A Process of Development and Lessons Learned: Transferring Core English From the Classroom to Online

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The COVID-19 pandemic affected all areas of society, including education. Moving face-to-face classroom-based courses online is no small task; doing so within an extremely short timeframe provides teachers with an exceptional challenge. This article details the transition online of the Core English Program at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies. In addition to detailing a process of converting a large-scale classroom-based course to an online course within just a few weeks, it will provide the results of student and teacher surveys on the effectiveness of the transition. From reflecting on the process and the survey results and lessons that can be learned, certain elements of best practice can be identified for situations that require rapid and fundamental change in educational settings.

1. Moving Core English Online

1.1 The Core English Program

Core English (CE) Program contains the following courses: Core English 1-4 & and Advanced Core English. Core English 3&4 are delivered to all sophomore students within the Department of British and American Studies. Advanced Core English is for sophomore students in the French, Japanese and Chinese Studies

Departments. Core English 1&2 are delivered to freshmen students in the six departments within the Schools of Foreign Languages and World Liberal Arts by a team of 18 EFL lecturers. Core English 1&2 are by far the largest courses and they set the tone for all other CE courses. It is the online transition of CE1 for freshmen students that will be the subject of this article.

The main goals of CE1 are as follows:

A• To foster an attitudinal shift in the way students view English and language learning.

F• To develop fluent and confident speaking.

K• To develop knowledge and awareness of certain content areas.

R• To encourage students to reflect on their own language use.

V• To learn new vocabulary and conversation strategies.

These goals and the rationale for them are detailed elsewhere (see Bradley, 2019). As this paper is concerned with the transition online rather than the fundamental elements of if the course, it is enough to say for now that, although all goals reinforce one another "the primary goal is an attitudinal shift from a passive, often can't do, attitude towards English to one that is characterised by a growing ownership of English" (Bradley, 2019, p.4). In this sense, repositioning English in the minds of students from an academic subject, as it is often taught as in high school, to a skill that they both see themselves as possessing and being able to develop is central to the course.

1.2 Initial Considerations

The decision to transfer courses online was made only shortly before the planned start of the semester and resulted in both a delayed start date and a shorter semester; the usual 15-week semester was reduced to a 12-week semester. As such, a wholesale transfer online was not possible, and a trimmed version was required. The original 15-week course contained two introductory classes at the

start of the semester and two review classes: one before the mid-term test and one before the final test. To accommodate the reduced number of classes and to maintain unit/course cohesion, the following decisions were made:

- There will be a single introductory class
- Course / Student introductory activities can be posted online as preparation in advance
- The review classes will be removed – teachers can post review work online
- Each unit will be reduced from 6 to 5 classes

Following the establishment of a tentative schedule, the following questions were considered:

- Can the objectives of CE be achieved through an online medium?
- Which platforms are best suited to achieving these ends?

The two questions must be considered simultaneously as you cannot consider which goals are achievable online without considering platforms, just as you cannot assess platforms without having certain goals in mind. Though the two questions are presented as separate above, the reality is that they represent something of a gestalt in that every small development in the consideration of one must be cross-referenced with and developed alongside the other.

Each unit of the course contains multiple components (Figure 1), each of which contribute towards all or most of the previous mentioned goals. As the components of the unit were created to have a mutually supporting and reinforcing relationship with one another, the removal of components was deemed undesirable. Additionally, a review of technology options (Webex, Teams, Meets, Skype, Zoom, Google Suite, etc) by members of the lecturer team suggested that a transfer of all CE1 components was feasible and identified particular programs that were well suited to the task. The key considerations were:

√ Function – Do the programs allow us to do what we want to do?

√ Integration – How smoothly do the different parts work together?

√ User friendliness – Can students/teachers with limited computer literacy operate them quickly and easily?

Online classes hosted by Zoom and course work administered by Google Classroom and other programs within the Google Suite (Docs, Forms) were found to best satisfy the three criteria above. This is also represented in Figure 1.

1.3 Online Creation

Lecturers researching different technology options and regularly meeting to exchange findings allowed for informed decisions to be made within such a short time frame. The success of this pooling of time, research and knowledge, and the productive discussion that followed demonstrated that effectively achieving the task was best done as a collective effort. While we had identified the programs we wish to use, we were still not well-versed in their use, nor were any of the online versions of course materials constructed.

Figure 1. Components of Core English 1

Components within each Unit of CE	Area of development	Online
Unit Readings and Discussion	A / K / V / F	Zoom
Quizzes	K / V	Google Forms
Conversation Listening/Scripts	A / K / V	Google Classroom
Imaginary Dialogs	K / V / F / R	Google Docs / Google Classroom
Timed Conversation & Conversation Reflection	A / K / V / F / R	Zoom Google Docs / Google Classroom
Presentation	A / K / V / F / R	Zoom Google Docs / Google Classroom
Other Course Components		
Pre-test Review Classes	K / V / F / R	N/A
Mid-term & Final Tests	K / V / R	Google Forms / Google Classroom

Regular meetings involving all lecturers were held in which development tasks were assigned. Each lecturer produced online elements of the course which were kept in a shared location for teachers to add to their online classrooms. Again, this pooling of time resulted in the creation of materials that would have been beyond the scope of a single teacher. However, the pooling of time was perhaps not the most significant and impressive outcome. The level of teachers teaching teachers was remarkable. No one teacher was familiar with all programs or applications, so teachers not only produced online material, but they reported on the process of its development too. This reporting gave greater familiarity with all programs and allowed for the learning of little tricks, short-cuts and features that teachers by themselves would likely have never known. Additionally, the medium of discussion was Zoom, the program with which teachers would be holding their classes. Every meeting held brought greater familiarity with Zoom, such as what could and could not be done with breakout rooms, how to enable audio, share screens, use the white board effectively and so on. Within two weeks, the lecturer team had leaned how to use Zoom and all Google suite programs, as well as having created online versions of all components of the course for the full semester. In addition, teachers had registered each other as students in their classes so they could see how the online classroom looks from the students' perspective. This mutual support did not end once the course was made. Weekly team meetings were held to discuss the progression of the course and share information. Teacher chat groups were a hive of activity between the scheduled meeting times.

2. Views of CE Online

Though the lecturer team moved the whole course online and rapidly became familiar with the technology, this was the first time it had been done, especially under such extreme circumstances. To improve the course during the first semester and for the upcoming second online semester, it is imperative to have the

feedback of both students and teachers. This section will present the results of three surveys: a survey given to CE1 students after the completion of the first unit online and again at the end of the semester, and a survey at the end of the semester for lecturers who taught the course.

The two surveys given to students (one after completion of the first course unit, and one after the completion of the semester) both resulted in an extremely large number of responses. Posting the survey on Google Classroom undoubtedly resulted in the high response rate, though slightly fewer students completed the second survey (591) than the first (692). The teachers' survey was completed by all but one (the author) of the teachers teaching the course.

The results of the surveys are presented below thematically. For ease of analysis, the results of student surveys are presented in pairs with the top chart representing the first survey and the lower chart showing results of the second survey. Where applicable, results of the teachers' survey that focus on the same issue or theme are presented along side those of the students. These results are presented after those of students and in a different chart form for ease of distinction. Survey questions/statements were given to students in both English and Japanese, as shown in the charts. Survey questions / statements were given to teachers in English only.

2.1 Online viability

Although a wide array of options were available and there remained some uncertainty among teachers about the adoption of Zoom and Google Classroom, students were consistently satisfied with the programs throughout the semester. Less than 5% of students in both surveys disagreed with the statement that the choice of Zoom and Google Classroom was successful. Surveys used a Likert scale with 1 representing "Strongly Disagree", and 5 representing "Strongly Agree".
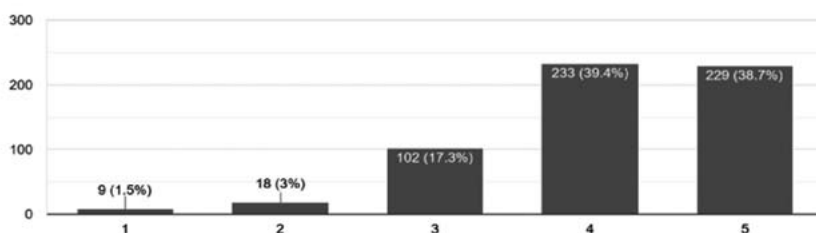
1. The combination of Google Classroom and Zoom is successful
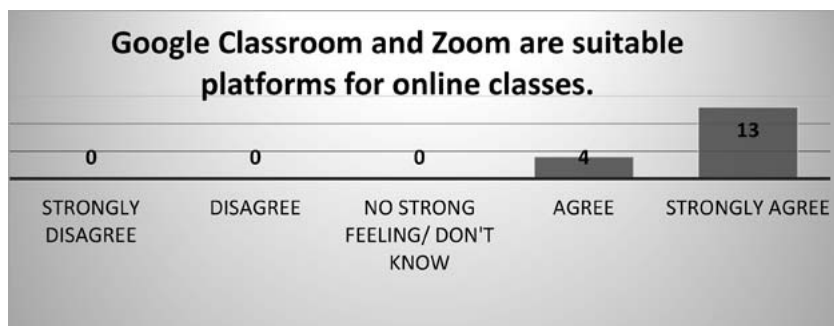 Google Classroom と Zoom を両方使った授業は成功していると思える。
642 responses
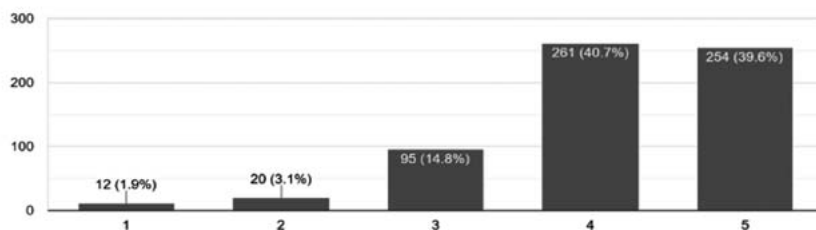
591 responses

As shown in the chart below, the views expressed by students above are also held by teachers, who overwhelmingly agree that the online platforms are suitable for online classes. It is likely that teacher endorsement of the platforms is greater than that of students due to testing of multiple platforms during the pre-semester course development stage (Section 1.3).

Google Classroom and Zoom are suitable platforms for online classes.

| STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NO STRONG FEELING/ DON'T KNOW	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
0	0	0	4	13

## 2.2 Google Classroom: A Short Learning Curve

An initial concern when considering the move to online was the level of computer literacy among students and their familiarity with Zoom and Google Classroom. Both Zoom and Google Classroom are extremely intuitive platforms and most students reported that they did not have issues accessing and submitting work through Google Classroom. As one may reasonably expect, this number increased over the course of the semester.

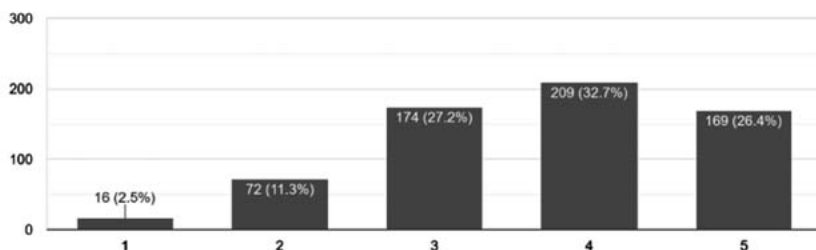**2. I can access homework and assignments easily　　宿題や課題へのアクセスは容易にできる。**
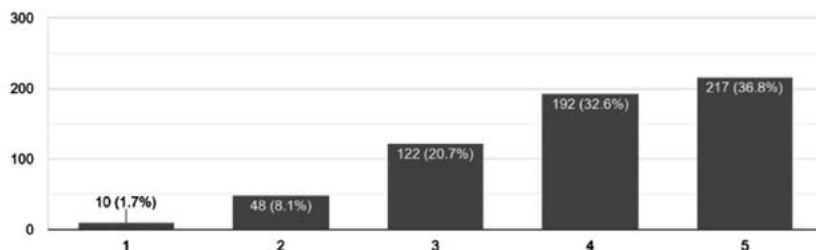641 responses
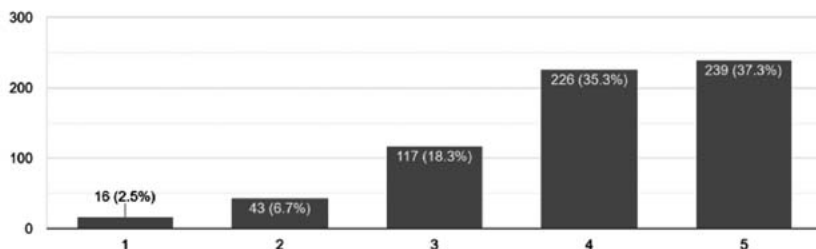
591 responses
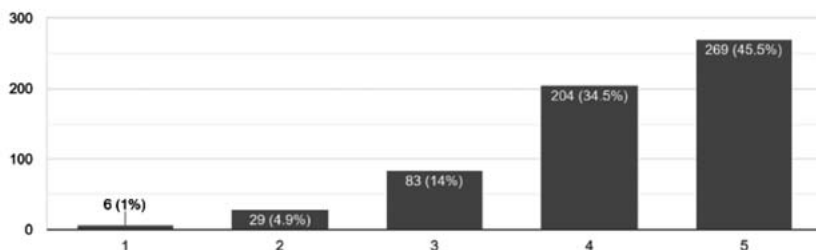
3. I can submit homework and assignments easily.　　宿題や課題の提出は容易にできる。
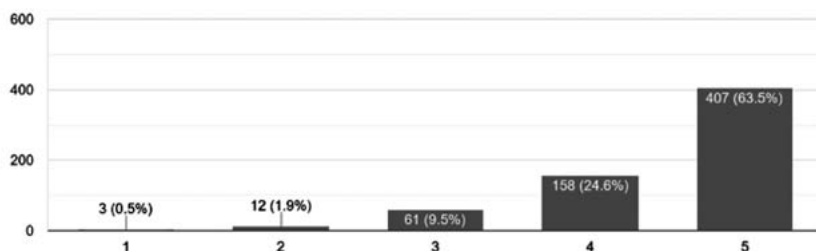640 responses

589 responses

The intuitive nature of Zoom and Google Classroom, and increased exposure to them are certainly factors in students' growing comfort with the platforms, as expressed in the charts above, but they are not the only reasons. Students received a high level of tech support from the university's Media Centre and from the Core English program and teacher. At the start of the course, when student technical issues more frequently occurred, students expressed a high level of satisfaction with the availability of their teacher. This high level of satisfaction was maintained throughout the semester.

8. My teacher is accessible if I have any
problems.　私の先生は、私に何か問題などがあれば快く対応してくれそう。
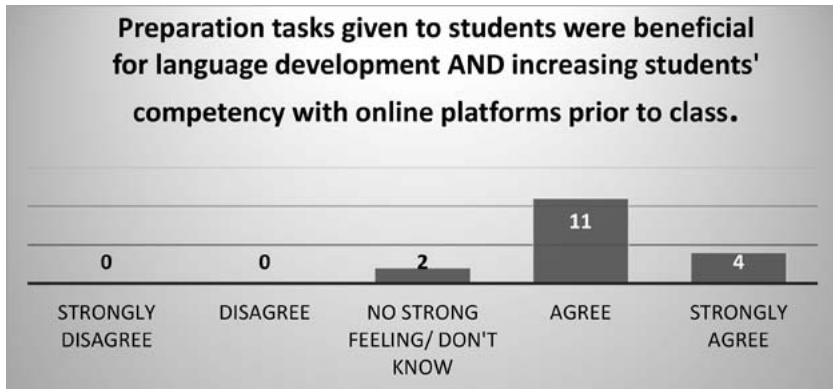641 responses
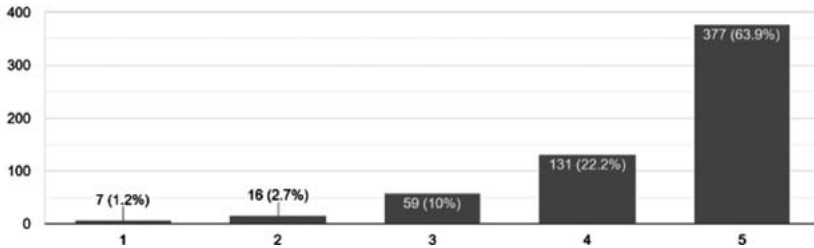
In addition to the availability of teachers in providing assistance to students, the materials given to students to work on prior to the semester beginning were also seen by teachers as preparing them to use Zoom and Google Classroom in addition to their language learning value.


2.3 Ambivalence towards Zoom

The strong endorsement of Zoom as the host of online classes is also shown in students' feelings regarding the breakout rooms that are a feature of Zoom and are used by teachers to allow student pair or group work. Students overwhelmingly (over 80%) enjoy using breakout rooms to communicate with their peers, something which was also frequently mentioned in their comments on the survey
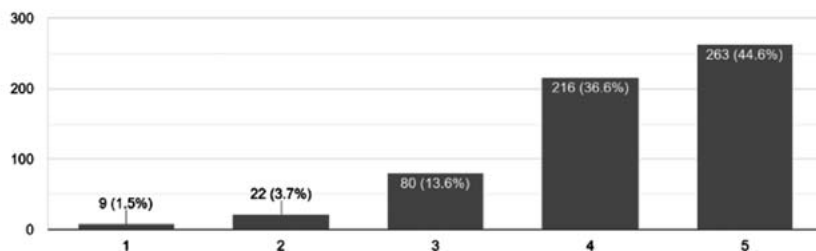
(Section 2.5).

7. I enjoy communicating with classmates in breakout rooms.   ...スメイトとのコミュニケーションを楽しんでいる。
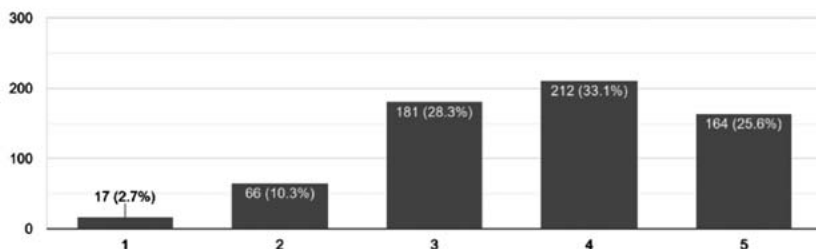
643 responses
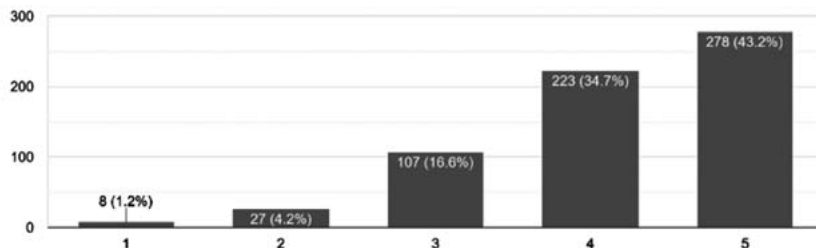
590 responses

The enjoyment of communicating in Zoom breakout rooms is not replicated across use of the platform in its entirety. Although students generally agree that Zoom allows for active participation, endorsement is not as strong as it was with breakout rooms and the number of students who disagree or, especially, are undecided is much higher.

4. Zoom allows me to participate actively in class. Zoom は、私がアクティブに授業に参加することを可能にする。

640 responses

589 responses
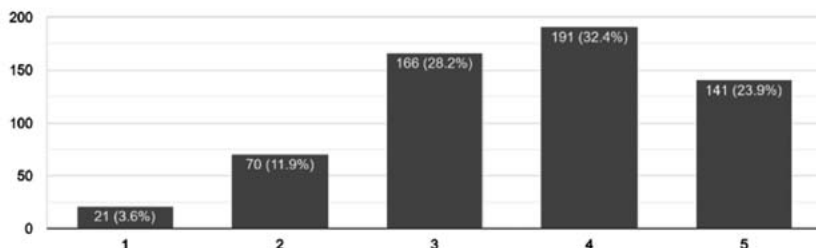
This is also expressed in beliefs relating to class atmosphere. Although a sizable majority of students believe the atmosphere is positive, there is a significant number of students (25.2–22.9%) that have neither positive nor negative feelings regarding it. Despite the strong endorsement of its selection and extremely positive assessment of breakout rooms and, to a lesser degree, the positive atmosphere and potential for active participation, Zoom is still an online platform that keeps people at a distance. Student comments (Section 2.5) show a desire to have classes in the classroom and show some frustration with being online. Teachers appear sensitive to this sentiment as 14 of 17 teachers agreed students prefer to be in the classroom.

Regardless of the quality of the online course, students would prefer to be in the classroom.

STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NO STRONG FEELING/ DON'T KNOW	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
1	0	2	9	5

Given these results, Zoom, in the eyes of students, would appear be the best of a bad bunch. While the program is positively reviewed by both students and teachers, it cannot escape the fact that it is online and keeps people at distance; two things that are beyond control.

6. In Zoom classes, the atmosphere is good.　Zoom を使った授業の雰囲気は良好だ。
642 responses

1	2	3	4	5
7 (1.1%)	44 (6.9%)	162 (25.2%)	227 (35.4%)	202 (31.5%)

590 responses

1	2	3	4	5
14 (2.4%)	51 (8.6%)	135 (22.9%)	212 (35.9%)	178 (30.2%)
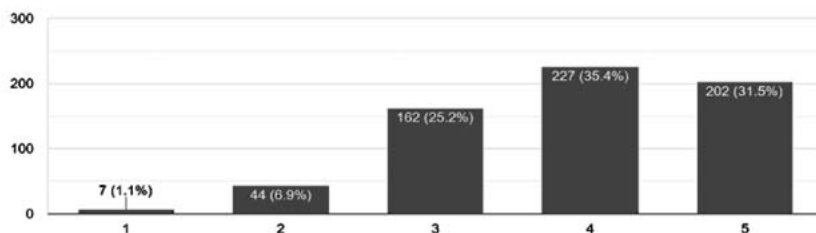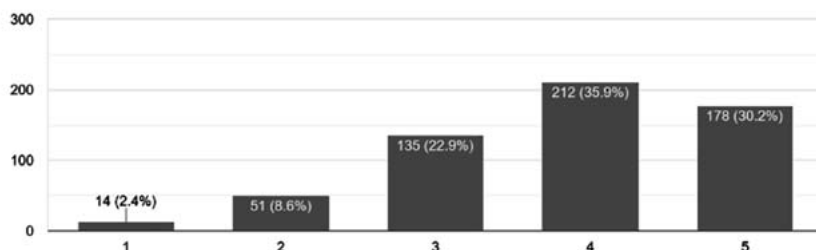
2.4 Achieving Course Objectives

As mentioned in Section 1.1, Core English is a course that has fairly standard goals concerning the development of fluency and acquisition of linguistic knowledge, but it is a course that also aims to alter attitudes to English use and develop a can-do attitude to English. Though students are likely unaware of the planning of courses when it comes to specific goals, students expressed a high level of belief in the value of the course as only 4.5% of students disagreed with the statement that their English will not develop with the course, 10.3% reported that they were not enjoying the course, and 11.8% said they did not look forward to their Core English classes.

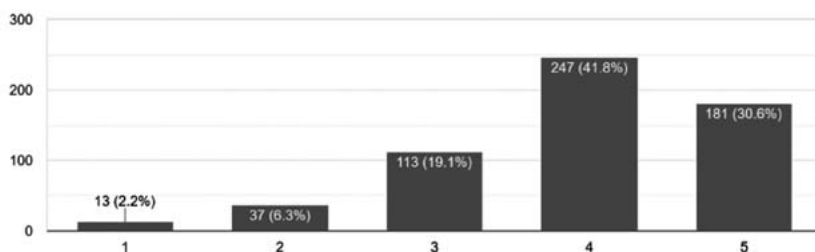10. I feel that my English will develop through Core English classes this semester　Core English の授業を通して私の英語力は成長する気がする。
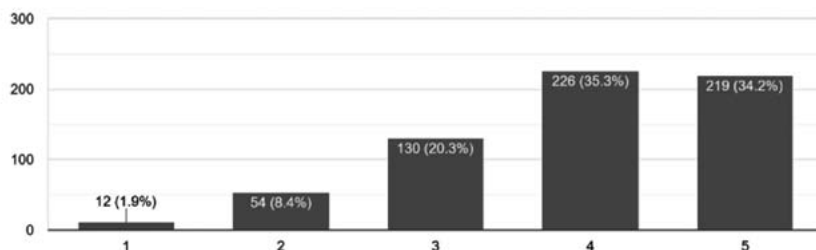641 responses
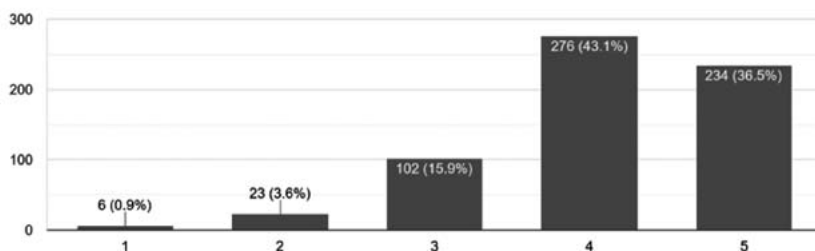
591 responses

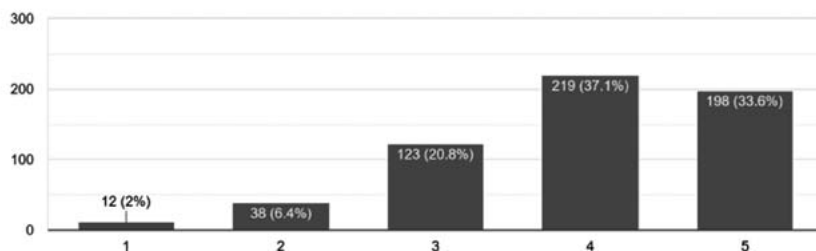**9. I am enjoying my Core English classes this semester**

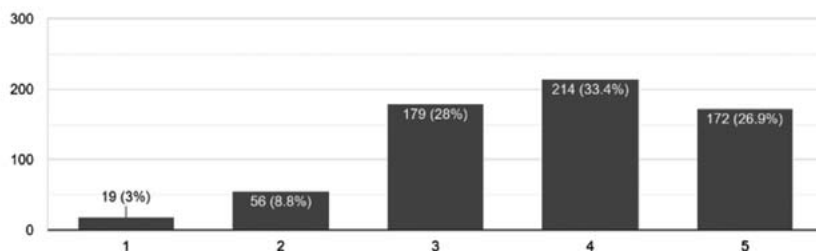今の Core English の授業を楽しんでいる。

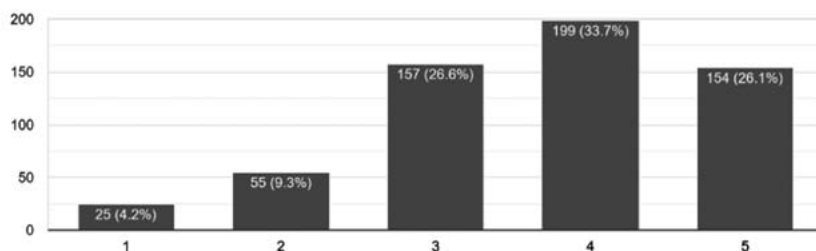641 responses

590 responses

5. I look forward to Core English classes this semester. このセメスターの Core English の授業を楽しみにしている。

640 responses

590 responses

When looking at student comments (Section 2.5), we can see that the greatest issue for students was the level of homework and out of class time required for the course. The level of homework may also explain the slight dip in positivity shown between the survey at the start of the semester and the survey at the end. Students at the start of the semester may not have fully known the requirements of Core English and other courses and will still have had very high energy levels. By the end of a semester that was reported by teachers and students as being very demanding, these energy levels and positivity may be somewhat depleted. Overall, however, the results above show a strong endorsement of the course as negative views were consistently kept to about 10% of the approximately 590-650 students who responded.

2.5 Student Comments

In addition to the Likert scale questions presented above, students were also invited to provide a response to three open questions. Student responses to these questions have been referenced in above sections where relevant. Due to this, the low number of comments received, and the lack of strong emergent themes in comments, little commentary of responses will be provided in this section.

The three open questions were:

12. Think about Core English this semester. What areas can be improved?
これまでCore Englishの授業を受けてきて、何か改善されるべき点があれば、意見を聞かせて下さい。

13. What areas do you like / think are successful?
この授業のどの点が成功していると感じますか。

14. Do you have any other comments about Core English?
その他この授業に関する意見やコメントなどあれば自由に記述下さい。

Though most students did not provide answers, the answers that were provided were grouped according to theme/issue. All issues that received ten or more responses will be shown.

In terms of areas that can be improved (Question 12), the top issues and the number of mentions were as follows:
- No comment (464)
- Amount of homework is too high / Short time to do the work (60)
- Teacher issues in class, such as lack of explanations, teacher personality or class/time management (21)
- Insufficient feedback from the teacher (12)
- Communication in class is difficult due to differing student levels, being online, insufficient time (12)

Question 13 received the most responses with the most common themes being:
- No comment (226)
- Able to communicate with many people / Communication in breakout rooms (175)
- Enjoyable assignments, particularly the presentations (49)
- Appreciation for teachers, such as visiting breakout rooms, quickly responding to emails, positive personality, help with technology, being encouraging and approachable (45)
- Good use of technology in class (40)
- Good class atmosphere (21)
- All English environment (17)

Like question 12, Question 14 received few responses
- No comment (437)
- Student is enjoying Core English (46)

- Passing on thanks to their teacher (30)
- Student is looking forward to having class on campus (20)
- Teacher issues in class, such as lack of explanations, teacher personality or class/time management (19)
- Student feels that the online class is successful (18)
- Too much homework (16)
- Feeling of improving their English or confidence in using English (12)
- Appreciation of having many opportunities to communicate in English (12)

2.6 Teacher Course Assessment

The positivity of students towards the course is maintained by teachers also as, at the completion of the semester, only one of the 17 teachers disagreed that the goals of Core English can be achieved online.

The goals of Core English can be achieved through online classes.

0	1	2	12	2
STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NO STRONG FEELING/ DON'T KNOW	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
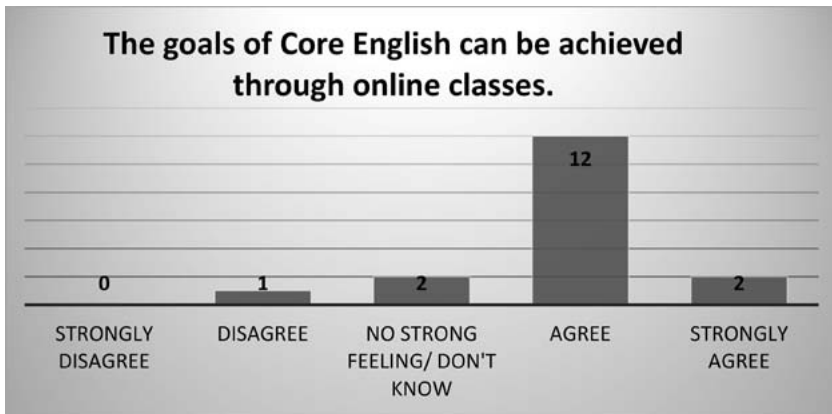
Although teachers expressed the positive view above, "can be" does not equate with "are being" and so teachers were also invited to rank the success of course elements.

17. I believe that the following elements of Core English were successfully implemented online.
(Please select all that apply)
17 responses

Element	Value
Pair / Group Discussion	15 (88.2%)
Conversation Listening	8 (47.1%)
Unit Readings	13 (76.5%)
Vocabulary Work	12 (70.6%)
Imaginary Dialog	14 (82.4%)
Conversation Reflection	9 (52.9%)
Project	14 (82.4%)
Quizzes	13 (76.5%)
Test	9 (52.9%)
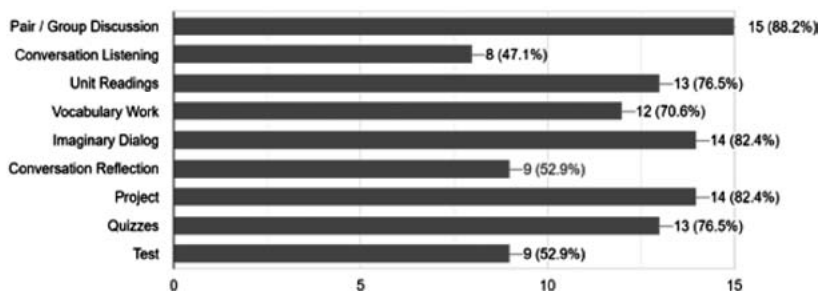
18. Which two elements do you believe were the most successful online? (Please select only two)
17 responses

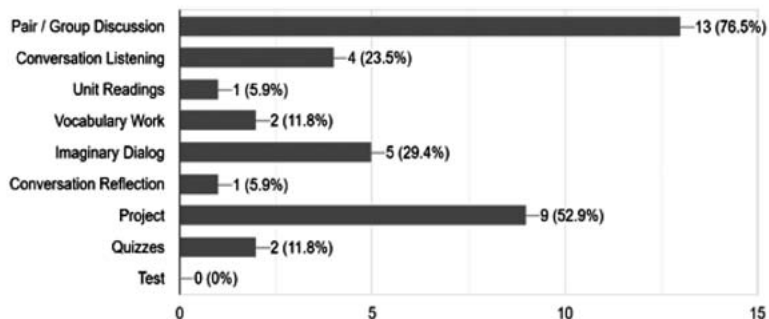| Element	Value
Pair / Group Discussion	13 (76.5%)
Conversation Listening	4 (23.5%)
Unit Readings	1 (5.9%)
Vocabulary Work	2 (11.8%)
Imaginary Dialog	5 (29.4%)
Conversation Reflection	1 (5.9%)
Project	9 (52.9%)
Quizzes	2 (11.8%)
Test	0 (0%)

19. Which two elements do you believe were the least successful online? (Please select only two)
17 responses

Element	Value
Pair / Group Discussion	2 (11.8%)
Conversation Listening	5 (29.4%)
Unit Readings	3 (17.6%)
Vocabulary Work	2 (11.8%)
Imaginary Dialog	0 (0%)
Conversation Reflection	7 (41.2%)
Project	2 (11.8%)
Quizzes	5 (29.4%)
Test	8 (47.1%)
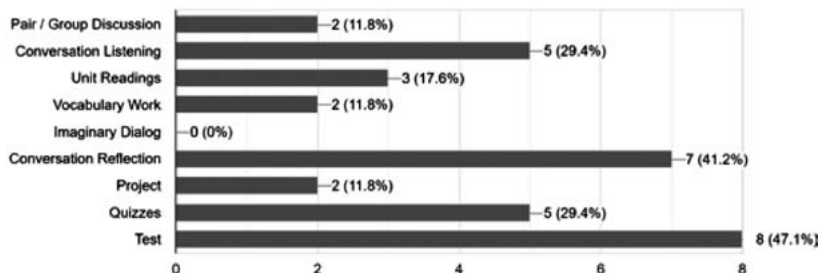
The three charts above are consistent in showing the elements viewed as being especially successful of problematic. The success of pair/group discussion is

supported by students' responses shown earlier regarding communication in breakout rooms and their ability to actively participate in class. The success of the project/presentation and imaginary dialog, which are also a feature of teacher comments, is a consequence of those activities being particularly suitable for the online format. Indeed, teachers often commented on the increased quality of students' PowerPoint centred presentations in the online semester over those in previous semesters where the support of technology was optional.

As course creator and coordinator, my focus is drawn more to what is seen as being unsuccessful. In this, the two clear elements of the course that require attention were the tests and the conversation reflection. The tests were the most flagged element by teachers and the element that received negative comments in the open questions shown below.

20. Do you have any comments about the transfer online of particular elements of Core English?	
Presentations were very high quality	Test didn't transfer well online
21. What benefits do online classes offer a course such as Core English?	
Assignment management (calendar, warnings, all in one place) Easier to do spontaneous activities	Tech skills (typing, software, hardware) Students become more self-reliant Increased out-of-class communication S-T
22. What are the drawbacks with online classes for a course such as Core English?	
Workload of teachers and students Technical issues Too much screen time / Zoom fatigue Cheating on tests BOR cut students off from the group	Can't replace face-to-face non-verbal elements Difficult to gauge the atmosphere Difficult to assess participation online Difficult to approach teacher in class / at the end Difficult to generate enthusiasm / motivate students

The negativity surrounding the tests centred on the perceived lack of fairness in the testing environment. Doing tests at distance with teachers unable to assess what students have access to while taking tests created a lack of faith in the fairness of results. This is compounded by the high level of work placed on students, some of whom may have little time to prepare for tests and might try to compensate for this by using textbooks and memos during tests. In a similar way, the conversation reflection was seen by teachers as something that exceptionally

busy students did not spend sufficient time on to achieve value.

The third element to be flagged, the conversation listening, had previously been a class time element, but was placed on Google Classroom due to the shortened semester. This loss of focus on this element was seen as being detrimental to the element itself while also increasing the out of class burden on students.

2.7 Legacy Issues

While the level of technical expertise among the 17 Core English teachers differed, moving a course online was a new experience for all. Though teachers experienced an increased workload because of this, it was viewed in a positive light because it exposed them to many new options and possibilities regarding teaching.

My view of teaching online classes has become more positive since online classes began.

STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NO STRONG FEELING/ DON'T KNOW	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
0	2	2	7	6
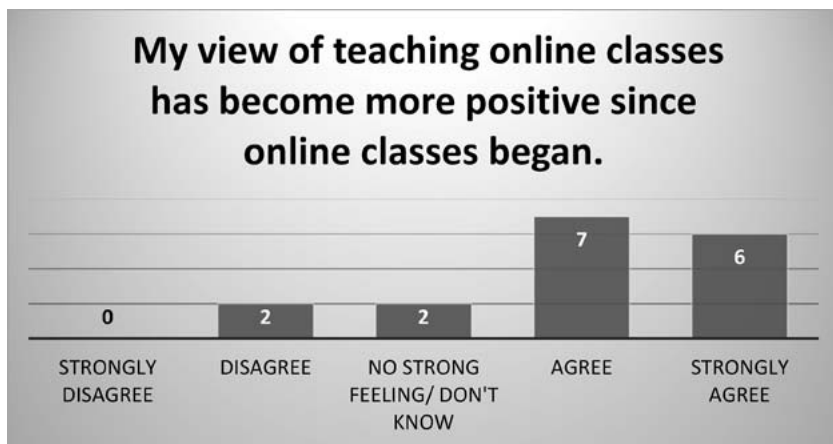
The shift to online classes has positively influenced teachers' views to online classes. This experience would appear to be profound for many, as 11 expressed a strong desire to continue using elements of the online course following the return to the classroom.

I will retain certain online aspects of the course when we return to the classroom.

STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NO STRONG FEELING/ DON'T KNOW	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
1	0	0	5	11

Another positive outcome is the increased level of collaboration between teachers. As mentioned in Sections 1.2 & 1.3, all teachers were involved in the transfer of the course online. The level of investment and collaboration required was viewed as being an extremely positive experience and something which, it is hoped, will become a regular feature of professional life.

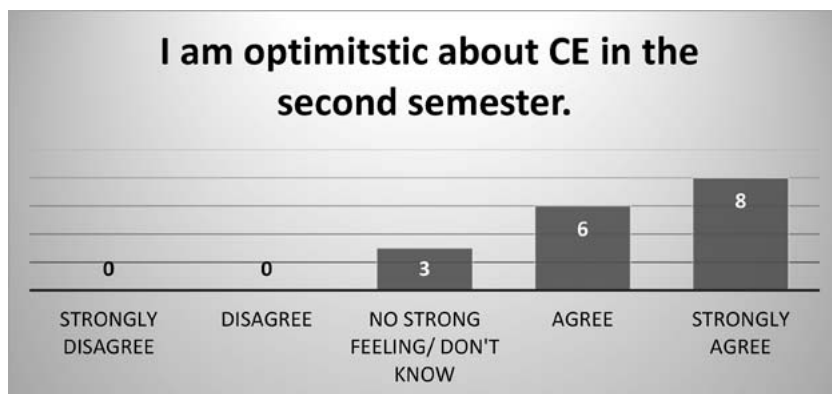## The collaboration among teachers in the development of CE was a productive experience.

STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NO STRONG FEELING/ DON'T KNOW	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
0	1	0	4	12

23. Do you have any comments on the collaboration between lecturers in the development of online CE this semester?	
Extremely positive experience	Everyone involved and supportive
24. What is your overall assessment of CE online?	
Extremely positive experience	Everyone involved and supportive

The positivity generated by the collaboration appears to have generated positive momentum because, despite an extremely challenging and busy semester, teachers at the end of the semester expressed a high level of optimism concerning the second semester.

I am optimitstic about CE in the second semester.

STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NO STRONG FEELING/ DON'T KNOW	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
0	0	3	6	8

3. Changes to CE

Having reviewed the course over the semester and considered student and teacher feedback, the following major changes were made for CE2 in the second semester:

- Removed tests and review classes for tests
- Due to the longer second semester and removal of the tests, all units are extended from 5 to 6 classes
- The conversation listening is incorporated into class time

- The conversation reflection is simplified and reformatted for smoother online completion
- The value of presentations is increased to reflect student effort and to compensate for the removal of tests

The above changes address all the main issues raised by students and teachers. Greater time assigned to each unit and the removal of tests reduces the demands on students and teachers as well as allowing the conversation listening to return to being an in-class element. Additionally, the removal of tests allows for a greater focus on the presentations, which were an exceptionally popular and productive element of the course in the first semester.

At the time of writing (two weeks into the second semester), it is too early to accurately assess the full impact of the changes. However, to offer some indication of the likely outcome of the changes, teachers responded to two simple questions:

1. Do the changes to freshman CE in the second semester effectively overcome the problems identified in the first semester?
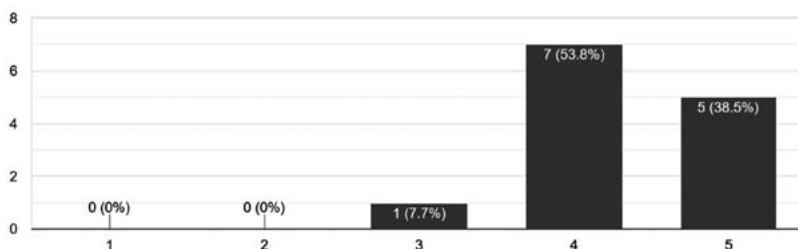12 responses
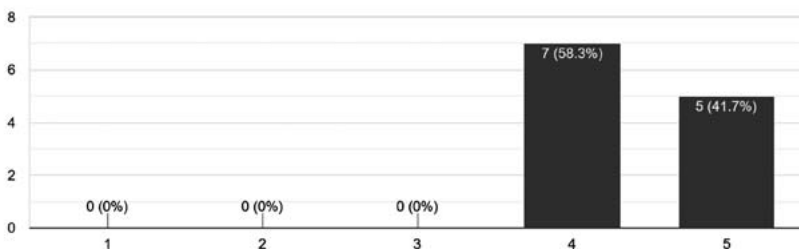
2. Do you feel that students are satisfied with the changes to CE?
13 responses

As can be seen, teachers appear satisfied with the changes and believe that their students share their satisfaction. Although teachers mention that it is too early to respond with any certainty, this snapshot of early opinion seems to offer a positive prediction for the new semester.

4. Final Word

This paper has attempted to chart the actions and reasoning behind the transfer of a classroom content based English language course to that of an online content based English language course. Though the course has been positively received and appraised by both students and teachers, there are certain aspects of the process that stand out as particular learning moments. Although it is (hopefully) unlikely that the circumstances and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic will be replicated in the future, these learning moments are applicable to more than these extreme circumstances.

Communication is vital

Providing communications and directions for students and teachers in a timely manner is vital in ensuring all are prepared and know the direction of future actions. The move online has the potential for often contradictory information to arrive from different sources at the same time. Maintaining one official channel of communication that keeps a clear timeline and presents steps and directions

in clear and concise terms allows for team focus and a shared direction in challenging times.

Manage assumptions and build upwards as needed

Transferring a regular class into an online class in circumstances that were far from proved to be too demanding for students. Hindsight shows that transferring key elements and possibly adding additional elements at a later date would have been preferable to transferring an entire course and then removing elements.

Collaboration exposes ideas and expertise

Many of the positives experienced during this process stem from collaboration. One key benefit of collaboration was the exposure to the creativity and previously unknown abilities of colleagues. It is a well-known maxim that challenge brings out the true nature of a person. However, without regular communication and means of collaboration, the knowledge, skills, and abilities of teachers would likely have gone unknown or unnoticed.

Collaboration improves the air

The increased exposure to the abilities and knowledge of colleagues creates greater respect among teacher. This increases group cohesion, which in turn increases collaboration and generates a positive cycle. The positive effects of this spread beyond task development and completion and influence many other aspects such as job satisfaction.

Investment improves and enables

By collaborating and building together, teachers feel invested in the course and strive to see it in being successfully implemented. Just as the Core English Program tries to develop a can-do attitude in students, the process of collaboration and the investment it brings developed a can-do attitude among teachers during a time that had the potential to cause great anxiety and withdrawal. Involved and invested teachers bring out the best of their course and their students.

Where there's muck there's brass

The final point not only allows me, as a Yorkshireman, to use a Yorkshire

proverb, it also reveals an important lesson. Although suggesting that there is money to be made in doing the unpleasant jobs in life, the proverb can also be broadly interpreted to mean that there is often something valuable (brass) in messy things (muck). This is exactly the point here. COVID-19 presented a challenge never seen before, especially in the timeframes involved and the overall level of uncertainty regarding almost every aspect, from student computer access and computer literacy levels, to online platform support, testing environments and even whether or not the later half of the semester will be online or in the classroom. Just as there is brass in the muck, there are benefits in the challenges. These have been documented here so they are not overlooked. By reflecting on them in this paper, I hope to never forget them.

References

Bradley, N. (2019). The Core English Programme in the Schools of Foreign Studies and World Liberal Arts. *Bulletin of Nagoya University of Foreign Studies*. 5, 1–20.