

On the Fifth Anniversary of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring Learners' Feelings Toward Assessment Methods and AI-Use Assignments in College Japanese Courses

コロナ禍5周年：大学における日本語学習者のコース評価方法と
AIを使った課題に対する心情を探る

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1. Introduction

2025 marks the fifth anniversary of the start of the pandemic. According to UNESCO (2021), over 1.6 billion learners in 190 countries were out of school at the peak of the pandemic. In the United States, most of last year's college graduates (the Class of 2024) began college with remote instruction in fall 2020. A significant number of students in the Class of 2025, who graduated this past May, took a gap year during the 2020–21 academic year to avoid remote learning in their first year of college. Although college professors tend to view the pandemic as a thing of the past, they should pay attention to reports such as, "Declines in academic demands and instructional quality were smaller at the high school level than in the middle grades" (Gwynne, Allensworth, Young, and Hart 2024:17). Now students who were younger than high school age when the pandemic hit are taking college courses.

This study will consider a post-pandemic Japanese college curriculum by exploring students' feelings toward assessment methods. To accommodate challenges posed by the pandemic, many colleges modified their assessment methods (e.g., see Chan 2022). How do our current assessments compare with those from before the pandemic? Do we feel that our courses are less rigorous than they used to be, and are we looking for an opportunity to adjust them? Another significant change is the advent of Generative AI (GenAI), which was not publicly available during the pandemic. Through surveys and essays in Japanese courses at a small liberal arts college in the United States, we will explore students' reflections on their experiences during the pandemic. For ease of exposition, let us call this Japanese language program Program A. We will examine how students in Program A reflected on assessment changes and their learning during the pandemic in their high school and middle school years by analyzing their survey responses and essay content. We will also explore how they feel about potential changes to the curriculum in their future Japanese courses in college. Specifically, we asked whether they would welcome more in-class quizzes and activities with GenAI.

2. What Happened?: Remote Instruction and Assessment / Grading Policy Changes

We will start with reviewing what happened to school instruction nationwide and worldwide. The sudden, unexpected switch to remote instruction posed serious challenges to education assessment in 2020. Teachers and schools were forced to quickly plan assessment and grading guidelines and policies, despite not knowing how effective their remote instruction was compared to in-person instruction by the same instructor. Hartney and Malec (2024) note that grade inflation was significantly observed in both K-12 and higher education during remote instruction and that lenient grading persisted even after schools resumed in-person instruction. They wrote, "Last year (2023), ACT

documented a growing divergence between high school students' grades and their performance on the college-readiness exam. Students' grades remained stable, even as their test scores decreased” (p. 1).

Regarding course assessments, Policsa, Stollhans, Bardot, and Rollet (2022) discuss how language programs at higher education institutions responded to the sudden shift to remote instruction in terms of assessment in 2020 and 2021. They surveyed ten representative language programs (including Japanese) in twenty-six higher education institutions (mostly in the U.K.) to determine how and if their assessment methods changed due to remote instruction. They report that various changes were implemented in these institutions, including reducing the number of assessments, such as canceling low-stakes assessments and using alternative forms of assessment. Indeed, Program A's adjustments included canceling small quizzes and daily assignments and assigning take-home tests instead of in-class tests during academic year (AY) 2020–21, when they had to offer courses remotely. Additionally, Policsa et al. (2022) note that academic honesty and plagiarism were widespread concerns during the remote learning period.

3. Background: Creating Essays that Reflect Lives During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The student survey we will discuss below was designed as part of a class project in which students wrote essays reflecting on their lives during the pandemic. At the end of the fall 2020 semester (December 2020), when courses were offered remotely, Program A students wrote essays reflecting on their lives since March 2020. Students were given the option to upload their essays to a website for future students, with or without their names. A total of 29 students uploaded their essays. Sophomores, juniors, and seniors described suddenly having to leave the college campus in March 2020 and/or having their study abroad programs canceled. First-year students wrote about their high school lives ending suddenly in March 2020 and starting college courses from home. Spring 2025 students were asked to read an essay from fall 2020 at their language proficiency level before participating in the survey. Afterwards, they wrote an essay describing what their lives were like during the pandemic.

4. The Survey Results 1: What Did They Experience?

We will now review the backgrounds of the survey respondents (students enrolled in Program A during the spring 2025 semester) and their experiences during the pandemic, using the survey results. The survey included multiple-choice questions, as well as questions asking respondents to select all that apply, followed by comments and discussions regarding their choices.

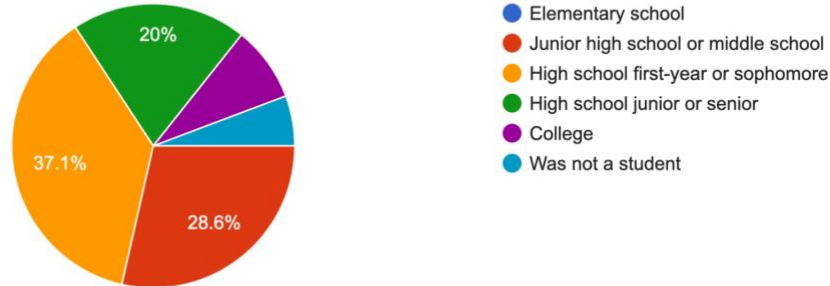
4.1 The Survey Results

In March 2025, 35 out of 40 students enrolled in Japanese courses participated in the survey. A large number of these students were international. First, let us examine what school the respondents were attending when the pandemic started. As shown in Figure 1, more than one-fourth of the respondents were middle or junior high school

students, while more than one-third were in lower grades of high school.

(1) What grade were you in the spring semester (January to August) of 2020?

35 responses



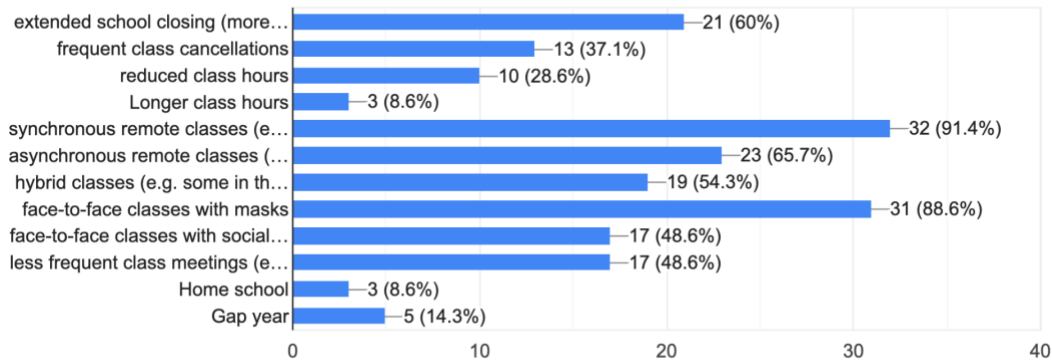
4.2 What They Experienced in Their Schools

First, the survey asked what kind of instructions the respondents had received during the pandemic. Figure 2 shows the respondents' experiences at school between January 2020 and June 2022. Nationwide, the pattern was remote learning in the 2020-2021 academic year (AY), followed by in-person learning with masks and social distancing in AY 2021-2022. Therefore, it is not surprising that more than 90% of participants had synchronous remote classes, and nearly 90% experienced face-to-face classes with masks.

(2) During the COVID-19 pandemic (from January 2020 to June 2022), what have you experienced?

(Select all)

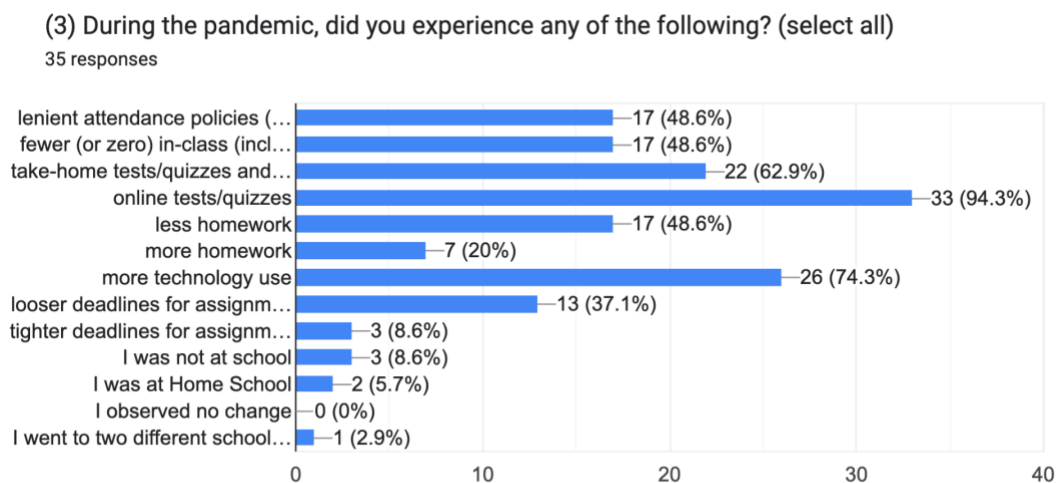
35 responses



As shown in Figure 2, five of them took a gap year. Some delayed college entrance, while others were college students who took a gap year to avoid remote instruction during AY 2020-2021. One student took a gap year after remote instruction ended because they were burned out after a year of remote learning, according to their essay. Furthermore, 60% of respondents experienced school closures of more than one week, 37% had less frequent class meetings, and 28% had reduced class hours. More than half experienced hybrid classes. According to their essays, some high schools started allowing students to attend some classes in person a few times a week during the 2020-

21 academic year. In their essays, they expressed how joyful they were when they could go to school and take classes with their classmates, even if only a few times a week, after many weeks of fully remote learning.

What changes did they observe in their courses during AY 2020-22? Figure 3 shows that nearly 95% of respondents took online tests. Some wrote in their essays about the difficulty of taking synchronous online tests, during which they had to keep both hands in view of the camera the entire time. Additionally, approximately half of the respondents claimed that they experienced more lenient attendance policies, less homework, and fewer tests, including those for synchronous online courses. It seems that their schools also reduced the number of assessments. Furthermore, more than one-third of the respondents reported looser deadlines for assignments.



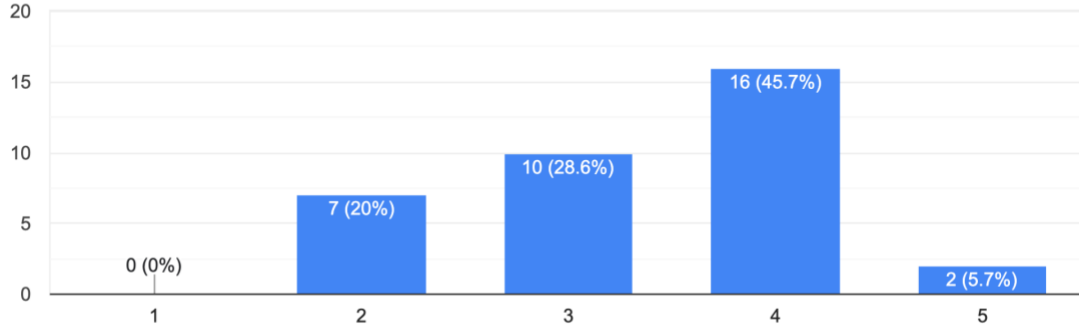
Approximately 75% of respondents said they used more technology. Some said they liked asynchronous assignments because they could learn on their own time. On the contrary, some wrote that using technology was "super unproductive."

5. The Survey Results 2: How Do They Reflect Their Pandemic Experiences?

Next, the survey asked the respondents whether they thought the changes to the learning environment caused by the pandemic had affected their learning style and preferences. The responses were measured on a linear scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Figure 4 shows that approximately 50% of respondents answered "yes (4 or 5)." Several respondents commented that, through remote learning, they realized how much they appreciated face-to-face learning. Others remarked that the change made them more responsible for their study plans.

(4) Do you agree with the following statement? "The changes in the learning environment caused by the pandemic have changed my learning style or preferences."

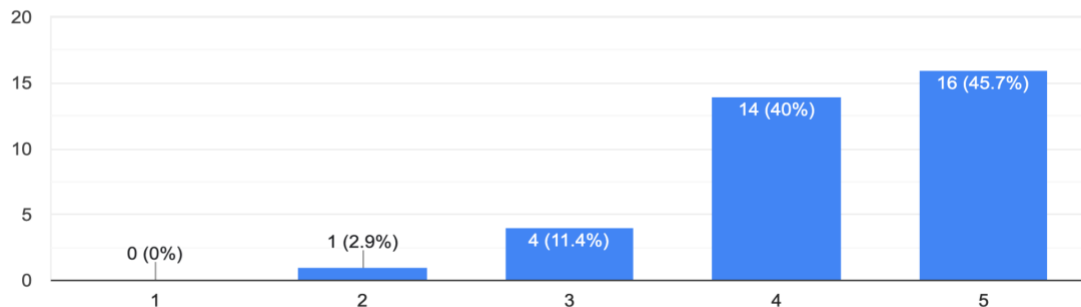
35 responses



As shown in Figure 5, the vast majority of respondents considered the change in their learning environment due to the pandemic to have affected their learning quality. (The linear scale ranges from 1, which means "strongly disagree," to 5, which means "strongly agree.") Several respondents commented that they often did something else while attending the class, since they could turn their cameras off during online classes. Some wrote in their essays about how difficult it was to focus on online lecturers when they couldn't ask questions. International students described having to attend synchronous online courses in the middle of the night.

(5) Do you agree with the following statement? "The changes in the learning environment caused by the pandemic affected the quality of my learning."

35 responses



6. Survey Result 3: On Their Future Japanese Learning

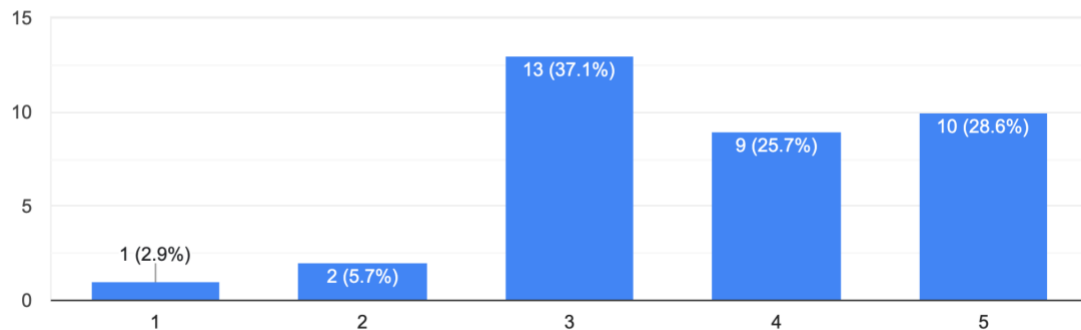
6.1 Assessment Methods: More Frequent Quizzes?

Due to technical difficulties, Program A eliminated in-class quizzes when offering remote courses in academic year (AY) 2020-2021. When they returned to face-to-face instruction in the fall of 2021, they decided not to reinstate the quizzes. Starting in AY 2023-2024, they reinstated a limited number of simple quizzes because instructors had noticed a decline in students' vocabulary knowledge. However, the frequency and rigor of quizzes and tests are not at pre-pandemic levels.

The survey asked respondents whether frequent small quizzes would help them learn. (The linear scale ranges from 1, "Definitely No," to 5, "Definitely Yes.") More than half of the respondents (those who chose 4 or 5 on the scale) consider in-class quizzes helpful for learning.

(6) Before the pandemic, our Japanese courses had more in-class quizzes (e.g., vocabulary and kanji quizzes). Do you think in-class quizzes help you learn?

35 responses

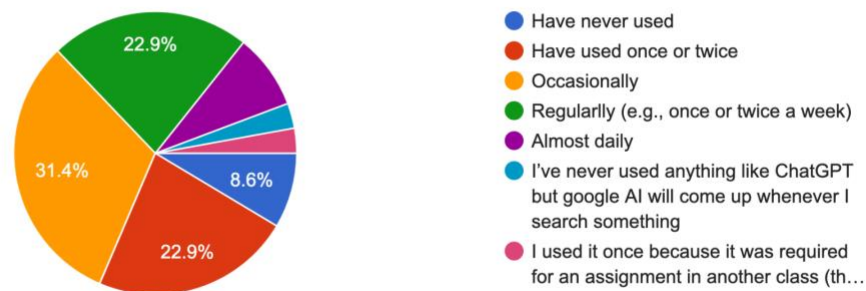


6.2 Use of Generative AIs

The next question is whether they would like to use Generative AI (GenAI) in college-level Japanese courses. ChatGPT was publicly launched on November 30, 2022, and it was unavailable during the respondents' remote learning period. GenAI is now considered a game changer in education. First, let us examine whether the respondents are using GenAI by March 2025. As shown in Figure 7, approximately 90% of the respondents had used GenAI by the time they participated in the survey. However, half of those respondents said they used GenAI less than once a week.

(7) Are you using generative AIs like ChatGPT now (for any purpose)?

35 responses



Next, the survey asked how they thought they would have used it had it been available during the pandemic. They wrote:

- I would have used it to teach myself by asking questions that I wasn't able to ask during the class time.

- I personally don't really like AI but it might have been helpful for understanding confusing questions when it felt hard to ask a teacher over google meet or email.
- It could have helped me better understand the part that I did not fully understand during the lesson.
- When I was in junior high school the assignments we had were mostly objective questions and followed a certain pattern in which AI can be used as an information generator.
- I think it could have explained the course content in more details
- I probably would've used it to help create study guides for online tests or create flashcards to study for language.
- I would use it the same way I do now, use generative AI to brainstorm and fact checks.
- When I read things that made no sense to me, I would have asked AIs to tell me what it meant. I don't think I would have used it academically; at my secondary school, we didn't have any assignments.
- Probably for writing brainstorming and refinement, college application assistance, quiz review.

On the other hand, five respondents simply wrote, "I would not have used them." Additionally, some wrote the following:

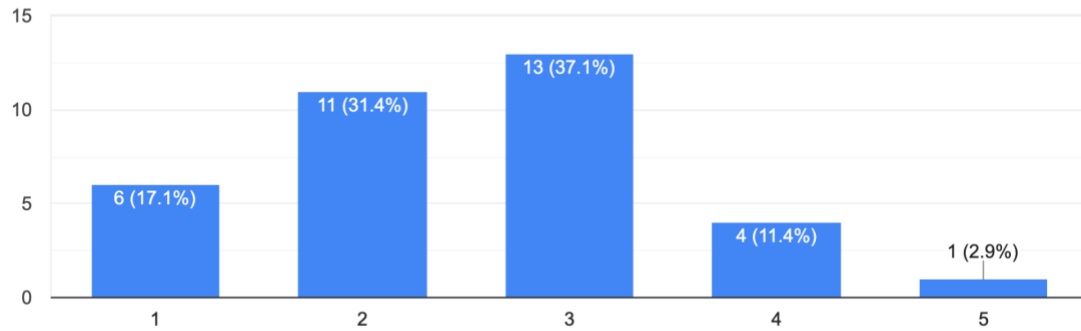
- I would have been absolutely going to use AI to generate my assignment and I would have learned nothing, so I'm glad that ChatGPT was not created yet during the pandemic.
- I don't think I would have used it because I personally don't like using AI, but I think a lot of my peers would have taken advantage of it to do their schoolwork for them, since there were little regulations on what students used their computers for during online learning.
- I cannot truthfully say that I would have used it in the best ways. Perhaps at that time I would have been tempted to use it to help me with my homework.. I am quite happy that I never really discovered AI until after the pandemic. That being said, I do find AI to be a valuable resource in terms of finding and fishing out information and data (stats) that sometimes would take a long time to find. My true issue with overuse is the negative environmental impact it causes.
- Maybe I would have used it once and a while for math classes when I was struggling, but I don't fully trust that it has up-to-date and accurate information. Also, I have moral reservations about using generative AI, especially for schoolwork.

Notably, multiple respondents linked GenAI use to academic dishonesty, which was a worldwide concern during the pandemic and one of the main concerns using GenAI for school works today.

The survey also asked whether Japanese courses should use AI more often to help students learn and if students were interested in using GenAI to practice conversational Japanese as part of a course assignment. Figure 8 shows that the respondents were not very enthusiastic about using AI for Japanese language courses (the linear scale ranges from 1=Definitely No to 5=Definitely Yes). Figure 9 shows that they are more interested in using them as conversation partners for practice. However, it should be noted that only one person in the entire group answered "definitely yes" to each question.

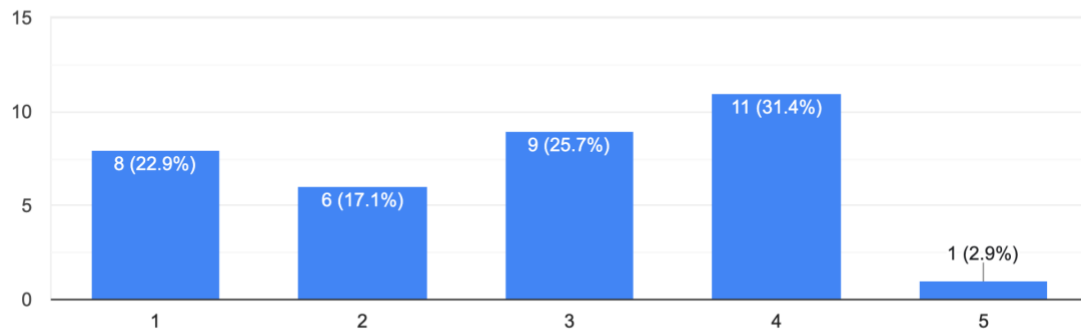
(8) Do you think our Japanese courses should use more AI, including translators, to help you learn?

35 responses



(9) Are you interested in practicing conversations with AIs as a part of course assignments?

35 responses



Let's compare the following two categories. One group consists of respondents who use GenAIs almost daily or regularly. The other group consists of those who have never used GenAIs or have only used them once or twice. Each category has 11 members. Figure 10 shows how many of them chose "yes" on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 means "Definitely No" and 5 means "Definitely Yes."

(10) Do you think we should use GenAI for Japanese courses?

Group (# of responders)	Use of AI for course learning (selected the scale 4 or 5)	Conversation practice with AI as course assignments (selected the scale 4 or 5)
Use GenAI regularly (11)	3	7
Rarely used Gen AI (11)	0	0

The respondents who use GenAI regularly commented on the use of GenAI for future Japanese courses as follows:

- As I mentioned above, I find it's more efficient to ask AI for questions related to vocabulary and grammar compared to searching websites. However, I do feel it is necessary to be aware that AI has its limitations. Its expression styles may not be as natural as native speakers, and it also gives wrong responses occasionally.
- In class because we have professors, there is no need for us to use AI; if we have a question, we can just ask and the professors would give correct answers. But after class I think we can have conversations with AI because maybe our friends or classmates also aren't really sure about all the grammar and vocabulary we learned in class. Practice with AI can allow us to know all the small mistakes we might have not noticed.
- For most of the coursework, I think an online dictionary will be enough. I have no knowledge about how to practice conversation with AI, but if there is a chance, I would love to try it as an activity, but not as an assignment format. For the assignment I would prefer more real face to face conversation or project. AI sounds too uncertain.
- I think it is quite fun to include the conversation with AI since they can give individual feedback to me and correct my answer if there are any mistakes.
- (8) I don't want to say generative AI does not help us, but when it comes to language learning, I think it is more effective to learn in a traditional way. (9) I would feel awkward as I know I'm talking to a non-human being.
- I don't think it would do a good job, and I'm not very good at online conversation.

On the other hand, respondents who had rarely or never used GenAI wrote the following: Some respondents expressed strong opposition to the use of GenAI in general.

- It may be helpful, but nothing replaces interaction between humans
- I would honestly rather practice conversations with a Japanese speaker or another learner.
- I don't like using AI for learning because I think that people learn better from real human interaction.
- While I recognize that AI is a very valuable tool for learning new languages, I am not the most comfortable using it (as it is a new technology and kind of scary). If we use AI as a part of course assignments, though, I would of course be ok with using it.
- I don't think AI is mature enough to substitute for human interaction.
- I am deeply opposed to using generative AI myself, but other non-generative AI, such as translator AI, can be useful from time to time or for certain purposes. I believe we have used some translator or speech prosody AI in class before, and I found them to be helpful. However, I would be uncomfortable if I had to use a generative AI like ChatGPT for a class.
- I am ethically against using AI because it is terrible for the environment.

Figure 10 and the preceding comments suggest that students need positive and accountable experiences with GenAI to use it effectively. I sensed that some international students, who are advanced learners of English, have already used GenAI to improve their English and are more likely to be positive about using it to learn Japanese.

7. Going Forward

We found that our respondents had issues similar to those reported in published reports during the pandemic. Although our survey did not address grade inflation, many respondents reported experiencing more lenient attendance policies, fewer tests, and less homework. While they may have received good grades prior to college, many feel that

the pandemic negatively impacted their learning. Interestingly, only three out of 35 respondents had negative feelings about taking more in-class quizzes in the future to learn Japanese. We must investigate which aspects of in-class quizzes they find helpful. One thing we can say is that quizzes often come with preparation guidelines, which may be what they want. Remote learning forced students to use more technology. At the same time, many experienced computer-screen fatigue. Furthermore, students are aware that academic dishonesty related to technology has become a bigger issue since the start of the pandemic. To take advantage of GenAI, we should consider how we can provide them with positive and accountable experiences with it. Finally, we should note that students appreciate the current situation, in which they can attend in-person instruction with their peers at college, and are happier with it.

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