

Utilizing Flip to Boost Class Cohesion

Jon Mahoney

Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the impact of using the website and application, Flip, in an English discussion class with Japanese university students. Despite the passing of the COVID-19 pandemic, current research has highlighted that many Japanese university students are still reliant on wearing masks, which has a detrimental impact on their ability to communicate effectively in communicative classes, with trust, empathy, timing, and recognition all impacted unfavorably when mouths are obscured (Mahoney, 2023). It was presumed that the tool would aid students in getting to know their peers more quickly and deeply, build their confidence of speaking without wearing a mask, and help boost students' speaking fluency in English. The implementation and utilization of the app is detailed, in addition to actions taken to augment student engagement with the application. The utilization of the tool and data retrieved from the participants are then considered and reflected upon. Finally, some recommendations are made for its use in future English as foreign language classes with Japanese university students.

Keywords: *Flip, Speaking, Masks, Fluency, Technology*

Introduction

It is no small secret that facial expressions are an inherent part of the way human beings communicate. Subtle changes can be immediately detected and interpreted in minutiae by interlocutors (Mahoney, 2023). People gather information from the facial expressions of others, which helps them to predict events and situations, and prepares them to develop suitable responses to them (Mheidly et al., 2020). Students have had to quickly adapt to using their eyes and vocal tones more during the COVID-19 pandemic, with many students feeling uncomfortable to show their faces and therefore use facial expressions, with these behaviors having negative consequences on effective communication such as loss of nuance and inability to form close bonds (Mahoney, 2023). Educators may have been wondering how to get students to relax and feel confident to show their faces again. Technology provides Japanese university students with instantaneous access to a vast amount of information and resources, whilst

furnishing the opportunity to share their ideas on topics and to get to know their classmates more deeply, and the chance to develop their critical thinking skills (Mahoney, 2021, 2022). Millions of videos are posted on SNS every day. This realization prompted the author to utilize the application Flip, (formerly known as Flipgrid) which is a platform where students can primarily post videos, to boost students' confidence in speaking without a mask, and to furnish positive relations between them.

A total of 131 students took part in the study at a private University in Tokyo, Japan. All the students were participating in the discussion module, a 14-week course with the primary goal of having students discuss pertinent topics using a range of marked language skills. It is necessary for instructors to encourage utmost verbal output from students and to assist in constructing balanced and interactive discussions in English with their peers (Hurling, 2012). Each class consists of 10–11 students, with each member placed into classes with other members with a similar English competence. Of the 12 participating classes, 3 were level 1 (TOEIC scores of over 680), 4 were level 2 (TOEIC scores of 480–679), and 5 were level 3 (TOEIC scores of 280–479). Ideally, 12- and 16-minute discussions take place in each lesson, and should be balanced, interactive and co-constructed by all participants, with varying viewpoints.

After taking a weekly reading quiz at the start of each discussion class, students then participate in a weekly 3-2-1 fluency activity. This activity is a modified version of Nation's (1989) 4-3-2, in which participants speak about a topic three times, with a different interlocutor each time. Participants are required to repeat the same ideas with each interlocutor. The amount of time given is reduced each time, from initially 3-minutes, down to 1-minute in the final speaking turn, therefore requiring the speaker to speak faster and faster. Several studies support this activity as a means of boosting fluency, (see de Jong & Perfetti, 2011; Thai & Boers, 2016). However, from the author's previous experience, students have often gotten stuck or felt stressed during this activity due to a variety of reasons such as a lack of preparation and confidence, and a lack of knowledge about the topic. Japanese students also tend to place great emphasis on speaking with exactness and perfection, which can have a detrimental impact on their fluency (Watanabe & Long III, 2019). The topics of the fluency questions are directly related to the topic of the discussion class in that lesson. Students are required to read a passage about the topic, for example, "Social Media" and then answer comprehension questions about the passage at the start of each class. The students are given three minutes to complete the quiz, which then directly leads into the 3-2-1 activity. The three questions are closely related to the reading, with the final question always being: "Share three interesting ideas or facts from the reading."

The weekly homework set by the author was for the participants to record a 3-minute video on Flip to their answers to the three fluency questions that they would discuss in their next class. This task was in conjunction with the task of reading the passage in preparation for the quiz at the start of each class.

Literature Review

The application used in this study, Flip, is a free platform created for educational purposes, with the intention of allowing students to post video responses to teacher questions (MacIsaac, 2020). Similarly, to threaded discussion forums, Flip generates threaded comments and facilitates short video replies between students (Lowenthal & Moore, 2020). There have been several recent studies that have advocated Flip's implementation in EFL classes. Tuyet and Khang (2020) examined the use of Flip with 60 tenth grade students in Vietnam. Students reported various advantages of Flip, such as reduced anxiety about speaking in English, increased engagement, and optimism in learning English. Another study overseen by Keiper et al. (2020) was conducted with ten undergraduate and graduate business education courses. Participants reported that Flip was useful and helpful for them, with many highlighting that it was fun and engaging to see their classmates on video and to interact with them in discussions about their weekly classes. Others mentioned that they felt shy at first but gained confidence gradually using the platform, making the class more interesting. Some disadvantages mentioned included a 2-minute time-limit for videos and that the website was sometimes slow uploading videos.

Feelings of increased confidence in speaking English were also reported by McLain (2018) due to increased speaking time between classes. Since Flip usage is asynchronous and allows students to participate comfortably at a place and at a time of their choosing, it has been reported that this has had a positive impact on students' connectedness in online classes and boosted their cognitive and social presence by using video replies and discussions (Bartlett, 2018; Lowenthal & Moore, 2020; Serembus & Murphy, 2020), and has had a positive impact on students' engagement, feelings of community and connection (Delmas & Moore, 2019; Holbeck & Hartman, 2018).

Positive findings about Flip have also been reported in a Japanese university context. Petersen et al. (2020) detailed very favorable student feedback of their videos being watched by their classmates, after previously assuming that students would be hesitant to participate in such an activity. In addition, Roarty (2023) has advocated its usage with Japanese university students and argued that it "may be beneficial to Japanese EFL students who have limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom" (p. 6).

As can be seen from the results of several studies, Flip would appear to be a useful platform for online learning. Discussion across language classes can be allocated smoothly by using Flip, and it has the potential to improve speaking time, pronunciation, and cooperation between students.

Procedure

The Flip application was introduced to students in the first class of the term. The author

showed the students a video about how to use the application and helped students' setup their accounts. The author then logged into his own Flip account in class on his smartphone and on the classroom PC, showing how to record and post videos with either appliance. The students' reaction to the introduction of this application was mostly excitement, with some hesitation mixed in. It was explained to students that Flip videos would be 10% of their overall grade, and that it would be weekly homework. Students were advised to record the videos in a quiet place and to take off their masks when recording. The author advised the students that it was important for them to get used to showing their faces to each other again, as this is an important part of communication.

Class Participation

In the 12 classes that participated in this study ($n = 131$), a total of 1561 videos were posted, which is an average of 11.9 videos per student. Since there were 14 video assignments for each student throughout the semester, most students submitted all the video assignments allocated by the author. Seven students did not complete the course, and most of those had stopped attending by week nine. Generally, the higher-level students participated more actively in these assignments. Apart from one Level 1 class which had low attendance and motivation, and in which 4 students failed, with a 58.8% submission rate for weekly video assignments, a total of 56 weekly assignments were not submitted by all students from the six other classes of levels 1 and 2, which is a submission rate of 93.75%. However, 143 weekly assignments were not completed by students in the level 3 classes for which the submission rate was 81.5%. This would suggest that higher-level students were more likely to complete the weekly homework tasks. The overall submission rate for 1820 videos throughout the semester was 85.5% (264 non-submissions).

In the first week, students were required to record two Flip videos. The first topic was "self-introductions." The author believed that this was the most important topic since students were new to university and this class. The author had noticed that in the first class only 14 students (10.6%) were not wearing masks. Mahoney (2023) has noted that masks can have a detrimental effect on students' ability to form relationships and communicate with each other. Therefore, having students submit a self-introduction in which they were required to not wear a mask was an important step for students to be able to bond. The author explained the importance of not being reliant on masks and the importance of showing facial expressions in communication. The author submitted an example self-introduction video, which was 1-minute 30 seconds in length, and all students were instructed to do the same before the next class. Only 3 students (2.2%) did not complete the self-introduction video task. In these videos, students comfortably introduced themselves in English within the set timeframe. Most students smiled throughout their videos, with almost all students smiling at some point.

The author advised students to comment on their classmates' videos and to ask questions

to get to know each other better. Roarty (2023) has argued that adding complementary tasks to the video assignments can lead to elevated self-reflection and self-regulation. The author also responded to the self-introductions with a simple comment or question for each student to boost their motivation and to indicate that their videos had been reviewed. In total, 318 comments were made by students about the self-introduction topic, which was an average of 2.6 comments per student. It can be noted that when the author failed to initiate and comment on three classes' videos, the students did not comment either, with a total of just 6 comments from those 3 classes, which is an average of 0.2 comments per student. Students were also required to record a 3-minute video answering the first textbook fluency questions on page 8 of the textbook, which was related to the first textbook lesson topic "The Importance of Communication", with the questions revolving around participants talking about their friends. Eight students did not complete the first fluency video (6.6%). This could be attributed to the fact that students had not practiced any fluency activities in-class yet and speaking for 3-minutes may have been a daunting prospect for them. Also, perhaps students were overwhelmed with the prospect of making two videos as the first homework. Upon watching the first fluency question videos made by students, it was clear that it was difficult for them to keep talking for 3-minutes about specific questions, as there were some long pauses.

In the following week, nine students (6.8%) did not complete the second textbook topic "Entering University." Between weeks 4–10, an average of 10.1% students ($n = 71$) did not complete the weekly video assignments, but between weeks 11–14, this had jumped up to 32.2% ($n = 129$). This pattern would seem to suggest that for several classes the novelty of making videos wore off. The final week's video topic, in which students were asked to share their experience of first year at university, had the lowest reply rate, with 32.5% of students ($n = 42$) not replying. Another possible reason why the submission rate declined in the latter part of the semester is that the textbook topics became progressively more challenging. In the early part of the semester topics such as "The Importance of Communication" and "Entering University" were undemanding for students to talk about, but latter topics such as "Public Behavior" and "Social Issues" required more thought, lexical knowledge, and background research from students before answering.

Findings

Advantages

In the final class of the term, students were asked to complete a Google Form, in which the final question was open-ended asking students to leave any positive or negative comments about using Flip. A total of 15 different advantages were identified by the students. The most common advantage given was that seeing their classmates' faces on Flip had various benefits such as helping students to remember their classmates' faces, helping to create a stronger bond in class, feeling more relaxed in class, and gaining confidence in speaking without a mask

(17 comments), supporting findings by Keiper et al. (2020) and Petersen et al. (2020). The second most popular advantage given (15 comments) was that Flip was good preparation for the discussion class, such as learning about the topic and being ready for the class quiz about the reading. The third most common advantage (12 comments) was that the students felt that their speaking and vocabulary skills had improved, giving credence to conclusions made by McLain (2018). Two further prominent advantages given were that it was useful to hear everyone's opinions before class (9 comments), and that the platform was easy to use (8 comments). Some of the positive comments made are show below:

- *It was good to get to know the faces without masks from the beginning while everyone else was wearing masks at the beginning of April, which made me feel closer to them.*
- *I think that because I was able to see them without their masks, I was able to get to know them faster than in other classes. It was great for me personally to see my friends' faces from the very beginning of the class, and it made me feel safe.*
- *Flipgrid was a very good application. We became good friends. I enjoyed this class through Flipgrid.*
- *I became confident when I could speak alone for three minutes. At first, it was a little difficult to make a video showing my face.*
- *Flipgrid helped me to remember classmates' names, faces, and their profiles, so I could understand them more and become closer, faster than usual.*
- *I liked being able to see my classmates' faces, which made me feel more familiar with them, and studying for the reading test at the same time.*
- *It was easy for us to understand each other and open up to each other by showing our unmasked faces. It was good to get a chance to use English outside of class.*

Disadvantages

A total of seven different disadvantages were indicated on the one Google Form open-ended question and final class discussion. The most common disadvantage given (17 students) was that it took time to make and post the videos. The second most common disadvantage was that it was difficult to find a quiet place to make the videos (8 students). Another notable disadvantage was that it was difficult to make the videos and make comments. It has also been reported by Keiper et al. (2020) that students had difficulty finding the time and making the videos. Below are some of the negative comments made:

- *It was difficult to do it every week because it took time to take the video.*
- *Some days I was tired and sometimes I didn't have the motivation to do it.*
- *I had to go somewhere quiet.*
- *It was difficult to find a quiet place during the day, so I had to stay late at night.*

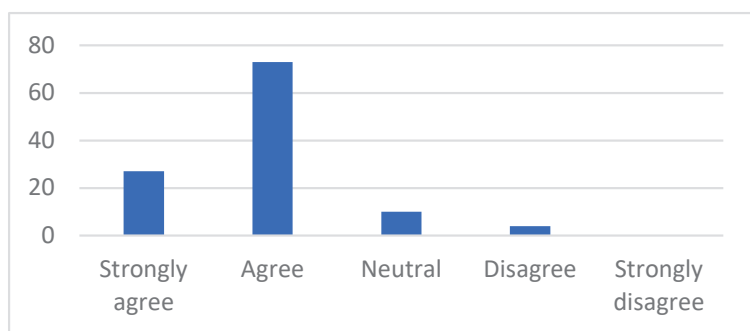
- *It was good to have more opportunities to experience English. However, it took a long time to upload the file, which was frustrating.*

A series of statements were presented to students at the end of term to gather their experiences of using Flip. Questions were specified to how Flip impacted on their English skills, and how it affected their ability to get to know their classmates better. The results garnered suggest that Flip had an overwhelmingly positive impact on class cohesion and students' English-speaking proficiency. A few examples are available here.

As can be seen in the first question below, students strongly indicated that Flip was useful for them in becoming more fluent and confident in English. 87.7% (n = 100) agreed with this statement. Only 3.5% (n = 4) displayed disagreement, therefore giving credence to findings by Roarty (2023), McLain (2018) and Tuyet and Khang (2020).

Figure 1

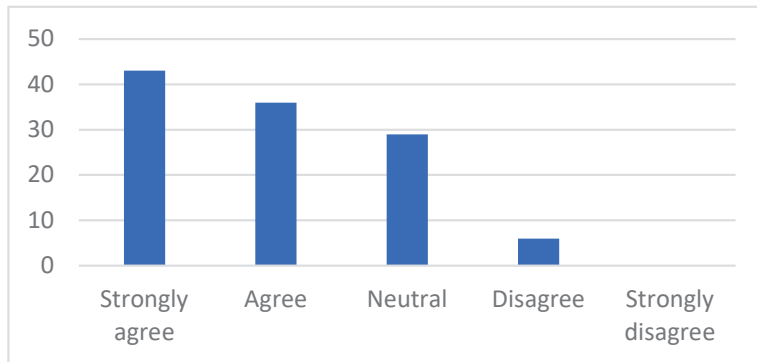
Flip Was Useful in Helping Me Become More Fluent and Confident in English



The second question posed to students also produced similar findings. 69.3% (n = 79) of students agreed with the statement that seeing their classmates' faces on Flip helped them to get to know them better. These findings correlate with comments from the qualitative question in which many students mentioned that seeing their classmates' faces in the early weeks of the semester helped them to feel closer to them faster, which has been described by Mahoney (2023).

Figure 2

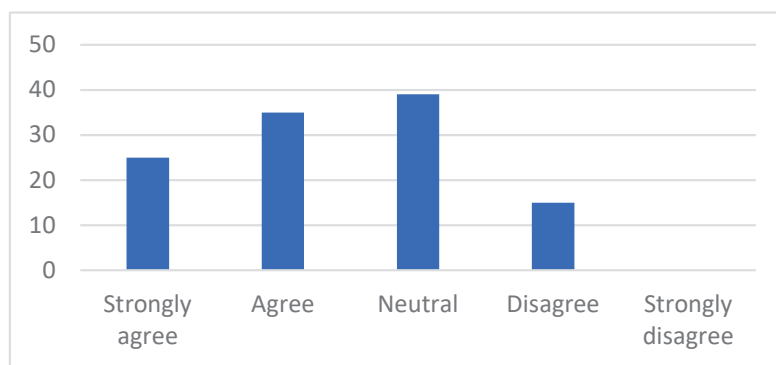
Seeing My Classmates' Faces on Flip Helped Me to Get to Know Them Better



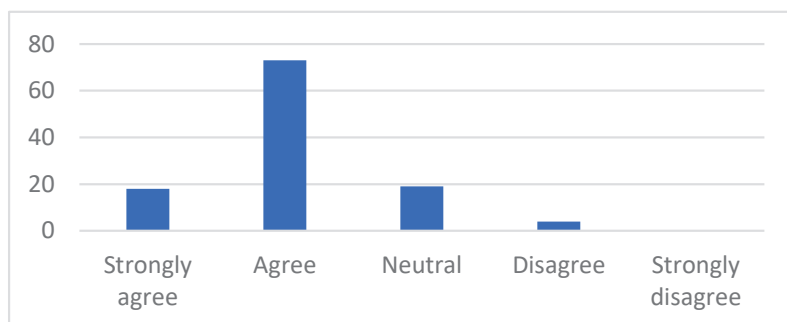
Just over half of the participants, 52.6% (n = 60) agreed with the statement that seeing their classmates' faces motivated them to participate more in the discussion classes. 34.2% (n = 39) gave a neutral response, with 13.2% (n = 15) disagreeing. These findings suggest that the usage of Flip did have a positive impact on motivation for the majority of students.

Figure 3

Seeing My Classmates' Faces on Flip Motivated Me to Participate More in Discussion Class



It is clear from the results of the question below that students were able to understand each other well on Flip. 79.8% (n = 91) agreed that it was easy to understand their classmates' ideas on the platform, with just 3.5% (n = 4) disagreeing. Since many students reported that seeing their classmates faces early in the semester had a positive impact, it could be argued that the self-introduction videos played a pivotal role in that students could easily listen to their classmates' introductions and remember important information and details about them.

Figure 4*I Could Understand My Classmates' Ideas Easily on Flip*

There were five identical statements poised to students using Likert scale statements ranging from 5–1 in agreement at the start and end of term surveys. We can see a comparison of students' replies from the start and end of term in table 1 below. The overall results indicate that students' perceptions of wanting to see their classmates' faces had altered during the semester.

In the responses given to questions one and two below: "I want to see my classmates' faces when we are talking" and "Seeing people's smiles makes me motivated to speak," we can see that students have agreed much more strongly with these statements at the end of term. Many students alluded to the fact that seeing their classmates' faces on Flip helped them to open up more quickly, feel familiar with each other and remember each other's names. Since all students did not wear masks in their videos, and almost all of them smiled in their self-introduction videos at some point, the author believes that this was a powerful factor in the results yielded.

In the responses to questions three and four below: "It is easier to get to know people not wearing a mask" and "I trust people when I can see their whole face," we can see that students also tended to agree more strongly with these statements at the end of term. Considering that students had been wearing masks for around three years consecutively prior to this research, it could be said that their perceptions had changed in the 14 weeks of this class. Seeing as one student mentioned that seeing their classmates' faces on Flip made them feel "safe," it could be said that using Flip made students feel more comfortable with each other more quickly than usual.

In the final question below: "Wearing a mask hinders my ability to communicate," we can also see that students' dependency on their masks was starting to diminish. Since the rate of mask wearing had dropped from 90% at the start of term to around 60% at the end, this could be argued to be a factor in this divergence.

Table 1
Student Perceptions of Using Flip (1–5 point scale)

		5	4	3	2	1	Mean
To what degree do you agree:		[Strongly Agree ----- Strongly Disagree]					
1. I want to see my classmates' faces when we are talking	ST:	(18) 14.3%	(43) 34.1%	(49) 38.9%	(10) 7.9%	(6) 4.8%	3.46
	ET:	(31) 27.2%	(47) 41.2%	(31) 27.2%	(5) 4.4%	(0) 0.0%	3.91
2. Seeing people's smiles and facial expressions motivates me to speak	ST:	(48) 38.1%	(52) 41.3%	(19) 15.1%	(5) 4.0%	(2) 1.6%	4.10
	ET:	(53) 46.5%	(48) 42.1%	(12) 10.5%	(1) 0.9%	(0) 0.0%	4.34
3. It is easier to get to know people not wearing a mask	ST:	(26) 20.6%	(54) 42.9%	(30) 23.8%	(12) 9.5%	(4) 3.2%	3.68
	ET:	(30) 26.3%	(43) 37.7%	(23) 20.2%	(14) 12.3%	(4) 3.5%	3.70
4. I trust people more when I see their whole face	ST:	(18) 14.3%	(59) 46.8%	(32) 25.4%	(15) 11.9%	(2) 1.6%	3.60
	ET:	(30) 26.3%	(45) 39.5%	(27) 23.7%	(10) 8.8%	(2) 1.8%	3.79
5. Wearing a mask hinders my ability to communicate	ST:	(9) 7.1%	(23) 18.3%	(47) 37.3%	(42) 33.3%	(9) 7.1%	2.94
	ET:	(14) 12.3%	(34) 29.8%	(28) 24.6%	(31) 27.2%	(7) 6.1%	3.14

Note. Twelve fewer students completed the end of term survey

Note 2. (ST= Start of term) (ET=End of term)

Conclusion

The results suggest that students benefitted from using Flip. Allowing students to post videos early on in the semester so classmates could get to know each other's faces appears to have had a positive impact on class cohesion. The author believes that in the early part of the semester, students bonded more quickly than in previous semesters. Since Flip is an app and is easily accessible, the author and students could easily log in and check who had posted the week's homework assignment. Since the app also shows students' names on the screen, this helps students and educators alike in being able to remember students' names more quickly.

Having the students post their opinions about topics before class, the author believes, led to deeper understanding of the weekly textbook topics, since students were often ready to give examples and reasons about topics more quickly than in previous semesters. Similar findings have been reported by McIntyre et al. (2020) who argued that Flip could be used to increase students' depth of knowledge. Another possible benefit of Flip was that students could develop social learning, which has also been referred to by Stoszowski et al. (2021). Generally, in each class, for every topic each week a more confident student would post a video first, showing a good example for the less confident students to follow. These students usually posted from their house, spoke with enthusiasm, and gave good examples in their answers.

The in-class fluency activities throughout the semester were always active, and students were always well-prepared for them. This was in contrast to previous semesters where many students had not done any preparation and often struggled to formulate meaningful answers to the questions. Nation and Newton (2009) have mentioned that preparation activities in which students can gain familiarity with fluency topics is advantageous. The author advised the listeners to listen actively and to ask follow-up questions to the speakers.

One caveat was that lower-level students often brought their homework video notes with them to class, and simply wanted to read their answers from them in the fluency activity, like a speech, thus, leading to a negative impact on their ability to think on the spot and to them worrying too much about accuracy. Acumen was required by the author in advising these students to only look at their notes sometimes, and to shorten their answers so that the listeners could ask follow-up questions. The author also stressed that they did not have to be accurate in their in-class fluency, but just to make themselves comprehensible. Nunan (2015) has asserted the importance of providing students with opportunities to develop speaking with both accuracy and fluency. The videos gave them the former, whilst also laying the foundation for fluency skills improvement in-class with some prior knowledge and practice.

Although it was difficult for students at the outset, having them post weekly videos and getting them used to speaking without wearing a mask would appear to have been advantageous for their English speaking skills, overall communication skills and confidence, and their ability to use facial gestures. One could argue therefore that Flip is a useful tool to complement English-speaking classes and to boost class cohesion, although more research should be carried to explore the impact on students' fluency.

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