# Desarrollo de una Ecología de Recursos online para profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) en una universidad japonesa durante la pandemia de COVID-19

# The development of an Ecology of Resources for online English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in a Japanese university during the COVID-19 pandemic

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**RESUMEN.**
La enseñanza del idioma inglés en las universidades japonesas se puede describir por su enfoque centrado en clases presenciales con relativamente poca actividad online. Por lo mismo, la transición de emergencia hacia la enseñanza a distancia durante abril de 2020 como respuesta a la pandemia de COVID-19 fue bastante complicada. Este artículo describe cómo los profesores de una facultad de inglés como Lengua Extranjera (EFL) de una universidad nacional en Japón, se coordinaron y unieron para ayudarse entre sí a través de varias guías online y la creación de grupos de apoyo de pares. Esta actividad se analiza en términos del desarrollo de una Ecología de Recursos (EoR) (Luckin, 2008) y una Comunidad de Práctica Online (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Los cuatro documentos colaborativos y el grupo de apoyo de pares que componen el EoR se describen en conjunto con ejemplos de este proceso de desarrollo docente. Al participar en la creación del EoR, los profesores no sólo aprendieron juntos cómo enseñar online en un contexto de emergencia, sino también esta colaboración puede llegar a ser la base para una futura enseñanza online en una institución donde esto no había sucedido antes.

**PALABRAS CLAVE.**
COVID-19, enseñanza remota de emergencia, inglés como idioma extranjero, universidades japonesas, desarrollo docente.

**ABSTRACT.**
English language teaching in Japanese universities can be described as having a very classroom-centered approach with relatively little online presence. Therefore, the transition to emergency remote teaching in April 2020 in response to COVID-19 was particularly challenging. This paper describes how the teaching staff in one English as a Foreign Language (EFL) department at a national university in Japan came together to support one another with various online guides and the creation of peer support groups. This activity is analysed in terms of the development of an Ecology of Resources (EoR) (Luckin, 2008) and an online Community of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The four collaborative documents and the peer support group that make up the EoR are described together with examples of this teacher development process. By partaking in the creation of the EoR teaching staff

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learned together how to teach online in an emergency context and this collaboration can be the basis for future online teaching in an institution where it had not happened before.

**KEY WORDS.**
COVID-19, emergency remote teaching, English as a Foreign Language, Japanese universities, teacher development.

## 1. Introduction.

Japan has a well-deserved reputation for advanced technology but in the education field conditions are decidedly traditional, even in the higher education sector (Poole, 2010). University classrooms tend to consist of fixed desk lecture halls with teachers writing on a blackboard with chalk. There may be computers and projectors that staff can use to lecture with slides but it is not unusual for them to just talk with no visual support for students. Learning management systems (LMSs) are a relatively recently introduced form of digital technology and even now many universities do not have them. Even if they do many of the staff will not be familiar with how they work and will not have used them and there is definitely a digital divide between 'staff haves and have-nots' (Willems, 2019, p.150). On campus Wi-Fi is also a recent phenomenon and there are many areas of universities that are not covered. Students will almost all have a smartphone but many will begin their university studies with little or no experience of using a lap top computer or of using technology for educational purposes (Wang, Iwata & Jarrell, 2018). In short, these conditions meant that Japanese universities were not particularly well prepared for the almost overnight shift to online learning in April 2020 brought on by the COVID-19 emergency (Bozkurt et al., 2020).

Okayama University is a national university in the west of Japan. It serves a regional population with an annual intake of about 2,300 students spread across 13 different faculties. There is no specific faculty for foreign languages but all first- and second-year students have English as a Foreign Language (EFL) lessons. This means that about 4,600 students take compulsory classes in the four skills (speaking, writing, reading and listening) together with a variety of more specialist elective options. These lessons are taught by about 60 full- and part-time staff who divide almost equally into Japanese and non-Japanese. Lessons are either one or two hours long and most lesson slots are occupied by about 20 to 30 classes happening at the same time. As classrooms are almost always fully occupied it is very difficult to carry out social distancing.

The school has provided Moodle as an LMS for several years but most staff have not used it and it has not been compulsory for them to do so. Interestingly, there is some evidence that even with a clearly organised program of training most staff in a Japanese university will not use Moodle (Stanley, 2015, p.133). Once the decision was taken to undertake 'emergency remote teaching' (Crawford, Butler-Henderson, Rudolph & Glowatz, 2020) in April 2020 the senior university management stated that teaching staff could use any kind of digital tools or software that they wanted to, but that they must upload their course materials to Moodle. Of course, this created a huge initial demand for information about how Moodle works. The senior managers did not state that lessons had to be synchronous or asynchronous but would leave that decision to each teacher. This was a very welcome move as it meant that every teacher

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could take a pedagogical approach that reflected their knowledge of and confidence in using various online tools and materials. This paper will describe what supporting documents and activities the EFL teachers created for each other in order to cope with this unprecedented change in teaching context and pedagogy. In doing so it provides a snapshot in time of how a group of teachers attempted to collaboratively upgrade their 'techno-pedagogical' knowledge and skills (Romeu-Fontanillas, Guitert-Catasús, Raffaghelli & Sangrà, 2020, p. 33).

## 2. Literature review.

The use of digital technology for EFL teaching has had a long history (Hockly, 2015), and although there have been various forms of online learning the blended version (Cowie & Sakui, 2014) is probably the most common with a combination of face-to-face classroom teaching and some element of online input. A typical scenario is the 'flipped classroom' (Goldstein & Driver, 2014) approach with students being asked to view online materials in out-of-class time and then discussing them or practising skills in face-to-face lessons. In Japan, wholly online learning is a niche field that takes place in after-hours cram schools, universities 'of the air' (similar to the Open University in the UK), and some elite university-led MOOCs (Aoki, 2015). It is not, however, a common option in most higher education institutions and most teachers and students have relatively little online teaching or learning experience in formal settings. Given this background, it is not surprising that university language teachers in Japan would struggle to teach online in early 2020 (Miller, 2020).

'Communities of Practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is a well-known theory of adult learning with a number of associated concepts. One of these, 'legitimate peripheral participation', defines learning as a process of entering a community in which members evolve from newcomers to old-timers. Through this process, people eventually gain a so-called legitimate position within the community as they move from being on the periphery to full membership. Learning takes place through participation in activities shared by the community members. A community is a group of people who share similar beliefs, values and ways of doing things. Lave and Wenger's original research focused on groups such as apprentice tailors in West Africa, and they were interested in seeing how informal learning contrasted with school learning. Communities of practice do not necessarily have to have a physical presence and many online communities have emerged in which members share values and purposes beyond the concepts of time and place. This is of course particularly the case as a result of COVID-19 with communities of teaching staff suddenly being forced to develop plans for online learning by actually meeting online.

Closely connected to this decoupling of learning from a specific time and place is Luckin's (2008) Ecology of Resources (EoR) framework in which a range of different educational resources can be used to support learning. Such resources include people, technologies and artifacts which a learner interacts with to create new meaning and knowledge. The EoR framework falls within a line of theoretical approaches to the analysis of professional learning that can be classed as Learning Ecologies (González-Sanmamed, Estévez, Souto-Seijo & Muñoz-Carril, 2020) in which there is:

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> …the assumption of professional development as a process of continuous learning, in which each teacher tries to improve their own training, taking advantage of the resources available through various mechanisms and contexts. (p. 10)

In the next section, we shall see how the English languages department at Okayama University used their distributed knowledge of online learning to develop a new community of online practice together with an associated EoR to support teachers who, for the most part, had almost no experience of teaching online.

**3. Methodology.**

After the initial decision by senior management to go online, full-time Okayama University EFL teachers soon realised that there would need to be set in place a number of different support mechanisms for all staff to be able to carry out online language teaching. There were online guidebooks and manuals provided by the university computer centre for the basics of Moodle, but in late March 2020 the language department decided to supplement these with a series of short, very practical workshops focusing on items such as creating a dashboard, making a syllabus, uploading materials and communicating with students. This was a familiar route to teacher development as this department has an over 15-year tradition of regular faculty development workshops and training events.

Subsequent to this initial response to COVID-19 the start of the new academic year was delayed from early April until the beginning of May. Face-to-face meetings were deemed unsafe and so there was a move to create various kinds of online documents and materials to support staff. The delay in starting the term was a short window of opportunity to get ready for all classes to be held online. Over this period of two to three weeks various documents were co-created and collaboratively curated synchronously over Zoom and asynchronously through email and by using Google Docs. Staff who were more experienced in online learning took the lead but all teachers had some part contributing to and developing the documents in action. The documents were shared through email, Moodle, Google Drive and Microsoft Teams. Once online teaching was underway, four ‘peer support’ groups were established so that teachers less experienced in online teaching could access the knowledge and skills of those who were more so. Each group of approximately 15 part-time teachers was organised and facilitated by two full-time staff.

The online documents and contemporaneous notes that were taken for each support group meeting are the basic data for this study, making up the three elements of Luckin’s (2008) EoR: people, technology and artefacts. The author reflexively examined this EoR in order to make a personal account of his experiences and reflections available to readers (Canagarajah, 2012).

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## 4. Results.

The main four collaborative documents that were created will be explained below, followed by a description of the peer support groups that were established.

### 4.1. Online teaching guide.

This shared Google document was in the form of a grid with types of teaching activity listed down the left-hand side (for example, lectures, communicating with students, giving feedback, and teaching the four skills) and three columns of suggestions for each content type: less technology use; mid technology use; and, more technology needed. Table 1 shows one example extract from the online teaching guide. You may notice that the advice is not institution specific as many of the part-time teachers have to work at several different universities, which is a very common situation in Japan (Williams, 2019).

Table 1. An example extract from the online teaching guide.

| Activity | Less tech | Mid tech | More tech |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Communicating with students** (check your school's policy on data protection and privacy) | Make an email list of each class.<br><br>Make sure that you 'bcc' the students so you do not share everybody's email address.<br><br>If your school does not allow email find out what method is used to get in touch. | 1) Use common Social Networking Services (SNS) to text or call students.<br><br>SNS examples include Facebook, Line, WhatsApp, Slack etc.<br><br>2) Share Padlet pages where both the teacher and students can upload information, questions etc. | Use a Learning Management System (LMS) to upload your course materials and contact students.<br><br>LMS examples include: Moodle, Blackboard, Canvas, Manaba, Edmodo, Google Classroom etc.<br><br>Teachers may use their own LMS or schools may have one for all teachers. |

### 4.2. Online teaching tips.

This document is a list of teaching tips that are suitable for teachers who have not done any kind of online teaching before. These tips were derived from notes that the author made on a live Zoom meeting on March 16th, 2020. This was organized by the National Institute of Digital Learning (2020) based at Dublin City University, Ireland. The tips are divided into four areas: general principles; first lesson priorities; online content; and, thinking about the learners (Cowie & Sakui, 2020a). This document was translated into Japanese and was made available on the university website for all teaching staff.

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Table 2. A short extract example from the online teaching tips document.

| **First of all, you are moving from teacher to learner…** |
|---|
| Don't panic!<br>Get guidance and help where you can.<br>Connect with students in any way you can such as through email and over social networks.<br>Provide 'how to' information in short instructions.<br>Do easy things that you are used to.<br>Keep things simple and limit the number of online tools that you use.<br>Be true to your own way of teaching. |
| **First lesson priorities** |
| Have a 'welcome' lesson where you explain expectations, steps you will take, and what tools you will use.<br>Ask students how they want to participate – try not to micromanage their approach too much.<br>Agree on rules of interaction with students and share resources with them. |

### 4.3. Frequently asked questions (FAQs).

This was the document which was updated most often as teachers came across more issues and problems as they went online. When it began the document was a chronological list of problems and questions to be solved. However, as time went on it gradually evolved into three clear areas. Two were specific problems related to the use of Moodle and Zoom, and the third was for more general work-related issues; for example: How should part-time teachers report that they have worked if they don't go to the campus?

Table 3. A typical question and suggested answer from early in April 2020.

| **Question**: Can we assume all students have an internet connection? |
|---|
| **Answer:** Almost all students have computers now, and students who do not have computers or internet access are instructed to use campus PCs. We have to teach class assuming all students have web access and can access Moodle. However, we must be patient and flexible for students who are having trouble getting a computer or web access, and of course, many students lack computer skills. Therefore, teachers are advised to be flexible about deadlines for assignments. Expecting all students to be online during the class time for a 'live' activity would likely lead to headaches. |

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### 4.4. Speaking lesson suggestions.

EFL lessons often include a certain amount of skills practice. For example, if a student wants to get better at speaking then they need to actually practice speaking or 'interaction' (Ellis, 2008) with their teacher or classmates. This need for a practical lesson, rather than a lecture or some kind of content delivery, posed probably the hardest challenge for many teachers. In order to help them overcome this, another specific document with teaching approaches and ideas for speaking lessons was created. Seven different types of speaking activities were divided into three sections: 1) a typical activity in a face-to-face lesson; 2) an asynchronous version of this activity; and, 3) a synchronous version.

Table 4. An example from the speaking suggestions document of how to 'warm up' at the beginning of a speaking lesson.

| **Face-to-face lesson** | **Asynchronous (e.g., using Moodle)** | **Live online (using Zoom or Teams etc)** |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Warm up chat in pairs | Students post comments on the Moodle Forum in response to a teacher prompt.<br>For example: ¿How are you this week? | Basic: The teacher greets students individually and they respond.<br><br>Advanced: Students talk in pairs in Breakout rooms (or take attendance via Padlet or Google Docs etc - give a link and students write their names on the document) |

### 4.5. Teacher support group meetings.

In addition to the support documents, eight full-time staff were allocated as mentors to four groups of part-time teachers. Initially this led to many individual email exchanges about issues which often resulted in an entry to the FAQs document. Subsequently, it was decided to have periodic video conferences for the four peer support groups. From April 10th until August 7th 2020, the author was involved in five such Zoom meetings with an average attendance of 12 staff. These took on a consistent format: firstly, each member of staff was asked how they were doing and if they had a specific issue to bring up; then other colleagues would offer suggestions for each problem and share their own experiences. At the end of this group round-up there would be an opportunity for more general questions and information sharing. Each meeting lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. The five meetings each took on a different theme that reflected the current concerns of staff at that time.

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Table 5. A summary of the main concerns expressed at each peer support meeting.

| Meeting | Main Concerns |
|---|---|
| 1. | Initial issues of how to use various digital tools such as Moodle, Zoom, Flipgrid, Google Docs. |
| 2. | Contacting students; students who had not turned up for lessons; increasing concern about teacher work load. |
| 3. | Teacher well-being and burn-out; gradually adjusting to meeting online rather than face-to-face. |
| 4. | Teachers were becoming accustomed to the online situation. |
| 5. | Sharing ideas on how to grade efficiently and general reflections on how the first online term had turned out. |

## 5. Discussion.

There are many different issues and implications that emerged from the development of materials to support online teaching and the peer support group meetings. This section will discuss three of these: 1) adapting to continuous change and the SAMR model; 2) the clarification of what is a community of practice; and, 3) the development of an EoR. After these three discussion points some of the limitations of this study will be pointed out.

Firstly, it was clear that the period from April to August 2020 was one of continuous change and adaptation to the disruptive realities of COVID-19 (Selwyn & Jandrić, 2020). The types of issue that were pertinent at any one time switched continuously. For example, there were initial concerns about the mechanics of using Moodle and Zoom and the fundamental concepts of how to move face-to-face classes online. Once teachers had mastered these new skills and knowledge areas, concern then switched to the quality of interactions with students, and later to how online pedagogies could be improved in the future. This continuous change can be analysed in terms of the SAMR (Substitution, Augmentation, Modification, Redefinition) technology enhanced learning framework (Puentedura, 2010). This framework describes a four-part line of development where at the 'substitution' level digital technology only substitutes or replaces traditional pedagogy; it does not change it. However, as we move towards the redefinition end of the scale, technology can be used to fundamentally alter (or redefine) what is happening in the teaching and learning process. In this study, for most of the term face-to-face teaching materials, activities and tasks were largely substituted with online versions as teachers scrambled to use familiar pedagogies in a new environment. But as teachers became used to this way of teaching they started to realise that online teaching is different and that there are affordances of technology that can augment what is done in face-to-face environments. This became clear in the peer support group meetings as teachers exchanged stories of their experiences with new applications and digital tools.

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One example was the video sharing tool, Flipgrid, which became a 'go to' application for many of the speaking skills teachers (Cowie & Sakui, 2020b). Flipgrid is an easy to use tool for both teachers and students. At its simplest students create short videos and upload them for each other to view. This involves students in creating a script, rehearsing several times and then performing. In addition, students can then view each other's videos, listen to feedback videos or emails from their teacher, and even make another video to comment on their peers. Students can stop, pause, rewind and review as many times as they like. Initially Flipgrid was used as a substitute for pair or group speaking practice but it can be seen from this brief description that is has many possibilities to augment such classroom activity and even to modify and redefine them: creating and sharing a cycle of interactive videos goes beyond what has traditionally been done in many language learning classrooms. At the time of writing it is clear that this group of teachers are continuing to explore further affordances of online learning and transform their teaching approaches towards the modification and redefinition end of the SAMR framework.

Secondly, the development of an EoR required much discussion and negotiation between teachers as to what kind of pedagogical approach was suitable for an online environment. Prior to 2020 this group of teachers had organised many self-help development opportunities which often revealed differences in approaches between individuals. However, the need to quickly and collaboratively move online crystalized these professional differences in a way that had never happened before. Differences in teaching activities, ways to assess and grade students, and how to contact students were all illuminated in new and unexpected ways. A monolithic community of practice where there is some central agreement about what is legitimate participation was somehow replaced by a number of overlapping communities. The one constant pulling them together was the need for all teachers to find common ways to teach online. Ironically, perhaps the one aspect of teaching that few people knew about (teaching online) drew them together. This process was itself facilitated by digital technology and online team work. Documents were created and shared online, and then they were discussed through emails and over Zoom. These meetings took place at an individual and group level and in two languages. In addition, role differences became blurry as part-time teachers who had never previously had any specific responsibility beyond their own classes suddenly found they were 'knowers'. They could contribute in a major way to a distributed network of knowledge and learning (Goldie, 2016) and traditional hierarchical differences between full- and part-time staff were disrupted.

Thirdly, it is important to note how an EoR can be created and sustained. An EoR consists of people, technology and artefacts interacting to support a learner's development. In this case, the learners were a group of teachers and the 'people' were colleagues. There were clearly some staff members who had online teaching experience that could be shared; however, what was interesting to see was that when novice online teachers asked questions or gave comments this would result in an expansion of the EoR through subsequent answers and additional materials. The EoR really was a distributed network with all members being able to contribute in some form or other. The second aspect of an EoR, technology, also had a vital reflexive role to play in the development of teacher resources. As the group of teachers could not meet face-to-face their introduction to online teaching was through digital technology;

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technology that they would then go on to use with their students. This direct and immediate use of tools can be seen as an example of 'experiential learning' or 'learning-by-doing' (Dewey, 1938; Kolb & Fry, 1975; and, Kolb, 1976). That is, teachers would learn firstly by the construction of abstract concepts about online teaching followed by immediate testing out of these concepts in their new online classes. The third aspect of an EoR, artefacts, were the various documents that were co-created and curated by the group. In their discussion of Learning Ecologies for the professional development of higher education teachers, González-Sanmamed et al. claim that training plans should offer 'personalised, open and flexible itineraries' (2020, p.16). It is suggested that the group-created documents are an example of how this kind of training itinerary can be generated from within a specific community of practice.

On a final note, there are an obvious number of limitations of this study. The main one is that it is one teacher's perspective on a complex and multi-faceted process of teacher development that affected 60 or so other teachers. The study would be more generalizable if the perspectives of some of those teachers could be included in the results, through surveys and interviews. This will be key in the next stage of research following the evolution of this community of practice. The full implications of these four months of emergency remote teaching are still to be worked out but it is hoped that the co-created community knowledge and expertise in online teaching and learning will be further developed and extended beyond the current crisis. The creation of an EoR is a model of collaboration that deserves to be analysed and critiqued to help maintain even more professional development in overlapping communities of practice.

## 6. Conclusion.

In 2020, worldwide, universities suddenly requested that their traditional classroom-based lessons be placed online. This created a particular burden on staff in countries and disciplines where there had previously been little online activity. This was the case for most language teaching departments in Japanese universities. This paper has described the response of the EFL staff in Okayama University to collaboratively create a variety of support materials and documents which were delivered in both synchronous and asynchronous ways. Although the university had a strong tradition of faculty development, collaborative workshops and professional sharing it was still an institution where 'teaching (occurs) behind closed doors' (Day, 1999, p. 78). However, the impact of COVID-19 meant that teachers, on the whole, came together as never before to raise their overall level of knowledge and expertise of online learning. Through the co-creation of an EoR there was a mass move from the periphery of the digital technology community to legitimate participation.

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