

# How Did Students Perceive Pre-recorded Online English Classes?

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This study aims to investigate how the students at Niigata Institute of Technology perceived pre-recorded online English classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sixty-one first-year students in 2020 and 46 first-year students in 2021 were asked to address both advantages and disadvantages that they recognized while taking the pre-recorded classes. The results suggest that this teaching method helped the students improve their self-regulated learning while they experienced a difficulty of asking questions. Comparison of the student evaluations from 2019 to 2021 shows that pre-recorded classes got a higher evaluation than in-person classes. This paper also discusses some pedagogical implications regarding the effective use of the pre-recorded method.

Key words: in-person class, Moodle, pre-recorded online class, student evaluation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Online teaching has become the main alternative teaching modality in educational settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though online courses, such as MOOCs, had gradually become more recognized and available in the last few years even before the pandemic, schools still conducted most classes face-to-face. This pandemic, however, suddenly changed the way classes were delivered, which meant that educators around the world were faced with relatively new pedagogical challenges. It also evoked a discussion about whether online classes could be as effective as in-person classes.

Now there are three main types of class options available in schools: in-person, live online, and pre-recorded online. Several reports have attempted to find out which type of class was effective for Japanese college students. The results have been somewhat mixed. According to Shibuya and Kawanabe (2021)<sup>[1]</sup>, students preferred in-person classes to the two online options, and their second preference was pre-recorded followed by live online. Mukogawa Women's University (2020)<sup>[2]</sup> shared the same result in the comparison between the two online methods. Regarding the ease of understanding learning contents, however, pre-recorded was rated higher than in-person by a wide margin (68.6% to 13.8%) among medical students (Mitoma et al., 2020)<sup>[3]</sup>. Nakamura (2021)<sup>[4]</sup> reported that the average final examination score was higher and the standard deviation was larger for pre-recorded than for face-to-face, indicating that the pre-recorded method could benefit motivated students better than less-motivated ones. Fukihara (2021)<sup>[5]</sup> observes that a pre-recorded style is less effective for students who dislike studying English than a conventional one while it

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enhances their self-regulated learning. Overall, these reports suggest that online classes, especially pre-recorded, are not necessarily less effective than in-person classes.

A pre-recorded method, which encounters fewer connection troubles than live online classes, was used for required English classes at Niigata Institute of Technology (NIIT) in 2020 and 2021. The aims of this paper were to find out how NIIT students perceived pre-recorded English classes and to obtain suggestions regarding how to improve the classes better.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In general, a pre-recorded class requires students to watch a prerecorded lecture video uploaded onto a Learning Management System (LMS) and complete an assignment by the deadline. Students do not have to be in a certain classroom at a scheduled time, allowing them more flexibility than a conventional class. What kind of influence does this flexibility have on their learning? Five reports, which focus on how students regard pre-recorded classes, were selected for this paper. All of them conducted a questionnaire with closed-ended questions.

### 2.1 Students' Perception on Advantages/Disadvantages of Pre-recorded Classes

One of the main factors that students appreciated about pre-recorded classes is the ability to study at their own pace (Abe, 2021<sup>[6]</sup>; Kyoto Notre Dame University, 2020<sup>[7]</sup>; Matsushima, 2020<sup>[8]</sup>; Tsujikawa, Mabuchi, Sakai, & Nakaue, 2021<sup>[9]</sup>). This teaching style allowed them to pause a video whenever necessary so that they could have enough time to take notes and look up what they did not understand. Other advantages included the ability to watch a video repeatedly as well as to easily review what they had learned whenever they wanted to (Abe, 2021; Kyoto Notre Dame University, 2020; Nakamura, 2021). Based on these findings, it can be said that a pre-recorded class enhances students' autonomous learning, helping to improve their comprehension of the learning contents.

As for disadvantages, many students had difficulty getting accustomed to using a digital device properly (Abe, 2021; Kyoto Notre Dame University, 2020; Tsujikawa et al., 2021), especially at the beginning of the first semester. This is understandable because it was probably their first time taking classes online by themselves at home. Other commonly mentioned disadvantages were difficulties asking questions and pacing themselves while studying (Abe, 2021; Kyoto Notre Dame University, 2020; Tsujikawa et al., 2021). In a pre-recorded class, neither their teacher nor classmates are present to ask questions to. While they might be able to ask questions via email or chat, it is often difficult for them to receive immediate answers. Another notable problem that students mentioned was the inability to know how other students are doing in class (Kyoto Notre Dame University, 2020; Nakamura, 2021). Students often compare themselves to their classmates in order to assess how fast or slow their understanding is. It is not impossible, but it is challenging to provide students with this opportunity in pre-recorded classes. These results suggest that it is important to establish a more

solid connection between a teacher and students as well as among students in pre-recorded classes.

## 2.2 Differences in Academic Help-seeking Between Online and In-person Classes

As pointed out in the previous section, many students find it difficult to ask questions in pre-recorded classes. Asking questions is a part of academic help-seeking behavior. Academic help-seeking is defined as the behavior through which students seek advice and/or ask questions in order to get assistance for the problems that they cannot solve by themselves (Nosaki, 2003)<sup>[10]</sup>. There are two main types of help-seeking: autonomous and dependent. According to Kera and Hayashi (2021)<sup>[11]</sup>, in autonomous help-seeking, students ask for assistance after trying hard on their own to solve difficult problems. On the contrary, students who display dependent help-seeking ask for assistance without attempting to work on problems by themselves. Does the difficulty of asking questions in pre-recorded classes mean that students give up seeking academic assistance at all? If not, how do academic help-seeking behaviors differ between online and face-to-face classes?

To answer these questions, Kera and Hayashi (2021) conducted a survey of 116 second to fourth-year college students who were taking online classes in two universities in Aichi and Fukui. The authors did not specify whether the online classes were live or pre-recorded. The survey discovered three aspects of help-seeking behaviors. First, the students displayed dependent help-seeking more often in face-to-face classes. Second, they were more hesitant to seek academic help in online classes because they were afraid that replying to their questions via email or SNS would be troublesome for their teachers and friends. Third, the students autonomously asked for support from their friends more frequently in online classes. The authors explained that the hesitation to seek help in online classes might make students scrutinize whether they can solve the problems on their own and whether help-seeking is really necessary.

It might be generally assumed that students can easily become demotivated when their questions are not answered right away. Although this is probably true for some students, especially those who are academically underprepared, the study of Kera and Hayashi (2021) suggests that there is the possibility that students' self-directed learning might be enhanced when they acknowledge that assistance is not readily available.

## 3. METHOD

### 3.1 Pre-recorded Class Structure

At NIIT, first-year students were required to take two English courses, Basic English I in the first semester and Basic English II in the second semester. Each course offered 30 lessons with the main focus being reading comprehension. The students were divided into two levels, upper and lower, based on the results of their placement tests, and they basically remained in their assigned classes throughout the academic year. The author of this report was responsible for one upper-level and one

lower-level class from 2019 to 2021. Students in 2019 attended in-person classes, and most courses, including Basic English, were online in 2020. In 2021, the required English classes were the only courses that the students took online. One of the reasons for continuing English courses online is that this allowed students to study at home and repeatedly practice pronunciation or read English aloud without the risk of coronavirus infection.

Pre-recorded classes in 2020 and 2021 were conducted in the following way:

(1) Each lecture was recorded on Power Point slides with audio, then converted into a video and uploaded onto Moodle, the LMS used at NIIT. The video length was about 60 minutes. While watching the lecture video, students were assigned problems or activities to work on, which were expected to take approximately 30 minutes.

The common teaching contents included asking reading comprehension questions, answering and explaining the problems from the previous assignment, reading aloud and/or dictation activities. The upper-level class also watched or read internet materials related to the textbook content, such as videos on YouTube, so that the students could be provided with more authentic English and additional knowledge. In the lower-level class, the emphasis was on grammar acquisition in addition to reading comprehension.

(2) A lecture video and an assignment were made available to students based on the school's schedule and stored in Moodle until the end of the academic year. Each assignment needed to be submitted by 5 p.m. the following day. The instructor checked every assignment and provided a grade and feedback within 1-3 days of the deadline. When the students asked a question or made a comment, the instructor added a reply to the feedback.

(3) One of the difficulties in administering an online English examination is the inability to detect cheating. Therefore, there were no examinations in 2020 when having many students in one classroom was discouraged. The course grades were based on how well students completed each assignment and extracurricular e-learning assignments. In 2021, 3 out of 4 examinations were paper based. At the end of the second semester, the sixth wave of the COVID-19 inflection suddenly forced all the courses at NIIT to offer final examinations online or assignments as alternatives to the exams. In Basic English II, it was decided that an online final examination would be administered with significant changes to the questions in order to suit the online format and also prevent possible cheating.

### 3.2 Participants

Sixty-one first-year students (42 in the upper-level and 19 in the lower-level) in 2020, and 46 first-year students (35 in the upper-level and 11 in the lower-level) in 2021, responded to the questionnaire. All of them belonged to the Department of Engineering.

### 3.3 Questionnaire

The students were asked to answer the following two questions in their own words in the last class of the first semester in 2020, and in the last class of the second semester in 2021:

Q1: What have you found beneficial about this pre-recorded class? (advantages)

Q2: What have you found difficult/challenging about this pre-recorded class? (disadvantages)

The purpose for using open-ended questions is to get as broad a variety of opinions as possible from the students. The majority of the previous studies referenced in this paper administered multi-choice questions prepared by teachers or university administrators. Although their results are useful in understanding how students perceive pre-recorded classes, there might have been other opinions that the teachers had not anticipated.

In this questionnaire, there were many students who gave more than one answer to each question. In order to get the most diverse data sample possible, all the answers given by the students were counted.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Advantages of Pre-recorded Classes

Table 1 shows the most mentioned advantages of the pre-recorded classes in both years. The results are very similar to those of the previous studies mentioned in Section 2.1.

Table 1 “What have you found beneficial about this pre-recorded class?”

2020	2021
Watching lecture videos again and again (38)	Taking classes anytime I want to (26)
Taking classes anytime I want to (20)	Studying at my own pace (16)
Studying at my own pace (17)	Watching lecture videos again and again (15)
Reading aloud until I am satisfied / Reading aloud without feeling self-conscious (3)	Reading aloud until I am satisfied / Reading aloud without feeling self-conscious (4)

#### 1. *Watching lecture videos again and again* (total 53)

The ability to review lecture videos makes it easier for students to not only take notes but also understand what they have learned. In addition, they can pause and rewind videos in order to repeatedly practice correct English pronunciation or English sentences until they understand them, which is extremely important in mastering foreign languages. This repeatability is difficult to provide in a conventional class where time is scheduled by the instructor.

#### 2. *Taking classes anytime I want to* (46)

Many students appreciated the flexibility in time and location. It allowed them to use time more effectively by taking the classes when they could concentrate. This flexibility could have a

positive impact on their effective learning.

### 3. *Studying at my own pace* (33)

Many students paused the lecture video when they came across something that they did not understand, and they took time to look it up and consider it thoroughly. Some students even utilized special functions of internet videos to effectively meet their own learning demands. For instance, several students lowered the speed of a video when they could not understand what was being spoken in English. One student increased the playback speed when working on a listening activity in order to get used to faster spoken English.

### 4. *Reading aloud until I am satisfied / Reading aloud without feeling self-conscious* (7)

Generally speaking, Japanese students tend to become nervous about their English pronunciation and hesitate to practice freely when they are surrounded by their classmates. In pre-recorded classes, however, they were able to practice to their hearts' content, which was beneficial for students who were strongly interested in improving their speaking skills.

## 4.2 Disadvantages of Pre-recorded Classes

The disadvantages that the students pointed out the most are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 “What have you found difficult/challenging about this pre-recorded class?”

2020	2021
Unable to ask questions when I want to (21)	Unable to ask questions when I want to (11)
Almost forgetting to watch a lecture video or submit an assignment (18)	Almost forgetting to watch a lecture video or submit an assignment (10)
Not feeling that I am attending a class (7)	Hard to take classes and submit assignments on an iPad (7)
Hard to take classes and submit assignments on an iPad (6)	Not feeling that I am attending a class (3)
Anxious whether I am doing alright (3)	Having Internet connection troubles (2)
None in particular (4)	None in particular (4)

### 1. *Unable to ask questions when I want to* (total 32)

The flexibility in time and space meant that their teacher and/or classmates were not always available when the students had questions. Some students wrote questions down on an assignment to get an answer from the instructor or asked their friends. Others presumably tried to find the answer by themselves or just left the question unanswered.

### 2. *Almost forgetting to watch a lecture video or submit an assignment* (28)

As mentioned earlier, a lecture video and an assignment were uploaded according to the school's schedule, and the deadline for each assignment was 5 p.m. the following day. The students could take a class anytime as long as their assignment was submitted by the deadline. Because of

this, there were students who nearly forgot to watch a video and/or submit an assignment. Despite their occasional difficulties in time management, most of the students did not fail to take classes. As for the students who did fail to complete some of their English classes, their attendance rate for other courses was also relatively low. In other words, those students missed some of the English classes not because the classes were pre-recorded but because they had difficulty in being punctual in general.

3. *Hard to take classes and submit assignments on an iPad* (13)

NIIT distributed an iPad to all its students in 2019-2021. Even though the students could use any device to take pre-recorded classes, most of them presumably used an iPad as their primary means of accessing the videos and submitting assignments. Some students struggled to work on an assignment and watch a lecture video on an iPad at the same time mainly because of its limited screen size.

4. *Not feeling that I am attending a class* (10)

There were students who preferred the classroom environment because they were motivated by seeing their fellow studious classmates. They thought that a pre-recorded class lacked this kind of encouragement.

5. *None in particular* (8)

Some students appeared to have adjusted to this new learning style without problems.

6. *Anxious whether I am doing alright* (3)

Some students became anxious about whether their assignments had been completed successfully. They were also worried about their level of understanding because they could not compare it to that of other students.

7. *Having Internet connection problems* (2)

Though most of the students seem to have been able to take pre-recorded classes without internet connection problems, some students sometimes experienced trouble when studying at home.

## 5. DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Comparison of Class Evaluations by Students in 2019-2021

As seen above, the students experienced both positive and negative aspects of a pre-recorded class. How did they evaluate the classes after all?

The university administers a class evaluation by students at the end of each semester. Tables 3 and 4 show a comparison of the evaluations of upper- and lower-level English classes respectively over the last three years (2019-2021). The students were asked to rate each item from 1 (I don't agree at all) to 5 (I strongly agree). The scores in both tables are the averages of the two courses (Basic English I and Basic English II).

Table 3 The average scores of the student evaluations (upper-level class)

	2019 (in-person)	2020 (pre- recorded)	2021 (pre- recorded)
1. Do you understand what is taught in this class?	4.33	4.53	4.51
2. Do you feel that the teacher is enthusiastic about this class?	4.21	4.80	4.54
3. Is the teacher's explanation clear and easy to understand?	4.15	4.64	4.54
4. Are the class materials effective for better understanding?	4.36	4.69	4.59
5. Does the teacher give students enough opportunities to ask questions or express opinions?	4.36	4.28	4.60
6. Does this class enhance your interest in this subject?	3.82	3.70	4.00
7. Overall, are you satisfied with this class?	4.02	4.36	4.46

Table 4 The average scores of the student evaluations (lower-level class)

	2019 (in-person)	2020 (pre- recorded)	2021 (pre- recorded)
1. Do you understand what is taught in this class?	4.10	4.22	4.40
2. Do you feel that the teacher is enthusiastic about this class?	4.25	4.51	4.60
3. Is the teacher's explanation clear and easy to understand?	4.36	4.51	4.59
4. Are the class materials effective for better understanding?	4.21	4.56	4.48
5. Does the teacher give students enough opportunities to ask questions or express opinions?	4.21	4.07	4.23
6. Does this class enhance your interest in this subject?	3.91	4.00	3.53
7. Overall, are you satisfied with this class?	4.07	4.45	4.30

Overall, the evaluations of pre-recorded classes in 2020 and 2021 were higher than those of in-person classes in 2019. The results of items 1, 3, and 4 suggest that the students thought that the pre-recorded method effectively helped them understand class contents. As seen in Section 4.1, many students made good use of the flexibility of pre-recorded class and self-regulated their learning, which may have consequently deepened their comprehension. Regarding item 2, which addresses the instructor enthusiasm, the pre-recorded method received a more positive response from the students than in-person classes. One reason for this might be that the instructor gave feedback or commented on every assignment, and the students seemed to appreciate the instructor's effort.

The results of item 5 should be interpreted with caution. Based on the evaluations, the students



seemed to recognize that the instructor made sure to allow them to ask questions or express opinions. However, as mentioned in Section 4.2, the students found it difficult to receive immediate answers to their questions in a pre-recorded class. In other words, simply giving students the opportunity to ask questions might not be sufficient. That being said, it does not necessarily mean that questions from students must be answered immediately since, as Kera and Hayashi (2021) pointed out, this inability could actually encourage students to consider their questions more thoroughly instead of expecting answers with little effort.

Considering the results of the student evaluations over the last three years, it can be assumed that the advantages of pre-recorded classes outweigh the disadvantages. It is important to note, however, that the results do not necessarily indicate that the students preferred pre-recorded to in-person. Nevertheless, it can support the claim of Glazier and Harris (2020)<sup>[12]</sup> that “online classes are not inherently worse than face-to-face classes or harder for students to like” (p.15).

## 5.2 Implications for Effective Pre-recorded Classes

According to Glazier and Harris (2020), factors that make classes best and worst for students differ between face-to-face and online classes. For in-person classes, the two most important factors are a teacher’s attitude and the relationship between a teacher and students. On the other hand, for online classes, assignments and course organization are the most significant. Also, when students in face-to-face classes think that their teacher lacks a caring attitude, they tend to rate the class worst. The factors that students think make online classes worst are assignments and lack of teacher engagement. These results suggest that, in online classes, it is most essential to design the kind of assignments that would be appropriate for students without diminishing the importance of a teacher. Glazier and Harris also emphasize the significance of the teachers being supportive and communicating clearly with students.

Based on a questionnaire survey of students who took pre-recorded classes, Tsujikawa et al. (2021) mention that class satisfaction is highly related to the ease of understanding the class contents as well as being able to study at one’s own pace. They also specify the factors that students think are important for effective pre-recorded classes. First, class materials should be simple and clear. Second, the students want class materials to be delivered through video or Power Point slides including oral explanations. Third, instructions and deadlines for assignments need to be clear. Fourth, the students want teachers to comment on their assignment as soon as possible and provide correct answers. Lastly, students prefer a class which encourages them to ask questions and offers additional materials. Aiba (2021)<sup>[13]</sup> found that the pre-recorded classes which students thought were effective offered high quality teaching materials, such as Power Point slides with audio, and feedback.

The present study revealed that the issue mentioned the most by the students was the ability to

ask questions and have them answered when necessary. There are several ways to deal with this problem. Teachers can encourage students to ask questions via email or SNS if they need to be answered as soon as possible. It also would be a good idea to create a Q&A section on Moodle where students can ask questions anytime and teachers answer them at a certain time. If students can wait a few days for their questions to be answered, teachers can include a Q&A segment in the next lecture video. Regardless of how teachers choose to deal with the issue, it is more important to assure students that a teacher is willing to answer any questions and communicate with them in pre-recorded than it is in in-person classes.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This paper discusses how the students of NIIT perceived pre-recorded English classes. Though the students recognized both advantages and disadvantages, the comparison of student evaluations suggests that the students perceived the classes positively. The results of the questionnaire indicate that the students made good use of the flexibility of pre-recorded classes, which could help to improve their self-regulated learning.

It is necessary to remember that this pandemic has had a major influence on the students' perception and acceptance of online classes. Most of the students accepted online classes because they understood their necessity in preventing the spread of coronavirus. Therefore, it is not certain how students would react to pre-recorded classes after the pandemic subsides and our lives return to normal.

Still, this new style of teaching should not be disregarded just because it lacks the actual physical presence of teachers and students in a classroom. It is important to take advantage of this new learning option that the pandemic has brought forth.

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