Students' perceptions of utilizing Flipgrid in a communicative English class

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Abstract

Three years into the COVID-19 pandemic our English Speaking and Listening classes (ESL) have taken full advantage of Web 2.0 technology through various tools associated with information and communication technology (ICT) that assist in learning when social distancing measures are implemented. While various interactive and collaborative ICT platforms have been implemented for students to use in and out of class, Microsoft's Flip (Flipgrid) has been an indispensable ICT platform for ESL. This initial investigation looks at how students perceive the use of Flip from written responses in class surveys and general feedback during course instruction. Student perceptions seem to suggest a positive attitude towards the technology and have benefitted from video-based speaking tasks through peer-to-peer feedback, along with teacher participation in follow-up tasks and instruction. While there are some negative perceptions of Flip, there seems to be a consensus among students that they enjoy using the platform. However, to better integrate technology in a communicative English class further inquiry into students' perceptions on using ICT technology will be necessary to bring forth an effective teaching model.

1. Introduction

Being highly transmissible, COVID-19 has had dire consequences for classroom interaction between teachers and students alike. Though our institution has primarily kept a policy of face-to-face learning, we have had to limit in-class interaction and collaborative learning which is an important steppingstone for successful student outcomes for our first-year English Speaking and Listening course (ESL) across all departments. Therefore, we have been tasked to "think out of the box" and find ways to promote communicative English assignments by employing information and communication technology (ICT) tools for our students.

To fill in this collaborative learning void, one ICT tool named Flip from Microsoft (previously named Flipgrid, but they will be used interchangeably in this paper) has been a vital source for social and collaborative learning over the past three years. By mimicking social media apps like Snapchat and Instagram, students

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have been able to communicate safely by video and share ideas on learned topics for discussion. Though there is a plethora of digitized solutions where students can collaborate (e.g., Nearpod, Padlet, Kahoot, etc.), the relative ease of use for both student and teacher has made it a popular choice for assigning discussion tasks and substitute live in-class discussion.

While live in-class discussion and presentations is the ideal learning environment for our students, Flip has numerous advantages (Hobbs 2021, Levine-Ogura 2021), and they are as follows:

- Students can observe their speaking progress by having a continuous record of performance.
- Like social media, peer feedback and commentary can be given with a simple "like" button or with more detailed written and video commentary.
- Students can observe their speaking performance and practice as many times as they want before submission.
- Flip creates a stress-free environment where students can build confidence and self-efficacy.
- Students can have access to their classmates' English anytime and anywhere, thus out-of-class learning is made possible.

Although this paper is only my personal subjective evaluation of our students' general perceptions of Flip as a communicative learning tool, it is my hope that my observations will lead to better ICT integration and practice for the communicative English classroom both in and out of class.

2. Literature Review

As smartphones have become ubiquitous in our daily lives the use of them in classrooms seems to be a natural progression because of their mobility and access to information. After all, if used properly they are "smart" devices!

In fact, researchers have suggested that the name, Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), to be changed to Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) due to the flexibility that these devices can offer to students with an "anytime, anywhere" approach to learning (Chien 2021, Gonulal 2019, Hsu 2013, Kukulsk-Hulme & Shield 2008, Liaw & Huang 2011). Nevertheless, COVID-19 has created a tsunami of change where the technological spillover into the classroom has been accelerated (Levine-Ogura 2021). The use of "anytime, anywhere" technology is now a foregone conclusion. With students already familiarized with similar technology due to the popularity of social media apps like Snapchat and Instagram, students should be open to use something similar as a language learning tool. However, going back about 10 years ago this was not the case.

Surveying the importance of computing devices as a vital classroom resource, White and Mills (2012) discovered that students did not see smartphones as an educational tool because digital technology, as a source of learning, was not widely used by Japanese educators. Previous research in this regard by Nakayama and Ueno (2008) had also concluded that even though Japan is technologically advanced, and there has been plenty of discussion at conferences and seminars, Japanese students had rudimentary practice with technology for their learning. With COVID-19 being a catalyst in forcing classes to go online, there has been a seismic shift, however. Technology-assisted learning and its implications for students are now forefront research issues for educators (Chien 2021).

Much of the literature notes how the popularity of online video sharing platforms, beginning in the early 2000s, like YouTube and Facebook had offered two-way communication and collaboration, which is a hallmark definition of what Web 2.0 had given us the ability to do (Aşıksoy 2018, Chien 2021, Pantano & Tavernise

2009, Thomas 2009). Chien (2021, p. 80) explains that these "technologies offer learners an opportunity to interact, share, and collaborate easily." Moving forward twenty years later, Flip has picked up on the popularity of social media by giving students the opportunity to interact with their classmates while mimicking the familiar platforms like Instagram and Snapchat (Taylor & Hinchman 2020).

While there are many video-based applications such as VoiceThread, EdConnect, and Marco Polo there has not been much research on Flip and mostly on VoiceThread (Lowenthal et al. 2020). Moore (2020) mentions that online educators have mainly focused on the later because its multimodal communication platform humanizes online discussions. This is certainly a concern, because students might find it hard to have meaningful discussions just by video. In fact, a study by Borup, West, Graham (2012), found that VoiceThread and YouTube had a limited effect on the social presence of students and only helped the presence of the teacher to influence any continued discussion. However, in another study by Pacansky-Brock (2014) suggested that students felt more social cohesion through video or voice responses when encouraged by the teacher if given choices of what students will respond to.

Other implications of online-video sharing platforms suggest that this kind of technology can promote a learner's motivation to learn, but it depends on the relative ease of use and willingness to use the technology (Jaramillo Cherrez 2019). Thought it was not a study on Flip, but rather towards the use of Instagram as an English learning tool, Gonal (2019) suggested English learners' perceptions were positive because Instagram was easy to use. Moreover, just as Pacansky-Brock (2014) suggested that students' social cohesion was improved through video or voice responses, online-video sharing platforms can help bring students together and give a sense of community. In a study by Casarez et al. (2019), Flip had improved interaction for students in an online program. Participants noted that they better understood their peers via video. Chien (2021, p. 80) explains, rather than just "traditional blog features on the learning management systems websites. The participants felt a strong connection and that a community was built via Flipgrid."

Video-response platforms can also help learners' communications skills. Young people enjoy these platforms because they are like what they use amongst their friends when sharing media activities (Levine-Ogura 2021). Mango (2021, p. 227) suggested, "using technology that offers features valued by youth such as video viewing and sharing could prove to be very effective in education. It could build on and hone the technical and social skills that learners use every day."

Chien's (2021) research on perceived usefulness of Flip among Japanese students was generally positive because "communication and interaction played one of the key roles in the outcome" (Chien 2021, p. 85). Students enjoyed the sense of community because they could hear and see each other rather than just written blogs or forum commentary (Bartlett 2018). One student response was, "Flipgrid was useful. Although we don't have a chance to meet people in the same class due to the pandemic, Flipgrid gives us the opportunity to see each other which leads us to a sense of closeness and familiarity" (Chien 2021, p. 85). Flip also played a key role in fostering opportunities to communicate in English thus students found it useful because it motivated them to speak English and improve. Moreover, Chien's research also found students being able to use Flip "anywhere, anytime" (a nod to MALL), being able to submit a video until they were satisfied with their performance and offering students to check their pronunciation and intonation before posting. Chien also investigated Flip's ease of use perceptions and came up with the following results:

- Not knowing what Flip was, students initially thought Flip would be hard to use.
- After experiencing Flip, many thought it was easy to use because the interface was simple and

user-friendly.

- Because Flip's similarity to social media platforms, there was a positive attitude for its ease of use.
- Being able to use Flip on their smartphones was convenient and this perceived mobility gave the opportunity for students to take control of their learning.
- A demonstration from the teacher was helpful.

3. The Flip Platform

Flipgrid, as it was once called, was launched by University of Minnesota professor Charlie Miller in 2014 as a subscription-based platform. The education start-up was acquired by Microsoft in 2018 and made free (CNBC 2018). It quickly became popular among educators in the United States, and it has become the most widely used video-response platform from kindergarten to the university level due to its simple ease of for all types of subjects (Vander Ark 2019). In 2022, Microsoft changed the platform's name to just Flip.

The Flip platform is best used on a smartphone through their free app available on Apple's App Store and Google Play Store. Flip can also be accessed via laptop or a desktop computer but bear in mind, since this is a Microsoft platform, Apple's Safari browser is not completely compatible. On suggestion, it is best to use Microsoft's Edge browser for a pleasant user experience. This is especially true for the "Group Lead" (teacher) managing the Flip account class settings and any successive teachers who join to "co-lead" the class.

Taking advantage of the popularity of short videos, including options to use augmented reality (AR) effects and stringing video segments together, Flip has been noticed by language educators as a useful tool for communicative language teaching (Taylor & Hinchman 2020). As McClure and Andrews (2016) explain, FG was created as an educational platform architecture based on students' shifting needs for course engagement, to boost student participation, promote communicative development, and increase teacher "awareness of student understanding of course concepts" (Taylor & Hinchman 2020, p. 26).

Setting up a Flip account is easy, and doesn't require much time and effort as Hobbs (2021, p. 24) explains,

"Creating student logins is a straightforward process, and after this is done the teacher can print out individual login cards with QR codes to give to each student. This QR code directs students to the downloadable app. After installing the app students input the user ID on their card, and the login process is complete. As with most smartphone apps, login details are thereafter not required unless a long time has elapsed since the app was last used."

Once students have accessed their Flip class, they will find a topic of discussion that the teacher has prepared to discuss about. In the case of ESL, it would be a topic that was covered in class, and students would perhaps speak in more detail or talk about their own ideas or thoughts on the subject.

The longest video a student can submit is 10 minutes. However, Flip makes it easy to manage video times by limiting the length of video submissions in each Flip assignment settings. However, it is best to remind students that videos over the time limit will not be accepted by the platform. When using this feature, I set the speaking assignment time shorter than the time set in the Flip assignment settings (e.g., a student must speak between 1-2 minutes, but the Flip setting submission time is set at 2 minutes and 30 seconds). You can also assign a submission due date, but I tend to leave it open for most assignments while leaving the onus of responsibility for on-time submissions with the student. Submitted videos are time stamped, so it is easy to check and see if there are any late submissions if necessary.

In the settings as well, a useful feature is to "moderate" (i.e., private) submissions. This feature is extremely

useful for the teacher to check if a) submissions are done correctly, b) prevents similar responses (i.e., copying), and perhaps most importantly c) gives the student the opportunity for some discretion from fear of awkwardness or embarrassment, especially if it is their first video spoken in English. Nobody wants to go first and be seen. That goes for more familiar in-class presentations as well!

After students have submitted an introductory video on the assigned topic is where the fun begins. Flip's simple response-platform makes it easy for classmates to respond creating a "response chain" of comments or questions. This mimics popular social media platforms, so students can feel a sense of connection, thus forming an online English-speaking community. As Pacansky-Brock (2014) pointed out, teachers may also want to give feedback or participate in responses as well. This would help bring cohesion to the online discussion classroom (i.e., community).

From here is where I will explain some from students' perceptions having used Flip in our ESL course over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Our Students' Perceptions of Flip

As mentioned in the introduction, the numerous advantages of Flip seem to correlate with students' feedback on using the platform as a source of topic discussion in an ESL class. Over the past 3 years of implementing Flip speaking tasks for the sake of student safety, responses have been generally positive of its usefulness. On investigation, these general observations from student commentary seem to corroborate Chien's (2021) research on Japanese university students' perceptions of Flipgrid in an English discussion class noted earlier.

From class surveys, many students have voluntarily noted (i.e., optional commentary) in writing that Flip was useful to notice their speaking progress and have a record of what needs to be improved upon. Many students have said that it helped them notice pronunciation and intonation issues which upon reflection, helped them improve their speaking for the next Flip assignment.

Teacher feedback about their speaking performance by private video was also welcomed. Students have commented getting detailed commentary during face-to-face class would be difficult, embarrassing, or even hard to understand. Being able to sit down and listen carefully to a teacher's private video commentary "anytime, anywhere" was helpful for listening and review. It should be noted however, video commentary from the teacher, especially for large classes, takes time and energy for obvious reasons. I suggest private video commentary should be done at your own discretion whether to help faltering students or give praise. Even though it may tax your time, giving quick video commentary to needed students seems to benefit student motivation. So, that is something to bear in mind. It can also help elevate the perception that Flip is a useful class communication learning tool to have as part of their English learning.

Students have commented that it is easier to speak English because Flip offers a stress-free environment once students understand and get over the anxiety of using Flip for their speaking assignments (i.e., recording on camera). Of course, the dynamics of a speech done in front of a live audience has important learning and practical implications. It is the ideal situation to gauge true speaking performance. Nevertheless, Flip can be a great steppingstone by helping students gain confidence and self-efficacy. On reflection, it may be wise to adjust the allocation of practice presentations by splitting presentations between Flip and in-class presentations in ESL, so students can benefit from both speaking situations. Of course, this method of task allocation will have to wait until the COVID-19 pandemic has abated. When we are allowed to have face-to-face unobstructed in-class

presentations and discussion again, it will be interesting to see how students will perform "flipping" between (no pun intended!) Flip tasks and in-class presentations.

There have been some negative perceptions, but I believe they are not pressing issues to be worried about. Some students have noted that they do not like the "like" button. They would rather see the number of "likes" private. Unfortunately, that feature is not available. There is a solution, however. In the Flip settings, the teacher can toggle "likes" off. Interestingly, when the "like" button was toggled off, students have never commented on wishing that there was a "like" button. As part of a survey, this might be one question to explore.

While some students have noted that Flip gave them the opportunity to speak English out of class (i.e., anytime, anywhere feature) with their peers, some students were concerned about not receiving replies to a speaking task. Chien (2021) mentions this issue as well when surveying Flip's perceived usefulness. Students "were disappointed about the loss of interaction" (Chien 2021, p. 85). It would be ideal to have all participants in the task get some commentary from their peers. Since Flip has shown to create a sense of community, students who do not get feedback may feel ostracized. To alleviate this issue, taking proactive measures by instructing students to reply to a set number of videos and replying to those comments ensures everyone has participated.

5. Conclusion

After three years of implementing Flip as an alternative to in-class speaking tasks and as a teacher becoming familiar with this ICT platform, student perceptions suggest that it is a positive tool to use in a communicative English class. Its ease of use and allowing students the opportunity to speak to each other seems to create a community where anyone can participate in English anywhere, thanks to its smartphone accessibility. Student feedback from class surveys suggests that students appreciate peer-to-peer feedback while following their own speaking progress. Since this is a preliminary look at student perceptions on utilizing flip in a communicative English class, more detailed analysis through a survey on how to better integrate technology in a communicative English class will be necessary to bring forth an effective teaching model.

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