Increasing Student Communication and Spontaneous Language Use in the L2 Classroom: A Careful Consideration of the Flipped Classroom Model

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Abstract: *There is an ongoing debate among L2 educators regarding the best way for students to achieve effective communication and language spontaneity. The flipped classroom refers to an educational model where the traditional practice of dedicating class time to direct instruction is flipped so that students receive initial instruction at home and then spend class time working with peers in a collaborative environment. Language instructors hope to promote conversation and communication among students, but with so much time spent on grammatical explanations in class, it is difficult to give communication the attention it deserves. The participants in this research study included community college Spanish students from sections 1 (the control group) and 2 (the experimental group) of SPAN 101 and lasted the duration of an academic spring semester. The findings are discussed, followed by a discussion on the applicability of this educational design.*

With the ongoing paradigm shift in teaching languages with communication as the central goal (Poehner & van Compernolle, 2011; Sidek, 2012; Tamjid & Birjandi, 2011), world language educators face the challenge of meeting the needs of all students as well as the demands of accrediting bodies. This leads to a debate among instructors as to the best way for students to achieve a level of language that leads to effective communication. This article suggests the implementation of the *flipped* classroom model to attain this goal. The flipped classroom, often referred to as the inverted classroom, refers to an educational model where the traditional practice of dedicating class time to lectures is *flipped,* meaning lectures are assigned as homework and class time becomes a collaborative environment (Johnson & Renner, 2012). That is, less active pursuits are removed from the classroom so that it may become a communicative environment. For the world language classroom, students receive instruction and review grammar at home, often through interactive videos via learning management systems. Later, the classroom becomes an environment fully dedicated to communicative practice, such as role-plays, interviews, and information gap activities.

The current study employed the flipped classroom method in a community college beginning level Spanish course (the experimental group), while another section of the same course (the control group) remained traditional. During the semester, the experimental group explored all grammatical concepts and vocabulary items at home via the textbook's learning management system, *MySpanishLab*. Class time was devoted entirely to group work and peer interviews, simulation scenarios and role-plays, and other activities that promoted communication in the target language.

Importance of the Study and Research Questions Guiding It

From a personal level, the researcher was intrigued by the idea of the flipped classroom, as he had received criticism from language teachers who reported that they wanted to find a way to spend more time working on conversation and communication among students, as recommended by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages or ACTFL (1998). But with so much time spent on grammar explanations in class, according

to informed colleagues, it was difficult to devote the amount of attention that communication deserved. Furthermore, explanations were often given via projected slides, and much time was wasted while students took notes and asked for additional information. It was not uncommon in the classroom to hear students say "don't change the slide yet," "I'm still writing," or "can you go back?" This, of course, occupies a large percentage of a class session that lasts simply 50 minutes at most American colleges and in some high schools.

The concept of the flipped classroom is gaining increasing attention (Gojak, 2012; Gorman, 2012; Green, 2012; Pearson & Flipped Learning Network, 2013) for its distinct advantages: Students can see and review the material at their own pace and according to their own needs; teachers can structure class time to optimize individual attention to students; and students have the opportunity to make use of the material they are learning in an enhanced environment (Muldrow, 2013). Educators are often able to repurpose time to incorporate activities that previously did not fit due to time constraints.

Moreover, ACTFL (2010) explains that "effective language instruction must provide significant levels of meaningful communication [...] in the target language in order for students to develop language and cultural proficiency [...]. [L]anguage educators and their students [should] use the target language as exclusively as possible (90% plus)" (para 1). While world language teachers try to find a way to speak in the target language for 90% of the class session, many of them struggle to do so, especially in explaining grammatical concepts. According to Crouse (2012, p. 27), "[teachers] are running into grammar-driven settings in which the first language predominates." The flipped classroom may be the solution to this problem. With its implementation, grammar instruction takes place mostly outside of the classroom; thus, teachers do not have to face the difficult task of explaining the more difficult syntactic concepts to students in the target language.

So far, there have been very few studies regarding the use of the flipped classroom in the teaching of world languages (Dill, 2012; Egbert, Herman, & Chang, 2014). One of the only available studies is that of Dill (2012), who made her thesis available on the effects of the flipped class on her middle school French students; however, scarce L2 studies exist at the high school or college levels. Additionally, most flipped data focuses on core subjects, such as biology, mathematics, computer science, engineering, statistics, and chemistry (Bergmann & Sams, 2009; Chaplin, 2009; Gojak, 2012; Johnson & Renner, 2012; Papadapoulos & Roman, 2010). There may be several reasons for this deficiency in information: a lack of knowledge of this method of instruction within the L2 educational community, limited technical support for language teachers, and programs that follow rigid curricula.

Regardless of the reasons for this paucity of published works that explore flipped instruction in the world language classroom, anecdotal evidence (Muldrow, 2013) seems to support the idea that the flipped classroom might be a good fit for L2 students. This is due to the fact that the flipped instructional model innately contains elements of an optimal language learning environment. Learning strategies for the flipped classroom naturally align with research regarding the ideal language learning context. Through these issues, the following research questions emerge:

*What effect does the flipped classroom have on effective communication among L2 learners?

*What effect does the flipped classroom have on summative student assessments?

*What effect does the flipped classroom have on the educator's ability to speak exclusively in the target language?

Indeed, it is vital to analyze previous and current studies about the flipped classroom while applying these results to the acquisition of world languages.

Review of the Literature

The flipped classroom is a specific type of blended learning that uses technology to remove lectures from the classroom and replaces them with practical learning activities. Open-ended questions and problem solving activities can be conducted within the classroom environment thus permitting more engaged pedagogies (Kellogg, 2009; Strayer, 2012).

Anecdotal reports on flipped instruction abound on the Internet (Egbert, Herman, & Chang, 2014). From these reports, the following section outlines major components that make up a flipped classroom, per Egbert, Herman and Chang.

Videos replace direct instruction as a central component for the flipped classroom. Students are required to watch videos at home created by teachers or publishers and come to class prepared to work with the concepts they studied. During school hours, the most common component is discussion, either in small groups or with the class as a whole. Time is also spent solving problems (Bergmann & Sams, 2012), working on projects, and tackling tasks in varying ways.

While the benefits found in the literature on the flipped classroom align well with the theories of optimal learning environments for student participation (Lin, 2012), there appears to be a lack of rigorous empirical evidence. Still, there is some available theory on the use of the approach in question. For example, Lage and Platt (2000) introduced the concept of the flipped classroom in a course on economics at the college level. Students were given multiple methods to learn the most important concepts outside the classroom; students could read a textbook, view a PowerPoint presentation, or watch a video conference online. The aim was to allow students to choose the learning methodology best suited for their individual learning styles. Lage and Platt found that students enjoyed the flipped classroom more so than the traditional classroom and also performed well on their assessments.

Similarly, Marcey and Brint (2011) studied the flipped classroom at the college level. Two sections of an introductory biology course took place at the same time; one section was taught via a traditional method, with lectures given during class time. The flipped section removed reading assignments and in-class lectures. Instead, students were assigned online lectures for viewing outside of class. In class, students were divided into small groups and were involved in active learning tasks. In the end, it was discovered that the flipped section performed significantly better on all tests and examinations.

Within studies on the teaching of world languages is the research conducted by Dill (2012) who examined the effect of flipped education on student achievement and participation in a French course at a middle school. The researcher also looked at the completion of tasks, mastery of grammar, and writing proficiency. The study compared and contrasted the data with a control group where traditional teaching strategies were used. The results of the data supported the hypothesis of the author in the sense that student proficiency increased significantly with respect to the mastery of grammar and writing.

Methodology

In the spring semester of 2015, two groups of beginner students of Spanish at the terti-

ary level were chosen. The two groups represent a different section of the same subject, Spanish I. During the semester, the same content was provided in the two groups via the communicative teaching method. However, the second section of students, referred to as the experimental group, watched grammar explanations and videos online through the learning management system provided by the textbook, *MySpanishLab*, instead of receiving direct classroom instruction. Students of both groups were given two oral exams during the semester and a comprehensive final exam.

Venue

The location in which the study was conducted is a town in the Midwest of the United States. The area has about 80,000 inhabitants. The college in question has more than 5,000 students and the male-female ratio is comparable to the national average of approximately 47:53, with a predominantly female student body and with an average age of 24.9 years old. About 79% of the population is White, 7.3% is African American, and 4% is Hispanic. The college is accredited and offers degrees in 21 fields of study (US News and World Report, 2013).

Subjects

The population of the study included all beginner students of Spanish as a world language at the designated college during the spring semester of 2015. According to the administrator for the Department of Humanities, there were 57 students studying beginner Spanish during the semester in question. Consent forms to participate in the study were sent to 30 students and 27 of them participated (16 in the control group and 11 in the experimental group). According to Gutzman (2013), a population of 57 students and a sample of 27 students has a confidence rate of 90% and a margin of error of 11.5%. There was no bias in the selection of the groups. The researcher did not have access to group information when selected.

Instruments and Data Collection Procedures

Instrumentation for data collection included two oral exams (to answer Research Question 1, quantitative component), a final exam (to answer Research Question number 2; quantitative component), and an instructor journal (to answer Research Question number 3; qualitative component).

The oral exams were created by the instructor of the course and consisted of role plays with scenarios that were randomly assigned to students. Students conducted role plays with a partner in front of the teacher, although they received individual grades. Evaluation criteria were based on a point system according to the specified category. For example, to receive between 90-100 points out of 100, the student had to:
- use the grammatical concepts covered throughout the semester and incorporate them into his/her speech.
- incorporate semester vocabulary use full sentences instead of isolated words.
- use his/her imagination to develop themes.
- be enthusiastic, understandable, and avoid English.

Conversely, a student would receive between 50-64 points out of 100 for:
- failing to contribute to the conversation.
- using monosyllabic answers
- lacking enthusiasm or involvement.
- making so many grammatical errors that speech was almost incomprehensible.

An example of one possible role-play required students to find a time to meet to study for the final exam.

The final exam for the course included sections on listening, reading, and writing, and covered grammar, vocabulary, and culture. The exam was cumulative and assessed students on the present tense in all its forms, the present progressive, expressing desires using *gustar*, the basic differences between *saber* and *conocer* and *ser* and *estar*, demonstrative adjectives, and direct object pronouns.

Results and Limitations

For research methods one (oral exams) and two (final exam), an independent *t* test was used to determine whether two sets of scores were significantly different. For Research Question 1, examining the effect of this design on effective communication that corresponds to the oral exam, the following was found:

Control group: M = 78.56, SD = 26.90; experimental group: M = 72.41, SD = 30.68. According to SPSS, by conventional criteria, it is considered that this difference is not statistically significant.

For Research Question 2, investigating the effect of this design on summative assessments corresponding to the final exam, the following was found:

Control group: M = 59.31, SD = 26.09; experimental group: M = 55.64, SD = 28.71. According SPSS, by conventional criteria, it is considered that this difference is not statistically significant.

As for the daily teaching journal regarding the experimental group, the instructor found that his use of the L1 (English) was slightly reduced, that L1 use by students also subtly dropped, and that the use of the target language increased slightly among students and that students seemed more confident in using the L2 spontaneously.

Some limitations that must be taken into account include the size of the sample (27 participants) and the fact that the present research study was conducted in only two beginning Spanish college classrooms during only one academic semester.

Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

Based on the results of the present study, the author would like to suggest that the flipped classroom may produce equally positive results as a traditional classroom. This conclusion is based on that fact that there were no statistically significant differences between the control and experimental group scores in this study. Therefore, it is suggested that the flipped classroom should be considered as a viable alternative to the traditional classroom for world language classrooms.

As a viable alternative, this study cautiously suggests that the flipped classroom may indeed be superior in nature to a traditional classroom based on conclusions drawn from the instructor journal. The flipped instructional model contributes to reducing the use of the L1 among teachers who struggle to explain grammar in the target language and thus, subsequently diminish the use of the L1 between students. Likewise, the use of the L2 among

students increased, especially because there was more time for communicative activities (i.e., role plays or information gap activities), thus contributing to increased spontaneity.

In terms of educational implications, this method (the flipped classroom) may be the best method for teachers to use in study abroad programs or for teachers who are already exclusively using the L2. Beginning students often struggle to understand lessons presented in the target language and could benefit from external or tutorial videos that can be viewed several times (outside scheduled classroom time) until they grasp the material.

Generally speaking, the author recommends that L2 educators implement the flipped classroom design and compare scores with a control group or with scores from previous semesters as well as keep a journal of observations. They should ask themselves, did L2 use among students increase? Did spontaneity and risk-taking increase? Were summative scores comparable or better?

Finally, all educators who try out the flipped classroom should create accountability among students for viewing videos or other pre-class materials, such as giving students occasional pop quizzes or tying participation points to the videos. Many learning management systems allow instructors to check whether or not individual students watched videos or not.

While L2 educators are constantly trying to find the best way for students to speak more effectively and are trying to reduce the overall use of the L1 in the classroom and increase spontaneity, the flipped classroom design may be the best solution.

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