Online Student-centered Seamless Learning Course under the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: In this paper, we describe the case study on conducting online student-centered seamless Japanese language and culture learning course under the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan. The Blogger and a chat tool called InCircle were introduced to run an online Japanese language and culture class, which consisted of 7 international students during 2020 spring semester at the university in the western part of Japan. The result of the questionnaire survey implies that the Blogger and InCircle combined language and culture learning class was successful though it has a minor limitation. The use of InCircle as a means of live communication contributed to the successful online class. It would be a useful tool even after the end of COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, Japanese language learning, international students, online class, student-centered, seamless learning

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected various aspects of education in Japan. All the campuses in Japan had been closed after Emergency declaration issued in April, 2020. The university, which the first author belongs to, had decided that all the courses would be held online throughout 2020 spring semester. An online Japanese language and culture course for international students was conducted by the first author. Though the preparation time was not enough, it turned out that class was going well. The rest of this paper refers to how the class was conducted and the result of the questionnaire survey.

2. Backgrounds

2.1 Student-centered seamless learning

The term, "seamless learning" was referred by American College Personnel Association back in 1994. They stressed the importance of linking students' in-class and out-of-class experiences to create seamless learning and academic success (cited from Wong and Looi, 2011). Besides, student-centered learning has been drawn attention and it is reported that student-centered and small-scale course programs resulted in more academic success than lecture-based course program (Severiens, Meeuwisse & Born, 2015). In addition, numerous publications emphasize the importance of cultural understanding in foreign language learning (Schulz, 2007). Taking those things into account, the learning scenario was designed to realize a student-centered, seamless learning class emphasizing the learning of the cultural background of the language.

2.2 Blogger and InCircle combined language and culture learning class

2.2.1 Google Blogger

The blog was created for the students to upload and share what they have learned during their out-of-class learning. They could learn their classmates' knowledge on the Blog. The teacher picked out some topics and deepened the knowledge using InCircle to carry out seamless learning where students' out-of-class learning is entwined with their in-class learning.

2.2.2 InCircle

InCircle a, chat tool, is a product developed by AOS Mobile Inc., Tokyo, Japan with our second author joining this project as a chief software architect. Teacher created accounts for their students and made a group for class in advance. This tool was used mainly during real class time which was scheduled to be held on Tuesday, the 4th period.

3. Evaluation

3.1 The target class

The class was targeted for international students who were studying at the university in the western part of Japan. It consisted of 7 students (2 French, 1 Germans, 1 Finnish, 1 Greek, 1 Indonesian, 1 Uzbek). All the students' target language was Japanese. They were all owners of smartphones and PCs, so there was no difficulty for them to take online courses.

3.2 Learning Scenario

Figure 1 shows how out-of-class learning is entwined with in-class learning. Student A learned a Japanese word, "鳥居(torii=gate) " during her out-of-class learning and uploaded to Blog B. Students were supposed to do it as one of their home assignments. The teacher told them that the number of uploads affected their grades. The teacher picked out some useful topics to deepen their knowledge during class. She picked out "鳥居(torii=gate) ", which takes an important role in Japanese culture and explained more deeply about it on InCircle during class. The students autonomous out-of-class learning was entwined with their in-class learning. That way student-centered seamless language and culture learning was carried out.

Table 1. *The results of the 5-point-scale questionnaire*

	Questions	Mean	SD
Q.1	Was it fun to learn Japanese language and culture with our class Blog,"CallSpring2020ClassVocabularyBlog"	4.6	0.89
Q.2	Was it easy for you to handle Blog?	3.2	1.64
Q.3	Please rate its interface of Blog.	3.6	0.89
Q.4	You also learned Japanese language and culture via InCircle. Was it helpful?	4.6	0.89
Q.5	Was it easy for you to handle InCircle?	4.6	0.55
Q.6	Was it fun to learn Japanese language and culture via InCircle?	4.6	0.55
Q.7	Please rate its interface of InCircle.	4.6	0.55

Figure 1. Student-centered seamless learning.

3.3 Results

3.3.1 The Questionnaire Results

Table 1 shows the results of the five-point-scale-questionnaire on the usability of Blogger and InCircle, which was conducted at the end of the phase. The higher score, 4.6 was given when they were asked about InCircle (Q.4,5,6,7) than when asked about Blogger, which was created to carry out student-centered seamless learning. Student #3 felt Blogger was fussy and #5 felt it was confusing (cf. Table 2), but all the students' comments were positive on InCircle. Table 3 shows their comments on the merits and demerits of online class.

Table 2. *The students' free comments on InCircle and Blogger*

	Blogger	InCircle
Student #1	Although it was unusual in the beginning, i think it has it's benefits if students are frequently exposed to it's content	It was useful to talk about topics. It is also nice that one can always go back and check the chat-log for information again.
Student #2	It was really great learning with blog, since everything is structured and it is divided per date of post. However, it will be better if you give bullets for each point you want to announce since it's a bit confusing	Incircle is really interactive and fun! Plus, I can do it anywhere I want since it is a chat application.
Student #3	Fussy	It's a simple messaging app. I like simple.
Student #4	I used to study in traditional way with books, Blog was new for me	This way also was new for me and tried to cope with it
Student #5	It can be confusing sometimes, but it is very practical.	It is easy to learn about new topics, when everyone is participating in the conversations, offering their own experience. The best part is that you can always log in and read everything again in case you forgot.

Table 3. *The students' free comments on the merits and demerits of online class*

	Merits	Demerits
Student #1	It is quite convenient do be able to access and work on class related things from anywhere.	It might be easier to get distracted. It can create a lesser sense of urgency to complete assignments in time and result in procrastination.
Student #2	I think no, there is still benefit pushing for studying even in online method	No, the important thing is knowledge learned, but not the method
Student #3	we can do it anywhere, however we do not get the chance to presentate and interact face to face	A lot of people can skip classes whenever they want!
Student #4	There is no point to conducting this class in person, because we use computers anyway.	Lack of body language
Student #5	Easy access, more private, information and knowledge gathered in a place	Less personal

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Blogger was created to entwine their out-of-class learning with their in-class learning. However the questionnaire results revealed that Blogger site sometimes confused in terms of its interface. As Student #3 in Table 2 suggested, bullets points would help them look more organized. The use of InCircle as a communication tool contributed to the successful online class from the following reasons. It made it possible to conduct real-time online class for those who could attend class real-time as well as for those who could not attend class real-time. As Student #1 commented, "It is also nice that one can always go back and check the chat-log for information again" and Student #5 commented, "The best part is that you can always log in and read everything again in case you forgot. "(Table 2), it contributed to the learning reinforcement. As Student #2 commented: "Incircle is really interactive and fun!" (Table 2), real-time attending students interacted actively with other real-time attending students, which was in fact difficult to do the same thing in the face-to-face class since some students hesitate to express themselves in front of a large audience. On the other hand, As Student #1 commented in Table 3 "It might be easier to get distracted.", there were some limitations such as a difficulty for the teacher to grasp what they were actually doing in a virtual class and handfuls for the teacher to handle InCircle where students reacted different topics at the same time. With such limitations, it was still a very supportive tool to conduct real-time online class. As a conclusion, it would be a useful tool even after the end of COVID-19 pandemic.

Acknowledgements

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