Lessons from Emergency Online Teaching: A case study on effective integration of Flipgrid in an English communication class

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コロナ禍におけるオンライン授業からの教訓

～英語コミュニケーションの授業における「Flipgrid」の効果的な活用について～

プロヴェンザーノ・クリスティ

Lessons from Emergency Online Teaching: A case study on effective integration of *Flipgrid* in an English communication class

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Like educational institutions worldwide, Japanese universities were compelled to make a rapid switch to emergency online teaching (EOT) when the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the country starting in 2020. At many institutions, the digital infrastructure, administration, faculty and students were ill-prepared for the sudden change, and there are many stories of both success and failure in the implementation of EOT. Yet the ensuing chaos brought the opportunity for all stakeholders to experiment with and adopt digital educational tools that many had avoided until the pandemic forced the issue. Taniguchi and Provenzano's (2023) review of feedback on the EOT experience from faculty and students at a small, private Japanese women's university shows that many advantages to distance learning and digital tools were discovered during EOT and both faculty and students aim to retain some aspects.

This paper is a case study companion to Taniguchi and Provenzano's (2023) broader discussion of online education. It is an example of what educators can carry forward from lessons learned during the EOT experience, focusing on the application of a digital learning tool discovered during EOT and continued post-EOT in an English language learning class. Action research undertaken on the adoption of a video application called *Flipgrid* in an English language debate class is described. The aim of the research was to determine student attitudes and perceptions of Flipgrid's usefulness in preparing for debates and, more generally, in facilitating the development of oral/aural English skills for the Japanese students. The paper briefly reviews relevant background in the literature, describes the class and the application, the rationale for incorporating *Flipgrid*, its implementation, student and instructor feedback and attitudes toward this digital tool, and projections for future use.

Background

Digital aids to language learning have been explored and incorporated for decades in a robust field of inquiry known as Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). (For more about CALL's history and development, see Warschauer and Healey [1998] and Beatty [2010].) In the Internet age, CALL-related functions can include the one-way access of resources like vocabulary lists, image databases and online dictionaries. These resources have been improving over time and continue to be essential to learners and educators alike, but there has also been explosive development in "Web 2.0" tools – applications that allow the user to go beyond just receiving information from web resources, with the expectation that they will interact with others and create their own unique content (Stevenson & Liu, 2010). This includes all manner of blogs, wikis, podcasts, social networking sites, online chat rooms and even role-playing games and virtual worlds (Sykes, Oskoz & Thorne, 2008). While all of these tools are useful in a limitless variety of fields, they are uniquely suited to language learning because the basis of communication is, after all, language.

Web 2.0 tools like blogs, chat rooms and discussion boards provide opportunities for either (or both) synchronous and asynchronous communication among stakeholders in the class. While many language educators were already making use of interactive web tools and platforms prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, EOT forced even reluctant educators to learn how to use them and figure out what worked for their contexts. Perales and Metz-Matthews (2021) observe that "virtual language-learning" during EOT has opened up "profound connections between teachers, students, and materials, which may never have otherwise occurred" (para. 2), going on to note how these connections and discoveries can be carried over to inform our approach to language instruction even after we return to in-person classes.

About the course and *Flipgrid*

1. Course aims, format

This action research was undertaken in an oral English communication course called "Presentation for Debate" in the fall semester of 2021. At the time, it was a new elective course for third-year students in the English Department, with the following aims provided to prospective students via the syllabus, which was available on Universal Passport (UNIPA), the university's learning management system (LMS):

In this course, students will have the opportunity to exercise their English language skills by engaging in active debate of issues relevant to today's society. Students will exercise their reading, listening, and writing skills as they investigate these issues to prepare for debating. Then, in active debate, students will not only deliver short, prepared speeches, but question other speakers and defend their positions. At every stage, students will develop their ability

to think critically about all sides of an issue.

Periodic EOT measures continued to be in place in the fall semester of 2021; therefore, the first two (of a total of fifteen) classes were delivered remotely in real time using the Zoom video conferencing platform. Subsequent classes took place in person on campus. Both the online real-time video conference style and the face-to-face style classes offered ample opportunities for group discussion and team planning.

2. Class activities

The debate class materials comprised step-by-step guidance through the stages of English debate. Students worked together to brainstorm possible debate topics, practice making propositions, vote on desired propositions to carry forward to debate, and then went on to prepare affirmative or negative arguments, refutations, and rebuttals in teams. The preparation culminated in the presentation of those speeches – in English, of course – after which audience members would vote on the winning arguments. There were two full debate cycles over the course of the fifteen-week semester.

3. Choosing *Flipgrid*

Through the initial period of EOT in 2020, the teacher-researcher became newly familiar with a variety of online tools to support and enrich English language learning. Looking for a way to encourage students to interact in English with both her and their debate team members outside of class time (both during and post-EOT), she narrowed her search to three options: the text- and image-based application *Padlet* (https://padlet.com/), a kind of online bulletin board; *VoiceThread* (https://voicethread.com/), a multi-media presentation application; and *Flipgrid* (now known as *Flip* https://info.flip.com/), a video-based asynchronous discussion application. The teacher-researcher's initial criteria were that the application be free, user-friendly, and compatible with many types of devices (smartphones, tablets, PCs).

Upon further consideration of the course's aim to improve students' oral English skills, she eliminated *Padlet* as an option as it is text-based, realizing, as noted by Saçak and Kavun (2020) that *Flipgrid* and *VoiceThread* allow for a kind of dynamic interaction not possible in text-based online discussions. She also eliminated *Voicethread*, which – despite its many strengths – is too complex for the relatively simple activity the debate course required. The teacher-researcher therefore settled on *Flipgrid*, which fulfilled all her criteria, and because it focuses on asynchronous oral/aural discussion (Lowenthal & Moore, 2020). A further user-friendly strength for *Flipgrid* is that it is available as an add-on application to Microsoft Teams, an important LMS at the teacher-researcher's university. This integrative feature allows students to login to the application using their university e-mail address and login information. It allows instructors to easily track students' contributions and avoids students having to make and keep track of multiple independent accounts and logins (Pacansky-Brock, 2017).

4. *Flipgrid* in use

Flipgrid allows teachers to upload discussion topics (via text, voice, or audio) and students can respond by uploading a video recording of themselves. Further interaction is possible via both text and video responses to student uploads. Teachers can manage *Flipgrid* settings to make student responses public, so that all team members can view them, or private, so that only the teacher has access. Both functionalities were employed in the debate class, and students were required to respond via video, not text. For example, the first *Flipgrid* homework assignment was designed to introduce students to the basics of using *Flipgrid* as well as to the important debating skill of using persuasive language to influence listeners' opinions. Students were informed in a *Flipgrid* assignment that in the first face-to-face class (week three of the semester), a chocolate treat would be awarded to the student who explained most convincingly in English why she should receive it. Students uploaded their videos, which were reviewed by the teacher-researcher. They were also accessible to all class members, with the number of views displayed on each video. The most persuasive speeches were voted upon in the first face-to-face class, and the treats duly awarded.

Later, students submitted *Flipgrid* videos to practice delivering their argument, refutation and rebuttal speeches. For this, private video settings were used, allowing the teacher-researcher to offer individual feedback without prematurely revealing debaters' attack strategies to the opposing team. Feedback could be offered by text or orally in a video reply, so the teacher-researcher could model intonation, pace and pronunciation for problem areas, as well as deliver feedback on content orally. In addition to occasional all-class open videos, students were required to submit private *Flipgrid* speech practice videos prior to delivering their speeches in class, a total of six speech practice videos over the semester.

Survey
1. Participants

Eleven third-year students enrolled in the course, along with three fourth-year students who requested and were granted special permission to audit, for a total of fourteen students. They were all English majors and all female. Japanese was the L1 for all participants. All students were unfamiliar with *Flipgrid* at the beginning of the semester. *Flipgrid* assignments were set for all students, and all students completed a majority of the assignments, although the completion rate was not 100% for all students. All participants consented to take part in the gathering of this survey data, with the understanding that whatever data they provided would have no impact on their grade in the course.

2. Survey questions

Both quantitative and qualitative responses regarding participant attitudes and impressions

of *Flipgrid* were gathered at the end of the course using a Microsoft Forms survey. Part one of the survey comprised 9 statements to which students responded on a 5-point Likert scale: Strongly disagree; Disagree; Neutral; Agree; Strongly agree. Part two of the survey was a simple open-ended question asking for students to elaborate on their experience using *Flipgrid* for homework in oral English communication classes. Survey items were written in both English and Japanese, and students could reply to the open-ended survey items in either Japanese or English.

3. Analysis

The Likert scale statements aimed to elicit attitudes in three areas: Perception of the efficacy of using *Flipgrid* to improve oral English skills; Perception of difficulty of using *Flipgrid* to do homework, including both technical issues and language task difficulty; Overall perception of using *Flipgrid*. The qualitative data from the open-ended responses provides further insight into the quantitative responses, and correlations between the themes of the quantitative results and the qualitative responses have been identified. Of the fourteen class participants, thirteen responded to the survey. Ten students responded to the open-ended question in English. Any quotes below from those responses are reported in the original (sometimes imperfect) English. Three students responded in Japanese, and any quotes from those responses have been translated to English.

Results

1. Perception of the efficacy of using *Flipgrid* to improve oral English skills
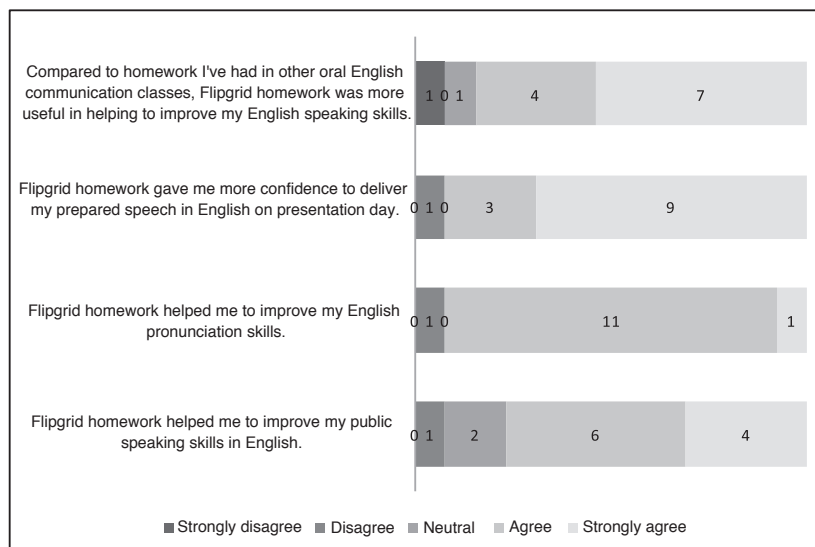

Chart 1. Using *Flipgrid* to improve oral English skills

Four Likert scale statements addressed students' views of whether *Flipgrid* helped them to improve their oral English skills, and the responses were mainly positive. Chart 1 shows that a large majority of students (79%) agreed or strongly agreed that *Flipgrid* homework was more useful in improving their English speaking skills than other types of oral communication homework they had experienced in other classes. Related comments from the open-ended question include, "I think my English skill improved by *Flipgrid* because I reviewed my video again and again, so I like to practice my speech in the video," and, "This app is so useful for speaking practice."

A similarly large majority agreed or strongly agreed that the *Flipgrid* practice improved their confidence when delivering their speeches (92%). One representative comment directly addressed this point: "My voice was sometimes quieter than I thought it would be, so I made a conscious effort to speak clearly, and I feel like I gained a little confidence." However, despite the generally positive quantitative result, not all students gained confidence so readily: "I didn't like it because I was nervous at first, but later I got used to it and it was okay."

Almost all students (92%) responded that *Flipgrid* homework was helpful in addressing pronunciation problems. Some felt the ability to monitor themselves was useful, "Using Flipgrid was very helpful because I could see how I was pronouncing and what kind of facial expressions I was making"; and others benefitted from feedback provided by the teacher-researcher, "It's hard to get comments about pronunciation, but it helped me to correct the pronunciation and intonation."

A smaller majority (77%) agreed or strongly agreed that the *Flipgrid* practice could be credited with helping them improve their overall public speaking skills in English. This is supported in the open-ended responses; for example, "I think it is a good way to practice speeches," and, "I thought it was very good because it could be used as a practice for presentations."

2. Perception of difficulty of using *Flipgrid* to do homework

While many students had no trouble using *Flipgrid*, there were technical issues for some. Chart 2 shows that 36% agreed or agreed strongly that they had technical problems. Related open-ended comments ranged from unfamiliarity with the application, "I was confused at first using the app, but once I got used to it, it was okay," to insurmountable technical obstacles, "It was not difficult, but I sometimes couldn't upload. I don't know why I couldn't". Still, a majority of students reported no problems using the application, as can be seen in comments like this: "I used it for the first time, but it was easy for me."

In response to the more general statement, "Using the *Flipgrid* app was difficult," a greater number of responses were ambivalent, with 31% agreeing and 39% being neutral. The open-ended comments provide deeper insight to this topic. Technological issues aside, some issues arose from
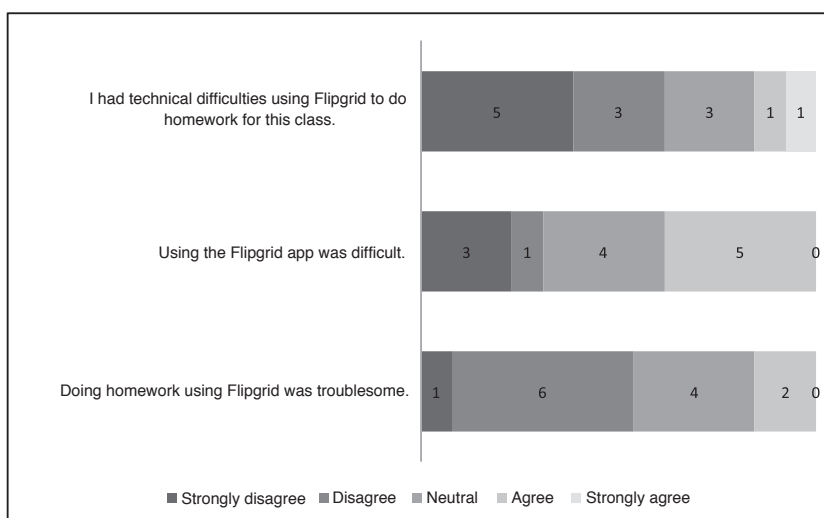
Chart 2. Perception of *Flipgrid*'s difficulty

the use of video as a medium for doing homework. One student was shy to speak English when members of her family were home and was also reluctant for other students to see her videos: "I choose time to recording because I don't like to speak myself when someone is in the house. I don't like to see my video to other students." Another student found watching herself in the video to be distracting: "Since I was on camera, it was a little difficult to pronounce English while being aware of my facial expressions."

Finally, in response to the statement, "Using *Flipgrid* to do homework was troublesome," again, most students disagreed, but 31% remained neutral and 15% agreed. Some insight to the possible nature of the "trouble" was offered by one of the fourth-year students who audited the class (she reveals her year in the comment): "I didn't dislike doing *Flipgrid* but it took me quite time to take a video, load it, and upload it. … That's why I thought it was difficult for third year students to do it because they had some other classes. For fourth year students, it was very good experience." This suggests that some students may have found the video-based homework quite time consuming.

3. Overall perception of using *Flipgrid*

As shown in Chart 3, only one student (15%) admitted to disliking *Flipgrid* homework, while the majority of responses showed that students did not view it negatively, or were at least neutral about it: "It's a very good way to practice speaking," and, "Once I got used to it, I thought it was a great app." However, the response to "I want to use the *Flipgrid* app to do homework for other oral English communication classes," a slight majority (54%) responded neutrally, showing there was not an enthusiastic positive attitude. Some possible reasons and potential solutions to this are explored in the discussion below.
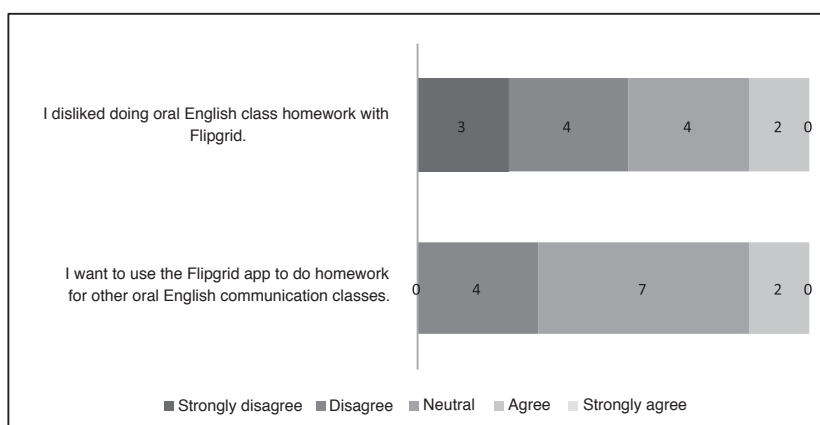
Chart 3. Overall perceptions of using *Flipgrid*

Discussion

As an exploratory action research project examining attitudes and logistics in the implementation of *Flipgrid* as a way to provide enriched out-of-class oral English communication practice for language learners, the results of this survey provide valuable feedback. However, the very limited scope of this research should be acknowledged. Involving only fourteen participants, all of them Japanese females of a similar age, the survey results cannot be widely generalized. Even so, the responses can be useful in determining improved integration of *Flipgrid* in oral English communication classes, particularly in this teacher-researcher's teaching context. The discussion below includes observations on survey responses as well as the teacher-researcher's own reflections on her experience with implementing the application, and considerations for future integration of *Flipgrid* in oral English communication classes.

1. Using English outside of the classroom

The overall reaction of survey participants to using *Flipgrid* for debate speech practice was positive, with a number of students commenting that seeing themselves in the video caused them to practice repeatedly until they were satisfied with the final product. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning contexts, the opportunities to engage with the target language outside of the classroom are minimal, and low levels of student motivation are common (Brown, 2001). The *Flipgrid* video homework creates a need for that valuable out-of-class speaking practice in a format that seems to spark motivation to pursue higher-quality output.

2. Private / Public responses

Although a small number of *Flipgrid* topics in this project had public settings for the responses, meaning that all group members could view and comment on videos, most of the topics were set to be private, so as not to prematurely reveal debate teams' points of attack or rebuttal. As mentioned, some survey respondents were glad for this privacy, as they found it

uncomfortable to share videos of themselves in a more public forum. Edwards and Lane (2021) received similar feedback in their study, which was conducted with students in a comparable Japanese context. They suggested that students' discomfort could be eased by easing into the activity with neutral topics such as self-introductions early in the course and teaching very shy students how to use *Flipgrid*'s stickers and emojis to shield their faces in the video (Edwards & Lane, 2021).

One student in the current study, however, preferred the public setting for videos, offering this frank observation: "I thought it was better for everyone to have nervousness or motivation [that comes from others seeing] my video!! Then, I would take more time to practice, to be honest. I knew that the listener was only [the teacher]." It is true that using the private setting, necessary because of the limitations of the debate context, deprived participants of some of *Flipgrid*'s interactive advantages. Furthermore, different groups of students may respond to the *Flipgrid* format in different ways. For example, in their small-scale, Japan-based study, Peterson, Townsend and Onaka (2020) note, "even though the researchers assumed that many of the Japanese students would be shy about their peers watching their videos, 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). A further action research project in a non-debate oral English communication class would clearly be an informative next step to see if the social pressure of more public postings would be positively received.

3. Burden of time

A number of survey respondents commented on the amount of time required to produce the *Flipgrid* video homework. This was in addition to the time spent researching and preparing their speeches. While time spent on-task in the target language is certainly beneficial to acquiring a second language, it is important for instructors to consider the total workload of students, who have heavy assignments in other classes, too. Taniguchi and Provenzano (2023) report that many students who experienced online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic felt overburdened with schoolwork, commenting that the instructors of their various courses seemed to have little grasp of students' total workload.

Survey results in this paper's action research project suggest that the teacher-researcher adjust the homework burden to ensure students have a reasonable and balanced amount of work outside of class, allowing extra time for students to familiarize themselves with *Flipgrid* to further ease the cognitive load of learning to use the new software. It may be the heavy time burden that prompted 54% of survey participants in this project to respond "neutral" to the Likert statement, "I want to use the *Flipgrid* app to do homework for other oral English communication classes," even though a majority otherwise viewed it as an effective language learning tool.

Instructors considering adopting *Flipgrid* must also consider their own time commitment when it comes to implementing *Flipgrid* and monitoring submissions. Taniguchi and Provenzano's (2023) survey showed faculty respondents felt that preparing and reviewing online materials was time-consuming and occasionally overwhelming. In this project, careful review and personalized feedback for one assignment's fourteen videos took a moderate amount of time, but in a much bigger class, it would certainly be unmanageable. In bigger classes, employing *Flipgrid* as a public, interactive, open-ended forum among students and instructor could demand less feedback time for the instructor while still offering effective out-of-class English communication opportunities for students.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic pushed university administration, faculty and students headlong into a crash course on the ways and means of online education. Taniguchi and Provenzano (2023) suggest that even though many stakeholders were eager to get back to face-to-face communication in brick-and-mortar classrooms, the EOT experience has had a positive impact in many ways. It has shown how education can be delivered, enriched, and made more accessible to all by technology.

The small-scale action research project described in this companion paper aimed to determine if and how *Flipgrid* could enrich English language learning and practice in an English debate class. The results show promise for *Flipgrid* as a tool to create opportunities for students to interact orally in English beyond the walls of the classroom. Discussion of the results finds that the application was perceived by a majority of survey respondents as confidence-building, instructive and relatively easy to use. The discussion also highlights areas where use of the application for oral English communication classes can be adjusted and improved.

EOT threw the digital door to online platforms and digital tools in education wide open, facilitating the discovery and implementation of interactive applications like *Flipgrid* that can provide richer and deeper communication and learning opportunities for students. Now, moving beyond EOT, it is important that the digital door be kept open, encouraging the use of online education options and digital tools like *Flipgrid* that can improve not only the learning experiences and outcomes for students of English, but for learners in all disciplines.

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