




# Japanese Graduate Students' Experiences in Online International Development and Peace Through Sport Courses Using English-Medium Instruction During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Junko Oishi<sup>1</sup> , Takahiro Sato<sup>1</sup> ,  
Ryan T. Miller<sup>2</sup>, Shinichi Nagata<sup>1</sup>,  
Maho Fuchikami<sup>3</sup>, Satoshi Shimizu<sup>1</sup>,  
Tsuyoshi Matsumoto<sup>1</sup>, Taku Yamaguchi<sup>1</sup>,  
and Satbyul Estella Kim<sup>1</sup> 

## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate five Japanese graduate (master's level) students' experiences in online courses in international development and peace through sport that used English as the medium of instruction. The study was situated in the framework of andragogy theory and used a descriptive-qualitative design using an in-depth, semistructured interview approach using online oral and written interviews. Three emergent themes were established. These recurrent themes were (a) *learning online specialized content using English as a second language*, (b) *students' struggles in group projects through online education*, and (c) *students' opinions about the improvement of online education*. To better support Japanese graduate students' online learning,

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<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Health and Sport Sciences, University of Tsukuba, Tsukuba, Japan

<sup>2</sup>Department of English, Kent State University, Kent, OH, USA

<sup>3</sup>Joint Master's Program in International Development and Peace through Sport, University of Tsukuba, Tsukuba, Japan

## Corresponding Author:

Takahiro Sato, Faculty of Health and Sport Sciences, University of Tsukuba, 1-1-1 Tennodai, Tsukuba, Ibaraki 305-8574, Japan.

Email: sato.takahiro.gf@u.tsukuba.ac.jp

this study encourages academic departments, administrators, and faculty to better design appropriate courses and online activities. This will contribute to a greater appreciation for the richness of sports development and peace and to increasing the availability of meaningful academic and social experiences for graduate students at Japanese universities.

### **Keywords**

online education, international development and peace through sport, andragogy, English mediated instruction, COVID-19

### **Introduction**

The influence of the global crisis linked to the COVID-19 pandemic has gone far beyond the public health sphere and has deeply challenged the fabric of our modern society. Structural questions have emerged which have affected a wide range of sectors. Education has been no exception, with no less than 188 countries around the world shutting down all schools, including institutions of higher education, affecting the lives of almost 1.6 billion children, youth, and their families (UNICEF, 2020). Although closing colleges and universities appeared necessary to slowdown the epidemic and protect students and those surrounding them, it also disrupted their learning process. The COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant challenges in the day-to-day activities of higher education. Many college students around the world were forced to move to distance (or remote) learning from home using a variety of technologies including computers, television, radio, and paper, or alternative approaches that schools quickly implemented to remain connected (Burke, 2020). In Japan, for example, very few colleges and universities had online courses before the COVID-19 pandemic. Many professors and students had little to no experience with online teaching and learning prior to the pandemic (The Mainichi, 2020).

Aside from the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the growth of online learning around the world during the last decade has been remarkable. Online learning is defined as institution-based formal education where the students' learning group is physically separated and where interactive telecommunication systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors (Schlosser & Simonson, 2009). Online courses are a popular form of education being adopted at both undergraduate and graduate levels in higher education and have been found to offer a distinctly different experience than face-to-face learning. Effective online education is not simply a matter of adapting the structure and modes of interaction of a face-to-face classroom environment to an online platform (Gorsky & Blau, 2009). Rather, cognitive expectations, instructional choices, and support practices need to be carefully reconsidered with recognition of the complexity of issues (Peters, 2003). For example, part of the challenge of online education is for students and instructors to become comfortable in the virtual

educational milieu. In face-to-face courses, students and course instructors have a clear sense of the roles that both should play based on their previous educational experiences (Rice & Carter, 2015). However, when the domain of the class moves online, course instructors and students are left to determine their new roles (e.g., online mentors; independent learners) and how to perform those roles within the online space (Anderson et al., 2001).

Ideally, online courses are centered on a set of student tasks (e.g., lectures, projects, and assignments) that constitute student learning experiences, both independent and collaborative, and that provide mastery of course objectives (Carr-Chellman & Duchastel, 2000). Despite dramatic growth in online education in various academic areas in kinesiology (Bryan, 2014), including international development and peace through sports programs, there is a lack of research examining the effectiveness of online instruction, and guidelines for developing and implementing an appropriate educational experience for graduate students enrolled in online courses are limited.

### *International Development and Peace Through Sport*

*Sport for development and peace* (SDP) refers to the intentional use of sport, physical activity, and play to attain specific development and peace objectives, including, most notably, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (United Nations, 2003, 2020). Since 2003, a large number of SDP programs have emerged in communities and universities around the world (Blom et al., 2015). Successful SDP graduate programs allow graduate students to develop their skills to successfully navigate unpredictable scenarios, evaluate each situation by providing clear and concise communication, act to correct miscommunication, and be as flexible as possible while remaining focused on the primary purpose of that specific activity (Blom et al., 2015). Examples of course contents of SDP programs are sport for development and peace, global physical education, disability sport, international sport policy studies, project management, research project management, and health promotion. Effective programs identify individual and community needs, solve issues and concerns, and achieve goals and objectives of sport for development. These programs embody the best values of the sport while upholding the quality and integrity of the sports experience. Strong SDP programs combine sport and play with other non-sport components (e.g., recreation) to enhance their effectiveness (Blom et al., 2015). They are delivered in an integrated manner with other local, regional, and national development and peace initiatives so that the programs mutually reinforce each other. Programs seek to empower participants and communities by engaging them in the design and delivery of activities, building local capacity, adhering to generally accepted principles of transparency and accountability, and pursuing sustainability through collaboration, partnerships, and coordinated action.

In 2016, two Japanese public universities established a joint master's program in International Development and Peace through Sport (see <https://tkjids.taiiku.tsukuba.ac.jp/>). This program aims to educate students who will contribute to solving social

issues using sport as a tool for development and peace. It actively provides an innovative academic program in English, which allows students to develop practical competence in international development and peace through sport.

### *English-Medium Instruction Degree Programs in Japanese Universities*

In Japan, the number of universities offering degree programs using English as the medium of instruction (EMI) has doubled in the past 20 years (MEXT, 2017). More specifically, 305 universities (representing more than 40% of all universities in Japan) offered some EMI courses in 2015 (MEXT, 2017). Japan has been facing the challenges of a declining gross domestic product (GDP) and a low population growth rate, leading more universities in Japan to develop EMI degree programs to increase international competitiveness and attract students from other countries (Brown, 2014). However, although the prevalence of EMI programs has been rapidly increasing in Japan, teaching content in English is still a challenging task for many Japanese professors, who may struggle to demonstrate how to use English as an instrument rather than a subject and may have difficulty adjusting the course content to match the levels of students' English language proficiency (Alfehaid, 2018; Miller & Pessoa, 2017). They face additional challenges in guiding graduate students' academic English abilities, increasing students' knowledge of different academic disciplines, and preparing them to take part in the international community (Wanphet & Tantawy, 2018). Dearden (2014) reports four issues that make EMI implementation difficult in many countries, including Japan: (a) there is a shortage of linguistically qualified lecturers; (b) there are no stated expectations of English language proficiency; (c) there appear to be few pedagogical guidelines, which may lead to ineffective EMI teaching and learning; and (d) there are few education or professional development programs that prepare lecturers how to teach EMI courses. Therefore, Japan needs to adopt policies to become more internationally oriented (Bradford, 2016).

In recent years, the Japanese government has introduced various initiatives, such as CAMPUS Asia 2010 (Brown, 2018) and the Strategic Fund for Establishing International Headquarters in Universities, in order to increase the international competitiveness of its higher education system. EMI programs both encourage Japanese students to study abroad and recruit top international students to Japan. There has been a growing awareness of the need for students to study abroad to gain international experience, learn another language, and develop cross-cultural communication skills that enhance their global employability (Sauzier-Uchida, 2017). Because sport is used in a wide range of situations to serve development and peacebuilding efforts as part of the educational practices of individual development, gender equality, social integration, and health promotion and disease prevention (Gadai, 2019), the International Development and Peace through Sport program were developed as an opportunity to gain graduate (master or doctoral) degrees in English. The International Development and Peace through Sport program trains graduate students

who can cope with the pressures of using English in international contexts and working with diverse populations (Tsuneyoshi, 2005).

## Theoretical Framework and Purpose

This study was based on Andragogy Theory (Knowles, 1989). According to Malcolm Knowles, andragogy is the art and science of adult learning (Kearsley, 2010). In this study, Andragogy Theory is applied not only to collecting concepts and ideas about how graduate students learn but this theory also helped us to improve online course content and instructional strategies in graduate classes in international development and peace through sport. Plus, this theory is relevant for analyzing students' learning from both prior experiences and new experiences. This theory helped us to analyze individual findings and common characteristics.

Andragogy is derived from the terms *andro* (meaning man) and *agrougous* (to lead). Taylor and Hamdy (2013) explain that adults learn differently from children, so andragogy should be adopted for the teaching of adults. Taylor and Hamdy (2013) explain that adult learners differ from children in the following six ways: (a) the need to know (*Why do I need to know this?*), (b) the learners' self-concept (*I am responsible for my own decisions*), (c) the role of the learners' past experiences (*I have experience which I value and you should respect*), (d) readiness to learn (*I need to learn because my circumstances are changing*), (e) orientation to learning (*Learning helps me deal with the situation in which I find myself*), and (f) motivation (*I learn because I want to*). Andragogy theory allocates greater responsibility to the students in terms of how their learning experiences are applied to their real-life contexts. Knowles et al. (2005) explain that the appropriateness of the pedagogical model decreases significantly as an individual ages and matures, especially for college and university students. In college education, however, students have often been taught with a pedagogical model. For example, many students conceptualize learning as a professor-designed and professor-led endeavor that occurs in classrooms where students sit and learn through interacting with course materials and professors (Tweedell, 2000). Knowles et al. (2005) describe that self-reflection, intrinsic motivation, and higher self-efficacy are the purpose of human life, and learning happens not only through instructors but also through life and professional experiences.

Forrest and Peterson (2006) claim that andragogy theory focuses on the needs of the adult learner (rather than youth) and the creation of independent and adaptable learners. As adult learners gain new knowledge, it becomes integrated with their existing knowledge base. Knowles (1989) explains that andragogy theory helps adult learners use processes of elaboration, refinement, and restructuring to connect new information with existing knowledge. Elaboration is linking (precise rather than general) new knowledge with what we already know (Stein et al., 1984). Refinement is the act of shifting and sorting the information to retain those elements that make sense (Taylor & Hamdy, 2013). Restructuring is the development of new knowledge maps that allow adult learners to demonstrate expertise

(Norman & Schmidt, 1992). Through the process of these three elements of learning, adult learners may develop their independent self-concept and their ability to direct their own learning. Knowles (1989) also reveals that adult learners are more problem-centered than subject-centered in learning.

In this study, graduate students in international development and peace through sport were tasked with learning sport, coaching, and physical education instruction and determining how their online graduate course experiences benefit them. Andragogy theory supports online graduate courses in that the courses push students to reflect on (a) what they expect to learn, (b) how they might use it in practice, and (c) how online courses help them to meet the goals of their individualized learning plan (Fidishun, 2012).

The purpose of this study was to investigate Japanese graduate students' experiences in online, EMI courses on international development and peace through sport. The research questions that guided the study were as follows: (1) How did the online international development and peace through sport courses influence Japanese graduate students' interpersonal interactions with other classmates and the instructor? (2) How did Japanese graduate students' academic and social experiences contribute to student learning outcomes?

## **Method**

### *Research Design*

This study utilized a descriptive-qualitative design using an in-depth, semistructured interview approach (Seidman, 1998). The intent of using the interview method was to describe and explain graduate students' online learning experiences and to explore the meaning that they ascribed to those experiences. The international development and peace through sport graduate program at the university annually accept only five students. Therefore, the descriptive-qualitative design is an appropriate methodology, not only because of the small sample size but because this research design helped us describe a comprehensive summarization of specific events by individuals or groups of students. Therefore, a descriptive design provides us with the opportunity to choose a research design that is suited to the research purpose.

Unquestionably, interviewing is a powerful way to gain insight into educational and social phenomena experienced by individuals in educational contexts (Seidman, 1998). Interviews are unique in that they allow the researcher "to acquire data not obtainable in any other way" (Gay, 1996, p. 223). Examples include student experiences with international development and peace through sport and reflections on past and present learning experiences. The lead author conducted a series of semistructured interviews with five graduate students enrolled in online courses. This study sought to expose the participants' online learning experiences in international development and peace through EMI sport courses.

## Research Site and Participants

One Japanese public university was the site for this study. This site was chosen based on the reputation and history of kinesiology (e.g., sport and physical education) graduate degrees at both the masters and doctoral level. The university's graduate program is accredited by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). Participants ( $N=5$ ) were graduate (master's level) students enrolled in an international development and peace through sport graduate program. This graduate program annually admits and accepts a maximum of five graduate students who pass the university's entrance exam. Graduate students in the international development and peace through sport program must take a minimum of 30 credit hours, including 14 credit hours of lecture courses (e.g., International Development and Peace through Sport I and II, Sport Promotion), 10–12 credit hours of on- and off-campus seminar courses (e.g., Non-government or Non-profit Organization Project in Sport, Sport Council Project), and 6–8 credit hours of practicum courses (e.g., domestic and international internships). For example, some graduate students participated in refugee sport coordination internships for 16 weeks and completed 560 h of work in foreign countries. Each course is worth 1 credit hour and consists of 75 min per week through a 10-week semester. This study focused on Japanese graduate students' experiences in online lecture courses using English as the medium of instruction.

All five participants (Ayaka, Satomi, Yasuo, Hiroshi, and Kunio) were residents of Japan and first-year graduate students at the time of the study. Each of the participants had earned a bachelor's degree in a kinesiology-related field prior to enrolling in the graduate program. Taking online courses was a new experience for all participants upon entering the graduate program, and none had substantial previous academic experience in an EMI program. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants and the university to ensure anonymity and protect their identities. Table 1 provides further descriptive information about each of the participants.

Participants were purposefully sampled using a criterion sampling method. The criteria were that the participants (a) were admitted to an international development and peace through sport master program at the research site, (b) were required to complete multiple online courses as a part of their program of study requirements (lectures and/or seminars), (c) were required to read, write, and communicate with classmates in English and professors taught in English during coursework. This program offers EMI courses such as International Development and Peace through Sport I, Olympic Studies, Research Methods, and weekly seminars (Table 2).

The logic of criterion sampling is to select and investigate all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance or interest (Patton, 2002). In this study, graduate students enrolled in online international development and peace through sport courses were identified and voluntarily agreed to participate in this study. Approval to conduct the study was granted by the institutional review board at the lead researcher's university, and signed consent forms were collected from all five participants.

**Table 1.** Characteristics and Educational Backgrounds of Participants.

Name <sup>a</sup>	Age	Gender	Experiences with online education course(s)	Experiences with English-medium course(s)	Major
Satomi	25	Female	None	None	International Development and Peace through Sport
Ayaka	23	Female	None	None	International Development and Peace through Sport
Yasuo	23	Male	None	None	International Development and Peace through Sport
Hiroshi	26	Male	None	None	International Development and Peace through Sport
Kunio	23	Male	None	None	International Development and Peace through Sport

<sup>a</sup>All names are pseudonyms.

### Data Collection

*Interviews.* This study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to maintain social distance and avoid face-to-face contact and long-distance travel, interviews were conducted through online video calls. This study used semistructured interviews that were organized using a set of predetermined open-ended questions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). During the interviews, the researcher asked additional follow-up questions to all participants to obtain insightful and informative statements about online learning in international development and peace through sport courses. As such, all interviews were conducted online using the Microsoft Teams communication and collaboration platform. The interview questions were developed based on previous research on students' experiences in EMI courses (Kang, 2018) and online learning (Sato et al., 2017) and modified for the present study based on results from a pilot study. In the pilot study, two Japanese kinesiology professors who both teach international development and peace through sport courses and were familiar with qualitative research also reviewed the interview questions. During the interviews, the lead researcher asked participants questions about the environment, lecture content, online teaching strategies, and learning experiences that shaped their positions and experiences in international development and peace through sport courses. The interviews lasted 60 to 90 min with each participant and were conducted in Japanese. The questions were carefully worded to ensure relevancy to their environment and experience. Example interview questions include:

- (a) What type of international development and peace through sport (online) courses can help you become more self-directed (independent)?



**Table 2.** Themes and Subthemes.

Themes	Subthemes	Number of participants: narrative phrases
I. Learning online specialized content using English	• Felt anxiety about taking EMI courses in online platform.	5
	• Had difficulty to have good eye-contact and find facial expression.	5
	• Believed that professors' feedback should be corrective.	5
	• Needed to develop critical thinking skills.	4
II. Students' struggles in group projects through online education	• Perceived that professors should help keep presentations interesting, not reading lecture slides.	5
	• Struggled to develop literature review, theory, and methodology in effective group project. Need to learn how to have better communication with groupmates and professors.	5
	• Checked that all teammates had equal contribution to their group work.	4
III. Students' opinions about the improvement of online education	• The professors should encourage students to enhance their theoretical knowledge through online courses and develop critical thinking skills.	4
	• Students need to understand how to apply their knowledge, skills, and learning to sport for development contexts.	4

- (b) How did the international development and peace through sport (online) courses prepare you as an expert? How did the international development and peace through sport (online) content, lectures, and assessments help you to improve the quality of your learning of the course content in English?
- (c) What types of feedback did you receive from the international development and peace through sport (online) course instructor? Were communications through Microsoft Teams helpful for your learning? How did you analyze your learning experience?

*Follow-up email interview.* Email correspondence was used to support the interview data. Email correspondence was used when clarifications, illustrations, explanations, or elaborations were desirable or needed (Meho, 2006). Email was useful for checking messages from participants regularly and, if necessary, to summarize the participants' responses to previous questions and return the responses to participants for verification.

**Translation process.** In order to prepare the data collected in Japanese for analysis and reporting in English, a cross-cultural translation technique developed by Banville et al. (2000) was utilized. This technique involves a group of researchers proficient in both languages working individually and collaboratively in order to ensure that meaning is retained through the translation process. In this case, the process began with three Japanese-English bilingual researchers individually translating the interview transcripts. Later, they formed a committee with an established researcher to critically compare and discuss their translations to ensure that the meaning of the original items was preserved, making edits as recommended. Finally, all members were sent a copy of the final translation for final comment and critique.

**Data analysis.** In order to analyze the interview transcripts, a constant comparative analysis method was used, which involves the reduction of large qualitative datasets by coding and recoding data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). By constantly comparing data within each interview and across participants, the researcher is able to categorize codes (Boeije, 2010). In our case, meaningful narrative phrases that related to either online EMI learning or international development and peace through sport content. In this study, coding was conducted by the lead and second author and reviewed by the other authors as peer debriefers to avoid potential researcher bias.

## Results

The purpose of this study was to investigate graduate students' experiences in online international development and peace through sport courses. These recurrent themes were (a) *learning online specialized content using English as a second language*, (b) *students' experiences in group projects through online education*, and (c) *students' opinions about online education improvement*.

### **Theme I: Learning Online Specialized Content Using English as a Second Language**

All students had great expectations of improving their English language proficiency through social interactions and academic engagement with other students and professors. The results showed that all participants felt anxious that they were not well-prepared to master the knowledge and content of their courses due to their limited English proficiency. Moreover, the graduate courses not only required English language proficiency but also critical thinking skills in online courses. According to one student:

When I took this online course, I learned that this online platform [Microsoft Teams] allowed me to use an extra communication tool when I communicated with others. I realized that it would be helpful when we have students with hearing impairment in the class. This online education system would help students with hearing and speech impairment for

their learning. I think online learning may be better than face-to-face courses. As you see, I do not have a disability, but speaking English [as a second language] in this course was difficult and a challenge. Therefore, this online course allowed me to use the chat system when I struggled to communicate [verbally] with other students. I had an extra tool to communicate with others. That is good. In this course, professors covered the contents of disability sport and soccer practices in inclusion. I felt that I had better engagement with professors and other students than face-to-face courses. (Yasuo, oral interview)

This student was motivated and became a self-directed learner who demonstrated independence, a willingness to take initiative, and persistence in learning. It was clear that he believed that the course allowed him to appreciate a new learning format and made him think how an online platform could be used for the international development and peace through sport course content as well as for working with students with disabilities. This opportunity made the course a meaningful experience for him. Another student, Satomi, explained that

I had a hard time communicating with my classmates using English. One challenge was that I could not make eye-contact and gesture through online communication. I struggled to see facial expressions and emotions. International development and peace through sport content includes controversial issues and theoretical content. I need to think a lot because there are no right or wrong answers in sport for development, but we need to justify our positions and we need to convince others in sport and education contexts. It was difficult to explain my rationale in online classes. (Satomi, email interviews)

Satomi learned that her actions (e.g., participating or withdrawing) were strongly related to whether or not the online education learning atmosphere implemented the concept of social inclusivity. Her frustrations were caused by students' language and comprehension barriers through controversial topics of the international development and peace through sport program. Another participant (Kunio) said that some professors were also struggling to give feedback (through online education) to their students using English as a second language. For example, she explained that:

When I had discussion, some professors were hesitant to give feedback through online education. It seems that when I wanted feedback from the professors, they did not give me any comments or feedback about my presentation. They asked another student to prepare presentations. I found that, sometimes, professors tended to give critical comments and feedback during face-to-face classes, but in online education, they behaved the opposite. I felt that many professors faced different challenges. (Kunio, oral interviews)

Kunio believed that his professors' feedback revealed their teaching competency. However, it was unfortunate that he rarely received any feedback or comments

without discussing critical incidents of his presentation that did not contribute to an expansion of his learning.

### ***Theme II: Students' Experiences in Group Projects Through Online Education***

All participants believed that it was difficult to proceed in their group projects and develop teamwork when they were scattered geographically and unable to meet face-to-face. They felt that they had double learning barriers due to using English as their second language, and the online education platform that prevented their effective communication with other students and course instructors. They felt that the group project helped them to analyze complex issues and concerns and learn how to initiate and take steps toward collaborating with national governments, sport federations, and international organizations for funding. For example, Hiroshi said that:

I felt that it was stressful to organize research presentations including a theoretical framework and research methods through group projects. Our research topic was Children Learning: Socioeconomic Issues and Concerns in Sport Development and Peace in Developing Countries. It was important to conceptualize the research method and study how to use the theoretical framework and establish appropriate methods for measuring refugee children's sport experiences and peace development. It is also important to analyze national governments, sport federations, sport policies and funding agencies. We needed to spend a long time and put our efforts in this group project. I felt that face-to-face meeting (with teammates) would be better than online meeting, because the content is sensitive and controversial, and we need to communicate with other teammates in the group project. It was a challenge. (Hiroshi, oral interview)

Hiroshi said that he had a hard time selecting an appropriate theory for designing a research study as a group project. He was confused about the difference between educational model and theoretical framework. He had difficulty in explaining the concepts and generating research ideas with his teammates. Yasuo explained that:

When I did a group project on diversity issues and sport with my teammates, it was difficult. I needed to discuss how our knowledge, skills, and learning experiences applied to development and peace through sport in developing countries, so we had to make decisions on topics, literature reviews, and research methods with my teammates. I wanted to have good conversation, but it was a challenge. I used strategies such as translation and reading articles repeatedly. I had a hard time evaluating my teammates' viewpoints and how much they value the group projects. I thought we had to have better communication. If we have good moderators in the group project, we would be able to have productive learning. (Yasuo, oral interviews)

Yasuo believed that online courses should help students develop reflective thinking skills and application of their knowledge and skills to future professional settings.

Therefore, by exchanging their ideas through group projects, students can understand course materials or projects thoroughly and engage meaningfully with teammates (Sato et al., 2019). Satomi also explained that:

My teammates and I had an opportunity to introduce sport for development and peace projects including disaster-relief projects, peaceful international relations, and improvement of sport capacity in developing countries through an online education platform. Each of my teammates was assigned to prepare a chapter presentation. It was unfortunate that we were unable to review and provide feedback until our presentation day, because all of our group members were taking other classes and had time conflicts. This was a challenge since we could not check the midterm progress of our presentations. Therefore, the quality of the chapter presentations was not consistent. From this struggle, I learned that clear and concise roles and responsibilities for the group project must be shared with the group members. (Satomi, oral interviews)

Satomi learned that cooperation and accountability became important factors in online group projects. Although she was a part of the group and was assigned to take responsibility for her contribution to the completion of the project, she believed that her own success must be linked with other team members' success in the group project.

### *Theme III: Students' Opinions About Online Education Improvement*

All participants believed that their professors should enhance the quality of online courses and that their professors should meet their cognitive expectations, including instructional choices and support practices. Students believed that professors should not only encourage learners to gain the ability to learn how to learn but they should also facilitate learners' understanding of the concept of how to be taught through social interaction. Effective online education is not simply a matter of adapting the structure and modes of interactions of the face-to-face classroom environment to an online platform.

For example,

When I took online international development and peace through sport courses, my professors assigned us to complete literature reviews and present reading assignments. After the presentations, there were question-and-answer times and time to exchange opinions and give feedback. I think that the professors should focus on experiential or problem-solution based learning, because all students must complete international and domestic internships and complete master's thesis projects next year. However, it was difficult to study in online courses...I may not be able to identify the problems, issues, and concerns related to sport policy, poverty, educational training, sport equipment. In order to enhance the quality of class contents, the professors may be able to invite guest lecturers from a NGOs or NPOs and allow us to interview them during the class. (Satomi, oral interview)

Satomi explained that the professors should allow their students to use online course content for their application of knowledge to their future internships and master's research projects. Another participant Ayaka explained that:

It seems that the professors only gave general feedback about presentations, not corrective and constructive feedback. In my opinion, the professors struggled to adjust themselves from the face-to-face to online format. I remember that when I took face-to-face courses, the professors brought their critical viewpoints that allowed students to think critically. I think that the professors should minimize the gaps and show consistent quality of delivering feedback. International development and peace through sport course contents are difficult and challenging. Therefore, the professors continuously need to improve their pedagogical skills. (Ayaka, email interview)

Ayaka believed that it was important that the professors offered flexible but meaningful learning for the participants so that all graduate students could become self-directed and build time management and/or organizational skills that allow them to secure their freedom of learning. Hiroshi also explained that:

When I took an online course, one of my professors gave free talk and question-and-answer time for all students. This type of flexibility of learning is important, because this opportunity helped us to have emotional engagement with other students and professors. One of my professors allowed me to use Japanese language for 30 min if I was not comfortable. Using Japanese language helped me to release my stress. Online courses made me anxious and isolated and sometime stressed, because no one told me if I was on the right track or not. For example, the international development and peace through sport program focuses on two important components: how to become practitioners and how to become researchers. These components must be well balanced while studying the contents. Free talk and question-and-answer time gave me an opportunity to learn classmates' academic progress between practical and research learning (Hiroshi, oral interviews).

Hiroshi explained that online courses should contribute to his transformative learning or a change in their way of viewing his academic performance. More specifically, the goal of online courses is to understand why professors and students screen and monitor their performance the way they do, how the goal is to shake off constraints, and to produce new perspectives into adult learning experiences (see also Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to investigate graduate students' experiences in online international development and peace through sport courses using English as the medium of instruction. This study utilized the theory of andragogy (Knowles, 1989),

where Japanese graduate students' online learning experiences are influenced and shaped by a problem-solution-based model context using English as a second language with classmates and professors.

Some graduate students reported that they did not perceive online courses to be equivalent to face-to-face courses (see Platt et al., 2014, for similar findings). All graduate students were suddenly forced to take their courses online. Carr-Chellman and Duchastel (2000) explain that the essence of an online course is the organization of learning activities that enable the students to reach certain outcomes. However, there is no unique recipe for the professors to combine online design approaches (synchronous, asynchronous, online, and offline) for meeting students' unique needs and interests. Therefore, international development and peace through sport courses necessitate class activities that have significant interaction and hands-on components, which were considered high-risk activities during the COVID-19 pandemic (Valeria & González-Calvo, 2020). Moreover, their previous face-to-face courses consisted of transmitting knowledge from professors to students and single-objective learning outcomes (e.g., reading, writing, and presenting in English) (see also Arbaugh & Benbunan-Finch, 2006). In contrast, these graduate students realized that there were different types of learning (e.g., collaborative and cooperative learning), and the international development and peace through sport program needed to determine how to engage students in learning activities and assess learning outcomes in online courses.

Rapanta et al. (2020) explain that the COVID-19 crisis is new to the students, and professors must take into account the time and effort students need to regulate themselves in order to adapt to the new learning situation. One way of doing this is to make self-regulation a part of the assessment through self-reflection and portfolios rather than taking exams.

All graduate students felt that these online education tools may be helpful for students with diverse backgrounds, especially students with hearing impairments who may be able to participate in the discussion using text-based chat communication. More specifically, Tonks et al. (2021) also recommend that graduate programs with online courses may need to hire peer tutors who are able to assist students with disabilities. The programs need to solve various psychological and mental health issues, grasp a sufficient level of understanding of online lectures, and enhance students' coping abilities in online classes. Plus, the university online education system designers must clearly understand students' needs and supply the requisite educational provisions to set goals (Alkahtani, 2021). Although none of graduate students had any experiences working with individuals with disabilities, they tried to seek new possibilities and positive perspectives about online educational tools that may solve educational problems and enhance educational resources for specific groups of individuals in sport for development and peace. In accordance with andragogy theory, the graduate students focused on their independent self-concept and were expected to develop the ability to direct their own learning (Knowles et al., 2005). They thought from the standpoint of people with diverse backgrounds (e.g., refugee children, teachers, coaches) through the online content of the sport for development and peace courses.

The graduate students showed academic frustrations due to anxiety associated with English language proficiency. This has been found in other EMI contexts (e.g., Chou, 2018) and was also found in the present study within the online classroom. Students faced challenges resulting from their unfamiliarity with specialized English vocabulary (including technical terms) related to international development and peace through sport content (e.g., *sustainable development goals*), as well as the cultural practices that indicate the complexities of the overall meaning of the discourse. Duff (2004) explained that professors of English-medium courses should design courses so that all students are equally involved in a process of academic discourse socialization and the development of academic literacy (Street, 2005) whereby students engage in various learning practices. The graduate students in this study learned how to adjust to new learning styles (collaborative learning to independent learning) in academic and social interactions during the online learning experiences (Sato & Hodge, 2015). According to Yuan (2021), students gain knowledge and improve their English competency when online courses are designed to use four different types of discourse, including introduction, clarification, disagreement, and counteroffer. For example, the master's program may be better to invite English language specialists and embrace a language focus in teaching design, so that both the professors and students can design debates (as an example) about a sport for development scenario. Debates encourage PE teachers to think critically and organize their thoughts in a clear, cohesive, and convincing manner (Sato et al., 2017).

Culturally, the Japanese students sought social support or help-seeking with classmates within the classes and relied on their classmates for supporting their emotional and academic needs (see also Tung, 2011).

In this study, the graduate students expected their professors let them know the purpose and rationale of feedback within the online courses. Brookhart (2008) explains that when professors provide feedback that facilitates learning processes and helps students enhance their learning, there is a greater impact on their achievement, and graduate students are motivated to take on more challenges in their learning. In the online course, therefore, feedback should be positive, but corrective, and identify which projects the students completed incorrectly or which reading materials, including PowerPoint lectures and articles, they struggled to understand. In andragogy theory, self-directed learning has a feedback component that provides an opportunity to help professors and students to review and develop. Therefore, these graduate students felt that it is important for professors to consider what constitutes feedback in the online environment and how feedback is provided, when it is offered, how it is focused or targeted, and how it is restructured in the development of new knowledge (Manderlach et al., 2006).

These Japanese graduate students believed that their group projects became important exercises, because international development and peace through sport courses must help students create extensive relationships at the community level as well as links to national governments, sport federations, and international organizations for funding. These sport networks are essential and allow individuals to work



collaboratively and cooperatively and overcome various challenges for sport for development and peace (United Nations, 2020). Additionally, the graduate students learned that the most important components in the course's learning process were the use of a theoretical framework and knowledge of research methods in online courses (Sato & McKay, 2020). According to Grant and Osanloo (2014), graduate students need to learn their own epistemological views while studying and selecting a theoretical framework and research method for their group projects. Although learning a theoretical framework and research methods using English as a second language in online education was a challenge, it is essential that graduate students use theoretical frameworks and research methods as assessments to compare and contrast contexts and conditions of various sport programs based on political, economic, and environmental situations around the world (Hancock et al., 2013).

In online classes, students were afraid of placing themselves in isolated positions when they were working on their online group projects. In the Japanese collective culture, a student's academic and social goals are often subordinate to group goals. Independent coping strategies are considered to be immature and selfish behaviors that threaten harmony in academic and social relationships within the group project (Cross, 1995). Therefore, all students felt less comfortable and had difficulty monitoring the quality of other teammates' work on group projects through online communication.

According to Ekblaw (2016) and Taylor and Hamdy (2013), in order to succeed in online group projects, all students should consider two components: cooperation and collaboration. Cooperation is defined as dividing the multiple tasks of a group project among the team members, but each teammate works independently. Collaboration is the process where the completed project is produced via interactions (working together) among all of the members of the group project. In this study, it seemed that the graduate students were unable to develop social relationships with their professors through their online group projects. In order to improve social relationships, students and professors must be (a) active agents in their knowledge acquisition; (b) realize that professors are no longer the single individuals who hold the knowledge; and (c) take responsibility for their own teaching and learning (Knowles 1975, 1980). Therefore, the graduate students suggested that moderating group projects in the online course were important to brainstorm problem-solving sessions. Through the learning process, they enhance their own ability to identify what they know, what they need to know (elaboration), where to access new information (refinement), and how to resolve problems in their online classes (restructuring) (Sato & Haegele, 2017). A moderator facilitates conversation and ensures that everyone participates and gives opportunities for all group members to resolve conflicts during the group project (Ekblaw, 2016).

These graduate students had opinions about online course improvement, including that their professors could use reflective practices and instructional strategies that stimulate students' academic and social learning in which graduate students engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to a new understanding of course content and assignments related to international development and peace through sport (Boud

et al., 1985; Sato & Haegele, 2019). These students had a hard time achieving a high degree of reflection in international development and peace through sport courses, because they paid attention to effective and appropriate technical reading, writing, speaking, and proper referencing skills, and effective communication (how to give good feedback). They explained that the professors' feedback should help students find the connection between course contents and their students' lived experiences (Boud et al., 2015), leading to their own self-directed learning. Therefore, it is important for instructors to consider what constitutes feedback in the online environment and how feedback is provided, when it is offered, and how it is focused or targeted (Mandermach et al., 2006). In andragogy theory, Chametzky (2014) recommended that online discussions may allow graduate students to develop deeper learning. This online discussion crafted class or course questions that required graduate students to think about how the online discussion and communication should be applied to their future professional situations in teaching and coaching sport for development and peace (Blondy, 2007). Ryan and Tilbury (2013) suggested that when professors offer flexible learning opportunities for their students in online education, they should consider the balance between instruction and facilitation with implications for pedagogical dynamics and professor and student relationships. Through flexible learning, all graduate students would be able to understand global–local connections and links between their lives and the experiences of other people worldwide, including the political, cultural, economic, and environmental factors related to international development and peace through sport.

### ***Study Limitations***

This study has two major limitations. First, this study included a small sample size. Thus, the findings are not generalizable to all graduate students who complete international development and peace through sport courses. However, the participants were purposefully selected and interviewed, and all graduate students took online courses. From a qualitative perspective, therefore, the reader might consider transferability to the contexts of other online programs in higher education. Second, our participants were purposefully selected from one public coeducational research university in Japan. Nevertheless, qualitative inquiries, including case studies, typically use small samples, often in a single research site, and in the logic of criterion sampling, the intent is to capture and describe the central themes that represent the phenomena under study for a particular cohort of interest (Patton, 2002). Our intent in using this sampling approach was to uncover common themes in graduate students' online course experiences with professor–student, student–content, and student–student interactions.

### **Recommendations and Conclusions**

The results of this study demonstrate that Japanese graduate students can have positive and meaningful experiences when enrolled in online, EMI international development

and peace through sport course work. However, a number of concerns (including language barriers, course content delivery, and feedback) were raised. Based on those concerns, the following recommendations are intended to enhance the quality of international development and peace through sport online course experiences for Japanese graduate students.

First, Japanese graduate students should be encouraged to practice a new paradigm, which might lead them to experience various cultural and contextual conflicts or dilemmas over academic and social learners (Yakunina et al., 2013). They must be taught how to take initiative and reframe learning stressors as opportunities for personal growth. Yakunina et al. (2013) suggest active coping strategies that may be valuable and beneficial for Japanese graduate students. For example, the university could find international students who can serve as English language mentors or tutor partners to allow the Japanese graduate students to develop their English language abilities (Sato & Miller, 2021).

Second, in order to increase graduate students' motivation, the online course should continuously focus on student-centered work including group activities. With these types of practices (e.g., creating online bulletin board discussions and online feedback rubrics), it is the responsibility of the professors to determine how the learning occurs. It is the responsibility of each graduate student to determine the degree to which they contribute (Hannafin et al., 2009) in order to complete their group projects successfully. By exchanging ideas as they progress through the exercise, they can understand course material more thoroughly (Kaifi et al., 2012) and engage meaningfully with their classmates.

Lastly, when the professors develop online courses, they need to take into account the characteristics of their students' academic backgrounds, including their research interests, focus areas, the age and gender of the students, and amount prior online learning experience (Richardson & Newby, 2006). These findings may facilitate the professor's plan for the use of scaffolds and other online learning aids that enhance their students' learning. Stoney and Oliver (1999) suggest that a well-designed student-centered program leads to increased student cognitive engagement and levels of higher order thinking (the ability to reflect on the learning experience and incorporate new knowledge with preexisting knowledge).

To better support Japanese graduate students' online learning, this study encourages academic departments, administrators, and faculty to better design appropriate courses and online activities. This will contribute to a greater appreciation of the richness of sport development and peace and to meaningful academic and social experiences available at Japanese universities for graduate students.


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## ORCID iDs

Junko Oishi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9749-9906>

Takahiro Sato  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3358-0809>

Satbyul Estella Kim  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7193-9694>

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### Author Biographies

**Junko Oishi, Takahiro Sato, Shinichi Nagata, Maho Fuchikami, Satoshi Shimizu, Tsuyoshi Matsumoto, Taku Yamaguchi, and Satbyul Estella Kim** are currently teaching EMI courses of Joint Master's Program in International Development and Peace through Sport at University of Tsukuba, Tsukuba Ibaraki, Japan.

**Ryan Miller** is an Associate Professor in Department of English at Kent State University, Kent, Ohio, USA. He teaches in the undergraduate and graduate programs in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL).