

Creating an online opportunity for longer speaking turns practice for Japanese University EFL Learners

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Abstract

It is generally accepted that the overwhelming response of Japanese University TEFL educators to COVID-19 has been to rely on the cloud-based video conferencing service ZOOM to deliver real time English oral communication lessons. While it is appreciated that a synchronous, simulated, conversational framework resembling a real classroom environment surely has its merits by providing necessary teacher contact, does this always mean that time is utilized efficiently online for the provision of extensive L2 practice for large university classes with diverse ranges of ability and motivation? An intuitive decision, formed predominantly by experience of teaching lower ability Japanese EFL learners, favored the asynchronous alternative FLIPGRID, a website used to enable video-discussions on a message board. In this way, Japanese EFL learners were given the opportunity to practice longer speech turns. In future online teaching contexts, it is anticipated that a combination of synchronous and asynchronous approaches would provide the necessary balance of motivation and opportunity to enable sufficient student L2 development.

1. Introduction - the need to go online

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has had a significant impact on society at large. In the educational context, starting in early 2020, universities and schools closed their classrooms to prevent COVID-19 infection. Consequently, teaching online using computer mediated communication (CMC) became the solution to ensure the continuance of students' education, despite many educators, including those in Japanese EFL, being unfamiliar with an online mode of teaching. ZOOM, the online video conferencing platform, very quickly became a buzzword of the times as the mainstream media utilized it to maintain social distance in the pandemic when reaching out to its pundits and commentators. Educational institutions followed suit and there seemed to be an unspoken assumption that ZOOM would also meet their needs by providing an online platform for lessons. For a while, it seemed that teaching online and ZOOM were synonymous. Moreover, it was generally expected that a teacher could just deliver educational content (i.e. teach lessons), but do it online via ZOOM instead.

It is not difficult to imagine how the transition to ZOOM for a one-way flow, lecture style approach to teaching, could be facilitated. However, the issue with ZOOM for Oral Communication EFL teachers, with the obvious communicative nature of their classes, is clearly the sufficient production of student L2 oral content denoting language practice. Furthermore, how such language production could, within the real-time parameters of a 90-minute lesson, with a large number of

students of varying levels of motivation be efficiently produced (i.e. minimizing “silent” waiting time and disruptive L1 chatter), whilst being comprehensively monitored with effective individualized feedback. To address the above mentioned conditions, it is necessary to explore the various CMC options available when considering an online educational environment. Perhaps the most influential factor, however, and one which impacts all others, is synchronicity.

2. Now or later - the question of synchronicity

Oral communication online lessons utilizing oral CMC can be classified by the degree of synchronicity into synchronous and asynchronous modes. Synchronous CMC (SCMC) occurs in real-time, face-to-face with little or no lag time and facilitates interpersonal speaking, examples include ZOOM and SKYPE. Asynchronous CMC (ACMC), on the other hand, has a long lag time and may fit a more presentational style of speaking. The longer lag time of ACMC allows more planning before any speaking occurs, whereas SCMC is more spontaneous. Crookes[1] (1989) discovered that learners who had planned what they would say produced more varied vocabulary and more complex grammatical structures as well as providing more detail. ACMC allows learners to evaluate their own performance which increases their own self-awareness of skills that need to be developed more. If necessary, the performance can then be revised and re-recorded allowing learners the benefit of showing what they consider to be their best effort. SCMC could be argued to be better for improving speaking proficiency as it is essentially face-to-face communication, but it is a difficult task for less proficient EFL learners, (Ono et al,[2] 2015). In fact, for less confident L2 speakers, ACMC may even offer a preferable option to speaking in a classroom context. According to Pop et al,[3] (2011), the factors of learners’ personality differences, learning and response rate, motivation level, and level of language proficiency which impact the ability of a student to speak in front of others in class are effectively avoided in an ACMC environment.

3. To ZOOM or not to ZOOM

As mentioned above, ZOOM, an example of SCMC, had become the almost go-to solution for online teaching. With any teaching method or approach, the context in which it will be used is paramount. Knowing the generally lower ability level with its often accompanying low motivation of the students at the university in question, ZOOM, it was decided, would not be a long term (whole semester, at any rate) solution. And “long term” is the key point here. At first it would be a novelty for students (and teachers) alike, but after the second, and third lesson, and on to the end of the semester what would be happening? Low confidence in ZOOM was fueled by the prevailing anecdotal warnings from other teacher acquaintances: reports of students not turning on their cameras, looking at smartphones through each session, and the big no-no in any oral communication class, using L1 (in this case, Japanese), when in ZOOM breakout rooms away from the eyes and ears of the teacher. Taking into consideration the teaching context at hand, it was decided that ZOOM would be a mediocre solution if an efficient use of L2 speaking time and clear

feedback was hoped for. An alternative tech solution which was easy, fun and attractive to use with which students could practice their English in an efficient way was therefore required.

4. FLIPGRID - an ACMC alternative to ZOOM

FLIPGRID is a website for teachers to create "grids" or message boards on which tasks are set up for students to post video responses that appear in a tiled grid-like display.

The grids are then shared with a class, and can hold an unlimited number of topics with each topic supporting any number of responses. Topics can be text-based or include varied visual resources such as photos, videos, Giphy, emoji, or other attachments. Student privacy is protected by customizable security settings.

Students respond to tasks directly via the FLIPGRID app or website with any mobile or tablet device camera, or by uploading a previously recorded video. Student responses vary in length between 15 seconds to five minutes, depending on the maximum time set by the teacher to complete the task appropriately. Students can also record replies/responses to classmates' videos. Each "Grid" can be customized with various features including feedback with the rubric set by the teacher.

5. FLIPGRID Vs ZOOM - why FLIPGRID would be better in the given context

5.1 Willingness to communicate

As already noted in Pop et al,[3] (2011) various factors exist which inhibit classroom L2 production with lower level learners. Among Japanese university students, communication apprehension exists in both Japanese and L2 (English) (McCroskey, Gudykunst and Nishida, [4]1985).

Hardworking students with high test scores are frequently believed to be reticent due to their fear of making a mistake in English in public, and in order to avoid this embarrassment favor silence instead (Matsuoka, Matsumoto, Poole,[5] 2014). This may be part of the greater Japanese educational milieu, most likely shaped by cultural beliefs originating from Confucianism and its effects on interactional behavior, which stymie students' willingness to communicate in English, (Matsuoka 2009; [6] Yashima,[7] 2002).

5.2 Longer speaking turns

When Japanese students do communicate, their utterances are often minimal and perfunctory at best. They frequently limit L2 communication to single words, sentence fragments, or maybe disjointed short sentences. Therefore, Japanese speakers of English in the EFL classroom require practice to develop spoken language at the level of text, in other words, longer speaking turns. Notably, the main factor in creating longer texts is to aim for more cohesion between sentences.

Japanese learners of English at the university level have a declarative knowledge of discourse markers and connectors, however, due to a lack of practice opportunity, they are unable to use them well in real time spoken interaction. With FLIPGRID, learners can take time to plan a longer speaking turn, with a timing requirement preset by the teacher to push learners to produce longer turns, which as already noted by Crookes, [1] (1989) is beneficial. At first this text may be written out and just read aloud, but this should only be a first step allowing learners to be acclimated to seeing themselves speaking English on FLIPGRID. Learners should be soon encouraged to speak more freely, probably with the aid of notes to guide their speaking. Typically lower ability students might write out the text in full and then highlight keywords which form the notes. Just using these notes, learners attempt to speak as smoothly and as grammatically accurately as possible. As FLIPGRID allows students to record (and importantly re-record) themselves, this serves as sufficient practice before actually uploading their best performance of the set task. The practice that is carried out is task-focused and time efficient allowing for improvement in fluency, especially.

5.3 Feedback

In addition to efficient use of time, monitoring and feedback (input) is also crucial to language development. In the lesson context of a ZOOM “break-out room”, it is impossible to provide consistent overall class or individual monitoring of students’ interactive L2 production because the teacher is only able to enter one room at a time. Anecdotal evidence describes learners drifting away from the task and inevitably slipping into L1.

5.4 FLIPGRID feedback feature

A central feature of FLIPGRID is the teacher’s ability to give direct individualized private feedback. The teacher creates a feedback rubric on which to rank students’ performance, which in this particular case was grammar, pronunciation, fluency and content, with each descriptor rated out of five. This, therefore, made it easy to create a percentage for grade weighting for each task the students engaged in.

In addition to the above descriptors FLIPGRID has a 1024-character text box, giving the teacher the advantage of pinpointing specific aspects (e.g. grammar or pronunciation) to provide individualized feedback. To provide such detailed feedback, on every utterance if necessary, is impossible in a large classroom, or ZOOM break-out room. Also with Japanese students who are incredibly sensitive about being given feedback, the individualized and private nature of the FLIPGRID feedback system suits the average Japanese learner who craves one-to-one teacher feedback ([8] Oxford & Anderson, 1995).

5.4 FLIPGRID response videos

One criticism of FLIPGRID, as with any ACMC, could be the lack of real time conversational exchange. With FLIPGRID, however, students are able to create response videos to other students' initial task response videos. It is therefore possible for a time-delayed spoken exchange to be created. Admittedly, this is not a real time conversation, however, it is another opportunity for students to engage in long speaking turns with the opportunity to plan what they will say. As previously noted, such planned exchanges are more accurate, grammatically complex, lexically varied and detailed.

6. Flipgrid lessons – using a textbook

All Oral Communication courses at the university in question used Cutting Edge, Third Edition, published by Pearson Longman, using levels Starter through to Pre-intermediate.

The textbook listening sections were used with additional teacher-made supplementary exercises and delivered by Google Docs links via email. As is often the case, EFL textbook listening exercises provide grammatical or thematic input for subsequent speaking tasks. With this in mind, the textbook semi-controlled speaking tasks were often used as presented, requiring minimal adjustments to make them appropriate for FLIPGRID.

For the first two lessons, teacher demonstration videos, providing a model version of each completed speaking task was uploaded. This contained appropriate language to successfully complete the task, as well as adhering strictly to the expected content length.

6.1 Textbook lesson idea

Cutting Edge, Third Edition, Elementary, Unit 8's grammatical focus is past simple and thematically partly based on "An evening in or out". After engaging in a listening task involving three people talking about their past experiences, of evenings spent in or out, both good and bad, a textbook speaking task is presented in as follows:

1. *Talk about a good or bad evening you had. Look at the questions and answers in the Useful language box and make notes. Ask your teacher for any words/phrases you need.*
2. *Work in pairs. Ask and answer questions about your evening.*
3. *Work with a new partner. Tell her about your evening or your first partner's evening.*

Using Flipgrid, students can use both the Useful language and the contextualized phrases from the audioscript to make their own short video about their own evening in or out, in this case between 30 seconds to one minute. When the video was uploaded other students were encouraged to leave responses - including both comments and questions to their classmates' videos. In this way, a meaningful dialogue could be practised, albeit asynchronously.

6.2 Non-textbook lesson idea

There are commercial English language examinations, such as IELTS, which contain a long-turn speaking part. Part 2 of the IELTS speaking test requires the candidate to speak on a topic for between one to two minutes using a cue card to guide the talk. Such an example might look like this:

Describe your favorite shop.

You should say:

- Where it is
- What things it sells
- What sort of people are its customers
- Explain why you like the shop so much

Using the textbook topic or theme, the teacher can create a short task using a similar framework as the above. Or alternatively, if no suitable theme or topic exists within the textbook, then a short video on a selected topic can be chosen along with the formulation of appropriate listening and comprehension exercises. A good source for these 2-3 minute videos was the YouTube channel, Great Big Story [9]. Ideally, the teacher would transcribe the text of the video to provide appropriate listening tasks, for example, comprehension or a cloze. Using the theme, a topic task similar to an IELTS part two speaking task shown above can be constructed. One example of such a video was “Vintage radio repair man” about a man, who as the title suggests, repairs and restores old transistor radios. With this material, learners completed comprehension questions and a listening cloze with the following speaking task:

Talk about some equipment or item that was broken (or which had a problem) that you had repaired or repaired yourself.

You should say:

- *What the equipment or item was*
- *What was the problem with it*
- *When and how you had it repaired / repaired it*
- *How you felt about it before and after*

Note: *Speak for at least two minutes (less will reduce your Content score). Do NOT read from a script (reading will reduce your Fluency score). Speaking from notes (not written sentences) is OK.*

The final Note regarding timing and delivery was added to ensure all students produced sufficient, appropriate quality material.

7. FLIPGRID learner reactions

Overall the FLIPGRID style classes were received favorably by the learners as attested by their anecdotal feedback and near 100% participation level throughout the semester. Some students had remarked, perhaps a little negatively, that Flipgrid required more involvement as it had been necessary to record and re-record their videos multiple times until they reached a level they had been satisfied with before uploading them. This repeated focused practice coupled with the more comprehensive preparation time are key factors in ensuring fluency and communicative competence are given sufficient opportunity to grow.

There was, however, one first-year class, which had not actually physically met each other or the teacher and were understandably curious to do so. Towards the end of the semester, they requested a ZOOM session. However, during the ZOOM session, even though it was a high-level class containing students of native or near native ability, students were noticeably reticent to engage in conversation (both with the teacher and other students). Maybe if more frequent contact with the teacher had been provided earlier this reticence to communicate might have diminished. The importance of frequent teacher contact for Japanese learners should not be overlooked as reported in Oxford R. and N. Anderson [8] (1995). It would most likely be more beneficial to find a way of incorporating more “teacher contact” time, especially with students who had never met each other or the teacher, in person. Other students participating in FLIPGRID lessons, who already knew the teacher and each other, were happy to take advantage of its asynchronous format which allowed them more flexibility with balancing their studies with out-of-university responsibilities. Nevertheless, more teacher contact would no doubt be desirable throughout an online course.

8. The Future – combining FLIPGRID and ZOOM

In the future, it could be beneficial to combine FLIPGRID and ZOOM. With ZOOM it is preferred to split the class up into smaller groups so the teacher can participate directly in a conversation with the students. After all, Japanese students prefer to practice their English by listening to and speaking with a native English speaker ([8] Oxford & Anderson, 1995). To do this, an 18-student group could be split into six groups of three, with 90-minute lesson being split into three sections of 30 minutes each. This could be available alternatively for students, so one week they upload a FLIPGRID video then the following week via ZOOM they speak to the teacher about the same topic as well as receiving feedback on their English in the FLIPGRID video.

Alternatively, the whole class could have a short session on ZOOM with the teacher who outlines the task to be completed on FLIPGRID, perhaps modelling the task and providing language as necessary. The initial part of such a ZOOM session could also include generalized feedback for the previous lesson’s task. Such a combination would provide the opportunity for learners to be pushed

to produce longer turns on FLIPGRID while receiving the necessary teacher contact on ZOOM as a means of sustaining motivation and providing feedback.

While it is hoped that online lessons will not solely be the standard way of delivering EFL content in the future, if or when such an occurrence does happen, the teacher will be more prepared as to creating the optimal environment for L2 growth by uniting both synchronous and asynchronous computer mediated communication with both ZOOM and FLIPGRID.

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