

# Students' Perceptions of the Online Oral Communication Classes

## オンラインのオーラルコミュニケーションクラスに対する学習者の認識

Jonathan ALIPONGA\* Yasuko KOSHIYAMA\* Takuya SHIMIZU\* Patrick SHORB\*

### Abstract

This project was undertaken to examine university students' perceptions of online oral communication classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of this investigation reveal that online participants were divided as regards to their views on the ease of communication with other students and their teachers; their speaking confidence in and satisfaction of the online speaking classes; as well as feelings of lost opportunity to improve communication skills by taking such speaking classes online. Specifically, this study found that those who had negative views about their online speaking classes recognized that they did not try their best to accomplish the required tasks. This evidence suggests that researchers should be aware of student attitudes so as to find appropriate teaching and learning strategies to maximize student learning in online speaking classes. Another finding is that those who had positive views on online speaking classes believed that taking speaking classes online could be as interesting and beneficial as taking them in-person. These findings contribute to the growing literature on online foreign language instruction, specifically for speaking classes. The data provides valuable insights for instructors when creating and designing courses, emphasizing the importance of providing delivery options that meet the demands and needs of students.

\* Faculty of Global Communication, Researcher at the Research Institute for Education, Kansai University of International Studies

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic tested the resilience of language-learning in Japan. Foreign language classes such as English suddenly needed to be taught online on a massive scale, requiring both instructors and learners alike to adopt to unfamiliar technologies, all while still successfully motivating students to achieve their language-learning goals. This has led teachers to develop various online approaches to cater to the needs of students; and researchers have in turn responded by conducting studies evaluating the effectiveness of such methods. Although there is a growing amount of research on online instructions in Japan, less attention has been paid to creating effective and sustainable curriculum guides to enhance oral communication skills in the normalizing stage of the hybrid education era. Previous efforts have focused mainly on the issue of the learning effort and satisfaction associated with online formats. One study conducted by Ono et al. (2020), for example, focused on the relationship between online class-styles and Japanese college students' degree of fatigue in an English classroom during the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Later, Ono collaborated with Ismailov to conduct a qualitative study focusing on assignment design in English classes and its effects on Japanese college freshmen's motivation in L2 emergency online courses (Ismailov and Ono, 2021). Likewise, in a July 2021 study, MEXT randomly selected 3,000 university, graduate, and technical college students, and founds that more than half were generally satisfied with their online classes. However, it is not enough to know whether students were satisfied with online learning. Especially in language learning, there are various internal and external factors determining whether such learning has become successful. Especially in Japan, where Japanese students tend to have high anxiety about speaking in front of other students and taking risks (Koba et al., 2000), it is extremely challenging to motivate them to speak, especially low proficiency students. In contrast to past research, therefore, this study focuses on investigating the perceptions of students about the learning within their online speaking classes.

Unlike reading and writing, oral communications involves real-time, two-way communication between the speaker and the receiver. Apart from the speaker and the receiver, there are many elements involved in the process of communication (Nunan, 1989). These elements include a source, stimuli received from that source, a receiver, sensory receptors, the receiver's interpretation of and responses to the sensations, noise, feedback, and

situation or context. Combined, these components of communication make it seemingly challenging to teach face-to-face, let alone remotely. Our study, specifically, sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the participants' perceptions of the ease of communication with other students using the online communication tools in online speaking classes?
2. What are the participants' perceptions of the ease of communication with teachers using the online communication tools in online speaking classes?
3. What is the participants' speaking confidence using the online communication tools in online speaking classes?
4. What are the participants' satisfaction with communication skills acquired in an online English-speaking class?
5. What are the participants' perceptions of the lost opportunity to improve communication skills by taking the English classes online?

## **Participants**

A survey was conducted among 54 students from the Department of Global Communication at Kansai University of International Studies. All these students are majoring in English Communication, with many hoping to pursue careers utilizing their English skills. Of the 54 students, 31 were in their third year and 23 were in their fourth year as of 2021. The gender breakdown was 28 males and 26 females. As for their levels of English proficiency, there were 2 at the beginner (introductory) level, 18 at the beginner level, 26 at the intermediate level, 4 at the upper intermediate level, 4 at the advanced level (near native), and none at the advanced level (native).

## **Instrumentation**

An optional, anonymous survey was conducted about online oral English classes. The survey consisted of two parts. Part 1 asked for the respondents' information, such as the name of the oral English subject being evaluated, and the respondents' perceived level of English proficiency. Part 2, which had 19 questions, inquired about which communication tools were used in the respondents' online English-speaking classes. The survey additionally asked respondents which communication tool was the most effective, how easy it was for respondents to communicate directly with classmates and instructors, how satisfied they were with the class,

how confident they were in speaking, and how much opportunity was lost to improve communication skills by taking their speaking classes online.

## Results

1. What are the participants' perceptions of the ease of communication with other students using the online communication tools in online speaking classes?

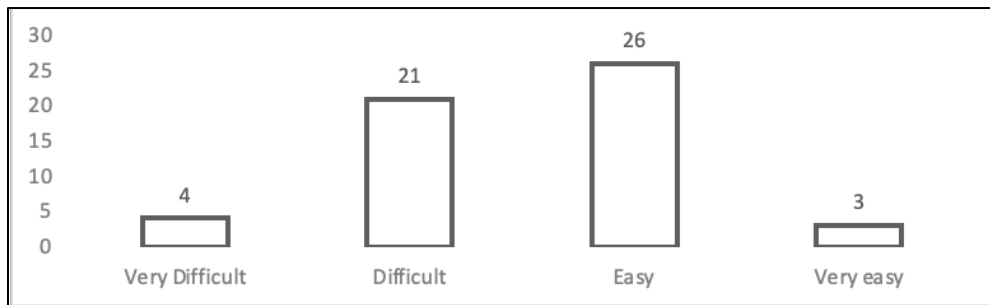


Figure 1. Ease of communication with other students using the online tools.

As can be seen from Figure 1, twenty-six students found it “easy,” and three thought it was “very easy,” to communicate with other students using the online communication tools in online speaking classes. On the other hand, twenty-one considered it “difficult” and four found it “very difficult” to communicate with other students using the online communication tools in online speaking classes. When responses are grouped as either “easy” (that is, “easy” plus “very easy” answers), or “difficult” (that is, “difficult” plus “very difficult” replies), a little over fifty percent (29/54) of students found communications with other students using online tools easy, while almost fifty percent (25/54) perceived it as difficult.

2. What are the participants' perceptions of the ease of communication with teachers using the online communication tools in online speaking classes?

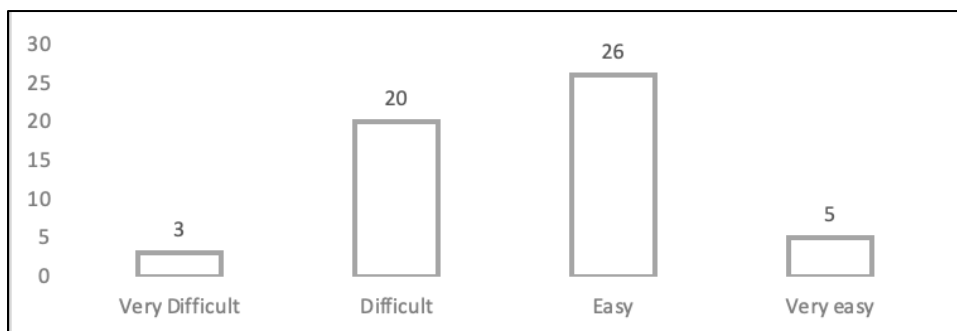


Figure 2. Ease of communication with teachers using the online tools.

As shown in Figure 2, twenty-six students believed it was “easy,” and five thought it was “very easy” to communicate with teachers using the online communication tools in online speaking classes. Conversely, twenty students thought it was “difficult” and four found it “very difficult” to communicate with teachers using the online communication tools in online speaking classes. What is interesting in this data, when responses are grouped as either “easy” (that is, “easy” plus “very easy”) or “difficult” (that is, “difficult” plus “very difficult”), is that nearly sixty percent of the students (31/54) found it easy to communicate with teachers using the online tools in the speaking class, while only forty-two percent (23/54) perceived it as difficult.

3. What is the participants' speaking confidence using the online communication tools in online speaking classes?

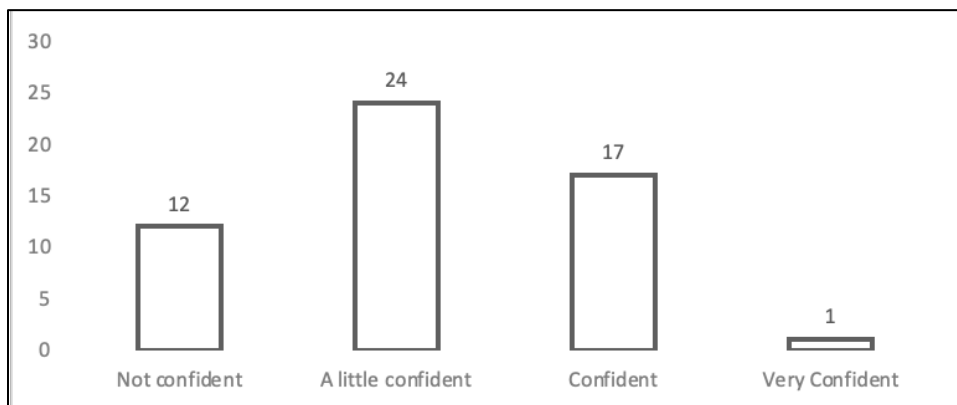


Figure 3. Speaking confidence in online speaking classes

From Figure 3, we can see that seventeen students were “confident” with their speaking ability using the online communication tools in their online speaking classes, and only one felt “very confident.” At the same time, twenty-four students were “a little confident” with their speaking ability using the online communication tools in their online speaking classes and twelve were “not confident.” When responses are grouped as either “confident” (that is, “confident” plus “very confident”) or “not confident” (that is, “a little confident” plus “not confident”), it is interesting to see more students who were not confident with their speaking ability using the online communication tools in their online speaking classes (36/54) than those who were confident (18/54).

4. What is the participants' satisfaction with communication skills acquired in an online English-speaking class?

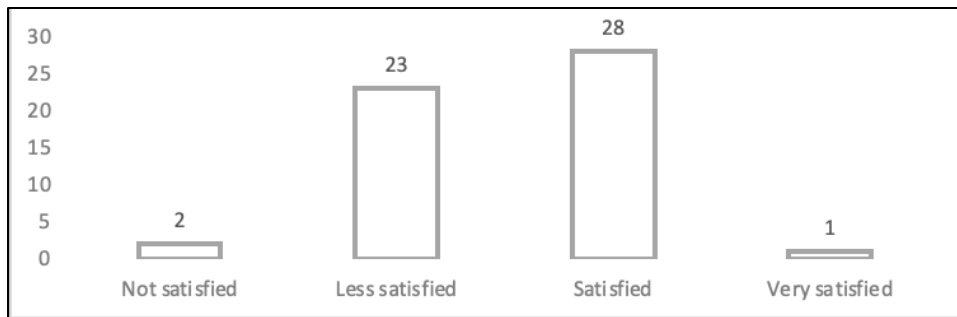


Figure 4. Satisfaction with communication skills acquired in online classes.

The data in Figure 4 shows that twenty-eight students were “satisfied” with the communication skills they acquired in online classes, and one was “very satisfied.” On the contrary, twenty-three students were “less satisfied” with the communication skills they acquired in online classes and two were “not satisfied” at all. When responses are grouped as either “satisfied” (that is, “satisfied” plus “very satisfied”) or “not satisfied” (that is, a “less satisfied” plus “not satisfied”), it is interesting to see just a few more students who were satisfied with the communication skills they acquired in online classes than those who were not satisfied. Although more students were satisfied, many students were also dissatisfied.

5. What are the participants' perceptions of the lost opportunity to improve communication skills by taking the speaking classes online?

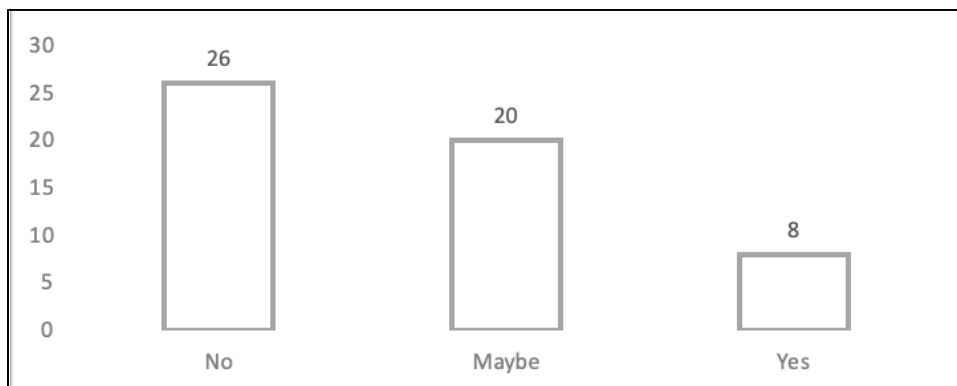


Figure 5. Lost opportunity to improve communication skills by taking the speaking classes online regardless of year levels.

As can be seen from Figure 5, twenty-six students believed that there was no lost opportunity to improve communication skills by taking the speaking classes online. While twenty students were not sure, eight students believed they lost the opportunity to improve communication skills by taking the speaking classes online.

## Discussion

From the data in Figures 1 to 5, it is seen that there were as many participants who had negative views as participants who had positive views with regards to the ease of communication with other students and their teachers using the online tools. A similar split in opinion is seen in respondents' self-report on their speaking confidence in and satisfaction of the online speaking classes, as well as their perception of potential lost opportunities to improve communication skills by taking speaking classes online. The participants who had positive views about online speaking classes cited using online tools such as group video activities and audio calls (e.g. Zoom, Skype, etc.), slide presentations (e.g. PowerPoint), and recorded videos. They also mentioned that online classes were like having face to face classes. Comments include: "By using video and voice calling tools like Zoom and Skype, we can actually talk face-to-face in English in real time;" and "when classes are held using a call tool such as Zoom, you can see your face on the camera, so you can attend classes without missing it." Since online formats also simulated face to face classes, some participants expressed motivation: "I also found it motivating because the lessons were held in real time and I was able to attend classes with all my classmates;" and "since I can see their faces, I feel closer to them and feel more motivated to study." Another participant commented: "You can take classes anywhere, and you can participate in classes without going to school."

Participants also wrote about the use of online tools, such as PowerPoint and Zoom, which provided them with opportunities for improving in-class presentations. Comments include the following: "I also think that using Zoom for screen sharing, etc. will allow for smoother presentations;" and "when preparing for presentations such as PowerPoint presentations, you can think about how to use English effectively during the actual presentation." As far as speaking English is concerned, the participants found opportunities to speak English online. For instance, one student wrote: "Interaction in communicating plays a crucial role for me to advance my English." Another wrote: "We had more opportunities to speak English during our online classes." When participants could communicate, they tended to be more motivated as seen in this comment: "When I was able to communicate, learn, and practice through these tools, I was able to approach English in a lively and effective way."

Aside from having opportunities to speak English, the participants found the videos and video recordings interesting and easy to use. They also provided them venues for reviewing and improving their skills and knowledge of English. Comments included: "Videos are more interesting and easier to follow," and "The video recording tool not only allows you to review it as many times as you like, but also allows you to view other students' videos, allowing you to objectively understand your own level and (those) areas where you are lacking." Another result worth noting are the comments about how comparable online speaking classes were with face to face speaking classes: "I don't feel that way because there is no difference between being able to talk online and face-to-face;" and "there was no particular difference whether it was online or face-to-face." Moreover, as one participant said: "Whether or not you can improve your communication skills depends on your ability." It suggests that a student's effort to learn can greatly affect the learning success whether it is online or face to face.

Although many students had positive perceptions of the online speaking classes, many also had negative views towards their online learning experience. The common reasons why they found their online speaking classes difficult included: being unaccustomed to artificial online environments, suffering too many distractions at home, feeling embarrassed by communicating online, and suffering technical problems. Participants who were both unsatisfied with their online speaking classes and who believed that taking online English lessons made them miss out on learning opportunities that could have enhanced their communication skills, for example, wrote the following comments: "My communication skills haven't improved;" and "I feel embarrassed to give a presentation in front of people, and feel like I wasn't able to demonstrate my abilities." Others mentioned noted the problem of getting distracted. Comments included: "I get distracted when I'm online;" and "I can't concentrate online." Dissatisfaction also appeared to have been related to students' lack of motivation to study. Comments included such concerns as: "This is not a dissatisfaction with the class, but a dissatisfaction with my own lack of learning. I feel that I must study more;" and "although I had the opportunity to communicate, I was unable to take action on my own." There were also participants who were disappointed with their own inability to use language. Such comments included: "I can listen and understand what is being said, but when I try to speak in my own words, the grammar is so messed up that I can't hold a conversation;" and "I feel embarrassed to give a presentation in front of people and feel like I wasn't able to demonstrate my abilities." Some students

suggested improving the class as related to the implementation of group-work and enhancing communication skills. The comments ranged from the negative: “I felt that group work with basic content was unnecessary,” to more general expressions of dissatisfaction, “I believe the course could have been better in improving students' communication skills.”

## **Conclusion**

This study set out to determine students' perceptions of online oral communication classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of this investigation show that there were as many participants who had negative views as participants who had positive views regarding the ease of communication with other students and their teachers when using online tools during speaking class. This was also the case with regard to the issue of speaking confidence, class satisfaction, and feelings of lost opportunity to improve communication skills through taking the online class. One interesting finding that emerged from this study is that those who had negative views about online speaking classes recognized that they did not try their best to accomplish the required tasks. This evidence suggests that instructors should be aware of these kinds of students moving forward. Instructors might need to consider additional teaching and learning strategies to maximize such students' potential when implementing online speaking classes. Another interesting finding is that those who had positive views of online speaking classes believed that taking speaking classes online can be as interesting and beneficial as taking them face to face.

The current findings add to a growing body of literature on designing online foreign language classes, specifically speaking classes. Furthermore, the data can provide valuable insights for instructors when creating and designing courses and delivery options that meet the demands and needs of students.

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## 抄 録

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