ABSTRACT
As the world grappled with the unprecedented challenges brought about by the spread of the virus and where a state of emergency has been in place worldwide (Roshan, et al, 2021), a shift to digital forms of instruction was imperative. Japan was no exemption. The rushed implementation of remote instruction brought to light the enormous issues regarding online instructions not only in the country (Obe & Okutsu, 2020), but worldwide as well. There is a need not only to holistically understand learning and teaching in contexts where technology mediates learning, but also to understand the immense complexity of effectively assessing learning results in such context.

KEYWORDS
Online Instruction, Virtual Learning, Assessment and Evaluation

1. INTRODUCTION
Assessment and Evaluation has been an area of numerous discussions and research in the past (Lynch, 2020). However, assessment of student language learning in an emergency online situation is a different and difficult situation. This paper aims to review practical issues that address language educators’ common question today “How can teachers effectively evaluate how much students learn from their online classes?”

Before proceeding with the discussions, it is imperative to clarify differences between synonymous concepts that have been interchangeably used with regard to online instruction and e-learning. A review of literature suggests that terms sharing common characteristics but with differing definition include, but are not limited to ① digital learning, ② online learning, ③ e-learning, ④ virtual learning, ⑤ distance learning, ⑥ blended learning. But the education world does not seem to universally agree on what each term means. Learning online is a vast landscape. Educators would usually describe learning online in one specific way: learning on a computer. How then can online learning be differentiated from e-learning and all other synonymous concepts in the field? In this section, I take two major instructional concepts discussed above and highlight their contrast as well as the aspects they share as they relate to the concepts of online evaluation discussed later.

First a clarification of the basic differences between e-learning and online learning. E-learning, which is usually home-based, usually contains soft copy materials such as PowerPoint slides and/or Word Documents and/or pre-recorded video lectures. Teaching materials are stored in a set of either hard or soft files, and students have to sit through a huge chunk of information by themselves. Lectures are pre-recorded; there is hardly any interaction. In case of question, students post on the platform or email the teacher. E-learning structure is rigid and standard. It does not cater to individual learners; all students go through the same set of materials.

Online learning, as the word suggests, is like conventional learning style, but is conducted entirely online. Lessons are conducted at the comfort of student’s homes, except the student is not alone. The student participates in a class taught live by the teacher. Live online lessons usually require both students and teachers synchronically – at the same time. Lessons are conducted real-time, and both students and teachers communicate with each other using the same platform like an audio, a video or an interactive whiteboard. There is a lot of interaction involved and guidance is provided as instruction proceeds. While the structure of e-learning is rigid and standard, online learning is customized to help students in the learning process. The relationship between these concepts is summarized below using ConexED’s definition.
As educators, we do not and cannot teach in a vacuum. Our practices are supported somehow in one way or the other by one or some existing theories of ESL investigations which in turn determine the learning outcome we expect out of our teaching. In the following section, I will summarize some of the earlier and recent contemporary ESL theories on second language acquisition research that have guided ESL instruction and are relevant to the discussions.

1.1 Earlier ELT Methods and Models of L2 Language Acquisition

1. **The Audio-lingual Method** was probably one of the earliest methods of instruction and learning. The goal of instruction is to enable students to respond quickly and accurately in any given communication situation. It is based on the idea on English Language Development (ELD) of the four language skills. It focuses on the development of oral communication skills using dialogues, pattern drills and carefully ordered structures. It is an offshoot of the behaviorist theory which postulates that humans, like other living creatures, could be trained through a system of reinforcement.

2. **The Behaviorist Model Theory** was first proposed by John Watson in the early 20th century based on the idea that “the mind is a blank slate” and behaviors are learned from environment. As indicated earlier, the theory postulates that human beings could be trained through a system of reinforcement. Skinner later argued that in terms of language acquisition, infants learn to speak a language by imitating human role models through a process involving imitation, rewards and practice. The need for a “learning model” is a key word in this concept.

1.2 Recent and more contemporary theories of Language Acquisition

1. **Interactionist theory.** The Interactionist theory suggests that one of the most salient and significant modes of discourse is conversation. Children learn language out of a desire to communicate with the world around them. Language therefore emerges from, and is dependent upon, social interaction. Children learn languages more easily than adults, and they are able to grasp grammatical structures without formal education, suggesting an innate or native ability for language. The Social Interactionist emphasizes lots of meaningful language use in the classroom.

2. **Krashen and Second Language Acquisition Theory.** Krashen’s theory suggests that students learn a language through predictable five stages, and language instruction needs to provide a positive affective domain. This means that learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, a low level of anxiety and extroversion determine success in second language acquisition. Classroom instruction therefore should build an accepting, encouraging environment, providing activities that allow student-student interaction.

3. **The Feedback model.** One of the most recent and widely discussed concepts in ESL instruction is the feedback model proposed by Hattie & Timperlery (20017). The concept suggests that using feedback with instructional content at the process level when learners are actively learning, helps the learners focus on information processing, which can be more effective. How and when can feedback be useful in the online classroom? Hattie & Timperlery suggest that elaborate feedback in instruction is more effective in retention of knowledge and skills rather than in formal assessment.
The universal and unchanging rule of assessment is that we assess what we teach; how can this be done? Assuming that assessment of student language learning in an emergency online situation is a different and difficult situation, how can we accomplish this goal? This paper suggests a clear understanding of the characteristics of online learning is the first step in achieving this goal.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF ONLINE LEARNING

Although the universal and unchanging rule of assessment is that we assess what we teach, assessment of language learning in an emergency online situation is an entirely different and difficult situation. This section focuses on the unique characteristics of online instruction which calls for a unique set of assessment tools to effectively measure how much learning took place. There is a need to holistically understand learning and teaching in contexts where technology mediates learning. The need for schools to turn to online instruction has shown a shift from an elitist mode of instruction to a mass and egalitarian education. The schools saw it imperative to create more structured and planned course programs and the challenge of uniformity in the delivery of those programs.

1. The most common general advantages attributed to online language learning include space and time saving, lower costs, flexibility in time and location, standardization in educational programs, improvement of instruction through using the class time efficiently, and providing immediate feedback. In addition, online instruction can offer numerous advantages including flexibility, accessibility, independency, interactivity, multimodality, cost-effectiveness, ubiquitous learning, convenience, and learner-centeredness (Moore, 2013).

2. The use of technology-enhanced language learning environments has facilitated interaction, collaboration, and communication with a wider audience. Butler and Wilburg (2003) proposed twelve attributes on how technology enriches language learning online and suggested that by providing comprehensible input; online instruction develops cognitive abilities and offers task-based, problem-solving and student-centered activities.

3. Mehran (2017) assessed Japanese students’ readiness for online learning and suggested that by helping Japanese learners who feel anxious or shy by allowing them to personalize their learning in their own way and at their own pace, online instruction allows flexibility, accessibility, independency, interactivity, multimodality, cost-effectiveness, ubiquitous learning, convenience, and learner-centeredness and enhances out-of-class learning.

4. Ikeguchi (2017) discusses the use of computer-mediated learning in terms of the degree of student-teacher interaction during instruction. The report differentiates between teacher-mediated instruction wherein the teacher plays a role in the delivery of online learning in the classroom using maximum student-teacher interaction, and total computer use by students independent of the teacher. The former has been labelled teacher assisted language learning (TALL), while the latter has been identified as technology assisted language learning (tall), arguing that although computer use in the acquisition of language in the classroom has become imperative, the teachers’ role in language instruction cannot be eclipsed by technology.

The innate characteristics of online instruction in terms of technical requirements, skills requirements, the breadth and use of different media, the dynamic interaction between learners and instructors seem to be its strength and its weakness at the same time. As in ordinary situations, testing online learning requires us to ask “how well the standards have been met? With a better insight on online learning environments, we realize that assessment and testing of language instruction online using ordinary face-to-face assessment methods based on the available theories needs a different set of approach, as will be seen in the following section.

2.1 Specific Issues and Challenges in Testing and Evaluation of e-Learning

1. The one-size fits all instructional pedagogy found in asynchronous online courses results in significantly less knowledge retention than does the personalized instruction in face-to-face course (Lindsey et al, 2014). The task becomes more profound when we think about testing and assessment in asynchronous online courses.

2. The problem of readiness. We often fall prey to the oft repeated fallacy that assessment begins when instruction ends. With online classes, however, assessment is necessary before instruction begins – to be able
to measure student readiness. To set the stage” for online course designers and teachers this refers to the need to evaluate students’ online needs and technical skills before starting instruction. (Aisami, 2009). While the benefits of student readiness cannot be underestimated face-to-face instruction, they help redefine and raise student achievement in e-learning situations.

3. “Accountability issue. Accountability in e-learning is required both from teachers and students alike. For the former, assessment of student learning solely for accountability does not necessarily lead to learning. (Zeliff, 2000). The past few months saw teachers submitting evaluation reports and grades using the same unchanged evaluation criteria used in ordinary situation. Assessment only at the end of a course is what has been called “autopsy evaluation”. Besides a mere obligation to stamp students a PASS or FAIL after completion of a course, it behooves the language teacher to gauge the extent to which students comprehend, remember and apply the results of instruction. For an online learning course to succeed, students must be held accountable for engaging in all essential and required course requirements.

4. The difficulty of feedback. The importance of feedback in instruction cannot be underestimated, but the online learning situation is different. Instructors should be reminded that while online learners are able to regulate and monitor their own learning (Bocchi, Eastman, & Swift, 2004) and assess their own progress student performance must, nevertheless, be carefully monitored, because instructors are unable to communicate with their students as quickly, easily, and fully as in traditional settings. Although feedback plays a significant role in learning, providing elaborate feedback during instruction is limited in online instruction. For this to be even more effective, students need to be empowered through constant feedback and reinforcement.

5. Academic honesty. A closer look at the situation gives an honest assessment of the practicalities we deal with regarding testing students’ learning online. Despite remote proctoring platforms that can monitor behavior during online tests, online assessment represents a greater challenge (Fodor, 2003) because no existing technology can ensure academic honesty (Scanlon, 2003). One view stresses that online tests should be viewed as take-home tests, because there is very little to catch cheats other than trust on student’s sense of personal integrity at a time when academic dishonesty is rampant.

6. Timing and frequency of tests. Language is a complicated component requiring a complicated set of assessment tools. There are several language tests, each measuring different skills. Language tests are conducted in several stages of language acquisition. Online assessment, however, requires a more ongoing, systematic approach than that of traditional instruction (Robles & Braathen, 2002). Assessment methods must match the level of desired competencies, online assessment requires educators to modify their methods of instruction. Assessment only at the end of a course is what has been called “autopsy evaluation”; assessment of online learning should be ongoing.

3. EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT OF ONLINE INSTRUCTION

1. Retrieval Practice Learning. Retrieval practice is a recent instructional approach that emphasizes bringing information to mind to enhance and boost learning (Ding, 2017). The theory claims that by deliberately recalling information, learners are forced to pull knowledge “out” and examine what is already known. In terms of testing, the strategy calls for constant and repeated testing. Testing students immediately a material learned, and repeated testing conditions allow students to retrieve information learned and incorporate these ideas to current experiences, thereby retaining long-term memory and making possible the transfer of learning. When assessment becomes a consistent part of teaching, it helps consolidate language learning (Firth, 2017).

2. The Skills Acquisition Approach. Deeply rooted in Cognitive Science original experiment suggested that games are a great source for practicing recently learned ideas and apply knowledge in practical solutions. Besides overcoming learning problems like frustration, gamification was found to foster more positive learning outcomes and helps transfer of skills learned. It combines both the elements of traditional learning and online learning. SHIFT (2018) provides interesting insights with regard to testing students in an online learning situation. Based on the Skills Application theory, the method suggests some of the best instructional tools teachers can use to assess students throughout online instruction including quizzes at the onset of the course, T-F exercises, self-assessments, case studies and problem-solving questions, scenario-based questions. These are summarized below.
3. Ongoing Assessment. To effectively measure online learning, assessment should be ongoing. I would call this formative assessment. Frequent assessment during instruction determines how well a student has learned the required material. This can be done by collecting data such as content and quality of student posts on discussion board, feedback that students are required to give to each other on peer-reviewed assignments, open-ended responses or tasks that the instructors deems necessary to the course or alignment of teaching goals and learning needs. The results of periodic tests explain to students where they are and provide feedback of their learning. One way summative evaluation of both traditional instruction and online learning can be done is summarized in the form of RDP, described below.

4. Use of Classroom Technology. While teachers scramble to learn how to use technology to deliver online classes, testing becomes a secondary priority and concern. To address this issue, Kohler and Mishra (2009) propose that teachers consider using technology together with pedagogy to deliver content learning in the online classroom. Readily available online quizzes, for instance, can tremendously help build understanding, alongside flashcards that assist student to commit to memory more permanently (Roediger, McDaniel and Brown, 2014).

4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The shift to online instruction as a temporary substitute for traditional instruction in times of pandemic has posed a new set of challenges. Information must be provided from research data to instantly inform education policy and practice. This paper discussed the unique character of online learning and suggested practical strategies for teachers to bridge theory and practice to address learning needs in online instruction.
REFERENCES


