

Hirao School of Management Review 第 11 卷

**Reaching Out to Students Individually  
while Teaching Emergency Online Courses**

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**【Abstract】**

This paper was originally conceived as an interactive workshop, based on the European Cinema Project (university course) taught from April to July, 2020, when it migrated online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The research aims to offer practical teaching suggestions, mainly to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors. The oral paper, intended for face-to-face presentation at the Teachers Helping Teachers (THT) International Seminar in Kyrgyzstan, ended up being adapted for online delivery live via a Zoom link instead. The workshop sought to provide useful signposts along the way to teaching better writing for students, addressing mainly how to set up and organize an online writing course, teach the language and structure of interpretive texts, and achieve the outcome of improved student writing as a product. The current paper focuses mainly on the first of those three aspects: teaching online in an emergency situation and giving students individual attention and feedback. The notion of an emergency online course differs markedly from that of a planned synchronous or asynchronous one (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond, 2020). The sudden and unprecedented challenges ushered in by the Covid-19 pandemic only serve to exacerbate the headaches for instructors.

**【Key Words】**

Emergency Online Course, Individual Feedback

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## 1. Introduction

The oral paper on which this report is based was presented at the THT International Seminar in Kyrgyzstan, held online in September 2020. The background to the study was the emergency online teaching situation in Japan, brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. The English program within which the course took place benefits from the experience of eight full-time and an additional 12 part-time foreign language instructors, the majority of whom are native English speakers, supported by a few Japanese specialists in applied linguistics. The expertise of the teachers notwithstanding, the sudden and unprecedented situation thrust upon the faculty in 2020 proved an enormous burden. It was hard for lecturers to know where to turn and instructors wracked their brains in the search for practical solutions. The main research problem involved giving helpful and supportive individual feedback in the online environment. In the case of the current author, the decision was made to take advantage of freely available software and applications that might be able to plug the gap between personalized attention, a facet of face-to-face contexts, and virtual modes where spontaneous one-to-one comments are hard to give. Having experimented with video capture in the past, as well as having presented and published papers about online feedback, an attempt was made to bring the affordances of screen capture software, video recording, and advances in broadband technology into the foreground (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Kress, 2010). In other words, if the students and the instructor could not come together face-to-face in real time, at least the instructor could reach out to the learners on an individual basis by recording and capturing their work and making it available for personal screening and review at a later date. This would allow a personal dialogue to take place between the instructor and learner, albeit separated by time and space, which otherwise would have to be abandoned entirely. Furthermore, this one-to-one dialogue would go some way to replacing the real-time social contact which was missing, a pertinent concern in computer-supported collaborative learning environments (Kreijns et al., 2003). In the absence of any viable alternative, what was being provided was the kind of social interaction that would otherwise take place in the classroom. Numerous researchers have identified the classroom as much less a space for the imparting of knowledge by experts, and much more a site of social interaction, such as in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). The theme has also gained considerable attention through work on the sociology of language (Bernstein, 1971), sociocultural theory (Lantolf, 2000), and the social function of language in expressing personally relevant meanings (Halliday, 1994). As instruction shifts increasingly into online modes, the role of visual design and giving students multimodal feedback has similarly gained in importance (Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, 2006).

## **2. Projects within the Curriculum**

The course which underpinned the current study comes under the category of a project in the curriculum of the private Japanese university in which it was taught. A project course typically involves around 25 students, who study together for the 15-week duration of the semester. A project differs markedly from many other courses in regard to the quantity of instruction, individual work and group work. The class comes together once a week at 14:00 and meets for 90 minutes. It continues from 15:40 for another class period. Then from 17:20 there is a further 90-minute period of study for the students to explore their own research interests, guided by and based on the instruction. Managing this amount of time is both a challenge and an opportunity for the instructor. The biggest problem, unsurprisingly, is keeping the class motivating, stimulating, and of the right pace so that students can continue to learn as a group over the period of approximately five hours. The great benefit of having students together for such a concentrated time is that the group as a whole is able to explore issues in much greater depth than they would otherwise be able to, and go off on a meaningful path as and when the need arises.

## **3. Focus of the Cinema Project**

The cinema project was taught entirely in English. Students were required to watch European films from a range of countries, entailing the viewing of cinematography in various languages and making use of Japanese or English subtitles whenever available. The focus of the course was on reading film reviews, and deconstructing their language and text structure (following the staged instruction of a genre-based pedagogy) before writing film reviews and interpretations in the role of a film critic. To become proficient in writing critical reviews in English, which is of course a foreign language for the students, is a highly advanced skill. Reading and writing go hand-in-hand and thus it was incumbent upon the students to watch as many films and read as many reviews as they possibly could during the course. In the absence of face-to-face time, the instructor focused on organizing the course for online delivery. The desired outcome was the progress of student development in critical reviews and interpretative writing. The project was constructed to move as seamlessly as possible from working with what the learners already knew, through to building new knowledge about aspects of film content, deconstructing a text when reading, and mastering unfamiliar genre-specific language and text structure in writing. With that in mind, the first five weeks of the course began with a process of reflections on films that students watched week-by-week. The next five weeks of the course dealt with the structure of the basic film review, building generic knowledge, and reading and writing basic film reviews. The last five weeks of the course concentrated on interpreting films, some basic aspects of 'reading to learn,' and individual research. The graphic below (Figure 1) offers a simple representation of the course:

Week 1	Select film from list, watch & write reflection
Week 2	French New Wave: watch & reflect
Week 3	Team presentation. New German Cinema: watch & reflect
Weeks 4/5	Italian Cinema: watch; reflect
Week 6	Film vocabulary workshop. Select, watch & reflect
Week 7	Film Review workshop. Select, watch & write review
Week 8	Read multiple reviews. Select, watch & write review
Week 9	British Asian Cinema. Read, select, watch & write review
Week 10	Film Interpretation workshop: practice rewriting
Week 11	Read, watch & write Evaluation/Synopsis/Reevaluation
Week 12	Team presentation. Choose individual research theme.
Week 13	Select films, read critiques, watch & write interpretations
Week 14	Select films, read critiques, watch & write interpretations
Week 15	Final submission/individual presentation of research

Figure 1: Representation of the Project

#### 4. Considerations in Designing an (Emergency) Online Writing Course

There already exist plenty of hints for creating online courses in an emergency situation from face-to-face ones. Newbold (2020) offers some encouraging advice that the normal admonition regarding switching over to online tuition without the appropriate degree of thought and preparation should not apply during a pandemic. In other words, while traditional courses are substantively different, and in normal circumstances one would design a remote learning space with a new set of principles taking into account visual design and alternative pedagogies, the current circumstances dictate that courses will migrate come what may, and the pressing need is to do the best that can be done without sabotaging the instruction or learning experience.

For this project, the decision was made in advance of the first online meeting to organize a course on Moodle. This university-supported platform already existed, hence it was only necessary to add a new course which would function mainly as a repository for course materials. Students knew that even if they could not join the live Zoom session (synchronous learning), they could invariably access all the documents they needed to complete their coursework and find out about assignments on demand (asynchronous learning). Students were contacted as a class group via the university and learning management system (LMS) and instructed to enroll on Moodle. Furthermore, they received directions on when and how to join the regular class meetings on Zoom. The instructor set up a class spreadsheet for attendance and assessment as would be done under normal circumstances. The only change to help in reaching out to students was to add the corresponding university email addresses to the student name list, since all communication would take place remotely.

Some commonly agreed best practices for online instruction place emphasis on notions that fit in with face-to-face instruction, such as stating learning objectives and

providing regular feedback. What comes across as different is the need to communicate more than usual, to be much more supportive and understanding, to break down tasks into smaller, achievable chunks of learning and, in fitting with the theme of this paper, to find ways to reach out to students on an individual basis (Cole, 2020). Figure 2 (below) shows part of a document for week one of the Project, a combination of a lesson plan and instructional stages for the teacher as well as easy to follow instructions for the students. Decisions regarding the choice of colour and font size take into account research into visual design (Newbold, 2020).

### *European Cinema after 1945: culture and social change*

#### Day 1: 2020 Overview

Welcome to European Studies 2020. Here is the agenda for today's class:

- (1) The Language aims
- (2) The Content aims
- (3) Day 1 Instructions
  - (3a) The French film
  - (3b) The German film
- (4) Other Class Work and Homework

This course has language aims and content aims.

(1) The **language aims** are to be able to talk about European films and societies and read and write about European films in English in roughly the same way as you would in Japanese. This means that you can function in English well. To help you achieve this, I will assist you with cinematic language which is specific to films, and I will teach you to read and write reviews and interpretations of films.

(2) The **content aims** are to be able to discuss films critically, write critical reviews and interpretations of films, gather information about post-World War II societies and the cinemas of those countries, and become an expert in one area of European cinema. This means that you develop a good knowledge base. To help you achieve this, I will show you clips of films as well as whole films. I will show you some features of the cinema in several European countries. I will

encourage you to find out as much as you can about the societies from which the directors emerged. In your class or homework time, you must watch at least one European film each week, discuss it and reflect on it, read reviews of it, and practice writing your own review of the film.

### (3) Day 1 Instructions

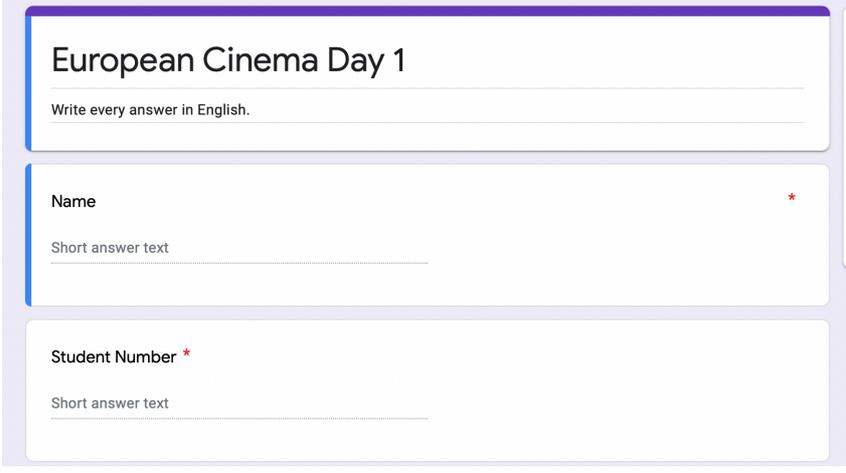
This week, I will ask you to choose one of the films below and watch it during our class time. The French film is a drama about manners and morals and our values in society. It looks at unusual social behavior and asks us if we agree or disagree with it. The German film is about the experience of German soldiers in Russia in World War 2. It also asks us about our values: is war ever acceptable? If we win a war, does that make us good? If we lose, are we bad? Can we talk about right and wrong in a war?

Figure 2: Project Week One (excerpt)

Compared to a traditional class, there is much less scope for modeling and demonstrating tasks. Purpose-built materials designed from the ground up for an online course are also an unrealistic yardstick for an emergency teaching situation. The aim is basically to make the materials self-explanatory, so that students can support their own learning with enough scaffolding. Ideally, activities will be achievable and self-contained for the learners, and easy to collect, grade and offer feedback or correction for the instructor. Where appropriate, student understanding can be checked and monitored by the instructor by means of Breakout Rooms (discussion groups) within Zoom. Additionally, the language contained in Figure 2 is more conversational and reassuring in tone than regular course materials. It seeks to ‘talk’ the students through what they have to do.

## **5. Individual Feedback Step-by-Step Guide**

### **Step (1) Google Form**

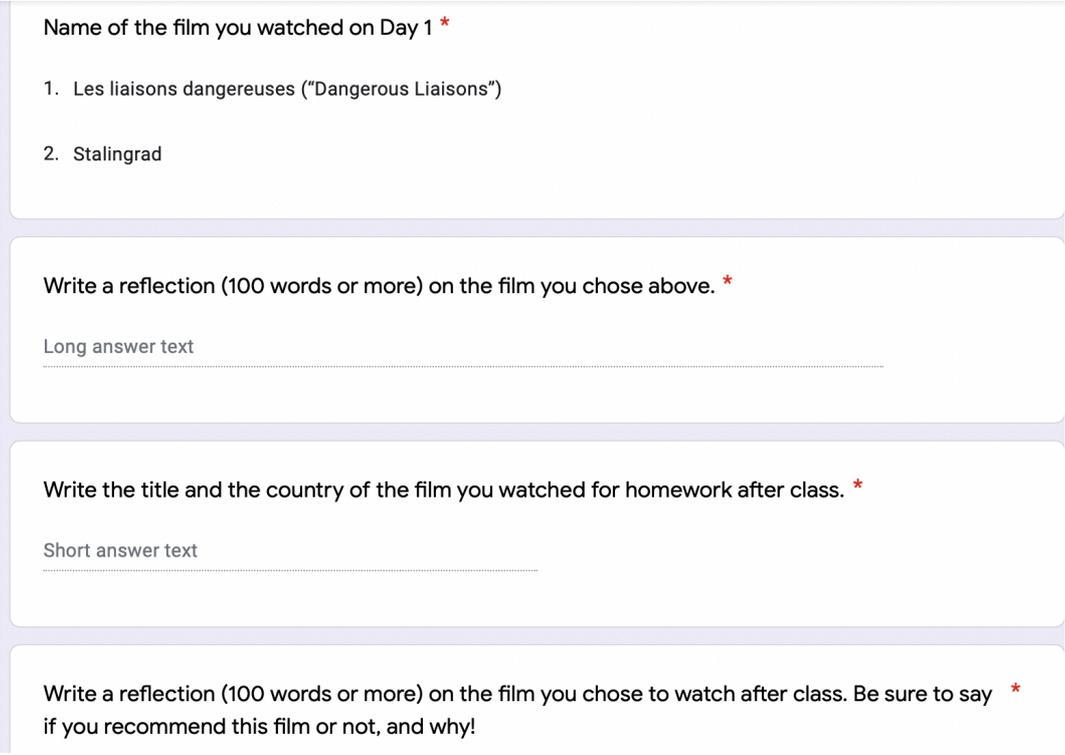


The screenshot shows a Google Form with the following structure:

- Title:** European Cinema Day 1
- Instruction:** Write every answer in English.
- Field 1:** Name (required, indicated by a red asterisk). Below the label is a "Short answer text" input field.
- Field 2:** Student Number (required, indicated by a red asterisk). Below the label is a "Short answer text" input field.

Figure 3: Structure of a Google Form

The instructor creates an online form where students can submit their assignments and he or she can access them. In this case, students are to write a reflection on the film they watched, using a Google Form link embedded into the document described earlier (Figure 2). Google Forms are free and easy to use, and contain powerful features including the ability to collaborate and share results, perform logic threading, and allow teachers and students to track progress and attendance (Edelmayer, 2020). In the case of the first week of class, the Google Form was called European Cinema Day 1. To organize the files, it is recommended to sort them by name and student number, as per Figure 3 above.



The screenshot shows a Google Form with the following tasks:

- Task 1:** Name of the film you watched on Day 1 (required, indicated by a red asterisk). Below the label is a list of two options:
  1. Les liaisons dangereuses ("Dangerous Liaisons")
  2. Stalingrad
- Task 2:** Write a reflection (100 words or more) on the film you chose above. (required, indicated by a red asterisk). Below the label is a "Long answer text" input field.
- Task 3:** Write the title and the country of the film you watched for homework after class. (required, indicated by a red asterisk). Below the label is a "Short answer text" input field.
- Task 4:** Write a reflection (100 words or more) on the film you chose to watch after class. Be sure to say if you recommend this film or not, and why! (required, indicated by a red asterisk).

Figure 4: Google Form Tasks

The red asterisks indicate that a student has to complete the section before proceeding to the next. This ensures that no information is missing. Furthermore, by breaking down tasks (Figure 4, above) into smaller chunks, these kinds of forms allow for a simple structure that students can easily follow and complete to their satisfaction. Keeping the tasks down to a manageable word limit ensures that the students spend most of the time watching and trying to comprehend the films.

### **Step (2) Save Forms as Individual Files**

The instructor saves each individual response submitted to the Google Form as a PDF file (for example, by going to the print menu of the computer and then selecting 'save as PDF'). The file name should include the student number, to allow sorting into order for grading purposes.

### **Step (3) Audio and Video Screen Capture Feedback**

It is recommended to install a free version of a commonly available screen capture application. For the Cinema Project, two apps were used interchangeably: Monosnap and TechSmith Capture. Both allow for video capture of the desktop with simultaneous voice narration. It is helpful to keep teacher comments down to about two minutes, in an effort to ease the burden of work on the instructor and the cognitive and linguistic load on the students who have to listen carefully in English. The comments amount to feedback on the written work which the students had submitted as a reflection in the Google Form. Both of the apps store the videos on their own servers, allowing the instructor to simply provide a link to the students. Advantages of voice feedback are numerous. For one thing, the instructor avoids the laborious task of printing off the assignment and adding notations. This process is time-consuming and without directions students often misunderstand the corrections, and might even feel threatened or dejected when they see all the red ink. Frequently, students fail to read the comments from the teacher carefully, or at all, and there is an absence of a personal dialogue between instructor and student. By providing an interactive video, where the teacher's cursor hovers over the student's work as he or she speaks, the power relationship changes. Rather than red ink focusing on mistakes, the instructor now enters into a dynamic dialogue with the student's work as the object of instruction. As opposed to teaching from a canonical text, the pedagogy now focuses on that student as an individual and the merits of their own work (Bezemer, Diamantopoulou, Jewitt, Kress & Mavers, 2012). While part of the feedback necessarily involves correcting the paper, the instructor is also playing the role of commentator, with the ability to make positive and encouraging comments, showing appraisal of the work of the student author (Martin & White, 2005).

### **Step (4) Dialogue with the Individual Student**

As noted in the previous section, the screen capture of the student's work as audio/video recording is uploaded to the application developer's cloud or server. The upload normally takes about a minute with a reliable broadband connection, and upon completion a link to the recording is automatically created. This is the link that the

students use to listen to the instructor's comments and feedback on their own work. The teacher opens the grade book, selects the student email address which matches the student number in the file name, and composes a simple email to indicate that the message contains feedback on the Google Form assignment. The student is to listen and respond, either by email, or online in the subsequent class, perhaps in a Zoom Breakout Room, or by other means. (As a suggestion, there is an important further instructional stage when the students install the application themselves to respond to the comments and act on them in reply to the instructor. That goes even further in creating a dialogue and reaching out while teaching and learning online.) Upon clicking the link, the student receives the video discussing their task in detail: what they see on the screen is the desktop view which the instructor used, displaying their written work exactly as it was submitted to the Google Form; the cursor moves as the instructor speaks so that they can follow easily; the instructor is talking directly to them, as if in a personalized conversation or dialogue. In this way, the instructor achieves the aim of reaching out to students personally, even while inhabiting these separated, virtual classroom spaces. The gap between the impersonal online universe and the traditional face-to-face classroom, though obviously still some distance apart, is brought much closer together.

## **6. Concluding Remarks**

The need for emergency online courses, with their special demands on instructors and learners, has made the process of reaching out to students with individual feedback much harder than usual. The report described here is merely one attempt to navigate a safe path through the storm. What is likely to occur henceforward is that students will have heightened expectations of online instruction, once it becomes entrenched as the norm. Understandably, having become accustomed to online teaching, learners are very likely to expect online interaction and feedback of the type described here to be the very minimum. After one year of the ongoing pandemic, arguments by instructors and institutions that the situation continues to be an emergency may fall on deaf ears. Without doubt, there has been ample time to adjust to this new reality and the affordances of technology which make virtual instruction easy to deliver. Purpose-built online instruction based on robust pedagogies increasingly appears to be the rule, not the exception. It is hoped that this paper helps instructors as they try to reach out to students and embark on the journey to more effective online teaching.

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Hirao School of Management Review (2020), Vol. 11 pp.75-85  
原稿種別：論文(Article)

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