Strategies to build a community of learners in online classes

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Abstract. This paper describes the use of screencast feedback to enhance teaching presence and weekly self-reflection surveys to enhance social presence among students and build a community of learners. These approaches were found to diminish the feeling of isolation in online learning environments. Further findings indicated that this multimodal approach to providing feedback helped build a rapport between the teacher and students which led to increased motivation and task engagement. These strategies to build a community of learners will be of particular interest to educators looking for innovative approaches to improving teaching and social presence in online learning environments while also providing personalized, formative feedback.

Keywords: multimodal feedback, screencasts, online learning, teaching, social presence.

1.   Introduction

At the outset of the coronavirus pandemic, Japanese universities experienced an unprecedented shift to online learning. Although Japan is often thought of as a leader in innovative technology, most classes at the tertiary level are still very much analog. To make matters worse, the decision to 'pivot' to online learning was made only weeks before the beginning of the school year at many institutions in April 2020. While studies by Kumar, Martin, Budhrani, and Ritzhaupt (2019) and Hodges et al. (2020) found that effective online university-level courses took between six to nine months of thoughtful planning, teachers in Japan had a relatively

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short amount of time to design their courses. Furthermore, a lack of educational technology support led many analysts to predict that the Japanese education system would have a particularly difficult time to adapt to online learning environments (Kittaka, 2020).

To better understand the results of this shift to online learning, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) conducted a survey of 3,000 randomly selected students in early 2021. While the survey found that almost 60% of respondents were satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their online classes, it also found that 53% felt a feeling of loneliness and isolation from their peers (MEXT, 2021).

Furthermore, a study conducted by Irwin (2021) of 103 first- and second-year university students found that 65% of respondents felt isolated and socially distant from both their classmates and teachers. Students were missing what Lawrence (2017) described as 'the human feel' in their online classes caused by a lack of social and teaching presence. Lawrence identified social and teaching presence as essential for successful online learning, and that, "teaching presence is the catalyst that fosters social and cognitive presence" (Lawrence, 2017, p. 142).

Therefore, the author of the present study developed two strategies to address the perceived lack of interpersonal interaction students reported experiencing in their online classes. The two instructional strategies described in this paper were developed to promote teaching presence by providing personalized screencast feedback and social presence through weekly self-reflection surveys. The goal of each was to help students establish a rapport with their teachers and classmates while also fostering a sense of community in their online lessons.

2. Instructional learning context

Two hundred and fifty first- and second-year undergraduate English as a foreign language learners (A2-B1 CEFR level) enrolled in ten online classes (divided by year and language ability) participated in the lessons described in this paper. The lessons were conducted online in English and held once a week for 90 minutes during a 15-week semester. The lessons combined real-time instruction using a video conferencing platform with on-demand materials in the form of video tutorials, narrated slideshow presentations, and study materials uploaded to a Learning Management System (LMS). The lessons and study were conducted during the 2021 spring term (April-July).

3.   Personalized screencast feedback

To improve teaching presence in the online lessons, the instructor utilized screencasts to provide personalized feedback on a variety of assignments. The screencasts were in the form of digital video recordings with audio narration that captured feedback on digitally submitted assignments displayed on a computer screen.

Each screencast feedback video followed the format of feedback conferences outlined by Ferris and Hedgcock (2005). The screencasts started with a salutation and affirmation, highlighted the strengths of the assignment, discussed its weaknesses, provided suggestions for improvement, and finished with closing remarks of encouragement. Following this format, the screencast feedback was highly personalized and provided an emotive element conveyed through the tone and inflection of the instructor's voice.

The length of feedback videos and the time it takes to produce them varies depending on the type of assignment and feedback focus. As an example, for a paragraph writing assignment of 150 words, the videos averaged four minutes in length and took approximately 15 minutes to produce. The production time required depends on the screencaster experience, workflow efficacy, and teaching context.

In terms of improved teaching presence, Irwin (2022) describes an experiment in which students were separated into a group that received written feedback (control) and a group that received screencast feedback (experimental). Among several significant findings, students in the experimental group reported that the feedback style resulted in enhanced feelings of encouragement and a closer connection with the instructor. Thus, screencast feedback helped develop a rapport with the instructor that did not evolve from traditional written feedback.

4.   Weekly self-reflection surveys

To address social interaction, weekly self-reflection surveys were utilized. The surveys were conducted using an online form and were to be submitted by the end of each week.

While the content of the surveys changed slightly each week depending on the lesson materials, each survey followed a similar pattern. Students were asked to report how they felt during the week, the amount of time they had spent engaging

with the lesson material, what they had learned, what they had trouble with, and if they had any comments or suggestions for the instructor to help improve the lessons.

The survey results were then anonymized and compiled into a spreadsheet that was uploaded to the LMS and shared with the class. To acknowledge student contributions, the instructor highlighted responses in each question category that were deemed to be insightful or thought-provoking. Finally, the instructor created a short screencast of the survey results to encourage the students and respond to any difficulties they were having. This form of contextual socialization allowed students to compare their efforts, learning outcomes, and difficulties with their classmates. By acknowledging the student contributions in this way, a virtuous cycle of feedback and response was created. This was demonstrated by the fact that the thoughtfulness of the responses each week deepened and developed from the outset of the activity until the end of the term.

5. Conclusions

By combining the assignment screencast feedback and weekly self-reflection surveys, the instructor was able to enhance both teaching and social presence in the online lessons described in this paper. As a result, students reported extremely high satisfaction levels in anonymous course evaluation surveys conducted by the university at the end of the semester. Further results showed that students appreciated the instructor for utilizing the two strategies because they felt that they had developed a genuine rapport with both the teacher and their classmates.

The challenge of planning and implementing online language lessons that provide appropriate teaching and social presence should not be underestimated. However, without sufficient attention given to interpersonal interaction, instructors risk increasing attrition rates in their online classes (Tyler-Smith, 2006). The two strategies described in this paper can go a long way to creating an online learning environment rich in both teaching and social presence while at the same time providing highly personalized and motivating feedback.

It is difficult to predict what lasting impacts the coronavirus pandemic will have on education in general and online learning specifically. However, screencast feedback and weekly self-reflection surveys are not activities that should be limited to online learning environments. They can be used to create unique opportunities to develop and strengthen rapport within hybrid style or in-person lessons as well.

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