going to be used and preview the grammatical structure and vocabulary. It was hoped that this option would benefit lower-level students who needed the additional support. This ability to language plan before class would help scaffold output and input during the lesson. If the student didn't need the extra support classroom time was not wasted. This way, support was provided when needed. This kind of support was also available through tutorials on key concepts taught in the different CEP classes.

Additionally, students are often hesitant to interrupt a class to ask a question or to contribute to a discussion. Having a LMS allowed more channels for communication with classmates or the teacher. Students could make comments without disrupting the flow of the class. With blended learning, the class time goes beyond the bell to bell time, and students feel freer to contribute after the class has finished. To summarize, an LMS and a blended learning approach allow students the flexibility to take part in classroom activities by giving students different forms of interaction and asynchronous options.

There was always email, but this is often used sparingly. With an LMS, comments could be made in "chat" to the class, a comment on a post, or directly to the teacher. This was also evidently clear with Flipgrid where students would make contributions to three or more classmates every week. This was not always possible in a normal face-to-face class. However, with a blended approach, this level of interactivity can be maintained.

Classroom Management

Not surprisingly the pandemic and emergency remote teaching brought the need to initiate a learning management system. This brought a lot of advantages to the CEP program. Below is a list of some of the improvements that were made possible when all students and teachers were required to have and use computer devices daily.

1. One source and destination for content

When the LMS was initiated, we made all the files needed for the course available for students online through both the LMS and a dedicated CEP website. Students were able to access many of the materials that were used in the class. Also, the fact that file sizes are not limited like regular email made collections of assignments much easier for teachers.

2. Archiving of materials submitted by students and distributed by teachers

Assignments submitted were date stamped and stored on Teams. It was easy to archive material and confirm when materials were submitted. It also made it easier for teachers to provide feedback on assignments. In some cases, like in the writing class, we were able to shorten the cycle by allowing part-time and full-time teachers to give feedback during the week for assignments.

3. Grading and assessment integration with LMS

The LMS allowed for automatic grading for multiple-choice tests. Also, it was easier to grade papers as the papers were available from one site, and grades would be automatically recorded in

the grade book. Also, with one click, tests and grades could be returned to students. This improved the timeliness of the feedback by decreasing the time it took for students to receive feedback on assessment materials. The normal cycle would be at a minimum of one week.

4. Students were able to gain valuable, authentic experience using a popular management system that is used in the business community.

Efficiency

While it was always possible to reuse materials from previous years through reprinting files or using paper copies, LMS made it much easier to develop more complex multimodal materials that linked to a tutorial or authentic materials to either support or lead teacher instruction. The work spent on developing resources can be carried forward to subsequent years with a click of the mouse.

Also, LMS allowed a higher degree of collaboration between teachers. This also supported the coordinated system that is part of the CEP culture. Many of the teaching points could be collaboratively decided within the course team and distributed among the ten groups in the first year and the five groups in the second. With this approach, the content of the classes was held to a higher degree of consistency.

In conclusion, while the process of research and initiating emergency remote teaching was taxing to teachers and students the result has been a substantial improvement in the quality of the CEP. It is hoped that in the coming years the program continues to improve the blended learning aspects of the curriculum. It will be important that we continue to train our first-year students on blended learning so that we will be able to face challenges in the future. A good example happened recently when a large typhoon was predicted to strike the Chubu area. It would be a formidable solution to be able to keep students and teachers safe at home under safe conditions while they continue to study their courses remotely. Time will tell if we have learned the lessons that were taught to us with this Covid pandemic.

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