Toward a Blueprint for Online Reading Classes: Reflections on Flipping the Classroom, Collaboration, and Fluency

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Abstract

The challenges of teaching online Reading classes to Japanese university students were met with a consideration of how to best maximize the online context. To this end, a flipped classroom seemed to be a natural fit, as homework allowed students to complete learning at their own pace outside of the classroom which could be assessed to ensure concepts were correctly understood. Synchronous class time was then used to apply knowledge and skills collaboratively in small groups. Establishing and maintaining a participatory classroom culture maximized the success of such activities. In addition, although the online context presented challenges related to improving reading fluency, in-class timed reading, extensive reading logs, and book reports were moderately successful despite issues related to accountability. Furthermore, the wealth of communication and instructional tools available to facilitate online learning needed to be pared down and carefully considered in order to maintain a focus on learning language rather than learning technology.

Keywords: online classes, flipped learning, collaborative learning, reading

Introduction

Rikkyo University in Tokyo requires all freshmen to take a Reading course in the spring semester (followed by a closely related Writing course in the fall semester). Each semester is fourteen weeks, with classes meeting once per week and class sizes capped at 25 students. The goals of the Reading course are to improve reading fluency and comprehension, improve vocabulary knowledge, and develop strategic reading skills (such as previewing, skimming, scanning, inferring, and recognizing organization patterns). In addition, students are required to write summaries and short responses of reading texts (Reading and Writing Committee, 2020).

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Reading courses were conducted online for the spring 2021 semester. I taught two such classes, one with students whose TOEIC scores ranged between 280 and 479 and the other with students whose TOEIC scores ranged between 480 and 699. Furthermore, course goals were supported in my classes by Rikkyo's in-house Reading textbook, *Reading the Future* (Garside, et al., 2019), as well as a commercial textbook, *Select Readings: Pre-Intermediate* (Lee & Gunderson, 2011b) for the lower-proficiency group and *Select Readings: Intermediate* (Lee & Gunderson, 2011a) for the higher- proficiency group.

Online classes pose difficulties that face-to-face classes do not, such as connectivity issues, learning how to use various communication and instructional tools, and the lack of physicality, which can make students more hesitant to communicate. Given the unique challenges of teaching online reading classes, I cast my lessons into a principled blueprint I hoped would motivate student engagement and achievement of course objectives while minimizing the challenges of the online context for both student and instructor.

Discussion

Maximizing the Online Context and Flipping the Classroom

Learning and using a variety of communication and instructional tools can be difficult for students. Thus, as much as possible, I minimized the need to switch between different applications. Zoom was the sole real-time communication tool, and email was the sole asynchronous communication tool. I used Blackboard as the learning management system (LMS) for distributing course materials, including posting homework assignments which students completed in Google Forms. Meanwhile, Google Drive acted as the repository of regular student assignment submissions, with each student given their own folder. However, as of this writing, there exist other, even more unified, LMSs (such as Google Classroom) that can further reduce the number of tools students need to use. In general, I have found that the number of required communication and instructional tools should be minimized as much as possible; students enrolled in language courses may view requirements to use technology as a barrier rather than an aid to language studies, so it is important to consider the best ways to use such tools.

In addition, students can become fatigued from sitting in front of their screens for long periods, which could negatively influence engagement or even health. I mitigated these negative effects by shortening class times, as university guidelines permitted assigning additional homework in lieu of using all the allotted time. As a result, a flipped classroom was a natural fit. As described by Bergmann (2012), the flipped classroom "allows the direct instruction to be asynchronous" so that "the pace of the class is appropriate for each student" (p. 62). The classroom then becomes a place in which to practice the skills and concepts that students learned outside of the classroom.

Following the flipped classroom model, each lesson's homework provided an introduction of and practice with skills and concepts later practiced in-class via collaborative activities. Each lesson's homework had two components: (1) a reading text accompanied by comprehension questions and (2) an explanation of a reading skill accompanied by comprehension questions about the skill itself and a practice activity. Although flipped classrooms are typically accomplished with video recordings, this is not always the case; in this course, Google Forms were used to guide students through relevant textbook activities. Furthermore, I prepared these Forms to give feedback on student answers; if students answered a question incorrectly, they received an explanation of the correct answer and/or were notified of where to find relevant information that could have helped them answer correctly. For example, after reading information about the skill of skimming, students were asked to answer a true/false question: "When skimming, you should read everything slowly and carefully." If students answered the question incorrectly, they would receive this feedback: "When skimming, you should NOT read everything. You want to QUICKLY learn basic information about the reading, such as the main ideas. Read the title, the first paragraph, the first sentences of some paragraphs, and the last paragraph." Likewise, if a student answered a comprehension question about the reading text incorrectly, they received feedback that instructed them to review specific lines in the text to locate the answer. This kind of assessment-centered feedback encourages students to reevaluate their misunderstandings of course materials. In sum, this homework provided students with foundational knowledge that could be acquired at their own pace and applied later in class, without requiring a substantial amount of class time to introduce a reading text or reading skill.

Encouraging Participation and Collaborative Learning

Online communication can feel impersonal when one cannot see who is speaking or who is listening, so it is important to avoid this situation in a communicative classroom. In addition, Japanese people, especially Japanese learners of English, have often been regarded as shy or unwilling to speak (Doyon, 2000; Osterman, 2014). When cameras are off, students might be even more hesitant to communicate than usual. Furthermore, students are more likely to remain motivated if they start with motivation than they are if they do not begin with it (Ushioda 2013). Because of these factors, it was important to establish a classroom culture which supported communication from the first lesson; one key focus was setting the expectation that students turn on their cameras when in small groups. This was accomplished in the first lesson by having students turn on their cameras in small groups (in some cases, with some coaxing from me), introduce themselves to a few classmates, and discuss their general reading experiences using guided discussion questions. In addition, at the end of class, they again entered small groups with their cameras on and confirmed their understanding of the contents of the first lesson together, including where to find homework and what to do for homework.

In order to maintain clear expectations of a participatory, collaborative classroom culture, each lesson began with a brief reminder for students to be prepared to turn on their cameras and microphones and have their textbooks ready. As Hrastinski (2009) argues, "If we want to enhance online learning, we need to enhance online learner participation" (p. 78). In addition, every lesson had a consistent structure that made it easier for students to focus on the content of lessons rather than the structure of lessons. First, I provided a very brief review of the reading skill from their homework to ensure that students understood the skill they were about to practice, and this review also provided enough information that students could complete the practice activity even if they had neglected to do the homework. Then students completed a collaborative practice activity to apply the reading skill in small groups. Given the burdens of taking online classes in a foreign language, it is important to maximize the outcomes of students' cognitive processing when practicing and mastering L2 skills. Flipping the classroom can achieve this by giving students opportunities to apply, rather than learn, skills in class. For example, students completed homework which introduced them to and gave them practice paraphrasing. In class, each group was given a short paragraph to paraphrase. After a few minutes, each group was responsible for presenting their paraphrase to the rest of the class. Rather than working to understand the skill and how to apply it during class time, they were able to focus largely on the application of the skill.

In the next stage of the lesson, students collaborated to improve their understanding of the reading text they had answered comprehension questions about for homework. First, students connected the topic to their prior knowledge using general discussion questions. For example, in one lesson, students had completed a reading text about a man who predicts that technology will allow him to live forever (Lee & Gunderson, 2011b, p. 73-74). Using a textbook activity, students first connected their experiences to the topic by discussing things they do to be healthy (p. 72). After that, they used a collaborative comprehension activity that stimulated critical thinking about the reading; they agreed or disagreed with the man's predictions about the future and then discussed their own opinions about the future (p. 76). In most cases, textbook activities fulfilled these criteria of helping students to connect to the topic and promoting critical analysis of the text, but I occasionally made substitutions when the textbook's activities did not meet these criteria.

Having been introduced to reading skills at a pace of one per week during lessons two through twelve, students completed homework to review reading skills before lesson thirteen, the penultimate

lesson. Using the results of this homework to target feedback, I then provided a brief review of all the skills before students participated in a collaborative review activity where they applied the skills to complete a practice final exam. Afterward, I was able to use this assessment to provide feedback on areas for improvement before the end of class. Before lesson fourteen, the final lesson, students again completed homework to review reading skills. Then, in the final lesson, I used the results of the homework to provide a final brief review before students individually completed a final exam that required using all the reading skills. The frequent and instantaneous assessment provided by this system, as well as peer collaboration and teacher feedback, ensured that students had a clear understanding of the reading skills before their final assessment.

Overall, these strategies of flipping learning and encouraging participation resulted in a high level of student participation. While students were collaborating on completing their tasks (in their Zoom breakout rooms), I would check in on each group, and I rarely found students disengaged. My formal and informal course assessments support what other studies have found—that collaborative learning in online courses benefits learning outcomes (Fredericksen et al., 2000; Hiltz et al., 2000). Working together in groups with clear task-oriented goals meant that learners had many opportunities to apply skills, synthesize knowledge, and think critically. Furthermore, given the amount of synchronous collaboration, students had opportunities to develop learner communities. Despite the course's lack of physicality, I noticed that students often held one another socially accountable for their learning; they asked each other for help when needed and checked that everyone in their group had achieved the same level of understanding when completing a task.

Promoting Reading Fluency

Another aim of the course was to improve reading fluency. Timed reading was one activity used for this purpose. Having had many opportunities to understand the lesson's reading text, both individually before the lesson and collaboratively during the lesson, a timed reading exercise concluded each lesson. During this phase of the lesson, students were encouraged to re-read the text as quickly as possible to improve reading speed. Nation (2005) suggests that effective speed reading texts should have easy content but that repeated reading "can be used with material that has some difficulties for the reader" (p. 28). As the reading texts in our textbooks sometimes included difficult content, the before-class and during-class comprehension activities attempted to compensate for these difficulties. By the time students completed the timed reading activity, they had read the text at least twice for meaning. Nation (2005) also notes that a focus on meaning is important in fluency activities, and he suggests having students answer comprehension questions afterward to ensure this focus. However, as this exercise was implemented, the activities preceding the timed reading were meaning-focused, but there were no additional comprehension tests after the timed reading; this may be a weakness of this exercise's implementation. In addition, Nation (2005) further suggests noting reading times on a chart to track reading speed and develop goals of reading faster each time. In our course, times were tracked on a chart for each text, but each text was only timed once. Thus, after students inputted their reading time into a spreadsheet, a graph was automatically updated that showed their progression of reading speed across texts. A weakness of this approach was that students could not see a clear increase in reading speed for each text despite typically seeing a clear increase in reading speed across texts. Finally, I reviewed these charts regularly so that when students had very low reading speeds or were not improving their reading speeds, I had the opportunity to intervene.

Another fluency aspect of the course was extensive reading, which helps students improve their reading speed and "gain meaning-focused input," such as new vocabulary items from context (Nation, 2005, p. 31). It might also help students find enjoyment in learning English and improve their cultural knowledge of English-speaking countries and literature. The approach I took toward extensive reading was based on Day and Bamford's (2002) ten principles for teaching extensive reading. In sum, learners should choose from various easy and enjoyable reading materials and try to read as much as possible as quickly as possible. Day and Bamford also note that it is important to orient students to the concept of extensive reading by showing students how to access appropriately-leveled reading materials, encouraging them to choose materials they are interested in, and emphasizing that they read quickly without using a dictionary, even if they achieve less than 100% understanding. Thus, in the first lesson, I explained the concepts of extensive reading, instructed students to complete an online test to determine which level of graded reader they should choose, and guided students through the process of checking out appropriate books from the University's online e-book library.

These extensive reading concepts were then reiterated throughout the semester through regular check-ins on extensive reading progress. To ensure that students were on track with extensive reading goals and to encourage accountability, students were required to track their approximate word count in a reading log and write very short (a minimum of 60 words for the lower-proficiency group and 80 words for the higher-proficiency group) weekly entries about their extensive reading experiences. When students lacked entries, I initiated an email exchange to ensure they understood what to do and where to find reading materials. In some cases, students found their chosen books to be too difficult, and I encouraged them to seek easier graded readers. In other cases, students were uncertain whether they should continue reading a book that they found unenjoyable, and I assured them that they should discontinue reading it and find another book—one that was enjoyable. These journal entries were intended to be easy writing assignments that encouraged both reading and reflecting on the experience of reading. However, journal entries did not guarantee that students did the required reading; it was possible to write entries after merely skimming or reading a summary elsewhere. In addition, in course evaluations, some students commented that they did not enjoy writing these journal entries, thus putting accountability at odds with enjoyability and undermining the purpose of extensive reading. It might be possible to better balance the benefits of the reading journal with the work it requires by reducing the required length of each entry.

Another method of ensuring accountability was also employed in the form of regular written book reports in which students summarized their extensive reading experiences and gave opinions about what they had read. After completing each book report, students had small group discussions in class to share their opinions about the books they had read and make recommendations to each other based on their experiences. Book reports alone might be enough to extrinsically motivate students to complete extensive reading, and additionally, book reports and subsequent in-class discussions may also help students perceive extensive reading "as its own reward" (Day & Bamford, 2002, p. 138) because they can fully complete an experience of reading a book before writing about it, rather than being concerned with pressures of writing weekly journal entries.

Ensuring that students complete extensive reading assignments is always a challenge. Without a way to accurately track whether students completed the required amount of reading, it is impossible to know for certain whether students actually completed the reading. In a face-to-face course, students could be monitored during a designated period of in-class extensive reading, but such

monitoring would be difficult online. Despite issues with accountability, extensive reading is a valuable activity for students, so instructors should strive to minimize any barriers which prevent students from doing it.

Conclusion

Overall, I believe this lesson style to be conducive to achieving the intended goals of the course. Based on my experience evaluating their homework and in-class interactions, students were engaged in the course. In terms of the reading skills and texts, the time they spent preparing for class clearly complemented the time they spent working together in class. Outside of class, assessments provided automatic feedback to help students reevaluate most misunderstandings at their own pace. In addition, I was able to use the wealth of assessment data to judge when and how to make effective interventions.

Although my online Reading course was based on principled approaches, there remains room for improvement. One downside of this style is that students needed to be somewhat autonomous with goal setting, homework task completion, and time management. There were instances of students who failed to complete preparation tasks or who failed to adequately manage their time when completing long-term extensive reading tasks. In addition, although I integrated as many accountability checks as I could reasonably conceive of without overburdening students, accountability remained an issue in some cases, such as with extensive reading. However, many of these difficulties are not unique to online contexts.

In terms of the online context specifically, if I were to teach this course again in a similar way, I would make a few alterations. First, as educational technology continues to improve, I would attempt to reduce the number of communication tools, instructional tools, and LMSs used, with the intention of reducing students' burden of learning how to use these tools instead of learning the language itself. For instance, I would replace Blackboard and Google Drive with Google Classroom, as it largely combines the features of these two tools into a single LMS. Second, in terms of promoting reading speed, it might be worth having students read the same texts multiple times across longer spans of time, such as in a subsequent class. This would have the additional benefit of allowing better progress tracking for intervention purposes. In terms of extensive reading, I would attempt to improve accountability methods to make them both more reliable and less cumbersome for students; given the online context, one especially suitable option would be to use an LMS designed specifically for extensive reading, such as XReading. Finally, I would attempt to foster a greater sense of community and metacognitive reflection by providing students with more time for open-ended discussion questions about their overall course progress and goals during small group warm-up or closing discussions.

Given the increase in the number of online classes due to COVID-19, as well as a general trend of technology increasingly being used in education, it is important to consider how to best design courses to maximize student learning outcomes without burdening students with the technology itself. Online classes will likely continue to play an important role in education, and by carefully considering how they are structured and how technology is implemented, I believe that they can effectively motivate students to learn for themselves and to learn collaboratively.

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Appendix 1: Overview of Online Reading Course Classroom Procedures

Lesson 1
- Establish Participatory Classroom Culture
- Small Groups: Discuss General Reading Experiences
- How to Use Online Instructional Tools
- How to Do Extensive Reading
- Small Groups: Confirm Understanding of Online Instructional Tools and Homework

Lessons 2-12
- Reminder to Maintain Participatory Classroom Culture
- Check-in about Classroom Matters (As Needed–Extensive Reading, etc.)
- Brief Homework Feedback: Reading Skills
- Brief Reading Skill Introduction
- Small Groups: Reading Skill Practice
- Wrap-up & Feedback
- Small Groups: Connect Prior Knowledge to the Reading Text
- Wrap-up & Feedback
- Small Groups: Analysis and Discussion of the Reading Text
- Wrap-up & Feedback
- Individual: Timed Reading of the Reading Text

Lesson 13
- Reminder to Maintain Participatory Classroom Culture
- Homework Feedback: Reading Skills
- Reading Skills Review
- Small Groups: Reading Skills Review
- Feedback

Lesson 14
- Homework Feedback: Reading Skills
- Final Exam