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Title	A Reflective Narrative from One Instructor Post-Online Study Abroad
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Citation	メディア・コミュニケーション研究, 78, 33-53
Issue Date	2025-03-31
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/94450
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	78_02_KLASSEN.pdf

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【査読論文】

A Reflective Narrative from One Instructor Post-Online Study Abroad

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SUBMISSION 4

Abstract

In this reflective narrative, I report on student and instructor perceptions and reflections of distance learning experiences of courses held online at a Japanese university and online study abroad experiences using survey data, interview data, and student reflections. In 2020, many educational institutions in Japan faced the challenge of adapting to distance learning to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Instructors were primarily concerned with implementing effective lessons, navigating student expectations, and adapting to the changes in performance while negotiating with educational institutions during this challenging time. I narrate and discuss the findings of this study concerning meeting student needs, the use of in-house Learning Management Systems (LMS), active learning implementation, and student reactions to a shift to the online study abroad situation. My reflective study calls for additional educational resources that can support instructors in preparing, designing, and conducting online courses. Based on data analysis, I propose future suggestions for effectively implementing online teaching and incorporating online courses on a needs basis. As there is an increased number of online international training programs, online internships, and remote work, I believe that an online study abroad experience can provide students with insights into ways to prepare themselves for their academic and professional careers.

Keywords: Distance Learning, Teaching Approaches, Study Abroad, Educational Technology, TESOL, EFL

Introduction

The world has been grappling with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, with universities in Japan having to learn and relearn lessons from other countries and adapting to using new technologies, just like the rest of the world. In the wake of the pandemic, research has shown that during the pandemic, people experienced heightened psychological conditions including anxiety, stress, depression, and poor-quality sleep not just in Japan, but all over the world (Horita et al., 2020; Karakose et al., 2022; Kikuchi, 2020; Rajkumar, 2020; Sato et al., 2022; Vindegaard & Benros, 2020; Wang et al. 2020). While many institutions in Japan initially fared well compared to other OECD countries in adapting telework in compatible industries, the makeshift response led to problems in the subsequent months (Nae, 2020; Suzuki, 2023; Okubo, 2020). Despite its adequate infrastructure and available technology on a societal level (OECD, 2019), many academic institutions in Japan seem to have faced challenges in transitioning to distance learning and remote work, but the COVID-19 pandemic also created an opportunity for growth (Kittaka, 2020).

In response to the pandemic and afterward, many educational institutions have aggressively sought ways to create technologies for education and started promoting them to educators worldwide, as well as those interested in learning online. As the effects of this global phenomenon continue to be explored, some higher education institutions are actively searching for ways to provide students with international education with English language online building off of the lessons learned during the pandemic and from measures taken during that time to meet the challenges of the moment.

Experience with Online Education

2020 was a moment in time that placed educators in a pivotal position, demanding the acquisition of new skills and adapting to a “new normal” in online education (Selingo, 2021). This forced the hand of many educators to use online tools and new ways of delivering their pedagogy through methods appropriate to online education. Like many industries, in order to adapt to the “new normal” many people had to relearn how to approach their profession. In the post-COVID world, there are many educators who have continued to use the tools that they used during this transition, and this aligns with what students desire from education as well.

Even terms like “online learning” are falling out of favor, as many students no longer make the distinction between online and offline (Selingo, 2021). Students now expect professors to offer both online and offline content, and some professors report that it has helped to improve their teaching methods (Toyoshima, 2023). The MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) Japan’s education ministry has also set guidelines for universities that continue to integrate on-demand education in various ways, such as hybrid classes and face-to-face classes (“Japan’s Education Ministry sets guidelines,” 2023).

Online education can be an effective way of learning through many different formats, such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), online courses held with video conferencing tools such as Google Meet, Skype, or Zoom, completing learning activities online through companion sites such as khanacademy.org, or distance learning, which involves interaction between instructors and learners and opportunities for timely feedback (Tsai & Machado, 2002). Despite people and educators often conflating the terms *online education, on-demand classes* and *distance learning*, the term *distance learning* (遠隔授業 enkaku jugyō) was used to reference the adaptation of colleges and universities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A significant number of studies have been conducted on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on online study abroad/training programs in terms of student satisfaction, faculty opinions, and effectiveness of technologies used for online study abroad/training programs (Dong & Ishige, 2022; Giovanangeli & Allatson, 2022; Matikainen & Cote, 2021). Many of these studies focused on the reflections of faculty members and students, educational expectations of the program, how these programs and institutions responded to the pandemic situation (Sato, 2022; Yamamoto et al, 2023; Yamamura & Tsutsui, 2021), followed up with some future suggestions for improvement of ways to respond to the pandemic situation. However, few studies have focused on documenting student and faculty member’s reflective reports of online study abroad/training programs in private universities that actively focus on a shift to online study abroad, after students completed the programs and ways to systematically reflect on their experiences. Previous research studies researched students’ self-reflections and feelings about the online study abroad/training programs during the pandemic, rather than specific directions and suggestions for future studies (Matikainen & Cote, 2022).

A number of institutions that had included study abroad as a key part of their language learning curriculum also experienced a great upheaval as programs relying on international exchange had to be postponed or outright cancelled (Callahan, 2020, Collier-Murayama, 2023) and instead moved to an online model where students could conduct distance learning while not compromising students’ learning outcomes as much as possible (Yoshikubo et al., 2023). This

sudden change led students and program administrators to consider new possibilities in conducting study abroad (Liu & Shirley, 2021) and how study abroad experiences could be enhanced and improved by building upon the creation of online study abroad programs in the future.

Documenting the Transition to Online Study Abroad

As I documented the abrupt transition to online study abroad, I gathered multiple sources of data including my own personal observational accounts as one of the instructors in the program. I first explain our local university situation, the study abroad program that had been designed to send students abroad, survey responses and interviews from faculty members students' responses to the transition, and students' reflective reports, followed by my own reflective notes as an instructor. The rationale for this study was to explore the preparedness of the instructors who were forced to adapt their teaching to meet the moment of the COVID-19 pandemic, and explore the phenomenon of conducting impromptu online study abroad, when the existing program and curriculum existed to promote in-person study abroad. This study began as an open query, with the following research questions in mind.

1) How did instructors adapt their teaching to on-demand teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic? What difficulties did they encounter and what support did they receive from their educational institutions?
2) What were the experiences of students who studied abroad online in light of the temporary shift in the global travel situation?

Focal University Situation

In this university, classes were switched suddenly from face-to-face instruction to distance learning for the first semester or first and second quarters of the school year, and instructors were given approximately three weeks to prepare to teach their courses online for the first time. University faculty were given workshops and opportunities for consultation, but many of these workshops were not mandatory. Zoom licenses were distributed to faculty on a first-come first-serve basis, but at the beginning of the semester, full-licensed versions were not available to all. The stipulations for teaching online were that: classes must be held during regular class

time (synchronous sessions), and that the universities' learning management system must be used for class materials.

This university also featured a component of study where students were able to study abroad in the 2nd year of their English study abroad (早期海外留学 sōki kaigai ryūgaku), which meant at the onset of the pandemic in 2020, the study abroad portion of the program was cancelled, and students who were planning to go abroad had their programs cancelled. A number of students who had started their study abroad in March 2020 were forced to return in April 2020. Students who were unable to go due to travel restrictions were given the option to conduct a remote study abroad with cooperating institutions that shared the same time zone as Japan, including institutions located in Oceania and Southeast Asia. Students who participated were able to attend Zoom classes with institutions that were already study abroad partners with this institution. Therefore, this study focuses on instructors who taught during the first semester of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as students whose study abroad experiences were disrupted by the pandemic.

Instructor Survey and Interviews

The participants were university faculty working at a private university in Japan who were employed at the university, and responsible for teaching classes in junior-college, college and graduate courses. Questionnaires were distributed to 117 faculty at the institution, and twenty-seven participants responded. A follow-up semi-structured interview was conducted with seven participants during February and March 2021. Interviews were conducted in English and Japanese, according to the interviewee's preference. However, five out of seven interviews were conducted in English with instructors whose first language was English. This research interviewed both full-time tenured and non-tenured staff, as well as part-time staff: I will refer to the participants as "instructors." The survey and interviews investigated students' general reactions to the use of technology for distance learning, and interviews asked students' reactions after the online study abroad experience.

The survey was distributed in both English and Japanese. Editing was done by native speakers of both languages to ensure the accuracy of the wording of the survey questions. The survey was distributed through email and conducted on Google Forms. Follow-up interviews were conducted with volunteers in the language of their preference. These semi-structured interviews were transcribed and coded according to relevant themes in English or Japanese. I

focused on the results of the semi-structured interviews, with survey results giving context to the general background of the university instructors' situations during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Coding and theme creation were conducted by the main researcher during analysis of the interview transcription. In-vivo coding was used to represent the descriptions of the participants of their lived experience during the research, which places emphasis on the actual spoken or written words of the participants (Manning, 2017).

The results of the survey showed several informative results which were coded and organized into several categories. The surveys showed that instructors had little experience with online teaching tools, with 75% of respondents answering that they had used these tools rarely (9) or have never used (11) online tools such as Zoom or Skype, many respondents reported that they did not have experience with online courses or distance learning (N = 13 never used) and nearly 20% (7) of instructors indicating they had no experience with using LMS in their classes before the COVID-19 pandemic measures were taken.

Participants also claimed that adapting active learning approaches for their students using online tools was one of the most challenging aspects of the transition to online teaching, with 45% of those surveyed answering challenging (8) or very challenging (4). Active learning can be described as involving students through thinking and doing as opposed to passive learning. Active learning requires students to be proactive during lessons, ask questions and participate with others (Caine, 2020). Through additional questions and conversations in the qualitative interviews, additional details and common difficulties were discovered. Table 1.1 presents key survey results that align with the research themes discussed below.

Table 1.1

Selected Survey Answers - Instructors

Question		Variables	N=27
Before introducing distance learning, how familiar were you with the following technology?	PC	**Used Daily**	**26**
		Used Frequently	1
		Used Rarely	0
		Never Used	0
	Online Courses or Distance Learning	Used Daily	4
		Used Frequently	5
		Used Rarely	5
		Never Used	**13**
	PowerPoint/Google Slides	**Used Daily**	**18**
		Used Frequently	7
		Used Rarely	2
		Never Used	0

	Skype/Zoom	Used Daily	1
		Used Frequently	6
		Used Rarely	**9**
		Never Used	**11**
	Learning Management Systems	Used Daily	7
		Used Frequently	5
		Used Rarely	8
		Never Used	**7**
Which aspect of technology use was the most challenging?	Choosing Appropriate Software such as ZOOM, LMS, PowerPoint	Very challenging	1
		Challenging	3
		Slightly challenging	5
		Not at all challenging	**16**
	Learning how to use software such as ZOOM, LMS, PowerPoint	Very challenging	1
		Challenging	4
		Slightly challenging	11
		Not at all challenging	9
	How to adapt active learning activities to distance learning	**Very challenging**	**4**
		Challenging	**8**
		Slightly challenging	11
		Not at all challenging	2
How much additional guidance did students need?		1 (Less than usual)	1
		2	1
		3	11
		4	**6**
		5 (More than usual)	**6**

Table 1.1
(continued)

Question	Variables	N
How well did students adapt to distance learning?	1 (Adapted poorly)	1
	2	5
	3	2
	4	**14**
	5 (Adapted well)	3
How much time did you spend on assignment grading in distance learning compared to face-to-face classes?	Much Less Time	0
	Less Time	**7**
	No more or less time	2
	More Time	**8**
	Much More Time	**10**

Challenges of Online Teaching

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants focused on inquiring about their experience teaching classes online, specifically about the challenges they experienced during the transition to teaching and holding classes online. These interviews were held online, using ZOOM, and questions were asked regarding fulfilling teaching duties, student performance, and their general experience teaching students during the 2020 school year. Among the most pertinent issues that came up for these teachers were preparation time, adapting lessons to distance learning, adjusting for student needs, and relying on software tools.

Preparation Time

According to the survey conducted, 60% of teachers spent more time preparing assignments and grading for distance learning (DL) as opposed to face-to-face (F2F) classes, and this was reflected in interviews as well. Making the switch from mainly paper-based instruction, using textbooks and overhead projectors (OHPs) in the classroom and having to convert everything to digital technologies and digital formats such as PDFs and PPTs were among the most time-consuming factors. Many teachers were already using PPTs in their classes, but additional measures were taken for teachers who preferred to distribute slides online, so students could follow along instead of relying on Zoom's screen-sharing feature.

Existing materials that had been used for F2F classes had to be adapted to online, such as providing links to videos on an LMS or through email, as opposed to simply showing these during the class period, due to the difficulty of showing video through screen sharing. Group activities were adapted by some teachers into Google documents, setting up a group document for each breakout room, or an entire class document for each class period. Some instructors had experience using Google documents in a F2F classroom, but now had to rely on online instruction to provide guidance and instructions for students who were not tech-savvy.

Meeting student needs during a course or semester is always a balance that must be met, no matter the materials being taught or the goals of the course. However, during the shift to distance learning, instructors found that they had to make additional adjustments and accommodations for students struggling with the shift to online classes. Instructors reported spending more time explaining how to use certain technology in the classroom, and how to use certain tools or new technologies. Due to this, teachers of these courses tried to find a balance between using new tools that would provide opportunities to use language and technologies that were more user-friendly. In other words, teachers preferred a simpler teaching tool such as Google Documents with fewer features over Microsoft Word Online, that has more functionality

but may be overwhelming for students. One teacher who taught English conversation skills described it as not wanting to "overload them" with additional moving parts, as they already were dealing with the stress of studying from home, using new tools, and for many, having to communicate solely in a English-only environment for the first time at the university level, on top of the added stress of working under a global pandemic.

Many teachers also commented on the lack of opportunities to build face-to-face connections and rapport building in classes, with teachers in many cases being unable to see their students without cameras due to slow or unstable internet connections, and students were unable to establish strong relationships with their classmates, which made group work and friendships between students more difficult to establish. Without being in the classroom, this rapport building and chances for casual conversation affected students' ability to participate in classes, especially classes where student participation was necessary, such as English conversation classes.

Computer Literacy

As noted above in student needs, one of the major challenges for teachers was giving appropriate instruction for students, which was time-consuming both inside and outside the classroom, due to many students' lack of experience with using technology. As Japanese teachers were some of the least confident in using technology in the classroom (OECD, 2019), this results in students who enter university being unfamiliar with the use of technology from an educational standpoint. Therefore, ease of use was the most important factor when deciding on tools to use, and teachers opted to use tools such as Google Classroom as an LMS, Flipgrid (Flip) for conversation and speaking practice, Google Forms/Sheets/Docs for traditional assignments, and had to provide multiple sessions of troubleshooting during class, during office hours, through email, and in some cases, created documentation in multiple languages as necessary (EFL teachers often created bilingual materials, where other teachers created monolingual materials), which was a challenge for both instructors and students. Many instructors noted that students were capable of using their smartphones, but much of the work had to be completed on a PC, which added further burden on providing tech support. Students who were unable to gain access to a PC were put at a disadvantage. One instructor went as far as to re-arrange two sections of her class to accommodate students with access to a PC, and another section for students who only had access to a smartphone. It should be noted that this was a decision made by the professor, not a top-down decision, and that, while this was a display of dedication on the instructors' part, should not have to be done - students should have equal access to instructional approaches, even during a pandemic.

Student Performance

Following the benefits of distance learning, many instructors reported that students were very flexible, took time to understand the materials posted, and participated as much, and sometimes more than in previous classes, depending on the subject taught. However, the transition to distance learning may have caused stress on many students, which may have affected their academic performance, and has been seen in other studies to varying levels (Gyambrah et al., 2017: Masalimova et al., 2022)

Group Activities

Due to the features of Zoom online classrooms and the use of breakout rooms, group activities were made an even more important part of active learning in the classroom, and benefited student performance in a number of ways, after students had become accustomed to the practice. In English-speaking classes, teachers were able to use breakout groups to encourage students to practice conversation, group work and collaboration more effectively than in the traditional classroom, and instructors were able to overhear conversations with students often unaware of their presence, leading to fewer inhibitions and more natural use of language, often in the target language. Other teachers reported, however, that some students did not feel the pressure to use English as much at these times, so strategic group-making was necessary.

Students' Reflective Reports

In order to address the second research question, student reflections were obtained as part of the study abroad experience. After their return from their sojourn abroad, they are required to submit their reflections as part of their experience within one month of return. Students were asked to provide written reflections based on their experience with study abroad. These reflections are written in English, which acts as both a way to evaluate their linguistic progress as well as learn about their experience abroad. This assignment is accompanied with monthly progress reports during a typical on-site study abroad, but due to the irregularity of the study abroad program, student reflections were limited to a capstone reflection.

Study abroad was a crucial component of students' education in this institution, and students were able to participate in distance learning in institutions that shared the same time zone as Japan, located in Oceania (Australia) and Southeast Asia (The Philippines). Student reflections were collected after a period of two to three months of online study abroad after their return to

normal classes as part of the study abroad program. These reflections were required to be written in English, and asked students to share their experiences and impressions of their study abroad. 59 responses were coded thematically, and the main findings are shared below.

The results of student reflections showed that although students did not have high expectations for their study abroad experience at the beginning, many students did find benefits from the experience. These themes included a lack of motivation ("Feeling Unmotivated"), a belief that this experience was inauthentic compared to the real thing ("Feeling Short-Changed"), but that there were still benefits to be had ("Feeling Motivated and Finding new meaning"). Select quotes are featured in Table 1.2. Given student names are pseudonyms, all students were 1st year students, and the online study abroad destination is given.

Table 1.2
Focal Student Reflections

Reflections Themes	
Feeling Unmotivated	"I was suspicious of the program's effect before it was commenced to be honest." (Mariko, 1st year, female student - Australia) "To be honest, I had little motivation at the beginning of this program and was very sad to have replaced the planned study abroad program." (Tatsuya - The Philippines) "At first my motivation was…not good…I thought it was not enough experience." (Sora, 1st year, male student - The Philippines)
Feeling Short-changed	"I thought that taking a foreign class online is no different from taking a class at [our] University" (Kiryu, 1st year, male student - Australia) "…at first, I found studying abroad online to be a hassle…I thought I wouldn't get anything if I stayed on" (Masaru, 1st year, male student - Australia)
Feeling Motivated and Finding New Meaning	"…Although it was not the same, there were many chances to be active and improve my English…" (Shinji, 1st year, male student - The Philippines) "[it was] hard to communicate on Zoom…but more benefits than I thought" (Kazumi, 1st year, female student - Australia) "However, in order for this experience to be successful as a result… I started to set my own goals for the day. For example, I have to speak three times a day in class… Setting these goals has been very motivating for me." (Riku, 1st year, male student - Australia)

Students who anticipated a traditional in-person study abroad experience, as was initially promised during recruitment and admission into the university program, were initially unmotivated when the program transitioned to an online format due to the changing global circumstances. Students were well aware of the experience of previous students who had been

abroad, which were their senpai (upper-class students), who typically had positive experiences studying abroad, and often boasted improved confidence and English-speaking skills. Compared to the real thing, students saw it as being a "hassle" and that the quality did not differ much from the online courses they already took at their home institution. However, students reported that they did gain something from the experience, as can be seen in the "making the most of it" theme.

Students reported that although there were not as many chances to communicate inside and outside the classroom when doing remote study abroad, students still reported experiencing the target culture within a virtual classroom, learning about the target culture (Australia or The Philippines), and framed this as a preview for when they eventually study abroad on site. Students considered this a preview to learn not only the language but also the culture, and get to know the university and some of the students from afar before making the jump to the real thing, meaning face-to-face study abroad.

Need for Additional Instruction. Due to this lack of proficiency in using technology, students needed additional time to make the jump from using only a smartphone to completing and submitting assignments on a desktop computer, using tools such as Google Docs, or other assignments. Students often had the option to submit documents either electronically or in person, depending on the nature of the courses being taken, but now there was only one option. Teachers in charge of EFL writing courses for first-year writing students, in particular, had trouble with students having limited knowledge of how to use collaborative writing tools, having had little experience using these in Japanese high schools.

Gap in Student Performance. Although there were many instances of positive changes cited by many of the instructors, such as higher test scores, and increased participation in speaking, writing, or group work, the gap between students who could thrive with a more independent learning style and those who were more accustomed to receiving guidance, widened during this period. In particular, an EFL instructor who taught business English noticed that students who were unmotivated or unwilling to cooperate were students who had benefited from the classroom environment and needed to be pressured into cooperating or participating in active learning activities - now that classes were online and were working from the "comfort" of their homes, it was seemingly easier to ignore the authority of the teacher. Students who were motivated and engaged seemed to enjoy the online classes, and some commented that they could concentrate more on engaging in activities, but those who were not motivated were likely to disengage and fell behind in performance.

My own Reflective Notes as an Instructor

As an instructor at the time of the transition to online learning, I shared similar sentiments as the instructors and the students. During the teaching experience, much of the instruction time was dedicated to onboarding students to use never-before-seen programs, facilitating active learning utilizing online tools that were unfamiliar to both parties, and the inability to meet face-to-face to hash out serious problems further hindered our efforts. However, once the initial period of adjustment passed, the potential of using these collaborative tools including Google Docs, Flip (Grid), and Zoom for breakout sessions became clear, and these tools are still being used during F2F classes, for additional online lectures, homework assignments and projects. Although not part of this data set, other instructors have reported that they have used these technologies after online classes have ended, or that they have changed their teaching approaches to better suit their students (Toyoshima, 2023)

As the semester progressed, it became clear that the travel restrictions would not be lifted in time for face-to-face study abroad. This realization impacted student motivation, and the movement to transition to online study abroad meant that their experience would be markedly different than what was promised. This change in attitude, the obfuscation of the authority of the classroom and the lack of immediacy in completing assignments may have had a demotivating effect on students who relied on the presence of the instructor and the motivation of study abroad to persuade them to study seriously. Even after their return, I felt that there was a concern that students did not reach the same proficiency as the students who had face-to-face study abroad experience, which would have a ripple effect in their university studies, and potential employment opportunities.

Moving Forward

Regardless of the difficulties met by the implementation of distance learning, instructors did report a number of benefits from making the switch to an online format for their classes, as was posed by the first research question. Of course, safety for their students and themselves was important, and students were introduced to educational technology (edtech) in a short time, albeit in conditions that were not ideal. However, many teachers, particularly those with previous experience with edtech in previous classes as an instructor or student (often in online

programs offered by colleges or universities outside of Japan), were able to adapt their lessons to use active learning and saw great progress in students' use of technology, and could anticipate future avenues for these tools. Education will require changes in teacher training and tools, and more support for teacher training regarding these tools (Korkmaz & Toraman, 2020). Instructors reported that homework assignments created using ed-tech required students to interact with the assignments more actively, using speech recording tools like Flip (grid), and Google Documents/Slides which could be used collaboratively with other students and teachers, and looked forward to using a hybrid approach in the post-COVID-19 world, which has been seen in other research studies (Eraković, & Topalov, 2021). Especially for teachers of writing, using Google Documents allowed teachers to provide immediate feedback, writing suggestions, coordinate writing together in the classroom, and give immediate feedback to students completing homework, similar to other findings in EFL settings (Alharbi, 2019). The share screen function was also used to great effect to correct global grammar errors more effectively than on a whiteboard (Chu & Kennedy, 2011; Gillow-Wiles & Niess, 2015). One writing instructor commented that aesthetically, the classroom was preferable but online was more effective in some ways.

Instructors reported that they would use what they learned this year in their future teaching approaches, if they continued to teach online or if they returned to F2F classes, and that they would continue using the tools that they became more accustomed to during this period. Use of the LMS to distribute materials, organize classes, and provide opportunities for forum discussions and other active learning approaches would be continued, and materials that were provided specifically for online classes would be re-adapted back to F2F class formats. Instructors felt more confident in their teaching approaches and more flexible in light of these developments.

Another side effect was that teachers decided to make the teaching of computer literacy another priority for students. A writing teacher commented that they would implement typing practice in their classes as a warmup, and other teachers would employ more presentation creation using the Google Slides platform. Teachers also expressed interest in allowing students to create videos in the classroom when F2F classes and group work would be more feasible. This supports the findings of Funamori (2017) who showed that due to the lack of meaningful computer literacy at the high school level, students may be unprepared for the implementation of LMS or online tools at the university level.

The framing of the online experience is a critical factor influencing students' perceptions of its validity, regarding the second research question posed, connecting with the research findings.

The fact that online study abroad programs are compared to traditional, on-site programs lead students to perceive it as being a lesser, inferior experience (Callahan, 2020). To mitigate this, presenting online study abroad programs as being additive or preparatory distinct experiences would allow them to be judged on their own merits, and students would be more likely to approach it with an open mind and appreciate its unique merits. Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) has been introduced in a number of institutions, and allows students to engage with international peers, and often collaborates with study abroad programs to promote further cooperation (Esche, 2018).

Findings from these reflections suggested that online study abroad is not a substitute for students, but that there are benefits to be gained from future online stand-alone study abroad programs. Students were mostly surprised by their learning gains, and the progress made in their language abilities. However, this was not comparable to the progress they would have made if they had been able to go abroad. This was according to the observations of the researcher, but this was seen in other research, with groups participating in virtual study abroad attaining an average of one proficiency level lower in speaking than their face-to-face counterparts (Davidson & Garas, 2023). As mentioned above (Esche, 2018), online study abroad could be considered as an addendum to a traditional study abroad, for follow-up experiences or even internships that could be extended into on-site internships.

Online study abroad is an area that is still being actively researched, and its merits and shortcomings are being explored (Jackson, 2018) on its own terms. Therefore, we need to go beyond the discussion of merits and demerits, advantages and disadvantages of online study abroad. As there will always be a debate between in-person and online learning experiences, with different circumstances, it becomes necessary to give more weight to the experience students will take away from their chosen learning environments, but the importance of study abroad for adolescents and young adults cannot be overstated (Davidson & Lehman, 2005; Kinginger, 2008; Salisbury et al., 2013). Students should be provided with opportunities to articulate their personal experiences and how they would evaluate their performance in different mediums and environments. These evaluations should include portfolios (Kaneko, 2019; Lam et al., 2023), journals, and reflective narratives to assess individuals' study abroad experience. As instructors and administrators of a study abroad program, it is important to develop a systematic way of evaluating student experience. This does not simply mean assessing students' linguistic output or outsourcing it to a language test such as IELTS or TOEFL. One of the ways to assess student performances more holistically is to include students' reflections on key moments experienced during the online study abroad, as was seen

in this study and has been suggested in other studies (Doyle, 2009; Michael, 2022).

Just like face-to-face study abroad, there is a wide range of experiences students can learn from exposure to foreign languages and cultures in an online learning situation. By introducing different assessment areas such as flexibility, autonomy, adaptability, and spontaneity, which are qualities that study abroad programs value, a greater scope of the effectiveness of study abroad could be explored. Flexibility and adaptability could be assessed by the degree to which students adapt to working with other student groups from different backgrounds or elaborating on the challenges that they met in the online space with differences in class structure, participation, or other measures. This could be assessed through group interviews post-study abroad, reflection essays, or post-study abroad presentations and portfolio creation (Lam et al, 2023). Spontaneity and adaptability are measures that could be evaluated by actions taken by students when unexpected difficulties arise, such as technical issues, or cultural challenges overcome by negotiation and cooperation in a digital environment.

Furthermore, with some industries embracing the changes in working styles such as teleworking, working and interacting through online environments will become more common. For study abroad program designers to incorporate these experiences and innovations, new assessments will be needed. Study abroad programs will need to adopt reflective narratives for students to create portfolios of their experiences, focusing on the use of technologies including evaluating the usability of various digital platforms in online education, and thinking about future technologies for communication. Students can create their own web-based portfolios to help build their online presence during this study abroad program, with a focus on effective and ethical online communication through websites, web-based portfolios, and thinking about future use of technologies, they can discuss how these technologies helped them, how it shaped their perspectives, and perceptions of international communication online. Although there will always be the perception that online study abroad does not achieve what a physical study abroad experience does, if we can set goals specifically designed for online learning, we can achieve educational goals that are useful to students in the future of distance learning and teleworking.

Limitations

These results are from a small group of university teachers, and due to this, the claim that these results can be applied to other situations is limited, but considering the research and

results of this research, it can help to inform practices and policy approaches in the future. Instructors who volunteered for follow-up interviews were mostly teachers of English as a Foreign Language teaching in the Liberal Arts Program (5 out of 7), and only two professors who taught in other departments volunteered to be interviewed, so the results are skewed towards English as a Foreign Language education. Furthermore, the reflections from the study abroad experience were framed in a negative light, having lost the opportunity to study abroad, which resulted in similar themes found throughout the reflections, and making the comparison to an on-site study abroad experience throughout. This caused the students to judge the interactions unfairly, as opposed to if students had taken an online language course or an online study abroad experience. Additionally, students were studying during the latter half of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic was starting to wind down, and the necessity of travel bans were starting to be questioned, and the vaccine was being developed and was scheduled to be released in February 2021. However, most people were not vaccinated until well into 2021 (Statista, 2024), and travel bans were not completely lifted until October 2022 (Takahara, 2022).

Conclusion

Instructors were faced with a tremendous challenge in light of the developments of 2020, and met the moment with professionalism, flexibility, creativity, and dedication. The instructors who participated in this study were dedicated to meeting their students' needs and to delivering the best possible learning opportunities during an unprecedented time. Although the experience was stressful and demanding, instructors felt more confident in their ability to diversify their instruction, widen their repertoire of teaching tools, and develop future ideas for pedagogical approaches in a F2F, online, or hybrid format.

In closing, educational institutions must now prepare for the future of online education, not only in Japan, but across the globe. As online education has suddenly been thrust into the laps of students and teachers, it is time to decide how to integrate hybrid classes into everyday teaching and make online exchanges between institutions not as a substitute for study abroad, but a regular occurrence. Collaboration and professional development across institutions are now more possible than ever, thanks in part to the measures taken to bring distance learning to the forefront of education. While there is pressure to go back to teaching practices during pre-COVID-19, education must embrace the new normal and make connections locally and globally.

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