

The Flipped Classroom, Two Classes in One

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Abstract

The amount of content that can be covered in university English classes is severely limited by the 90-minute, 16-week maximum time constraint. Presenting a flipped learning environment to students gives them an opportunity to experience the course both inside and outside of the classroom. In the spring of 2016, students at Hirosaki University were exposed to courses with a very strong outside-of-class component. Students participated extensively on the social format of Moodle, the university's learning management system (LMS). In addition, they used online materials, including workbooks accompanying their textbook, prepared projects and presentations and studied colloquialisms and slang for a special quiz bowl. Detailed student feedback was collected at the end of the course. The feedback indicated that students remained highly invested in the various activities and that they also began to create a regular personal English study habit. In short, this paper describes the process of conducting flipped classes and analyzes related student feedback.

Keywords: flipped, flipped classroom, inverted classroom, LMS, Moodle, reflection, student feedback

Why flip?

As professional educators, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) instructors clearly recognize that learning English as an adult is a lifelong commitment. Japanese university students, however, do not likely begin their tertiary education on the same page. Following a secondary school background where English is often taught like math, students tend to believe that there will always be one perfect answer and that the learning process is set and finite.

The university system, with its time-honored tradition of scheduling language courses for a single contact period of 90 minutes per week, exacerbates this underestimation of the English-learning process. Apparently, those governing education somehow believe that substantive language learning will occur during this weekly hour and a half. As if this constraint were not daunting enough, English teachers at national universities are asked to present such courses in one-semester increments. Is there an English-teaching miracle that can be performed in 22.5 to 24 hours of contact time? Such a phenomenon is highly unlikely. Consequently, the university English teacher is in desperate need of a strategy to turn this situation around. One possible solution is to create a second arena outside of class that gives students daily practice with the language, a situation often referred to as a flipped classroom. Traditionally, flipped, or inverted classrooms have been described for courses with rather concrete content that can be introduced through recorded lectures or some similar resources outside of class. The material studied outside the classroom is then analyzed, discussed, expanded upon or perhaps refined in the classroom. This is considered

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“flipped” when compared to the notion of listening to lectures in classes and then going home and doing homework, reading material and/or writing reports that analyze and expand upon what was presented. In this model, the homework has become the classwork and the classwork has become the homework.

In 2007, Woodland Park High School chemistry teachers Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams (2012) began recording lectures and posting them online to accommodate students who had been absent. They were excited by the results and began to rethink their approach to the classroom. They quickly shared this concept with other educators. While they are the names most associated with “flipped classrooms,” the teachers themselves claim that this style of classroom management cannot be attributed to any one individual or group. Along the way, various instructors have contributed to the concept. Bergmann and Sams also state that there is no single definition of “flipped.” It means different things in different situations.

Compared to secondary school chemistry courses, the subject matter of Japanese university English classes is far more abstract. In other words, language production and overall communication can encompass innumerable combinations of words. Furthermore, language ability is evaluated rather subjectively compared to other types of classes. Students can amply communicate and demonstrate improvement even if they are not speaking with one hundred percent grammatical or lexical precision, whereas this may not hold true in other areas of study. While it may be ideal for the outside and inside venues to be significantly intertwined, the main goal of the class model delineated below is to instill a short, daily language study habit in advanced English students at Hirosaki University. The hope is that the routines and skills they learn will stay with them throughout their careers. Moreover, student feedback has confirmed that by practicing more regularly, the individuals do come to realize and appreciate the greater role that English now plays in their lives.

Not only do students get added exposure when introduced to a flipped environment, they also gain reflection time, which is invaluable for language learners. Reflection is a crucial and often overlooked aspect of language learning. When Curran (1972) established Community Language Learning, his teaching method based on Counseling Learning, he indicated that in order for learners to achieve retention and discrimination of material, they must first reflect. The student feedback cited below is based on a reflection format and shows that learners in two Listening classes and one reading class carefully contemplated what they had done over the 16 weeks and expressed an eagerness to improve and expand upon the base they had developed in the future.

The first semester of 2016 was the original experimental period for shifting a great deal of the material covered in the course to a virtual classroom. The instructor had been using Moodle, the university’s LMS (learning management system), in earlier classes, but decided, at this juncture, to increase the demands on the students and create what became essentially two worlds—the one inside the physical classroom and the one that took place in the virtual classroom. The following is a description of the role that each component played.

The Physical Classroom

1) The teacher organized each class into squads of four or five students. Every member of the group was given a permanent designation of north, south, east, west, or in groups of five, there was also a north2. Every week, the position of the directions would change, but, every time, the student in the first slot would lead the discussions and the one in the second place would take attendance and give a short impromptu speech on the topic of the day. In addition, the student in the third spot would mine vocabulary from the textbook, the board and the group discussion and post a vocabulary list of the words found on Moodle; and the one in the fourth position would post an overall summary of the day’s activities on Moodle.

In Week 2, for example, the order was SEWN2, so Mr. South led the discussion; Ms. East took attendance, gave homework points and told a story; Ms. West made a vocabulary list to post; and, Mr. North (North2 in the

larger groups) summarized the day's activities to upload to Moodle. Impromptu speeches included topics such as "Memories of a rainy day when I was a child;" "My experiences at the school festival;" "The best places to go in my hometown," etc.

2) In addition to the above classroom management activities and textbook discussions, students gave speeches and presentations, created model conversations and participated in one on one intensive pair work that employed variations on "4/3/2" fluency activities (Nation, 1989).

The Virtual Classroom

1) Students were required to use Moodle as a blog, or "social forum," as well as a hub for outside of class assignments and overall assignment clarification. The Moodle site was a place where...

- A. students were asked questions and posted opinions
- B. students contributed original sentences, conversations and mini stories using designated vocabulary, sometimes with pictures, etc. attached
- C. students downloaded vocabulary practice sheets for supplementary vocabulary that included up-to-date slang and colloquialisms
- D. students commented on the posts of peers
- E. students suggested possible revisions on usage to peers
- F. students read about upcoming events
- G. students checked teacher announcements clarifying assignments

2) Students were instructed to use the online workbook for the textbook as a self-regulated, self-access project.

3) Students were required to cover about 75% of the textbook material for the class on their own as homework. They were given a URL to access the course audio and other related resources.

4) Students were asked to visit the university language center, the English Lounge, to interact with other teachers and international students and borrow materials.

Student Reflection

Students were told to complete something called a "Reflection Form" at the end of the course. They were given the option of posting it online as a Moodle attachment, where it could be shared with others, or e-mailing it to the instructor so it would remain private. This form was one more activity, meant to be a learning experience, which took place outside the classroom. It did in fact, subsequently, serve as feedback for the instructor.

Below are samples of student reflection on one unconventional topic taken up in the listening class, "insults." Students were given a few example conversations and various URLs with insults in English and invited to create original conversations using language that was somewhat out of the ordinary for them. The research for this was done outside of class with students pairing up and getting in contact with one another to be able to perform their model conversations in class. The reflective comments on this activity appear in italics below and consist of the original student language. They have not been altered or corrected.

Tuesday Speaking Group

Excerpt 1

Insult Partner Conversations, S1

State one of the insults you used: *You are mad!*

My performance on this task was: 1 2 3 4 ⑤

Comments on the insult dialogs:

I tried to compose compact and clear sentences. In addition, I was able to put my feelings into words when I read it.

Excerpt 2

Insult Partner Conversations, S2

State one of the insults you used:

Where [sic] your confident has gone?

My performance on this task was: 1 2 ③ 4 5

Comments on the insult dialogs:

It was difficult for me to think about the situations.

Also, everyone including me should have expressed more exaggerated.

Clear reflection was evident on the part of both students. While S1 displayed a great deal of confidence in her performance of this exercise, it is apparent that S2 felt he was less successful with the task. Nevertheless, he actually expressed an important point regarding all of the learners in the situation. He felt they needed to be conversing with clearer and stronger emotions. This may not seem important, on the surface, but the fact that he was able to identify what made him less successful than he had hoped gives him some tools for improvement in future exercises. As this is the one group that also was assigned to the same instructor for a second semester, now a speaking class, it is possible to observe an increase in confidence and overall improvement in self-expression with S2.

Student feedback covered a variety of topics with many mentioning that there was an abundance of homework. Most students also commented, at the same time, that they had lots of opportunities to interact with one another and were exposed to a wide range of language. It was also gratifying to note that students actually took it upon themselves to employ a variety of colloquial expressions to describe their experiences.

Wednesday Listening Group

Excerpt 3

PechaKucha Project, S3.

Comments on the PechaKucha project: *It was very difficult for me to talk according [sic] to twelve seconds, but I crushed it. This project was very exciting.*

Excerpt 4

Comments on the PechaKucha Project, S4

I got nervous and I sometimes fluffed my lines.

The following two excerpts show overall reflection in both of the listening classes. Students were aware of self-improvement. This is also rewarding. Despite the fact that the course is called “Advanced,” the students are probably high intermediate. Nonetheless, English classes are often frustrating for non-beginners, as they fail to see themselves progress. The wide variety of experiences in this flipped class gave students a chance to see changes in their ability to comprehend and use the language.

Tuesday Listening Group

Excerpt 5

General comments about your experience in this class, S5

First I thought your English was so fast and I couldn't understand what you said, but now I have a good skill to listen to English. Thank you.

Wednesday Listening Group

Excerpt 6

General comments about your experience in this class, S6

There were many chances to talk in English with many people. So, I think that our English [sic] were improved very much. I also try to study English harder from now.

Advantages of the Dual Environments

By organizing these parallel learning environments the instructor was able to

- 1) transform large chunks of the textbook into outside assignments leaving room for a variety of three dimensional activities.
- 2) shift the focus of the lessons from *What?* to *How? Why?*
- 3) encourage Deliberate Practice.
- 4) incorporate both the human and material resources of the English language center.
- 5) connect with the students and have them connect with one another.
- 6) spend time on broadening their horizons and offering them a new window on English.

As explained and illustrated, students in the 2016 spring classes were exposed to two different learning environments. They were given a number of outside assignments requiring that they develop a routine of Deliberate Practice. The theoretical framework for Deliberate Practice was developed by Ericson, Krampe and Tesch-Romer (1983). It elucidates the importance of prolonged effort in mastering skills and reaching a higher level of performance. The concept is often used to contrast the idea that skillful performance is innate. Geoffrey Colvin (2009) discusses a myriad of ideas for applying the concept to a variety of skills. To help them develop an English habit, students were guided through a form of Deliberate Practice, via the assignments they were required to submit on a frequent basis to Moodle. While the Moodle tasks were highly prescribed, their use of the online materials that accompanied the textbook was to be done at their own pace and their own discretion. There was also some freedom in their preparation of other outside tasks and projects. In class, they were put in groups to discuss and analyze textbook material and they were primed for projects that needed to be completed outside of class and demonstrated in the classroom.

The main objective was to offer more learning opportunities. It was predicated on the simple idea that “more is more” and students needed to have opportunities for straightforward practice. An original vocabulary exercise called “Vocabulary 54,” was used to teach 54 idiomatic, colloquial and lesser-known expressions intensively. Students were given a master list and then spent seven weeks studying 7-10 words at a time. Each list of words had some accompanying exercises. At the end of the seven weeks, the students had two activities in class. The first was a quiz bowl, the “Super Quiz 54,” using the Moodle clickers (Turning Technology audience response software) to answer 38 questions, as is done on a quiz show. The groups were divided in half on the day of the quiz, so they were either on the red or the blue team. Each question either had a blue or a red background and students were asked to click only for their color. They were given a sheet to note their answers as well, so they were able to write the answer for the other team’s questions. The correct answers were displayed and they could see how much they understood. The students learned a lot of vocabulary to describe food. Most of the questions required logic and processing, as they were not simply asked to define, but to relate and categorize concepts.. For example:

Which of the following does NOT have the OPPOSITE meaning of “fresh”?

1. stale
2. rotten
3. savory
4. rancid
5. spoiled

It was relatively easy for students to determine that the answer to this question was “savory,” which they had learned as a useful term to describe the opposite of “sweet” food. The quiz bowl was anonymous and each student was trying to challenge him/herself. While the scores for many of the questions averaged 86% or higher, the purpose of the quiz was experiential and personal. Performance on this task and scores did not affect student grades.

For part two of the quiz bowl day, students were asked to actually respond on the spot using one of the idiomatic expressions. The name of the second half of the lesson was, “Agree with me.” Students were told that they would be given an abstract situation and their job was to be the first to be able to agree with what the instructor said. Sample questions and model answers are:

Example 1:

T: Wow, you have a lot of money leftover this month.

S: Right, I’m feeling flush.

Example 2:

T: We should have used this corn soup last week.

S: Yes, it’s past its expiration date.

Having employed this technique in classes that preceded this large-scale flipped class experiment period, the instructor learned that previewing the structure of this aural/oral quiz helps students perform better. Students have gotten progressively more adept at answering the “Agree with Me” part of quiz day. Unlike a traditional final examination, this is learning and performance-oriented and only evaluated as a classroom activity. In other words, students that don’t perform well on the Moodle quiz or either do not respond before the other team, or do not know the answer for their turn during “Agree with Me,” do not lose points on their final grade. They earn credit for doing all of the exercises leading up to this, as well. Moreover, those who excelled had the opportunity to receive extra credit.

Reading Group

Agree with Me (relay race-style competition), S7

How many of your turns did you win? 2 turns

How many times did you know the answer for other people’s situations? 0 times

My overall performance was: 1 ② 3 4 5

Comments: *On the contrary, I’m not satisfied with my result of “Agree with Me” because my answers were faltering.*

S7 is a good example of a student with a strong desire to work on his English. He performed well above the class average, but he has high expectations and would like to be producing language more fluently. Teaching another course in the student’s major field, the instructor has been able to stay in touch with S7 and see his initiative continue.

Tuesday Listening Group

Agree with Me (relay race-style competition), S8

How many of your turns did you win? *3 turns*

How many times did you know the answer for other people's situations? *20 times*

My overall performance was: *5*

Comments: *It was exciting.*

S8 was a dream student. He would leave the classroom and head straight to the English Lounge to start on his online assignments for the week. He studied the vocabulary for the Super Quiz extensively, so he was very ready for part two, "Agree with Me." He understood the majority of the questions correctly in the aural/oral segment, which is very admirable.

Second Semester

In terms of the instructor's own reflection, the objective is always to achieve better results than the previous classes. Compared to the first semester textbook, *PATHWAYS 3* by Becky Tarver Chase and Kristin L. Johansenn (2012), which had a free online workbook for the students and easy access to the video material, the textbook for the second semester of the same academic year, *WORLDBLINK 2* by James R. Morgan and Nancy Douglas (2016), even more so because it was a brand new edition, did not include as high a level of online support. For this reason, the instructor began to experiment with a website called Memrise.com. The site provides programmed learning-style vocabulary practice with various groups of words submitted by members. The instructor has assigned lists with TOEIC practice words to the Speaking classes and TOEFL practice words to the Writing classes. By and large, the site has fulfilled the purpose of having students work a little bit each day. Compared to the online workbook used in the spring semester, however, it has become clear that the Memrise site doesn't offer enough variety of contexts for the new vocabulary. The instructor is looking for ways to give students more developed contexts for the words they are learning. In some cases, they have mastered the meaning, but do not understand the usage or nuance completely.

Tuesday Speaking Group, S9

Memrise Vocabulary Share

*I have full **assurance** that he is the criminal.*

The sentence is completely grammatical and the definition on the site indicates that the word is used when there is doubt involved, but the learning environment has not stressed that the nuance of "assurance" is about clearing up doubt in a positive way, so that it is unlikely someone would want to be assured that another person is a criminal.

Wednesday Speaking Group, S10

*It is important to **retain** vegetable's freshness.*

The meaning here is perfectly understandable, but the example sentence makes it sound as if someone is in charge of a vegetable's destiny, rather than the idea that we look to vegetables to act of their own volition—"It is important that vegetables retain their freshness;" or "In order to be shipped across the country, it is important for vegetables to retain their freshness."

Future Goals, Considerations and Conclusions

With large classes, one on one correction is overly cumbersome, so the instructor has created a winter vacation assignment that takes examples from a variety of tasks and asked the class to suggest revisions over Moodle, explaining what the problem might be, i.e., usage, grammar, tense, spelling, etc. One drawback to this flipped classroom model is that it ends up taking a toll on the instructor's time. While most of the tasks are not tightly monitored, the reflection form was very carefully reviewed, resulting in the fact that grading of three classes took the better part of four days. A way to be able to evaluate the groups more quickly is definitely needed.

Choosing material with good online support also looks to be a plus for this dual classroom model. Because of the shortcoming during the second semester, the instructor has begun supplementing assignments in the Speaking classes with audio games on Manythings.org. It also remains important to continue to garner detailed student feedback to determine which activities are the most useful in shaping an ongoing language-learning habit.

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