Title of Project:
An Exploratory Study of the Lived Experiences of
Japanese Undergraduate EFL Students in the Flipped Classroom

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Project Summary

Purpose Statement

    Many college instructors tend to adapt technology into their courses without truly understanding the students' views on the usefulness of the technology or students' abilities to use the technology properly. Although instructors may use technology due to pressure from administrators or students, instructors need to consider carefully how technology is being used for learning. Instructors may witness students using technology for reasons other than learning, but do students enjoy using technology to study or learn? Students who participate in a course where the instructor uses technology may not be learning as much as the instructor believes, or as much as they could in a traditional course.

    The purpose of this exploratory case study was to understand EFL students' lived experiences of the flipped classroom at a Japanese university. The lived experience is described as witnessing the events taking place inside the classroom from the students' vantage point. These recollections paint a real life picture of how the student views various in-class learning activities, including student-student and instructor-student interactions, instructor talk time, and the integration of technology into the learning environment. The flipped classroom is defined as one where the instructor moves lecture content previously presented in class to the online environment in the form of podcasts, narrated presentations, or other types of digital formats devoting the entire F2F time to authentic, communicative, interactive activities in the target language. In order for Japanese to play a more effective role in the new globalized world, it is imperative that they possess the tools necessary to be effective communicators and active participants.

    This study examined the lived experiences of students who took part in a course taught using the flipped classroom model that provided a foundation for understanding the influences, motivations, challenges, and benefits involved in adapting technology in combination with this instructional method. The results should help college instructors develop student-centered courses by detailing the experiences of students who have taken a flipped course. Learning more

about the possible outcomes of the model can facilitate its effective adoption by university EFL instructors. By articulating the experiences of those who have taken part in an inverted course, this study illuminated its current use and drew attention to the significant role it can play in higher education.

In addition, the findings may interest faculty-development personnel and higher education administrators in their efforts to develop a more communicative EFL classroom. Further study of the model holds the potential to contribute much needed change to the conditions of the EFL undergraduate learning experience in the face-to-face (F2F) learning environments that currently constitute the primary setting for college courses in Japan. This study contributed to the body of knowledge on learning technologies that are used to support the implementation of a communicative, student-centered learning environment in undergraduate EFL classrooms.

Research Questions

This study used a qualitative approach in the form of an exploratory case study. Three data-collecting instruments: journals, observations, and interviews were used during the study. From the beginning of the semester, participants kept journals detailing their experiences in the flipped class. In addition, the researcher conducted observations throughout the semester. Finally, the researcher held focus group interviews with the participants twice during the study. The data gathered during the study were analyzed to answer the main research question: What were the lived experiences of EFL university students taught using the flipped classroom model? The following sub-questions were also addressed:

- What were the students' impressions and opinions about being taught using the flipped classroom model?
- What were students' perceived changes in their study habits as a result of taking a flipped class?
- What were the students' perceived benefits and challenges of learning English in the flipped classroom?
- In what ways, if any, did students experience increased communication opportunities in the flipped class?

Sources of Data

Iwate University is a national, coeducational 4-year university located in Morioka, Iwate Prefecture, Japan. The university has an enrollment of just over 6,000 students and undergraduate and graduate schools made up of four departments: social sciences, agriculture, engineering, and education. The university is also home to an international center where non-Japanese students can study the Japanese language and culture in order to build closer relationships with other students and the local residents.

The participants of the study were Japanese first-year agriculture and engineering students studying English as a foreign language. Students from other disciplines did not participate because English is not required for students in the social sciences and education departments. Participants were enrolled in a course, "Project One," to improve their English language skills. The students, aged 18 to 19 years, had been studying English between four and six years before entering the university, coming from both public and private high schools. There were 37

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students in the class, 24 males and 13 females, and participants had TOEFL scores between 200 and 420.

Findings

The four key findings from this study include: (a) active learning, (b) technology, (c) collaboration, and (d) workload.

Participants realized that learning in the flipped classroom resulted in English for practical purposes rather than for passing an exam or being a passive member of the class. A study by Matsuura et al. (2004) found that 60% of students agreed it was not useful to study English unless the reason to learn the language was for functional purposes. As PM1 noted, acquiring communication skills for presentations and skills to make statements in English enables students to use English more practically and changes how they think, enabling them to naturally translate Japanese into English as they adapt and acquire the skills to use English effectively. PH2 observed that using English for real life communication was a major difference from how participants learned English in high school in comparison to how they are learning English in the flipped classroom. PM1 and PH2 asserted that the students are in charge of learning in the flipped classroom and cannot be passive participants like they were in the past. The passive learning environment that participants experienced in high school was gone; they were now part of an active learning environment where they were responsible for their learning outcomes. Participants witnessed a pedagogical change in the flipped classroom: from learning English to pass a test, to a communicative classroom where the participants played an active role in the learning.

From this study, it can also be determined that technology plays a big role in learning, even if an instructor does not design his/her course to include the use of technology. Although the flipped classroom does not require the use of technology, the participants in this study mentioned the benefit of using technology to prepare and communicate with others at times most convenient to them, enabling participants to do better work as evidenced by a discussion between PL2 and PH2:

> PL2: "It's been helpful. Outside of the class, we can communicate regarding our activities and even the chances to use English increases through technology."
> PH2: "Being able to use the Internet tools for learning English after going home is really useful and helpful."

Participants in this study consistently mentioned that the flipped classroom offered them more opportunities to collaborate and interact with classmates in comparison to what they experienced in high school. Through these interactions, participants were able to evaluate their peers' work, notice weaknesses in their own work, learn from this new knowledge, and apply it to their own project (as PL2 and PH2 recalled). As a result, participants became cognitively aware of evaluating classmates' work as well as self-evaluation, leading to higher levels of language comprehension and use.

Workload seemed to be the one area participants felt was a negative aspect of the flipped classroom. When discussing if participants would want all their courses taught in the same manner during the interview, PM1 mentioned, "The same style from the beginning would be very hard. Taking step by step, gradually shifting might be fine. It does take some time to get

used to the style." PH2 added, "Only IF there's less to do, I would...Fewer activities/agendas would be preferred."

From the participants' point of view, the flipped classroom appeared to be an enjoyable learning experience. There was a learning curve, but as the participants became accustomed to the course format and witnessed the increased opportunities to communicate in English, they found the flipped classroom beneficial to their learning outcomes.

Recommendations

Policymakers and practitioners should seriously examine the research on the flipped classroom, which describes the following outcomes of the method: improved student-teacher interaction, opportunities for real-time feedback, student engagement, and self-paced learning. Bolstered by the findings of this study, policymakers and practitioners should consider implementing the technique into their curriculum. The three key points for policymakers and practitioners from this study include: (a) communicative English, (b) active learning, and (c) workload.

Participants continually mentioned how much communicative English they were using in class with classmates and the instructor as well as online in the forums. If policymakers in Japan are serious about developing Japanese citizens with more communicative abilities—citizens who can share ideas in English and take part in the globalized economy—they need to begin implementing the flipped classroom for language learning.

Practitioners should remember that during this study participants compared learning English in high school to the flipped classroom. It was the participants who used the words active learning; they were not parroting the instructor or researcher. When a practitioner flips his/her class, it is important to remember that he/she is no longer using class time to lecture, but instead is interacting with the students and engaging them in authentic language use. Instructors need to restructure the class, not simply overlay prepared courses on the flipped classroom. Throughout this study the participants mentioned that they enjoyed the active learning environment and that the students were in charge; hence, even if one decides not to flip his/her class he/she should still remember to make language learning an active process.

Policymakers and practitioners need to understand that workload was one area participants felt was a negative aspect of the flipped classroom. Considering the flipped classroom was new, students seemed to be surprised by the new classroom setup, therefore a slow implementation of the same system should be taken into consideration. If a school was planning to use the flipped classroom for all classes, the school might want to implement the program slowly, or be aware that the number of assignments or activities should be fewer in the beginning and grow slowly over the course of the first year. After a semester, the researcher feels students would become accustomed to the flipped classroom and it could be used in more classes or instructors could add more activities to the course.

Conclusion

This study has discussed the changes experienced by students when they learn English in the flipped classroom: the workload, use of technology, and most importantly, their ability to construct knowledge in English and become aware of their language abilities. In fact, the participants, unaware of the changes at the time, purposefully caused the changes that they have

experienced and continue to experience. Participants chose to alter the ways in which they learned both in and out of the classroom in order to improve their language abilities. Taking steps to collaborate with classmates, to continue expanding the learning environment through the use of technology, and to interact with classmates and the instructor in English, participants willingly became active learners. Actively engaged in the learning process, as well as learning from their past experiences in high school, the flipped classroom enabled participants to move forward and had a positive impact on their futures. Their primary reward for these efforts was their ability to use English to communicate effectively, exchange ideas and information, and participate more fully in the globalized world.

So where does the flipped classroom fit into all these concepts? According to this researcher's theory of the lived experience in the flipped classroom, it is not that no one thought of or tried innovative teaching and learning practices before, but that accessible tools are now available that make the flipped classroom more viable for instructors and students. From the students' lived experiences, the flipped classroom offers an exciting new alternative for language learning in Japan and a change from current practices. The flipped classroom model is not a panacea for all the challenges in language education. However, it is a valuable paradigm worthy of consideration by educators, administrators, and policy makers that will prove advantageous as Japan transitions into a new era of communicative language teaching and learning.

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