Advantages and disadvantages using Flipgrid in a communicative English class in times of COVID-19

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1. Introduction

According to the World Health Organization, COVID-19 is an airborne transmitted disease. When an infected person exhales, the virus travels through the air in droplets. People catch the virus by inhalation when they are in close proximity to the infected person. In addition, infection also occurs through the eyes, nose or mouth when an infected surface is touched. Furthermore, COVID-19 has been shown to be highly transmissible, therefore it has had dire consequences for our daily social interactions and lifestyle (World Health Organization, 2021).

Since our social interactions have been stunted by this disease, we have been forced to rethink our classroom approach, and adopt ways to promote communicative English amongst our students. Although at my institution we have mainly avoided online teaching (e.g., teaching via Zoom), teachers have been asked to limit talking and collaborative learning in order to prevent in-class infection in our first-year English Speaking and Listening course (ESL) across all departments. Needless to say, the challenge has been enormous. For the communicative English class, the proverbial "monkey wrench" has been thrown at us. Thankfully however, social media applications like Snapchat and Instagram, students have become familiar with video response technology (Taylor & Hinchman, 2020). Therefore, through the use of information and communication technology (ICT) I have been able to foster a communicative English environment in and out of class.

In this paper, the use of Flipgrid (FG) will be introduced as an example of one video response technology that I have found useful to help stimulate English communication as one tactic while mitigating COVID-19 infection amongst students and teachers. I will discuss its advantages and disadvantages, as FG has become our chosen tool of opportunity in a time of learning crisis.

2. Smartphones, Social Media and COVID-19

Smartphones have become omnipresent in our daily lives. Of course, this brings the popularity of digital social media to the forefront of any conversation when talking about these devices. They have unquestionably

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infiltrated our daily lives for good or bad. Social media's popularity is not only entrenched with millennials, but with all age groups, leading to an exponential rise in revenues. The global social networking platform market value in 2019 was evaluated at a staggering $193 billion in U.S. dollars and projected to grow to a shocking $940 billion dollars by 2026 (Research and Markets, 2021). Whether it is for work or leisure, it is becoming increasingly self-evident that social media, and these devices in general will become more pervasive (if not already) in our daily lives and seemingly vital for students and teachers alike as we head into the future.

COVID-19 has created a tsunami of change where the technological spillover into the classroom has been accelerated. This is to help control the spread of COVID-19 and aid in distance learning (e.g., Zoom conferencing). This seems to be obvious now, but 10 years ago Japanese university students did not see smartphones or other computing devices as vital classroom resources. White and Mills (2012) surveyed students in 2011 and discovered that they did not see smartphones as an educational tool because up until that time digital technology was not widely used in Japanese education. Nevertheless, there were changing signs in the following year when students were asked the question again. Students began seeing some practicality with their smartphone as an educational device by using the dictionary function more frequently and finding the device generally more helpful due to the fact that more sophisticated applications were being introduced and updated more often. Interestingly, it was also noted that there was a dramatic change with students using their smartphones more for social networking and other applications including the camera (White and Mills, 2012). In hindsight, here we can perhaps see the beginnings of how students felt familiarity with FG. This preliminary survey was possibly a potent sign of things to come, and a blessing in disguise for me to continue having a communicative English class during these challenging times.

3. Flipgrid: Snapchat for the Classroom

There is a universe of social media, and it seems as though FG could fall into this category (albeit under the category of education) by mimicking familiar platforms like Snapchat and Instagram (Taylor & Hinchman, 2020). As an online video platform, it allows students to talk with their classmates, the teacher, or with people around the world if necessary (Mango, 2021).

FG is presently owned by Microsoft, but it was launched in 2014 by University of Minnesota professor Charlie Miller. Free to use and having no advertisements, it quickly became popular among educators. In the United States, it has become the most widely used video response platform from kindergarten to the university level because it is simple to use for all ages and subjects (Vander Ark, 2019).

The popularity of FG cannot be ignored. Having been available for many years now and grown with the rise of other mainstream social media platforms (e.g., Snapchat, Instagram) there are now uncanny comparisons to them. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, about one in three teachers in the United States used it (Vander Ark, 2019). To put things into perspective, Vander Ark (2019) quotes Eran Megiddo, Microsoft's vice president for education, who said, "For the 2018-2019 school year, we added more than 700,000 new educators (that equates to a new sign-up every 45 seconds), 530 million videos were shared (that's 1.5 million per day) and 24 billion seconds of video were shared – equal to 2.1 years of video shared every day."

FG has taken advantage of the popularity of social media by using video response technology and converting this as a learning tool for educators (Taylor & Hinchman, 2020). A feature like enhanced storytelling is one example. Students can put together segments into one simple video. Another example is augmented reality (AR), where students and teachers can add virtual stickers to their videos while filming or during the

editing process before uploading it to the platform (Vander Ark, 2019). Taking a cue from regular social media platforms' successes, McClure & McAndrews (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 and Hinchman, 2020, p. 26).

FG is easy to set up and use. The teacher just has to create a free account. Once you have done that, you set up groups (i.e., my ESL classes) where you create the topic and explain the task. Each student is registered to access their own class by using a personal QR code that I have individually given out at the beginning of the course. Students are then instructed to download the free FG application from the Apple App Store or at Google Play (FG application can be used on tablets and personal computers as well). Once students access their class FG through their personal QR code, they will see a task to complete and new tasks as they are assigned during the semester. Students respond by video using their smartphones or some other device with a camera and access to the Internet. Video recording times are limited to 10 minutes per student. Generally, as the speaking tasks are similar to in-class short presentations, and depending on class size, I limit the video time to between 1 and 2 minutes in length.

One speaking task example would be from a topic about superfoods. Students are introduced to this topic in class through listening activities so they can learn its target vocabulary and expressions. To show that they have understood the topic, students then complete a speaking task on FG for topic expansion (e.g., a superfood recommendation). Students are instructed to watch their classmates' videos and learn about what their classmates have recommended. To continue the discussion, students use FG's video response platform for follow-up questions or commentary. Video submissions can be moderated if necessary (i.e., student videos can only be seen by me) and a due date option to close submissions is available.

Task instructions can be easily formatted using simple text design, but there are basic layout options (e.g., bold face, italics, etc.) that are similar to what you may find in Microsoft Word or other word processing programs. There is however a word limit on speaking task titles and instructions. Contingent on class level, pages can just be simple text instructions or designed with multimedia options to assist visual learners and for those who may have disabilities. FG has a feature which can transcribe videos to meet learners' needs in order to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (Bartlett, 2018). Depending on student level, I sometimes embed a video that I have made explaining the task again to help students who didn't understand the original instructions during class time, or put up a speaking task example for students to reference from. In addition, to help students visualize the topic, stimulate their curiosity or motivate interest, you can also design your FG page with other multimedia formats such as open source gifs or photos that FG suggests through its platform media search engine. You can use your own photos as well, but be mindful of copyright infringement. File attachments can also be imbedded (e.g., worksheets) if necessary.

4. ESL Classes: Socially Distanced Face-to-face Learning

Being a regular social media user myself, I am familiar with how social media platforms connect people with similar interests, enabling them to have discussions and share ideas. In some way by class design, my face-to-face classes have been doing the same thing. Students are in 90-minute "social English bubble" (i.e., the English classroom). They are learning a unit topic through videos, "shared" by me from the Internet. Later, after they have learned the English related to the unit topic, students are given the opportunity to use their learned

English and exchange ideas or opinions on a face-to-face "platform" through group work or pair work. Perhaps it is somewhat analogous to the teacher being the *influencer* and the student being a *follower*.

Though FG has been around for some years now, it was not necessary to use it as a classroom resource or learning tool. ESL classes have always been small and manageable to promote a communicative atmosphere. For students and me, it has always been a productive time to have a face-to-face exchange of ideas and opinions through English. However, it goes without saying that I was curious about FG and thought at times it could be easily implemented into my classes. In fact, prior to the pandemic, I already had an account but it was only to satisfy my curiosity. The disadvantages, which I will discuss later, dissuaded me from doing so.

It was only until April 2020 that FG became necessary because COVID-19, in a rather short time, changed everything. As we learned how the disease transmits from person to person, it became increasingly clear that regular tasks for speaking and normal class participation through group or pair work could jeopardize the health and safety of our students and teachers. Unlike at most universities, classes did not go online. Despite the chance of in-class COVID-19 infection, we persevered with in-class learning. Apart from the pressure to stay safe from COVID-19, in hindsight, this has been a good thing. However, there was one caveat; social distancing rules were in place and talking in class must be kept at a minimum. For our students' health and wellbeing pair and group work should be avoided. It was either do or die for the ESL class. How can you have a communicative English class without any group work or pair work? FG came to the rescue! In other words, thanks to FG I did not have to scrap the aims and objectives of the course syllabus. FG's video response platform was an ideal alternative to keep the discussion going. We needed an immediate fix and FG delivered.

Now in the second year of the pandemic with social distancing rules still in effect, FG has made it possible to keep students actively engaged in given topics through listening and speaking activities. Embedding FG into my teaching and learning repertoire has shown to be the best alternative to get similar results from my students while limiting face-to-face engagement. There are however disadvantages, but I will begin by discussing the advantages.

5. Flipgrid Advantages

Popular platforms for young people include YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat. The most popular media activities involve listening to music, watching videos, or playing video games. Young people enjoy these social media platforms because they can easily share their media activities with their peers (Common Sense Media, 2019; Mango, 2021). Mango (2021, p. 227) noted, "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." I think this has been one reason why students are generally comfortable with using FG. Despite some students having reservations about being on camera, they have accepted the platform as a language-learning tool because of its similarity to social media platforms. FG has also allowed them the opportunity to still participate in a communicative English class, but feel safe from COVID-19. Other advantages are as follows:

1) Students can see their speaking progress. As they go through the course, they can see what needs to be improved upon for the next speaking task. It is a record of their progress and that gives them a sense of accomplishment. FG allows them to listen to themselves and hear mistakes in pronunciation and intonation. Also, students can see if they are speaking too fast or speaking unnaturally, as if they were reading from a

text, which I try to discourage. Without FG, students might not see how much they have improved. FG helps visualize their growth in speaking skills.

2) FG allows immediate peer feedback and commentary. Teacher feedback is important but can also be intimidating. FG is similar to social media (e.g., submitted videos have a "like" button), and therefore peer feedback is more intimate and can boost confidence through student-student commentary.

3) FG allows students to speak in a stress-free environment anywhere. As we all know, speaking in class can be very stressful even in our first language. Students who plan their work and don't procrastinate can practice as much as they want and see themselves through the FG application before uploading the video. If a student doesn't like what they have recorded, they can redo it without any judgement from others. This is perhaps a convenient self-check system through which FG can build confidence and self-efficacy, and help with student motivation and self-reflection.

4) Improves skills in digital literacy. Digital literacy is not a primary aim in ESL. However, as a washback effect FG can help students become more confident and adept in using online media tools. COVID-19 has exacerbated the focus on digital literacy. More time spent with these tools will help them be prepared for a post-pandemic world as students move into their medical careers.

5) Out of class learning made possible. FG videos can be viewed anywhere, so watching videos during class is optional. It is easy to create a flipped classroom. For example, as a homework assignment, listening to classmates' videos can be done outside of class for follow-up discussion or commentary by submitting a new video or responding by text in the FG application.

6) Learner assessment made easy. As a teacher, I don't feel pressure to grade immediately because these are not live presentations. Once students have made their submissions I can begin grading them and give prepared feedback before class and move on to other parts of the lesson. Since I have a record of their work, I can also go back and watch the videos again, and if necessary reevaluate their performance. Likewise, just as students can see their speaking progress, I can do the same. I can look back and see if students are consciously trying to improve upon their weak points and assess accordingly.

7) Free and easy to use for both students and teachers. Compared to other online learning platforms (e.g., Nearpod, Kahoot, Quizlet, etc.) there are no paid features to access and is advertisement free. Likewise, you are not limited to how many students can participate. Other than downloading the free smartphone application (recommended), it is easy to navigate. Though there is a slight learning curve, as it looks like other popular social media platforms, students do not feel they are using something new. Furthermore, students also do not need to create their own account as with some other online learning platforms. They just go to my FG where they have been registered and access the speaking task.

ESL teachers can share their FGs with other teachers as well. This is called the "co-lead" option (formerly named co-pilot). In ESL, teachers rotate classes after 7 weeks during each semester. This is convenient because I don't have to create a new FG when meeting a new group of students. As a co-leader I can just join the previous teacher's FG and add new speaking topics and tasks. Additionally, students don't need to go to a new FG, which

can cause unnecessary confusion or extra work on my part. Furthermore, if necessary previous FG speaking topics can be recycled to one or multiple classes using FG's duplicate feature, which helps streamline your FG workflow. Previous videos and commentary will not be duplicated.

6. Flipgrid Disadvantages

As mentioned earlier, prior to the pandemic I had already opened an FG account out of curiosity. At that time, I thought to myself this might be interesting to use in my communicative English classes. While I heard of other teachers enjoying its many benefits, I was dissuaded by the disadvantages at that time.

Although low-stress and with many advantages, video presentations are not the same as live presentations. The feeling of "performing" in front of a live audience is very different from that of doing it through a video presentation, let alone on a platform that mimics social media. Students also need to experience the stress of a live presentation and find ways to improve their in-person speaking skills. This is not an easy task to accomplish. Practice is necessary.

Furthermore, students also don't necessarily have to memorize their English. Face-to-face speaking from memory in front of a live audience is very different from just reading from a text even if you are pretending to be "speaking" on video. Again, it takes concerted effort and practice to deliver your presentation properly. Those who can successfully accomplish these tasks are rewarded with higher assessment scores. I expect students to find ways to improve and develop these skills as a point in passing the course.

This leads me to the obvious downside when assessing FG presentations. There is a homogeneity in presentation delivery. Grading has become more difficult because students seem to be performing at the same level. The deviation between high and low scores has become too narrow. The dynamics of presenting live are unfortunately constrained. As mentioned earlier, although FG might offer a stress-free environment, it stunts the learning experience of speaking in front of a live audience. Moreover, as FG appeals to social media tendencies, savvy students can use effects and "fake" or "photoshop" their presentations by using the numerous Instagram-like editing effects. Though some students might like to think so, my communicative English class is not a place to practice social media literacy! There can be some misunderstanding here on what is acceptable.

7. Conclusion

Whether there is distance or in-class learning, it has become clear that COVID-19 and the ensuing pandemic has forced us to use new technology to mitigate infection. I am pleased that FG has been a temporary replacement for working around rules that discourage in-class speaking here at Iwate Medical University. It has provided a useful forum for stimulating and helping students participate in a communicative English class. Saying that it has been a blessing in disguise would be an understatement.

Yet, for all its high-tech features, believing that FG is a permanent fixture to my communicative teaching toolbox might be a bridge to far. Although it has been providing a safe alternative to in-class speaking and has numerous advantages as a low-stress language learning platform, it is not a platform that I can rely upon especially when assessing speaking skills in front of a live audience. Furthermore, its similarities to social media can give a false sense of accomplishment to students, and in fact obstruct course objectives.

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