# Three Delivery Modes for Beginning Japanese: Instructor Reflections on Traditional, Blended and Flipped Course Formats

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**Abstract**

Traditional direct instruction in face-to-face classes is a familiar format for both learners and instructors and tends to be the standard in university-level language teaching. While there are many and obvious advantages to frequent and regular face-to-face contact, particularly with beginning language students, the technical affordances of online delivery systems also offer benefits to both students and instructors. Blended formats can work well for learners who require flexibility in scheduling and physical access, as well as learners who require more time to process spoken language. However, in the author's experience, grades, successful completion rates and student satisfaction can be lower compared to face-to-face classes. Flipped classes, where students have initial contact with new material outside the scheduled class time, followed by active learning during class time when they have direct access to peers and experts who can help them, have shown great potential. This paper reports the reflections of an instructor who has taught the same first-semester Japanese language class in these three different formats, and is based on results comparing demographics, successful completion rates, and grades on various components, as well as qualitative results from student comments.

## 1. Introduction

The traditional face-to-face lecture-and-practice-based classroom has long been the standard delivery model for Japanese language learning, although in the past decades, innovations and alternative methodologies, particularly those relying on digital technologies, have been introduced and explored by many instructors. Language instructors have been at the forefront of supplementing face-to-face instruction with online activities, computer-mediated communication and cultural exchange, as well as experimenting with innovative delivery methods. Such

methods include fully online, hybrid, hyflex, blended, web-enhanced and other flexible delivery modes (Sener, 2015). Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the delivery of classes into a completely online course delivery model for many institutions in North America. While this shift has caused an upheaval in both instructors' and students' teaching and learning routines, it can also be seen as an opportunity to re-examine and reflect upon language pedagogy, and renew curriculum and methodology. The pivot to online learning has forced instructors and students to experiment with and adopt digital delivery methods, thereby enabling a realization of the practical and beneficial affordances of various digital tools and online teaching approaches. While many instructors and students are looking forward to returning to face-to-face learning, this recent forced exposure to digital delivery methods should be seen as an opportunity to take what has been learned from the pandemic online experience, and consciously apply the most beneficial and effective tools and methodologies in both face-to-face and online delivery methods. The author of the current study has been considering in particular the merits and drawbacks of traditional face-to-face, blended and flipped delivery methods, based on personal experience over the past several years, which the recent experience with exclusively online teaching has brought into sharper relief.

While most instructors have a clear idea of what traditional face-to-face classes look like (although of course methodologies and activities differ) definitive understandings of alternative delivery methods are not so clear cut, especially with respect to blended and hybrid learning. In the past, blended and hybrid learning were often thought to be one and the same (Grgurović, 2017; Halasa et al., 2019), but at the particular institution where the current study has been conducted, these two terms are distinguished as follows. Blended instruction is defined as a mode of delivery where classes are purposefully designed to contain both in-person and online instruction, and where students move as a cohort between the two modalities. In other words, the instructor decides what parts and when the class will take place in person and when it will be carried out online, either synchronously or asynchronously. In contrast, hybrid instruction also takes place both in-person and

online (both synchronously and asynchronously), but the student decides when and how to participate depending on their individual circumstances or preferred modality. The third mode of delivery under investigation, the flipped format, means that the first contact with new material and concepts happens at the individual student level, usually asynchronously online, and the concepts and structures are then practiced in scheduled face-to-face full-class sessions (Talbert, 2017). Flipped learning can be considered a particular form of blended learning.

This report is based on a self-reflective examination of classes taught by the author at a mid-sized Canadian research university from 2012 onward. There is no formal degree program in Japanese language, and students take courses in Japanese as electives or to fulfill their language requirement. *Genki I: An Integrated Course in Elementary Japanese* (Banno et al., 2011), has been used as the course textbook since 2006. Course enrolment caps of 35 to 40 students are relatively high, and the first level of Beginners' Japanese (JPST 100) is usually fully subscribed. Since approximately 2015, there has been a substantial increase in the number of international students in beginner classes, and the majority of these are from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. The classes in the current study include eight sections of a traditional face-to-face format, taught from 2012 to 2015, four sections of blended delivery from 2017 to 2019, and two sections of flipped delivery in Term 1 of 2019. (It should be noted that the last three weeks of the 2019 Term 2 blended class were taught completely online as a result of the cancellation of face-to-face classes due to the COVID-19 pandemic.) Essentially the same content and evaluation breakdown was employed for each different mode of course delivery.[1]

At this institution, the traditional face-to-face format for beginner-level Japanese classes consists of four hours per week of in-class grammar lectures, practice exercises, role plays, games, other interactive learning activities, and formal evaluation. Review quizzes and many of the other assignments are conducted and submitted online through Canvas, the learning management system adopted by the institution. From 2013, lectures introducing the writing systems and

assigned kanji for each chapter were pre-recorded and posted in the learning management system for students to access as resources. In the traditional format, each chapter, done over a two-week period, would generally include four to six online vocabulary, grammar, kanji, listening comprehension and reading comprehension practice quizzes, and one handwritten workbook assignment.

The blended course created by the author consists of online video-recorded grammar and orthography explanations which students are expected to use outside of class time. These videos are then followed up with review quizzes, homework, projects and assignments. The review quizzes include many of the ones that had been used in the traditional classes, in addition to new quizzes specifically based on the grammar videos. Students also attend a one-hour face-to-face class each week focusing on interactive learning activities such as information gaps, role plays, interviews, games, etc. The first three iterations of the course included an additional hour of synchronous practice in a video conference session. In general, formal testing was conducted during the face-to-face sessions for reasons of convenience and ease of proctoring.

The flipped format consists of online video-recorded grammar explanations and follow-up review quizzes (most of the same quizzes that had been prepared for the blended version of the course), homework, projects and assignments, and four hours per week of face-to-face in-class practice and other interactive learning activities. The flipped format in this case is similar to the blended learning format in that it takes the grammar explanations out of face-to-face time, but it also provides more hours per week for face-to-face interaction between students and instructor. Table 1 summarizes the major similarities and differences among the courses.

Table 1
*Summary of JPST 100 course components*

| Course Component | Traditional | Blended | Flipped |
|---|---|---|---|
| Face-to-face contact hours per week | 4 | 1 | 4 |
| Additional required online synchronous contact hours | 0 | 1 (2017&18)<br>0 (2019) | 0 |
| Online lectures on writing systems/ kanji and grammar [a] | Writing system only (12) | Yes (39) | Yes (40) |
| Online review/practice quizzes[b] | Yes (30) | Yes (40) | Yes (40) |
| Workbook homework[b] | Yes (6) | Yes (6) | Yes (6) |
| Recorded oral presentations[b] | Yes (2-4) | Yes (3) | Yes (3) |
| Project work | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Live paper-based grammar quizzes and exams[a] | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Live paper-based vocabulary quizzes | Yes (2) | No | No |
| Online graded vocab quizzes | No | Yes (6) | Yes (6) |
| Live paper-based hiragana/katakana/ kanji quizzes[a, b] | Yes (6) | Yes (6) | Yes (6) |
| Live listening comprehension quizzes[a, b] | Yes (2) | Yes (2) | Yes (2) |

[a] Same format was used for all delivery methods.
[b] The numbers of respective assignments are provided in the parentheses.

The objective of the current analysis is to examine and reflect on the process, outcomes and affect-related elements of these three delivery methods with respect to enrolment data, failure and progression rates, averages on sample exams, usage of learning materials and resources, results of student evaluations of teaching, and assumptions and reflections of the instructor regarding the experience. While there are issues with the author being both the researcher and the object of this study, it is hoped that an examination of both quantitative and qualitative data from several classes, keeping the variables of instructor, text and curriculum relatively fixed, can contribute to the discussion around the characteristics and effectiveness of these three delivery methods, and assist other instructors in reflecting about their own teaching experiences and choices for course delivery.

## 2. Literature Review

In recent years, a substantial number of studies in diverse fields have examined flipped and blended learning environments in comparison to traditional instruction in an attempt to ascertain effects on learning outcomes and student and instructor satisfaction levels. Many studies have indicated statistically significant gains in academic achievement with these methods. In a meta-analysis across a wide domain of disciplines, Van Alten et al. (2019) found a significant small effect in favour of the flipped classroom compared to the traditional lecture format. In addition, Van Alten and colleagues found an effect close to zero on student satisfaction, concluding that students are equally satisfied with flipped and lecture approaches. Halasa et al. (2019), in addition to finding significantly higher levels of academic achievement in the blended condition over the traditional, predicted a higher GPA at graduation if students continued to experience blended learning during their university career.

Other studies have shown no significant difference between flipped or blended and traditional delivery methods. Kay et al. (2018) found that there was no significant difference between lecture-based and a flipped approach on unit test grades in computer programming courses. Yong et al. (2015) also found no significant differences in academic achievement between flipped and traditional approaches in a required mathematics course. In a meta-analysis of pharmacy-based studies, Gillette et al. (2018) found that, for large classes, final examination scores showed no statistically significant difference between the flipped and traditional approach. Daigle and Stuvland (2020) compared a traditional lecture-based delivery of a mandatory political science course with a blended version of the course and found no significant difference in final grades between traditional and blended modes.

Studies comparing flipped or blended approaches with traditional class delivery in the domain of foreign language teaching and learning generally report similarly mixed results. Hsieh et al. (2017) report that flipped instruction resulted in significantly better results in learning outcomes, motivation and satisfaction

levels, and student engagement in the learning of English idioms compared to a conventional treatment, despite the perception that flipped learning required more time and work on the part of the students. Lee and Wallace (2018) concluded that while their EFL students in Korea were more engaged and invested in their learning, overall there was no statistically significant difference in learning outcomes based on final grades compared to the traditional classroom. However, the flipped cohort did achieve a statistically significant higher mean score on the final examination. Isabelli (2013) found no significant difference in the academic achievement of Spanish language learners in a blended format based on a variety of test scores and their final grades, concluding that the blended format prepared students equally as well as a traditional format for continued study in the language. Similarly, Grgurović's (2017) meta-analysis of studies comparing blended and traditional language learning concluded that there were no significant differences in student performance when comparing blended and traditional delivery methods, and that blended courses do not put students at a disadvantage in their studies. In addition, Grgurović reported that students are generally satisfied with their blended learning experience, particularly the flexibility that it offers.

Specific studies on these methodologies as they pertain to the area of Japanese language teaching also indicate either small effect sizes or no significant difference for flipped learning environments. Furukawa and Tezuka (2016) examined different conditions for flipping the instruction of grammar at the advanced level, and found that the flipped conditions resulted in an increase in the average on achievement tests of up to ten points compared to the non-flipped control group. Furukawa and Tezuka also found a strong correlation between individual viewing rates of the grammar instruction videos and higher test scores. Mori et al. (2016) studied the effect of flipping the instruction of *kanji,* Chinese characters used in Japanese, within an otherwise conventional class format, and found that introductory students in the flipped condition performed better on *kanji* tests than students in the non-flipped condition, but that this small positive effect was observable only for the first semester and not in higher level classes. Most

students in the flipped condition, however, found the accompanying online exercises to be effective for their learning of the meaning, sound and writing of *kanji*. The authors concluded that a substantial portion of *kanji* instruction could be moved to online instruction with no detrimental effect.

The bulk of these studies focus on a comparison of flipped and traditional classrooms, and studies that also include a blended format are relatively few. The current practitioner report aims to provide this additional perspective in order to broaden the discussion around effective modes of course delivery. Furthermore, as the studies cited above generally indicate that using these methodologies will not be detrimental to learning, the door is open to considering other aspects of the learning environment that might be impacted, including flexibility, enrolment factors, retention, and student and instructor preferences.

## 3. Class Composition

Table 2 shows the enrolment data for JPST 100 classes taught by the author since 2012. (There is no data for 2016 when the author was on sabbatical.)

Table 2
*Enrolments by Section, Format and Domestic/International Status, 2012 - 2019*

| | All sections 2012-19 | Traditional 8 sections 2012-15 T1 (Sept-Dec) | Blended 4 sections 2017-19 T1=2, T2=2 | Flipped 2 sections 2019 T1 | Face-to-face (Traditional + Flipped) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Domestic | 262 (55%) | 179 (62%) | 46 (38%) | 37 (53%) | 216 (61%) |
| International | 215 (45%) | 108 (38%) | 74 (62%) | 33 (46%) | 141 (39%) |
| Totals | 477 | 287 | 120 | 70 | 357 |

Students in face-to-face sections (traditional and flipped delivery) make up the bulk of enrolments. A blended version of the course was first proposed by the author in 2017 as an experiment in order to test both methodology and demand, and its initial success resulted in subsequent offerings of the course in this format. Between 2017 and 2019, students were able to choose between traditional delivery (in sections taught by another instructor) and a blended version. Choice was further enhanced by offering JPST 100 in the second term for the first time. However, a

discussion of student preference can only be tentative, since in reality, students do not have a great deal of choice in enrolling for either face-to-face or blended courses due to the fact that very few sections are taught, and the decision if and when to schedule one or the other mode is determined by factors such as the instructor's other teaching responsibilities and perceived demand for courses.

Given that international students make up only approximately 16% of the total campus enrolment, the overall percentage of international students enrolled in JPST 100 is relatively high, and it is particularly notable in the blended version of JPST 100, where the usual domestic/international distribution is essentially reversed. This raises the question of potential preference for a predominately web-based course among non-native speakers of the language of instruction, English. The discussion concerning a possible correlation between native-language, language of instruction, and preference for online or face-to-face courses can potentially be fraught with unexamined assumptions and biases, so must be approached with caution. While International status does not necessarily mean that the student is not a native or highly-proficient speaker of English, in practice, issues with communicating in English have been noted by the instructor for many of the non-native English-speaking international students. At the same time, Domestic status also does not necessarily indicate highly-proficient and articulate levels of communication in English. Without in-depth interviews with students who have chosen to take JPST 100 in the blended version, it is impossible to say with certainty that language issues have anything to do with that choice, but this preference for the blended format could indicate that students whose first language is not English might be more comfortable in an environment where they are able to review recorded lectures at their own pace, stopping to review sections that might not be clear to them, rather than have to deal with a live lecture that might be more difficult to understand. This conjecture is supported by Yong et al. (2015), who noted that non-native speakers reported that the videos used in the flipped approach helped them review what they might have missed in the lecture setting due to comprehension difficulties. More detailed analysis of individual student activity

around viewing lecture videos is required here. Of course, there are other possible explanations for this preference, which may include flexibility of access and timetabling. In addition, learners, both International and Domestic, may also choose an online option if they perceive it will require less time and effort to complete (Bawa, 2016).

Table 3 shows total numbers and percentages of students from various programs.

Table 3
*Enrolments by Program*

| | Traditional | Flipped | Traditional + Flipped | Blended |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| BA | 117 (41%) | 33 (47%) | 150 (42%) | 52 (43%) |
| BSc | 65 (23%) | 11 (16%) | 76 (21%) | 35 (29%) |
| BMGT | 74 (26%) | 18 (26%) | 92 (26%) | 21 (18%) |
| Other | 31 (10%) | 8 (11%) | 39 (11%) | 12 (10%) |
| Total | 287 | 70 | 357 | 120 |

The highest number of students are registered in the Bachelor of Arts program, ranging from 41% to 47%. The next two largest groups are the Bachelor of Science and the Bachelor of Management students, and these show slightly different trends for blended and face-to-face classes, with a higher percentage of Science students enrolled in the blended course, and a higher proportion of Management students enrolled in the face-to-face options. This situation contradicts the author's assumption that a higher proportion of Management students would take the blended version, due to the fact that the Management program is strictly scheduled and does not leave much room for electives. Because the blended version only requires one hour of face-to-face contact, it theoretically offers more flexibility, therefore it was assumed, incorrectly, that more Management students would choose the blended version. It does seem, however, that students in programs that have more focused and restrictive requirements, such as Engineering, do avail themselves of the opportunity to register in the more flexible blended course. While the general rate of registration across all 'Other Programs' is fairly consistent at approximately 10%, 80% (4 of 5 students) of the

Engineering students, 71% (5 of 7 students) of the Bachelor of Fine Arts students, and 100% (only one student) of the Nursing students that have registered in JPST 100 since 2017 have taken the blended course. All of these programs have fairly fixed timetables with few electives, and the blended version offers the opportunity for these students to enroll.

## 4. Failure and Progression Issues

Research into retention and failure rates when comparing face-to-face and blended courses in various disciplines has produced mixed results (Daigle & Stuvland, 2020). However, in the current study, the failure rate for students in the blended format is much higher than traditional or flipped versions, as shown in Table 4, and this poses a serious concern.

Table 4
*Failure Rate and Progression to JPST 101*

| | Traditional | Flipped | Blended excluding 2019 T2[a] | Blended including 2019 T2[a] |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Number of students | 287 | 70 | 91 | 116 |
| Failures (rate) | 25 (8.8%) | 6 (8.5%) | 18 (19.7%) | 18 (15.5%) |
| Number progressing to JPST 101 (rate) | 132 (45.9%) | 39 (55.7%) | 21 (23%) | 26 (22.4%) |

[a] Due to the pivot to completely online classes at the end of T2, students were allowed to withdraw up to the last day of classes, resulting in a last-minute decrease of 4. Consequently, no Fs were recorded in this section.

The fact that a mostly-online course requires more self-directed and self-monitored behaviour from students may play a large role in this higher rate of failure, particularly among learners who may have underestimated the amount of effort required to succeed (Bawa, 2016). In addition, fewer opportunities for real-time interaction with the instructor and with fellow students in online courses may impact levels of motivation and satisfaction (Bawa, 2016). Furthermore, a far lower percentage of students from the blended sections have chosen to take the next course in the sequence, therefore longer-term retention also appears to be an issue

with this blended format. None of the Bachelor of Management students, domestic or international, from the blended version continued on to JPST 101, while a not insignificant proportion (27%) of Management students from the traditional and flipped courses did continue on. Discovering why students are not having as satisfactory or successful an experience with the blended version of the course is essential to improving its delivery in the future.

## 5. Grades

As discussed above, studies of student performance have shown mixed results with regards to different course delivery modes. In this section, I will examine average grades on final exams, as well final course grades. The final exam format has remained consistent across all sections (with the exception of the 2019 Term 2 blended class). It consists of a general grammar review of the structures taught over the course of the term, as well as reading comprehension and sample dialogue creation, for which answers are written by hand on paper during a scheduled face-to-face examination. The 2019 Term 2 final exam was conducted online in a less secure environment, where the instructor was available to respond to student questions, but student browsers were not locked down and proctoring software was not used. The lack of time to sufficiently prepare a final exam under the circumstances, combined with the lack of appropriate security and a higher number of multiple choice or fill-in-the-blank items, led to unreliable results that have not been included in the average for the other three blended sections.

Table 5
*Final Exam Averages*

| Mode | Average |
|---|---|
| Traditional | 64.8% |
| Flipped | 72.1% |
| Blended 2017-18 | 64.9% |
| Blended 2019 T2 | 79.7% |

Setting the 2019 Term 2 grade aside, we can see that averages in Table 5 show a markedly better result for the flipped format (with the usual caveat regarding

lower numbers), and essentially no difference between traditional face-to-face and blended formats.

Table 6
*Average Overall Grade*

| Mode of Delivery | Number of Sections | Final Grade Average |
|---|---|---|
| Traditional | 8 | 72.8% |
| Flipped | 2 | 74.5% |
| Blended 2017-18 | 3 | 65.7% |
| Blended 2019 | 1 | 72.6% |
| Blended combined | 4 | 66.7% |

As shown in Table 6, the flipped version of the course also produced the highest average overall course grade, but the difference in final grade averages between the two face-to-face formats and the blended version is quite stark. Again, the averages for the blended sections have been separated because the pivot to a completely online delivery due to the COVID-19 crisis both gave students the opportunity to withdraw at the last minute and resulted in the different final exam format. Nonetheless, even when taking into consideration the effect of the final exam in 2019 Term 2, the combined overall average for the four blended sections is markedly lower.

**6. Student Use of Online Resources**

The effectiveness of both the blended and flipped delivery methods depends on students watching the screencast lecture videos for grammar and other instruction, and then completing follow-up online quizzes to test their understanding. Despite the recommendation of Guo et al. (2014) to keep videos brief (under six minutes), these videos, depending on the nature of the content, vary in length from four minutes to just over 15 minutes.

Table 7
*Samples of viewing behaviour from selected videos for JPST 100 2019 T2 Jan – Apr (beginning of term n=29; end of term n=25)*

| Video name | Due date | Total number of views | Number of students completing online quiz | Percentage of students completing quiz |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pronunciation | 01/08 | 33 (n=29) | 29 | 100 |
| Intro to writing | 01/10 | 18 | No online quiz | n/a |
| Yes/No/What questions | 01/16 | 15 | 28 | 97 |
| Time | 10/23 | 15 | 28 | 97 |
| Particles | 02/09 | 11 | 29 | 100 |
| Intro to Kanji | 02/19 | 15 | 27 | 93 |
| Existence | 02/16 | 10 (n=27) | 27 | 100 |
| Duration of Time Video/quiz | 03/07 | 40 (n=26) | 26 | 100 |
| Adjectives | 03/13 | 9 | 24 | 92 |
| Chapter 5 Kanji | 03/15 | 3 | 23 | 88 |
| *Te*-form | 03/25 | 4 (n=25) | 22 | 88 |

It is clear that not all students watch all the videos. However, not surprisingly, it appears that students are more likely to watch lecture videos that have quizzes either built directly into them or based on information within them than videos that are purely instructional and to which the review quiz questions are not directly linked. For example, the Duration of Time Video and associated quiz shown in Table 7 garnered 40 views. As with most other practice quizzes, students are allowed to repeat the quiz as many times as desired, and in this particular case, all 26 students watched the video and answered the questions at least once, and several students retook the test one or two times. Unfortunately, the Canvas learning management system was not set up to give detailed analytics about video views, but it appears that, generally, the first few videos at the beginning of the term are viewed by most students, and the rate then falls after that, echoing findings by Watanabe (2014). Videos introducing the writing system were viewed on average by slightly more than half of the students, and views of grammar videos during the first two thirds of the term were approximately the same, but fell considerably during the latter third of the term. Most students do complete the online quizzes

regardless of whether they watch the videos or not, so it can be assumed that a substantial number of students are using the textbook or other resources for instruction rather than the videos, or are completing the quizzes without instruction.

While the online mode opens up possibilities for the inclusion of learning materials created with a variety of interesting and pedagogically sound external tools, the students in this study have shown a reluctance to make use of external applications even when they are linked through the learning management system. Materials developed with EdPuzzle, an application that allows instructors to insert quiz questions into the instructional video, requiring viewers to respond to a question before continuing to view, were occasionally assigned as required activities. While the initial videos were reasonably well-subscribed, subsequent videos were not. This application did not integrate well with the Canvas Gradebook, and students may have felt that their lack of completion of these assignments would not affect their mark, as no numerical grade was assigned. Similar materials created with the much-less robust internal Video Editor in Canvas were better utilized but the tool offers fewer choices for question types and feedback.

Another external tool the author linked to the learning management system is Quizlet, a suite of learning activities and games that are conducive for vocabulary acquisition and kanji recognition. Since 2017, only 31% of combined blended and flipped format students have signed up for the application. It may be that students have found alternate vocabulary drill apps that they prefer, particularly if they are more comfortable in a language other than English, or that they just do not find digital flashcards useful for learning vocabulary. They may also be less comfortable with digital tools in general, and prefer to stick to the relative comfort of the basic tools in Canvas with which they are more familiar. The challenge for the instructor is to avoid being limited by the more basic affordances of the learning management system while not overwhelming students with too many choices or expectations for the use of external tools and applications, even if they potentially offer a richer learning experience.

The synchronous video conferencing tool in the Canvas learning management system, Collaborate Ultra, is also less well-utilized by students. In the earlier iterations of the course, students in the blended classes were required to attend an additional video conference session for one hour a week in order to practice oral and aural skills in a small group format. In both Terms 1 and 2 of the 2018-19 academic year, the average rate for participation in the sessions was just over 60%, despite the fact that attendance in the sessions accounted for 5% of the final grade. In 2019 Term 2, the video conference session was made optional, and not one single student chose to attend the sessions. Investigating why students do not avail themselves of this opportunity for oral practice, although not face-to-face, but at least synchronously, will be an important follow-up in this study.

## 7. Student and Instructor Satisfaction

Student satisfaction with their learning experience is obviously a concern when offering courses in both traditional and non-traditional formats, and various studies have revealed a wide range of findings relating to mode of delivery. Factors such as course design, access, flexibility, interaction, engagement, comfort with technology, learning style, etc. (Cole et al., 2014; Jackson & Helms, 2008; Daigle & Stuvland, 2020) all play a role in student satisfaction. While it may be a blunt-instrument approach to judging relative satisfaction rates with traditional, blended and flipped formats, my own Student Evaluation of Teaching results may illustrate general trends. These anonymous evaluations are conducted by the institution for every class. The "summative" categories of "Very Good Course" and "Very Good Instructor" in Table 8 are used to illustrate in a general way the perceptions of students in the three different modes of delivery.

Table 8

*Results from Student Evaluations of Teaching (5-point Likert scale)*

| | Traditional n=287, 8 sections | Flipped n=70, 2 sections | Blended n=91, 3 sections (no data from 2019 T2) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Very good course | 4.4 | 4.5 | 3.98 |
| Very good instructor | 4.63 | 4.71 | 4.28 |

There is a difference in student satisfaction with both the course and the instructor under the different conditions, with flipped and traditional formats being rated higher, and blended being the lowest. (Student Evaluation of Teaching was not carried out by the institution in 2019 Term 2 due to the sudden change to completely online classes.) Despite the fact that the same instructor is teaching the same content with the same textbook and a similar evaluation breakdown, students in the blended sections who completed the questionnaire are noticeably less satisfied with their experience.

Student comments from the evaluations are also instructive. Students were asked to provide responses to the following three questions: *What were the strengths of the course? What were the weaknesses? What did you enjoy about it?* 357 comments from eight sections of traditional face-to-face classes (average response rate of 43%), 95 comments from three blended sections (37%), and 89 comments from two flipped sections (61%) were collected and analysed. While the format for the questionnaire does not allow for comparison of numbers of positive and negative comments, some trends emerged from the responses that can be summarized and illustrated with examples as follows.

First, there was general dissatisfaction across all formats with the perceived excessive amount of material covered in the course and its fast pace, despite the fact that the content of JPST 100 is articulated with and similar to equivalent courses in other institutions.

> "Too fast! So much to learn, so much to memorize, overwhelming." (Traditional)
>
> "The course content went by really fast and sometimes it was hard to keep up." (Flipped).
>
> "Too much information in very little time to take in, the course went too fast." (Blended)

These comments may indicate the need for an examination of curriculum expectations for an introductory Japanese language course, but this is unrelated to the mode of delivery. However, patterns in student comments for different modes also emerged. The students in the blended and flipped formats particularly commented on course navigation and inability to keep track of deadlines.

> "Navigating the online course was confusing." (Blended)
>
> "It's easy to miss the deadline." (Blended)
>
> "Assignments...were hard to keep track of." (Flipped)
>
> "There were a lot of out of class online quizzes that were easy to forget about." (Flipped)

Students were provided with weekly checklists for assignments and learning activities, as well as the automatic reminders from the learning management system, but it is clear that the heavy online component of the flipped and blended classes causes additional burdens, particularly for students who might have more problems with time management. Keeping the organization and presentation of materials on the learning management system simple, clear and consistent is important, and over the iterations of the courses, I have attempted to make revisions such as hyperlinking all assignments to the weekly schedule page, colour-coding assignments to assist in noticing, reducing the number of clicks required to access assignment instructions, and organizing online modules more rigorously. Students also require careful orientation at the beginning of the course, and making graded assignments based on orientation materials can help direct student attention to the course outline, schedule and other requirements. Analysis of completion of required tasks is facilitated by the learning management system, which can make it easier to identify students who may be struggling to keep up. In addition to extra help from the instructor, these students can also be directed to institutional support such as time-management coaching or counselling.

The difficulty of doing pair or group projects was also mentioned by students in the blended class.

> "Did not have enough time to work with partner during the group project." (Blended)
>
> "The group projects have their limitations due to the course's online base." (Blended)

While the Collaborate Ultra teleconferencing room on the learning management system was freely available for students to meet online at any time, students did not use it to work on group projects, and chose other methods to meet with group members, either face-to-face or online. Group projects potentially contribute to building the feeling of community that is essential to the success of online learning (Cole et al., 2014; Daigle & Stuvland, 2020), so facilitating their execution is important. Students often prefer to use other (often more user-friendly) social media methods to connect with each other, which may make it more difficult for the instructor to monitor progress, but requiring students to use only the discussion and group messaging tools available on the learning management system seems excessively prescriptive and potentially demotivating.

Students also complained about the sound quality available in the Collaborate Ultra room and often had difficulties with the video. One student commented that "the collaborate part is convenient but time-wasting" and another did not find "the online collaborate conference to be effective for oral interviews", indicating some of the reasons why, given the option, students chose not to attend the Collaborate sessions in 2019 Term 2, as mentioned earlier. Subsequent experiments with the Zoom platform, which has since 2020 been built into the learning management system, have proven more successful for synchronous sessions and group work.

While studies have indicated that some students might resist flipped learning because they are more accustomed to passively receiving teacher-centred lectures and object to "teaching themselves," (Unal & Unal, 2017; Newton & Hes,

2013) there was not much indication of that sentiment in these student evaluations. Some of the students in the flipped format felt there was too much to learn outside of class from a time management perspective ("Much of the class had to be learned outside of class time making it difficult to learn if you had lots of homework from other classes"), but not because of the principle of flipped learning itself. In fact, some students indicated comprehension of and appreciation for the flipped approach to learning.

> "The strengths of this course included that the new content that was introduced to us prior to class was reviewed during class. Also, the instructor was always ready to answer questions in class when she saw we needed help or asked for direction." (Flipped)

> "Learning the material online and using class time to practice the concept was a very effective use of time." (Flipped)

Students in the blended sections also realized in practice some of the learning benefits of this format that have been pointed out in the literature (Unal & Unal, 2017).

> "Since the course materials are mainly videos, I can replay several times for the part that I have problem with." (Blended)

One of the most commonly reported strengths amongst the students in both the literature (see, for example, Cole et al. 2014) and my own blended classes, however, was the flexibility the format allows.

> "Flexible and easy to arrange time for studying the materials." (Blended)

> "Students can make their own schedules because it is online." (Blended)

Students from all formats commented on how they enjoyed the variety of activities (exercises, worksheets, role plays, videos with cultural content, music, games, online quizzes and resources), as well as the energy and positive, fun atmosphere of the face-to-face classes where they were able to interact with peers

and make friends. The following comment from a student in the blended mode underlines the importance of social interaction to the language learning context.

> "As much as the online element of it really benefited me, I really enjoyed the in-class work and practicing the language in partners." (Blended)

Interestingly, several students in each format commented that they wished there was more face-to-face class time, indicating their desire for more time to interact with their peers and the instructor. On the other hand, students who find speaking in a group situation to be stressful can benefit from potentially lowered anxiety levels that the less "in-your-face" environment of a blended class allows, as Blake (2013) has noted, and as the following comment illustrates.

> "Being called out in class and having to work with new people made me struggle to focus on learning the language and practicing proper grammar as I was too busy panicking." (Blended)

Affording students who experience this kind of anxiety the opportunity to study in a less public online environment makes the course more accessible to diverse learners.

Many positive comments focused on the exposure to cultural information in face-to-face classes. The students from the blended class also reported that they enjoyed their face-to-face classes for the same reasons, but I feel that I was not able to provide as much cultural information or undertake as many engaging activities as I would have liked in this format. While I introduce websites and YouTube videos with cultural content online by linking them in the learning management system, students must take the initiative to view them in their own time, making it perhaps less likely that they will receive this exposure to cultural information.

The importance of the self-initiative and self-discipline necessary for a student to succeed in the blended format is acknowledged in the following student comment:

> "It is hard facilitating a course online as there is a lot of responsibility on the student." (Blended)

Students who are not able or willing to take on this responsibility for their own learning may encounter difficulty with a blended course, resulting in demotivation and possibly failure (Bawa, 2016; Xu & Jaggars, 2014).

This lower rate of success in my blended class affects my own level of satisfaction with the course, reflecting results found in the literature (Bollinger & Wasilik, 2009). While the one hour per week of class time in the blended format benefits the instructor in terms of flexibility and convenience, personally, I very much miss the almost daily face-to-face interaction with students that happens in traditional and flipped formats. I feel limited in my ability to develop the same rapport with students online as I do in the classroom, and this, I believe, is reflected in student evaluations. I appreciate that the course enables a more diverse cross-section of students to experience learning Japanese language in a flexible manner, but the fact that both the attrition and failure rates are higher leads me to question whether students in the blended format progress with the same levels of proficiency and sense of satisfaction.

In some sense, the blended mode for me represents the *stuck-in-the-middle* phenomenon reported by Jackson and Helms (2008), where both the best and the worst of online and face-to-face formats are combined to produce a mixed result. While I also appreciated the scheduling flexibility allowed in the delivery of the blended mode, the front-end work required to design the course and create materials is considerable, as the literature shows (Mehring & Leis, 2018; Unal & Unal, 2017). However, having the online material already available was particularly beneficial in the quick pivot to completely online classes during the COVID-19 crisis, which again underlines the flexibility of the blended format. Furthermore, the previously prepared online materials also enabled me to transition easily to a flipped format. The careful attention to design, clarity and organization that is required in the blended format also had spin-off effects resulting in improvements to my face-to-face courses.

## 8. Conclusion

My most satisfying teaching experience to date, while admittedly based on only one term and two sections, has been using the flipped model. This format allows me to take advantage of technology by delivering lectures and other learning resources online, and spend the maximum amount of time focusing on student interaction and learning activities in the classroom. I feel this gives me the greatest opportunity to develop a relationship with individual students that enables me to respond most appropriately to their learning needs and goals. The flipped format also maximizes the time that students can work with peers to construct their understandings and knowledge about the Japanese language. However, as demonstrated by healthy enrolment numbers, the blended format is also attractive to many students for reasons including access, language issues, flexibility and personal learning preferences. These reflections on student success and satisfaction, as well my own my preferences, have led me to conclude that I will not return to a traditional teaching format that uses in-class time for lecturing, but will continue striving to improve both the online resources I provide for students, as well as the learning activities that I conduct in the face-to-face class. Having both blended and flipped formats available to me allows for flexibility in adapting to changing circumstances, which in the future may include enrolment trends, financial contingencies, and administration-level decisions about course offerings. This flexibility should also benefit students by providing choices responsive to their preferences and needs.

## Notes

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1. At this institution, the Academic Year stretches over two calendar years; Term 1 starts in September and Term 2 starts in January. The blended mode under study here has been taught in Term 1 of Academic Year 2017-18, Terms 1 and 2 of 2018-19, and Term 2 of 2019-20. For ease of reading here, academic years have been abbreviated to the calendar year in which they begin (i.e. 2019 Term 2 began in January 2020).

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