

Using Flip in an English Presentation Class With Japanese University Students

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Abstract

This paper details using the website and application, Flip, in an English presentation class with Japanese university students. It was believed the tool would assist students in preparing for their presentations and also help overcome feelings of anxiety about speaking in front of their peers. The week-to-week assignments are detailed as well as interventions to maximize student engagement with the application. The use of the tool is then reflected upon, and recommendations are made for its use in future English as foreign language classes with Japanese university students.

Keywords: flip, EFL speaking, presentation skills, technology assisted language learning

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for technology in education has become useful and essential. One such tool that has grown in popularity is Flip (formerly Flipgrid). Flip is a website and downloadable application that can be used on a number of devices, including smartphones and computers. The main function is to record videos. This may therefore serve as a useful tool in foreign language learning as students can practice their speaking skills. In Japan, opportunities to practice English as a foreign language (EFL) are often restricted by a largely monocultural environment. This was further restricted by the closing of borders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) had introduced reforms in EFL education shifting toward a more active, communicative approach, which focused on enhancing students' communication skills (MEXT, 2014). Central to these communication skills is enhancing speaking fluency and confidence. Anxiety has been shown to be prevalent in foreign language learners as noted by Horwitz et. al. (1986), "any performance in the L2 is likely to challenge an individual's self-concept as a competent communicator and lead to reticence, self-consciousness, fear, or even panic" (p.128 as referenced in Ohata, 2005). In particular, Japanese EFL learners have been shown to be reticent to communicate and anxious about speaking English in front of their peers (King, 2013). A number of factors may influence this reticence to speak English, such as cultural norms, a lack of opportunities in school English classes as well as sensitivity to embarrassing themselves in front of their peers (Humphries, Burns & Tanaka, 2015). In this project, the application Flip was utilized in an English presentation class at a Japanese university, with the aim of lessening student anxiety about speaking English in front of their peers and assisting students in preparing for their in-class presentations.

Literature Review

The application Flip was used in this project as a number of previous studies have indicated positive results in utilizing this application to aid students' speaking skills. For example, McClure &

McAndrews (2016) found that Flip improved American university students' public speaking skills. Mango (2019) also showed that American students learning Arabic found Flip to be a valuable tool in improving their listening and speaking skills. In an EFL context, McLain (2018) reported that South Korean students felt more comfortable speaking English after a semester using Flip. In a study exploring student perceptions of Flip in online courses, Lowenthal & Moore (2021) found that students generally liked using the application, but some students commented that they did not feel comfortable recording themselves. In particular, students noted that they had self-confidence issues about being on camera, felt they had to look presentable, or felt they were "showing too much of oneself" (Lowenthal & Moore, 2021; p.31). However, it is reasonable to assume that students with these feelings of seeing themselves on camera would have self-confidence issues before speaking in front of their peers in class. Flip may therefore present a soft entrance to giving a presentation in class as students are exposed to the feelings of nervousness that they may inevitably experience during the presentation. Prior to using Flip with Japanese EFL first-year university students, Petersen, Townsend & Onak (2020) "assumed that many of the Japanese students would be shy about their peers watching their videos" (p.173) but "an unexpected result was the overwhelming student approval of videos being watched by other classmates, both as a whole class or in small group exercises" (p.173).

Flip, therefore, presented advantages both in being used as part of an online course and as a supplement to face-to-face classes. Due to the pandemic, it was not known if classes would be online or conducted face-to-face; therefore, it was decided to use Flip as a tool in an English presentation class with Japanese first-year university students. The tool offered flexibility in assisting both online or face-to-face classes and had the potential to make students less anxious about delivering presentations to their classmates either online over web-conferencing software such as Zoom or in person in a face-to-face class.

Background Information

Flip was integrated into a first-year English presentation class at a university in Tokyo, Japan from September 2021 to January 2022. The first 3 classes of the semester were online (conducted over Zoom), and the remaining 11 (total 14 classes) were conducted face-to-face on campus. The author was the instructor of six presentation classes, and Flip was used in all classes. The course was mandatory for all first-year students, and in these six classes, students majored in a range of subjects, including Law & Politics, Tourism, Community & Human Services, Economics, Sociology, and Business. Students varied in language abilities, with TOEIC scores ranging from 280 to 700. In terms of the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR), this equates to levels A2 to B1. The textbook, *Present Yourself 2: Viewpoints 2nd Edition* (Gershon, 2015) was used in the course.

Implementation of Flip and Assignments

Prior to the first class of the semester, a group was set up for each class on Flip. In the first class, students were given the link to join the group and were shown the various functions of the tool, including how to use the website and how to download the application. As this first class was online, the instructor's screen was shared and students were able to see the process of how to add a video.

The instructor recorded an example video for the first topic, a self-introduction, and students were assigned the task of adding their self-introduction as homework. In their study with Japanese first-year university students, Petersen, Townsend & Onak (2020) detailed that “students were prompted to self-evaluate their videos before uploading them and to re-record videos for the purpose of improving their English, content, accuracy, intonation and fluency” (p.173). Additionally, Alrabai (2015) found that a successful strategy for reducing speaking anxiety in EFL students was to give opportunities for self-talk before they talked in real situations in class. Students were therefore shown how to preview videos before uploading them to Flip and were encouraged to do this in order to self-evaluate their performance. Students were subsequently given homework assignments to record a video on Flip each week. Table 1 below shows the assignments for each week of the course.

Table 1
Weekly assignments on Flip

Class	Assignment
1	Self-Introduction
2	Choose first presentation topic
3	Opener and introduction of presentation
4	Practice first presentation
5	Feedback on first presentation
6	Choose second presentation topic
7	Practice stressing important words
8	Practice second presentation (with slides in background)
9	Feedback on second presentation (self/peers)
10	Feedback on second presentation (self/peers)
11	Choose final presentation topic
12	Practice final presentation (with slides in background)
13	Final presentation feedback
14	Course reflection

The tasks mainly concentrated on practicing presentations, reflecting on in-class presentations, and improving some specific presentation skills such as week three where students practiced making an interesting opener and introduction, week six where they practiced stress and intonation, and weeks eight and twelve where they practiced presenting with slides in the background. A function of Flip is that it allows students to set their screen as the backdrop, so students may view themselves with their presentation slides behind them, thus mimicking an in-class presentation where they would be standing in front of a screen showing presentation slides. These assignments built on in-class activities where students were introduced to and practiced various presentation skills such as controlling their voice, engaging an audience, making presentation slides, and using gestures.

Complementary Activities

In addition to activities designed to develop presentation skills, a number of activities were used in this course in an attempt to enhance the benefits of using Flip. These mainly centred on self-reflection, peer reflection, and strategy planning. It was believed that such activities would allow students to become better self-regulated learners and further improve their English speaking abilities and study skills.

Self-Reflection

Zimmerman's (2002) model of self-regulated learning includes three main phases: forethought, performance control, and self-reflection. It is important that learners become aware of their own strengths and weaknesses through reflective activities. Flip may aid learners in this regard. Firstly, Flip allows students to preview their video before uploading to the application. This enables students to self-evaluate their performance before peers or the instructor. Highly motivated students were likely to make use of this opportunity; however, students with lower motivation may not spend as much time previewing and perfecting their videos. Yet, if these learners are to improve and become more self-regulated learners, which may in turn increase their self-efficacy, it is important they engage in some self-reflection. To ensure some self-evaluation took place, even in students with lower self-motivation, students were given time in-class to reflect on their Flip videos. The following questions were displayed on the board for students to discuss:

1. What was good about your video?
2. What do you want to improve next time?

Unfortunately, it was noted that many students did not fully engage with these questions and offered only short answers such as “my video was good” and talked in very general terms. In order to realize the benefits of self-reflection, students were given more specific examples of what they could identify as a positive point or a point to improve. These were brainstormed with students and added as examples after the questions:

1. What was good about your video? (for example, speed, volume, pronunciation, changing tone, looking at the camera, using gestures, content etc.)
2. What do you want to improve? (for example, speak slower, louder, practice difficult words, change tone, look at the camera more, use more gestures, prepare more interesting answers etc.)

These examples offered students more opportunities to identify the specific points they were doing well or could improve. Self-reflection was also integrated into the Flip assignments, with students reflecting on their performance in the three in-class presentations (week 5, 9/10, and 13). As this self-reflection became a key component of the course, it is hoped that students were able to become more self-regulated learners as a result.

Peer-to-Peer Reflection

Petersen, Townsend & Onak (2020) noted that students were positive about their videos being watched by classmates, and this activity was also integrated into this course. Students were placed into groups of two or three students and asked to view their group members' videos and then reflect together by answering the following questions:

1. What was good about your group member's video?
2. What should they try to improve?

As in the self-reflection activity above, students were also given possible points to focus on, such as the speed, volume, pronunciation, changing tone, looking at the camera, using gestures, and content of the video. Flip's built-in speech recognition software offered a means for students to check the pronunciation by turning on the closed captions. Students were shown how to use this in class, but it was stressed that the auto-generated captions would not be perfect, particularly for proper nouns such as names or places. Yet, this tool offered students a useful gauge of whether their pronunciation

was problematic. Students could then identify difficult words and practice these to improve their pronunciation. In the peer-to-peer reflection, students were asked to identify any words they could not understand before turning on the closed captions. Then, they were asked to identify any words different from the captions. This peer-to-peer reflection gave students the feeling of being watched and evaluated, which was also done when they gave presentations in class. This activity also encouraged students to complete the homework assignments as they knew they would be used in the subsequent class.

Flip also allows for this peer-to-peer reflection to take place on the app as students can comment on other videos. From the first week, students were encouraged to comment on other videos to increase interaction opportunities with their classmates. However, few students did this. One reason was that many students waited until the day of the class to upload their videos. Having noted this, and to encourage more peer-to-peer reflection, the deadline for uploading videos was changed to three days before the next class from week seven. Students then had more time to watch other videos and add comments. Adding at least one comment to another video was assigned as a task from week seven. As in the reflective activity done in class, comments were initially often very shallow, such as “great” or “your video is nice”, so in week nine students were asked to reflect on this task with the following questions:

1. What kind of comments have you received?
2. What did you think when you saw these comments?
3. What kind of comments would you like to receive?

Students reflected that they enjoyed getting positive feedback, but they would like to receive more specific comments so that they knew the praise was genuine. By reflecting on the comments they received and not the comments they had made, it was believed this activity would allow students to become more aware of how they could help classmates and subsequently how classmates could help them by giving more constructive feedback in their comments.

Strategy Planning

In order to further increase engagement with Flip, students were also asked to reflect on how they used this tool. It was hoped that students could then share some tips and troubleshoot any issues as well as encourage students to develop more successful task strategies. Task strategies such as time management and organizational strategies are another key component of Zimmerman’s (2002) model of self-regulated learning. In week six, students were asked to reflect on their strategy for adding videos to Flip as well as the functions of the website or application that they had used and if they had experienced any difficulties using it. Students were then asked to plan the time they would add their next video. While students were also told to ask if they had any problems using the application, some may have been reluctant to do this, but by giving some lesson time to reflecting on how to use the tool, students were able to assist each other to become more competent users. In this lesson, students were also shown how they could add slides in the background of their videos as well as other ways they could do this, such as using PowerPoint and uploading the video. The task in week eight was to practice their presentation with the slides. At the start of lesson nine, students were asked to reflect on whether they had successfully done this and what strategy they had used. Through this task, some students were able to better understand different ways they could use Flip and its functions.

Recommendations

Based on the use of Flip in this English presentation class, it is believed the tool had a positive effect on students' English speaking skills. Firstly, it gave more opportunities outside class to actually speak English. Secondly, it allowed students to make use of various functions such as the in-built speak recognition software, which automatically adds closed captions to videos. Students could then check mispronounced words and improve their pronunciation. Additionally, students could practice presentations in an environment closer to actually giving a presentation in-class. By recording the presentation, students have the sensation of being watched, which adds an extra dimension compared to practicing alone. Students are also able to watch themselves and edit their performance before uploading the video, which can be highly useful in identifying issues such as speaking too quietly, speaking too fast, or not changing tone. Students appeared to value the use of Flip in the course as mentioned in their course reflection videos as the final assignment. This aligns with previous studies, which showed that foreign language learners including Japanese EFL students indicated Flip can be a useful tool in improving speaking skills (Petersen, Townsend & Onak, 2020; Lowenthal & Moore, 2020; Mango, 2019). In order to maximize the benefits of using Flip, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Allow students time to share task strategies
2. Reflect on videos in class
3. Stage assignments in two phases: adding video and watching other videos

Firstly, it is important to give students opportunities to share and troubleshoot any issues they may have when using the tool. Students may be reluctant to share any difficulties they have with their instructor, but further to that, students can explore the tool together and discover various ways to make the most of its many functions. Secondly, by watching videos in class and reflecting on them, students are encouraged to add their videos each week, and they may also realize the benefits of self-reflection, an important part of self-regulated learning. Peer-to-peer reflections can also give students another perspective on their performance and further encourage task engagement. Finally, students will have more opportunities for interaction and to receive constructive criticism from their peers if the Flip assignment has two stages, add their own video and comment on other videos. These recommendations will hopefully allow students to become more self-regulated learners, more digitally competent and improving their listening and speaking skills.

Conclusion

Flip may be a useful tool for EFL instructors. It allows more interaction opportunities for students whether they are studying online or doing classes in a traditional face-to-face environment. In particular, this may be beneficial to Japanese EFL students who have limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom. The various functions of the tool make it well-suited to an English presentation class, and it is believed that the students in this course benefited from its use. More research is needed to see how the strategies utilized in this course actually affected students' speaking abilities and self-regulated learning, but it would seem that integrating Flip into an EFL course could provide many benefits for students, particularly if integrated with various reflection activities in the course, which allow students to engage in the process of self-regulated learning to aid their progress.

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