



## A glimpse of the “new normal” in online language learning and teaching

<sup>1</sup>Kasumi Arciaga 

<sup>1</sup>English Program, Utsunomiya University, JAPAN

<sup>1</sup>350 Mine Utsunomiya Tochigi

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#### Correspondence:

Kasumi Arciaga, English Program,  
Utsunomiya University, JAPAN  
[kasumi.arciaga@c.utsunomiya-u.ac.jp](mailto:kasumi.arciaga@c.utsunomiya-u.ac.jp)

### ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly promoted online foreign language learning and teaching, given in the situation of the widespread lockdowns globally. Most of Southeast Asian countries took harsher approach to the pandemic. In the context of the Philippines, where in-person school operations were prohibited for a continuous period of 20 months, the impact of these restrictions has been unmistakable. This study aims to explore and highlight the experiences of online language learners and teachers during the Covid-19 pandemic. Research in this area remains limited due to the recent conclusion of the pandemic. In the present study, eight foreign language teachers participated in the focus groups, and eight language learners took part in one-on-one interviews. Through thematic analysis, the findings of this study unveiled a notable trend, which are that learners exhibited a strong preference for online classes, while teachers expressed an equitable preference for both online and face-to-face instruction. This divergence in preferences signifies a dynamic shift in the landscape of language education. The study therefore concludes that the “new normal” of language learning and teaching has indeed materialized during the pandemic, as evidenced by the transformative shift towards online modes of instruction.



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**Distance** learning modes have been available for decades; however, it goes without saying that the Covid-19 pandemic certainly accelerated online language learning and teaching. The pandemic took its toll through lockdowns that prohibited face-to-face classes. This was the case of the Philippines for 20 consecutive months from 2020 to 2021. This unforeseen event unquestionably influenced the approaches of language learners and

educators towards language instruction. In this regard, the present study has therefore undertaken this notion that there may be the ‘new normal’ perspective of how online foreign language learning and teaching have been adapted. Additionally, this study also highlights experiences of online foreign language learning and teaching in the Philippines during the Covid-19 pandemic, contributing the construction of the post-pandemic language learning and teaching approaches.

Previous research on pandemic language learning has emphasized on the challenges that learners may face during their online language learning (e.g., Rahayu & Wizra, 2020; Ubaedilah & Pratiwi, 2021; Zhou & Farrah 2021). Enriching this discourse with the various encounters of online language learners and teachers amid pandemic-induced lockdowns, the study will bring out to be paramount importance to the area of interest.

The previous studies collectively reveal a nuanced narrative among learners e.g., Mahyoob, 2020; Maican & Cocorada, 2021). Initially, a strong preference for traditional face-to-face (F2F) classes was found and echoed by almost all participants. However, a significant portion of learners, around half, recognize certain advantages associated with online learning. Their preferred language skills align closely with those emphasized in F2F settings, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Interestingly, many learners still lean towards printed materials for note-taking, demonstrating a preference for tactile learning aids (Chen, 2021; Rintoga, et al. 2021).

Regarding motivation and preparedness, learners' perspectives diverge. While approximately half report high motivation, the other half express concerns related to connectivity with peers and teachers. Notably, learners perceive a high level of preparedness and effectiveness in online language learning, although they continue to express a strong preference for in-person classes. For instance, Ubaedilah and Pratiwi's (2021) study identified issues such as intermittent internet access and the high costs of digital devices as significant hindrances to effective online language learning. These challenges, as highlighted in their research in Indonesia, are indicative of broader digital infrastructure and accessibility issues in many parts of the world, including the Philippines, which is the focus of the present study.

Rahayu and Wizra's (2020) study in Indonesia highlight the challenges educators faced in adapting their teaching styles from traditional to online methods. Teachers found it necessary to revise course designs and develop new interactive approaches to engage students effectively. Although they recognized the potential of online classes, it became evident that digital skills needed to be cultivated among teachers for sustained success.

In contrast, in developed countries like Italy, teachers seemed better equipped for online education, with many having already integrated digital tools into their teaching methods before the pandemic. Age emerged as a

significant predictor of technological readiness, showcasing the importance of digital fluency among educators. For instance, Giovannella, Passarelli, and Persico (2020) reported on teachers' perceptions of online classes in Italy. They noted that teachers aimed to integrate digital skills into language courses. In contrast to teachers in developing countries, teachers in developed countries like Italy seemed to have already incorporated digital tools prior to the pandemic.

Delving further, Assalahi's (2020) exploration of the community of inquiry model highlights teaching presence as a significant predictor of successful online classes. This presence encompasses aspects like course design and significantly influences social and cognitive presences. Teachers' perceptions of the degree of boredom in online classes also link to teaching presence (Shao et al, 2023).

Rebenko, Nikolenko, and Doronina's (2021) study in Ukraine revealed students' adaptive learning strategies in synchronous tasks, despite some concerns about online assessments and distractions. Similarly, Tarrayo et al. (2021) found Filipino English teachers recognizing both the lack of student engagement in online classes and the advantages of convenience and pedagogical development.

While the Covid-19 pandemic has undoubtedly reshaped the landscape of language learning, both learners and teachers have encountered diverse challenges and opportunities. Limited internet access, a shortage of digital devices, and the need for further digital literacy emerge as persistent obstacles. The experiences and preferences regarding online language learning remain varied, with some learners embracing it while others long for the familiarity of F2F interaction.

As the pandemic continues to influence education, studies centered on this theme are still emerging. This ongoing exploration highlights the dynamic nature of language learning, characterized by the resilience and adaptability of learners and language teachers alike in the face of unprecedented challenges. The following research questions were therefore constructed in order to reveal the pandemic language learning and teaching experiences and to construct possible pedagogical implications for the post-pandemic era of online language learning and teaching.

- How do these learners and teachers perceive their online foreign language classes during the pandemic?

## **METHOD**

### **Research Design**

The present study employs a qualitative approach in which analyses the data gathered from focus group interviews and one-on-one interviews. All the

interviews were conducted via Zoom meetings; hence, the recorded Zoom meetings were transcribed.

## **Instruments and Procedures**

### ***Participants***

In the present study, eight Filipino Japanese teachers who taught Japanese online during the pandemic were invited for a focus group interview – two focus groups of four teachers. The teachers were selected through snowballing procedure as one teacher referred other teachers to join the focus group interview. As for the selection criteria, the teachers were expected to teach prior to the pandemic and during the pandemic. The learners were expected to learn online during the pandemic. The following table describes the demographic information of the teachers in the present study.

**Table 1. Demographic Information of the Eight Teachers in the Present Study**

<b>Pseudonym (Gender)</b>	<b>Years of teaching F2F and online</b>	<b>Focus group #</b>
Chie <i>sensei</i> (Female)	F2F: 7 years Online: 1 year	Focus group 1
Felix <i>sensei</i> (Male)	F2F: 14 years Online: 2 years	Focus group 1
Mayumi <i>sensei</i> (Female)	F2F: 1 year Online: 3 years	Focus group 1
Jake <i>sensei</i> (Male)	F2F: 3 years Online: 1 year	Focus group 1
Daniel <i>sensei</i> (Male)	F2F: 1 year Online: 3 years	Focus group 2
Kei <i>sensei</i> (Female)	F2F: 3 months Online: 2 years	Focus group 2
Sharon <i>sensei</i> (Female)	F2F: 1 year Online: 1 year	Focus group 2
May <i>sensei</i> (Female)	F2F: 0.3 months Online: 2 years	Focus group 2

Note: “Sensei” means “teacher”.

As referred by the teachers, eight learners were invited for one-on-one interviews. Initially, ten Japanese language learners were invited for the interviews; however, one decided to withdraw from the study, and the other one had a difficult time communicating with the researcher as her Filipino language ability was limited to communicate with the interviewee. This ended with the total of 8 Japanese language learners.

**Table 2. Demographic Information of Eight Students in the Present Study**

<b>Pseudonym (Gender)</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Referred by</b>	<b>Duration of studying Japanese</b>
James (Male)	20s	Worker	Daniel <i>sensei</i>	3 months

Pseudonym (Gender)	Age	Occupation	Referred by	Duration of studying Japanese
Amber (Female)	20s	Worker	Mayumi <i>sensei</i>	6 years
Nicole (Female)	20s	Freelance worker	Daniel <i>sensei</i>	3 years
Anna (Female)	30s	Freelance worker	Daniel <i>sensei</i>	1 year
Daisy (Female)	20s	Student	Felix <i>sensei</i>	6 months
Aaron (Male)	20s	Worker	Jack <i>sensei</i>	1 year
Mike (Male)	20s	Student	Felix <i>sensei</i>	6 months
Kamille (Female)	30s	Worker	Kei <i>sensei</i>	2 years

### Data Analysis Procedures

The present study made use of Dörnyei (2014)'s article on retrodictive qualitative modelling (RQM henceforth) as a method. This method approached that the expected outcome (teachers) was addressed first then was compared to the experiences shared by the learners. This approach is expected to bring out comprehensive narrative that helps to understand or explain about a phenomenon that learners and teachers may experience. First, two focus groups were conducted for the teachers, and they shared their experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic as well as describing their learners' typical behaviors found in their online classes. Then, these teachers referred their eight students. To analyze the collected data, thematic analysis (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003) was employed. Thematic analysis helped extract and interpret key themes and patterns within the data, allowing for a deeper exploration of the experiences and perspectives of both teachers and learners in the context of online language learning during the pandemic. Themes were determined and coded with two intercoders with the agreement of 100% on each theme.

### FINDINGS

The present study seeks learners' and teachers' perception of online foreign language classes during the Covid-19 pandemic. Almost all the learners mentioned their preference towards face-to-face (F2F) classes although half of them also acknowledged certain advantages of online classes. In contrast, all the teachers favored online classes yet with favors with F2F classes as well.

**Table 3. Learners' and Teachers' Perception of Online Classes during the Pandemic**

Learners' perception of online classes during the pandemic	Teachers' perception of online classes during the pandemic
Preference to online classes: Time and convenience	Preference to online classes: Convenience
Preference to online classes: Technology	Preference to online classes: Technology

	Preference to online classes: Learning how to be resourceful
Challenges of online classes: Intermitted internet connection	Challenges of online classes: Intermitted internet connection
	Challenges of online classes: Extra preparation
Challenges of online classes: Less interaction and limited activities	Challenges of online classes: Unable to check the reactions of learners

### Preference to Online Classes: Time and Convenience

On the contrary, surprisingly, four out of eight language learners expressed positive views regarding online classes. Their experiences and perspectives are best captured through interviews and quotations:

Nicole highlighted the flexibility of online classes, emphasizing the freedom to adjust learning schedules: "you have unlimited time and you can adjust it to whenever you're available I think like I said it's very flexible." (Nicole, personal interview, September 2022). This suggests that learners have effectively adapted to the change and harnessed the benefits of online classes.

James, for instance, mentioned time savings from avoiding the daily commute to school:

"*yung flexible yung time* [number one good side is the flexible time] *kasi* I mean *ung flexible yung time kumbaga hindi na ako magrroad magra-ride papuntang school* [in other words I won't have to ride to school] I can get my online classes here in my home" (James, personal interview, September 2022).

Commutes in the Philippines are notoriously time-consuming, a factor supported by teachers, as we will explore in the forthcoming section. Furthermore, Anna noted another aspect of time convenience, stating, "in some point there's a convenience in online because you don't have to take a bath" (Anna, personal interview, September 2022).

In terms of flexibility, access to online resources was deemed highly advantageous by learners. Kamille shared her perspective:

"we just easily go to the *jisho* [dictionary] and then there are lots of uh resource that we can find like for one word of course in Japanese there are many meanings" (Kamille, personal interview, September 2022).

### Preference to Online Classes: Technology

Another intriguing theme emerged as Kamille discussed the advantages of online classes, particularly the role of technology. She emphasized that online classes allowed her to harness online resources and discover valuable tools like mobile and online language learning applications independently: "a

projector in the big screen we are able to see it and uh what else, technology is the advantage" (Kamille, personal interview, September 2022). The preference for online classes was highlighted by the invaluable role of technology. It can be inferred that learners in F2F classes may not have been accustomed to technologies such as PowerPoint slides or the integration of technology into their learning environment. However, the pandemic necessitated the use of technology in online classes, prompting learners to become not only aware of technology but also adept at leveraging it for their educational benefit.

### **Challenges of Online Classes: Intermittent Internet Connection and Learning Environment**

Without a doubt, the challenges posed by online classes were a recurring theme, with five out of eight language learners highlighting intermittent internet connectivity as one of the most vexing issues. Amber pointed out that technical difficulties were evident on both the learners' and teachers' sides, leading to occasional communication breakdowns: "you can uh the person speaking didn't say something clear cause sometimes technology part" (Amber, personal interview, September 2022). Daisy also shed light on the sporadic power interruptions experienced in the Philippines, which often resulted in missed classes for her and her classmates: "and the power corruption yes and also uh how we communicate it's like we have a barrier we should limit what we have but we have yeah" (Daisy, personal interview, September 2022). Mike shared a similar experience, frequently missing classes due to sudden electricity outages: "I always uh missed some classes because of my Internet connection" (Mike, personal interview, September 2022). Anna concurred, emphasizing the instability of internet connectivity that led to disconnections: "online is so kind of difficult but because technical problems like when you're disconnected like that" (Anna, personal interview, September 2022).

### **Challenges of Online classes: Less Interaction and Limited Activities**

Seven out of eight language learners in our study expressed a clear preference for F2F classes. This preference is rooted in the perceived limitations of online classes, particularly the reduced interaction between teachers and learners, as well as the restricted range of activities available. Six of these learners highlighted that F2F classes offer more opportunities for interaction and enable specific activities that are only feasible in a physical classroom setting. For instance, Aaron emphasized, "we can interact with the whole class or we can do quizzes or activities personally without using our notes, so we will be forced to study really hard." This sentiment was echoed by Kamille, who emphasized the advantages of F2F classes, saying, "it's very limited, like

sometimes there are activities that you wanted to do in a face-to-face manner – that we cannot do online – especially interaction."

These comments emphasize that certain activities crucial for language learning are exclusive to F2F classes, making them an appealing choice for the majority of learners. In F2F classes, learners can directly engage with their teachers, ask questions freely, and participate in interactive activities without the constraints of online platforms.

Moreover, learners highlighted the challenge of asking questions during online classes, where muting and unmuting can be cumbersome and potentially disruptive to the class flow. James pointed out the advantage of F2F classes, where "you can directly ask your *sensei* [teacher]" without the need to navigate virtual communication barriers.

The significance of nonverbal cues and the overall learning environment were also emphasized by Daisy, who noted that the atmosphere differs when one is physically present in class, saying, "it's a different feeling if you're really with someone you're communicating with." This sentiment was shared by Nicole and Mike, who appreciated the class atmosphere and the ability to interact with their classmates in real-time.

In F2F classes, learners benefit from direct interactions with both their peers and teachers, while also being able to read nonverbal cues, which enrich the learning experience. These aspects become challenging in online classes, where interactions are limited to virtual platforms.

### **Online Foreign Language Teachers' Perception of Online Language Classes during Covid-19 Pandemic**

Interestingly, the result for the teachers' perception of online classes during the pandemic was not congruent with the learners' perception. All the eight teachers agreed that online language classes were advantageous, while only half of the learners expressed positive responses to their F2F classes.

#### **Preference to Online Classes: Convenience**

The theme of convenience emerged as one of the most prominent among the six teachers in our study, mirroring the preference expressed by learners for online classes. Mayumi sensei, for example, emphasized how online classes allowed her and her students to enjoy flexible scheduling. She mentioned, "In terms of schedule, yes, as I mentioned earlier, the students are often very busy."

Teachers, like learners, greatly appreciate the flexibility afforded by online classes. Additionally, online instruction saves valuable time that would otherwise be spent on commuting. Chie sensei specifically pointed out that the traffic congestion in the Philippines can be unbearable, and the prevalence



of inflation has made online classes particularly convenient. She noted, "Online classes save time on transportation and preparing to go to school for face-to-face classes."

Kei sensei echoed this sentiment by highlighting the financial and time-saving benefits of online classes. She explained, "First, of course, it saves money and time. Gasoline prices are very high, so it really helps save money. With online classes, even if you've just woken up or have limited time, even if it's just 30 minutes before your scheduled online study, that's okay."

Daniel sensei emphasized how online classes maximize not only the teacher's time but also the learners. He pointed out that online learning is easy for everyone to join, emphasizing the convenience of participating from one's own room, even immediately after waking up.

### **Preference to Online Classes: Technology**

Another significant advantage of online classes that emerged as a prominent theme among the teachers was the reusability of materials, particularly PowerPoint slides. This convenience was also acknowledged by learners. Felix sensei pointed out that online platforms allowed him to easily assign tasks and monitor his students' progress, stating, "Another advantage of online is that you can assign tasks, and when you go back, you can check them online as well. So, this is very convenient for us."

Traditionally, teachers used to correct assignments and tasks with pens, but with the advent of online platforms, it has become easier to track and grade assignments and assessments. Chie sensei highlighted the usefulness of such materials, which can be created once and reused for future classes: "You can easily prepare for future use, and the advantage is that you don't have to spend as much time because online resources are very useful."

Chie sensei further elaborated on the time-saving aspect, emphasizing that after creating materials, they can be used for an extended period, ultimately saving time for subsequent classes. She noted, "In all aspects, once you have created your materials, you can use them for a long time, so it seems like you also save time for future classes. I think the time spent creating materials for online classes is the same amount as if we had to prepare for each class individually."

Kei sensei also highlighted the cost-effectiveness of utilizing online resources, especially considering the high cost of gasoline. She mentioned her ability to make use of technology and platforms like YouTube, not only for teaching but also for additional income.

The development of digital skills emerged as a significant shift for teachers during the pandemic. Some teachers initially found it challenging to adapt to technology, having been accustomed to using whiteboards and

traditional teaching methods. However, after mastering tools like PowerPoint slides, they recognized the significant advantages, particularly in terms of time-saving and ease of material preparation.

The preference for online classes was further underscored by the opportunity for teachers to work from home (WFH). This arrangement was particularly advantageous for teachers with young children at home, as it allowed them to balance work and family responsibilities. Kei sensei exemplified this, stating, "I prefer online classes because I'm a full-time mom with two and five-year-old kids, so it's very hard to work outside."

WFH jobs became increasingly prevalent, offering more job opportunities for teachers during the pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic led to a surge in unemployment in the Philippines, making online teaching a popular and in-demand job option as people were confined to their homes for nearly 20 months. Sharon sensei expressed gratitude for her job during the pandemic, as it allowed her to earn a salary despite the strict lockdown measures.

May sensei highlighted that online platform like Zoom had increased in demand among learners, particularly during the pandemic when movement restrictions were in place. Learners were more focused and motivated during online classes because they had limited options for going out.

### **Preference to Online Classes: Learning How to be Resourceful**

Interestingly, another notable theme that emerged in favor of online language classes was the teachers' perspective on these classes as opportunities for them to become more resourceful educators. Jake sensei highlighted how online teaching encouraged teachers to explore innovative ideas to make their classes engaging and entertaining. He expressed, "It's a good thing that happens because teachers, we learn new things in order to grow and become effective educators."

May sensei also embraced various online resources, including apps and online games, to enhance the engagement of her students in learning Japanese. She explained, "We use gaming apps and incorporate them into our lessons so that our students become more engaged in learning Japanese. We also introduce them to free applications they can use on their phones."

Teachers in this context were committed to ensuring that their online classes went beyond traditional lectures. They integrated games and apps from external sources to maximize the efficiency of their students' language learning experience.

### **Challenges of Online Classes: Intermittent Internet Connection**

This theme aligns with the experiences of learners. Despite all eight teachers expressing strong preferences for online classes, seven of them also

acknowledged the downsides of this mode of instruction. In line with the learners, the teachers identified intermittent internet connectivity as a significant challenge during their online classes. Mayumi sensei, for instance, mentioned that power interruptions could lead to class delays and distractions:

"Online would be of course ((laughs)) the technical problems like the connection camera or for example there's a power interruption so there's no Wi-Fi or yeah and then like what [Jake sensei] said" (Mayumi sensei, focus group interview, September 2022).

May sensei further emphasized that internet connectivity was the primary challenge in online classes: "of course the number one challenge is internet connection" (May sensei, focus group interview, September 2022). Kei sensei added that it wasn't just her own internet connection but also her learners' that posed problems:

"number one is poor internet service in the Philippines -- internet service is not really good -- most of all if there is a storm suddenly I will be, get out of the internet and then or some of my students are in the same situation" (Kei sensei, focus group interview, September 2022).

Sharon sensei concurred, highlighting the critical issue of internet stability. Additionally, she mentioned that external noises, such as motorcycles outside the learners' rooms, could also disrupt the learning environment:

"number one is the connection stability -- next is distraction like noise, the motorcycle outside when they are in the room, then sometimes they need to excuse because of Shopee delivery etc or food panda" (Sharon sensei, focus group interview, September 2022).

May sensei echoed the concerns about external distractions, noting that these could not only affect individual learners but also disrupt the entire online class:

"there's also a lot of distraction like they can easily uhm check on their phones -- you saw them uhm looking at their phones, and some of them will excuse and unmute, excuse then and there's a Shopee delivery" (Mayi sensei, focus group interview, September 2022).

From the perspectives of both learners and teachers, it becomes evident that the number one challenge associated with online classes is internet connectivity. This issue is virtually unavoidable in the context of online instruction, posing a significant hurdle for effective learning and teaching.

### **Challenges of Online Classes: Extra Preparation**

While the teachers have highlighted the advantage of reusing materials as a benefit of online classes, this aspect can also be seen as a disadvantage, as it necessitates additional effort on the part of teachers to create new materials. Jake sensei expressed this challenge: "The most challenging part is the uh

making the materials for the students." In agreement with Jake sensei, Felix sensei added, "So as a teacher yeah yeah like [Jake sensei] said, we have to learn how to make PowerPoints" (Felix sensei, focus group interview, September 2022).

Earlier in the section, the preference for online classes was linked to technology. However, this aspect can be viewed from a different perspective, as it requires teachers to acquire new skills, such as creating PowerPoint slides. Mayumi sensei also pointed out the need for creativity and extra preparation, as she could not foresee the problems that might arise during her online classes: "you have to make it work in an online environment because not all activities can be done online -- So you have to be more creative to meet the uh lesson or more fun and interesting" (Mayumi sensei, focus group interview, September 2022). Just like internet connectivity, teachers cannot predict issues. In case of power interruptions or internet connectivity problems, teachers must be prepared. In addition to creating materials like PowerPoint slides, May sensei mentioned the need for mental preparation, as teachers must maintain high energy levels: "if they are learning or and of course, as a *sensei* [teacher], you really have to be *genki* [energetic] at all times because it's all online -- you don't want your students to get bored" (May sensei, focus group interview, September 2022).

Unlike students, all teachers expressed a preference for online classes, but three out of eight teachers reported a preference for teaching face-to-face (F2F) classes. This contrast in preferences highlights a disparity between teachers and students. Regarding the availability of instructional tools, the teachers mentioned that they do not need to prepare much in advance for F2F classes, as there would be a whiteboard and markers available in the classroom. Jake sensei pointed out that less preparation time was needed for F2F classes: "what they call this we don't need to make some PowerPoints or any materials, just write on the Whiteboard and then explain to the students" (Jake sensei, focus group interview, September 2022). Kei sensei also noted that F2F classes were easier for teachers in terms of preparation: "unlike before F2F, we had a whiteboard in there, we can just write on it and make use of it" (Kei sensei, focus group interview, September 2022).

Jake sensei further emphasized the advantage of F2F classes in allowing teachers to easily gauge their learners' reactions during language learning, while learners in online classes often keep their cameras off: "it's better for us to have uh face-to-face learning because during the time of uh online learning we cannot recognize or we cannot uh check the attitudes of this of our students" (Jake sensei, focus group interview, September 2022).

An interesting comment was made by Daniel sensei, who mentioned that in F2F classes, he can delve more into the cultural aspects of language teaching, which he found challenging in his online classes: "*soudesune bunka*

*toka ee yoku oshiete ageruto omoimasu* [that's right and can teach the culture better]" (Daniel sensei, focus group interview, September 2022). He believes that teaching the cultural aspect of the target language is crucial in language instruction.

### **Challenges of Online Classes: Unable to Check the Reactions of Learners**

Another challenging aspect of online classes is the limited ability of teachers to assess the attitudes and behaviors of their learners. Jake sensei pointed out that, due to many learners having to turn off their cameras due to intermittent internet connections, he couldn't gauge his students' reactions adequately: "it's not enough uh to check the behavior of the students" (Jake sensei, focus group interview, September 2022). Felix sensei echoed Jake sensei's sentiments, emphasizing the difficulty of assessing his learners' responses in online classes: "So it's very hard to see their attitudes and what they are doing sometimes they just come in for the attendance" (Felix sensei, focus group interview, September 2022).

One reason for this challenge is that many learners do not keep their cameras on throughout the entire class. May sensei faced difficulties in getting all her learners to activate their cameras during lessons: "some also don't want to open their cameras and with that, you can't also see their reaction to the lessons" (May sensei, focus group interview, September 2022).

## **DISCUSSION**

Throughout the course of the pandemic, the experiences of both learners and teachers in the present study have offered more understanding of the challenges and benefits associated with online language learning and teaching. These experiences have also showcased unique perspectives and adaptations in response to the evolving paradigm of foreign language education.

The most pressing challenge faced by both learners and teachers in the present study has been the issue of internet connectivity. This resonates with previous research findings (Mahyoob, 2020; Ubaedilah & Pratiwi, 2021; Zapata-Cuervo, et al., 2023; Zhoun & Farrah, 2021) that consistently emphasized limited internet access as a major hurdle in the online learning environment. In the context of the Philippines, ensuring reliable and consistent internet connectivity has proven to be a formidable task. Frequent power interruptions, coupled with weak signal have rendered the maintenance of consistent online engagement a significant challenge. For many, this translates into an uphill battle against the unpredictability of internet access, further complicating the process of online language learning.

Beyond internet-related challenges, the online learning environment itself has posed its set of issues. External noise and distractions have emerged

as significant barriers to effective learning (Diacio, 2014). This is an issue exacerbated by the prevalence of noise pollution in the Philippines. Unlike regions where this concern is less pronounced, Filipinos have had to deal with disruptive surroundings during online classes, adding yet another layer of complexity to the online learning experience. Furthermore, the lack of access to appropriate devices has proven to be a significant obstacle for learners navigating the paradigm of online foreign language education (Ubaedilah & Paratiwi, 2021). With some learners resorting to using smartphones for online classes, limitations imposed by these devices have constrained their level of engagement and interaction during virtual lessons.

These challenges have collectively contributed to a decrease in the level of engagement and satisfaction among learners in online classes, which aligns with the findings of Bozavlı (2021). This study reported that learners tend to allocate less time to online learning compared to face-to-face (F2F) classes. Moreover, Bozavlı's research indicated that over 70% of learners expressed dissatisfaction with their online learning experiences.

The findings also resonate with Klimova's (2021) exploration of learners' attitudes toward online classes during the pandemic. Her research revealed that learners held a preference for hands-on materials and cherished the interactive learning environment that F2F classes provided. The ability to freely ask questions and engage with teachers and classmates in real-time emerged as valuable components of F2F instruction. These findings underscore the persistent appeal of F2F classes, particularly for their interactive and immersive nature.

In response to these challenges, teachers have gone the extra mile to make their online classes as engaging and interactive as possible. Rahayu and Wizra (2020) found that teachers exerted additional effort to create materials while adapting to the new mode of language teaching necessitated by the pandemic. This aligns with Rebenko, Nikolenko, and Doronina's (2021) findings, which indicated that teachers' efforts to incorporate interactive tasks into their lessons were effective in alleviating students' anxiety about learning a language online.

While the majority of teachers in Giovannella, Passarelli, and Persico's (2020) study rapidly adapted to online teaching, a minority faced challenges in creating materials. This highlights that the transition to online instruction may be more time-consuming for educators accustomed to traditional F2F teaching. Notably, these teachers were from developed countries, which suggests that educators in developing nations may encounter greater hurdles in developing digital literacy and advancing their technological skills.

Furthermore, Chen (2021) emphasized the importance of providing appropriate materials, such as scaffolding materials, to enhance learners' autonomous learning. Initially dependent on their teachers, learners benefited

from scaffolding materials that promoted autonomy in problem-solving and task completion. This shift toward autonomous learning was facilitated by the availability of supportive materials and resources.

The preference for online classes among both learners and teachers has been driven by factors such as time flexibility and convenience. This preference aligns with the findings of Ubaedilah and Pratiwi (2021), who emphasized the advantage of time flexibility in overcoming space and time constraints. Online classes have been particularly appealing in the Philippines, where lengthy commutes consume significant time for both learners and teachers. The transition to online learning has eliminated the need for physical preparation and commuting, making it especially attractive to learners managing full-time jobs or parenting responsibilities.

Moreover, technology has played a crucial role in enabling teachers to be creative and resourceful in developing engaging and interactive materials for learners. This has allowed teachers to acquire sustainable digital skills that benefit their teaching in the long term. This aligns with Giovannella, Passarelli, and Persico's (2020) findings, which indicated that teachers' initial struggles with digital tools evolved into adept usage of resources like PowerPoint presentations and online platforms. Importantly, the study found that 92% of teachers took less than two weeks to convert and prepare their materials for online teaching, demonstrating their adaptability and rapid skill acquisition.

The experiences of learners and teachers in online language learning and teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic have revealed both challenges and advantages. While challenges related to internet connectivity, noise disruptions, and device accessibility have been prominent, the convenience and time flexibility offered by online classes have been significant advantages. Teachers' efforts to create engaging online materials have mitigated some of these challenges and contributed to a more positive learning experience. Additionally, the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of technology in language learning and teaching, equipping both learners and teachers with valuable digital skills.

The insights derived from this present study paint a portrait of the "new normal" in language learning and teaching in the post-pandemic era. As evidenced by the findings, learners and teachers alike have come to appreciate the advantages of online language instruction and continue to adapt to this evolving educational landscape. In the context of the Philippines, a unique synergy has emerged between pre-existing work-from-home trends and the increased availability of online language instruction opportunities. This convergence sets the stage for ongoing growth and adaptation in the post-pandemic period.

Furthermore, the acquisition of new technological skills during the pandemic is poised to become an invaluable asset for both language teachers and learners. Yuan (2022) highlighted the direct correlation between learners' enjoyment of classes and the effectiveness of their teachers. It is therefore imperative for teachers to enhance their newly acquired skills to create more engaging and effective online learning environments. To address the potential learning loss during online classes, as cautioned by Shcherbakova et al. (2023), teachers must remain vigilant and provide supplemental materials to mitigate any educational gaps. However, it is worth speculating that this learning loss may indeed represent the "new normal" of language learning, which can be effectively counteracted through learners' autonomous learning initiatives. The concept of autonomous language learning during online foreign language classes is supported by Chen's (2021) study, which highlighted the capacity of learners to independently acquire language skills. Nevertheless, it remains essential to have sufficient teaching support, as emphasized in Assalahi (2020). And of course, it is impossible to ignore the existence of Generative AI, which burgeoned during the pandemic; the integration of Generative AI tools can prove advantageous for teachers in crafting comprehensive lesson plans. Moorhouse et al. (2023) noted that teachers should possess the competencies required to leverage the capabilities of generative AI tools while maintaining a critical awareness of their limitations and potential drawbacks. This multifaceted approach, combining autonomous learning, teaching support, and AI-enhanced tools, reflects the evolution of foreign language education in the post-pandemic era.

## **CONCLUSION**

The insights gained from the experiences of both learners and teachers during the pandemic-induced transition to online language learning and teaching offer valuable lessons for the future of education. The findings in the present study will aid the construction of online foreign language program policy. The policy needs to take various external factors in learners' learning environment as they affect how they tackle their language learning. It may be a wise idea to implement explicit online language learning training as well as finding out what kind of learning environment their learners may be during their online language learning.

Although this present study did not look at language proficiency as a variable, it cannot be unequivocally stated that these will help learners advance their language level. However, it can be reiterated that learners who cultivate their language learning will overcome challenges and find their own 'new normal' way of adapting and developing their language learning journey. It will also be prudent to compare and contrast online foreign language classes during and post-pandemic periods for future studies.



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#### **THE AUTHOR**

**Kasumi Arciaga** holds a Ph.D. in applied linguistics from De La Salle University in the Philippines. Currently, she is an assistant professor at Utsunomiya University in Japan. Her research interests are collaborative international online learning, intercultural communication, and sociolinguistics.