Flipping a Content-Based ESL Course: An Action Research Report*

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Abstract

This action research study aims to uncover the pedagogical effects of applying the flipped classroom strategy to Content-Based Instruction for English language learners. Students' perceptions and academic performance were measured by adopting a mixed methods approach. Qualitative results from the post-course questionnaire indicated that student participants were in favor of the flipped classroom over traditional instruction; however, quantitative data derived from pre- and post-course questionnaires and academic performance did not reveal statistically significant differences.

Introduction

There are a growing number of intensive English programs for English language learners who wish to pursue higher education in America (Long, 2013). To prepare these students for academic success in American universities, it is not uncommon to see content courses embedded in program curricula. The College Preparatory Program (CPP) at Hawai'i Tokai International College requires students to complete World History, Sociology, Communications, and American Studies during their enrollment, with the aim of building students' academic proficiency.

"Foundations of Sociology" is a mandatory course for students in level three of the CPP. Level 3 students' TOEFL iBT scores are roughly 39 to 45. Early in the term, I learned that students found the textbook challenging and needed additional supplementary materials. At home, students completed assigned readings in preparation for lectures, and students listened and wrote answers to questions on handouts as I gave lectures with visual aids on PowerPoint slides. As I came to learn, my lectures were too fast for some students and too slow for others, as I noted that some students' handouts were incomplete. Moreover, the answers students prepared for critical thinking homework questions indicated a gap in abilities between advanced and struggling students. Having faced these challenges, I was eager to make my class more efficient so that individual student needs could be accommodated. In addition, I sought to create an environment where all students would be engaged in activities geared towards the

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development of their critical thinking skills. In this paper, I will first review the literature on Content-Based Instruction and the flipped classroom model and present my findings on its effects on language learners. I will conclude with a discussion of the study's implications for future research and teaching.

Content-based Instruction in ESL and the Flipped Classroom

Content-based instruction (CBI) or content-language integrated learning (CLIL) is an approach which prescribes using English as a medium to teach a given subject matter (Richards & Rogers, 2001). CBI is widely used in language teaching settings. Empirical evidence from Brown (2007) showed that students' grammar accuracy, reading, and writing skills significantly improved through CBI compared to cases of traditional skill-based classes. Students are more likely to be motivated in content courses, as the focus is not on learning language but on authentic content where they explore their ideas and opinions on varying issues. When course material is carefully modified to ensure comprehensibility among students, CBI is an ideal approach for successful language learning (Brown, 2007). Since CBI is a general approach rather than a method, the instruction methods employed will vary according to the goals of the program. (Richards & Rogers, 2001).

One pedagogical strategy that can enhance CBI makes use of the flipped classroom model. A flipped classroom, also referred to as an "inverted" classroom (Lage, Platt, & Treglia, 2000), reverses conventional teaching methods. The fundamental idea of the flipped classroom model is to direct attention toward students and their learning without sacrificing class time needed to cover new content (Lage et al., 2000; Bergmann, 2012). In other words, students learn and study new content introduced in digital or paper form for homework prior to class. After instructor-led short review lectures take place at the beginning of class (Lage et al., 2000; Bergmann & Sams, 2012; McLaughlin, 2014; Strayer, 2007), students then practice applying the knowledge which is traditionally acquired in class by engaging in activities that stimulate their thinking and motivate the learning process (Tucker, 2012). The benefits of the flipped classroom include providing opportunities for students to better participate in class and to develop higher-order thinking skills which fall within Bloom's taxonomy (1984) of educational objectives, namely, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. These skills are developed in class under an instructor's guidance and with peer support. Lectures or "pre-class input activities" (Spino & Trego, 2015, para. 4), which only require the use of lower level thinking skills, are done outside of class with ready-made videos (Bergmann, 2012). In a flipped classrom, the teacher becomes a "guide on the side" instead of a "sage on stage" and is available to assist students with their assignments in class (Lockwood, B., R., 2014, p. 3). Hence, the flipped classroom model is believed to foster student engagement, motivation, and improved academic performance (Tucker, 2012).

Many studies on the application of the flipped classroom model have been conducted with respect to varying academic disciplines in higher education. Early research on a flipped college economics course by Lage et al. (2000) showsed that flipped classrooms accommodate

various learning styles. Students found videotaped lectures, PowerPoint lectures with printed handouts, and in-class group work to facilitate their understanding of course content. In class, students learned from each other and felt comfortable asking their instructor questions. This dynamic allowed for more individualized student-instructor interaction. Lage et al. (2000) and Davies, Dean, and Ball (2014) agreed that the flipped model also increases student motivation because students are responsible for accessing online resources on their own to further their learning.

An entire first-year college pharmaceutics course was redesigned to fit the flipped classroom framework in hopes of enhancing students' learning, critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, team-work skills, higher-order thinking skills, and engagement with the material (McLaughlin, Roth, Glatt, Gharkholonarehe, Davidson, Griffin, Esserman, & Mumper, 2014). Students found the online materials helpful in the course when applying knowledge and skills that would be relevant to their future career. Student attendance and performance on final exams improved in comparison with the traditional format that was followed in previous years. Davies et al. (2013) also found that the flipped strategy yields higher exam grades.

Humanities courses have long operated within the flipped framework, as readings are commonly assigned for homework and class time is devoted to exploring ideas and themes (Berrett, 2012; Gaughan, 2014). Gaughan (2014) created online video lectures for her college students to watch as an addition to their assigned readings prior to their world history course. Her study showed that the videos prepared students better for class and as a result increased their engagement with the material and with in-class discussion.

Of the studies located, only one examinesed the impact of applying the flipped classroom strategy in English language learning contexts. Students in the study were enrolled in a communicative English course in a university in Taiwan. Students watched ready-made educational videos online for the course. The study's findings, which compare structured flipped, semi-structured flipped, and non-flipped classrooms, showed that students exhibited improved performance and attitude and devoted more effort to learning in both structured and semi-structured flipped classrooms. The study concluded that the flipped approach can play a promising role in non-STEM (i.e., science, technology, engineering, mathematics) disciplines (Hung, 2015).

While many studies document the benefits of the flipped classroom, some reveal its drawbacks. Strayer (2007) investigated the impact of applying the flipped model in an introductory college statistics course. Particular emphasis was placed on evaluating the resulting learning environment and comparing it to that of the traditional classroom. Students in the flipped classroom were less satisfied and were confused by the class structure, which centered on group work rather than the more predictable set of activities found in traditional classrooms. Research results have shown that some courses, especially college introductory courses, are not suitable candidates for the flipped classroom strategy. Egbert, Herman, and Lee (2015) also reported that the flipped classroom model is not suitable for college teacher education courses given the complex nature of the field. In several studies, students' grades in the flipped class were

either lower than those in the traditional classroom (Strayer, 2007) or did not significantly improve (Clark, 2015).

Many studies above have shown how the flipped classroom framework is conducive to creating a positive learning environment and results in better grades when compared to the traditional classroom. On the other hand, some instructors faced significant challenges and did not achieve the desired outcomes of the flipped model.

Nevertheless, research on the flipped classroom framework is still limited (Davies et al, 2013; Vaughan, 2014; Clark, 2015). Although ESL classrooms do not typically lend themselves to extensive lecturing when compared to STEM courses (Berrett, 2012), research in applying the flipped model in ESL courses is conspicuously absent (Egbert, et al., 2015). As argued by Huang (2015) above, the flipped classroom framework can be fruitfully implemented to increase students' enjoyment in learning, academic performance, and preparation for future college courses and work settings in contexts like the ESL classroom, where extensive lecturing is rare (Lockwood, 2014). Furthermore, a flipped class ensures that students gain an ample amount of input, which is a critical element in language learning. Having all the time needed to understand new content outside class, students are likely to be more confident and prepared to use language in activities. Hence, "students are less likely to fall through the cracks than in traditional classes" (Spino & Trego, 2015, para. 7). The inconclusive findings on the flipped model in current literature reinforce the need to examine the flipped classroom approach in ESL classes, particularly in content classes, in order to assess student's perceptions and its impact on performance.

Research Questions

In this action research, I aim to answer the following questions:

1. How are flipped ESL classrooms perceived by students?
2. How does the flipped classroom strategy affect students' academic performance?

Finding the answers to these guided questions will help ESL instructors gain insight in how a flipped classroom can foster learning and contribute to cultivating a comfortable classroom environment among multi-leveled students.

Methodology

Instruments

This action research was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative methods employing data collected from questionnaires and final course grades. Both methods were used to gain a broader spectrum of results on the impact of applying the flipped classroom model. According to Creswell (2014), a mixed methods approach is appropriate when conducting education research to obtain more thorough results than one method alone.

At the beginning of the term, all nine students in the flipped classroom completed a short Likert-scale questionnaire adapted from McLaughlin et al. (2014) soliciting their perceptions of learning, engagement, and learning preferences. During the ten weeks, the students were required to read the assigned sections in the course textbook, watch narrated PowerPoint videos (created by *Snagit*) online which were each around ten minutes long, complete handouts, and post comments or questions on the discussion board. Students were restricted from viewing their classmates' responses until they had posted their own. The first ten minutes of class time was devoted to reviewing content, responding to student-generated questions, and checking the answers on prior handouts. Then the students were given a handout with critical thinking questions to which they were instructed to respond along with their partners during the remaining class time. If time allowed, the students shared their answers with the class at the end of class before submitting their handouts. Each class ended with warm-up questions pertinent to the next topic.

At the end of the course, after ten weeks of instruction under the flipped model, the same Likert-scale questionnaire was administered to evaluate the impact this strategy had on their learning experiences. In addition, students elaborated on their perceptions of the flipped model by responding to two open-ended questions adapted from Gaughan (2014). These questionnaires can be found in Appendices A and B. Finally, students' final course grades were compared with those from the preceding term to investigate any changes in performance. Students' course grades are a compilation of their written quiz and exam grades, participation, and midterm and final speaking evaluations.

Participants
The participants in this study were nine Japanese college students ages 18 to 19 enrolled in an intermediate-level sociology course in the College Preparatory Program at Hawaiʻi Tokai International College. This study took place with permission from the institution. The students had been learning English in Japan for an average of about six years. Two of the nine students were newly admitted to the program and were placed in the intermediate level based on their placement test results, while three students were repeaters whose TOEFL scores and grade point averages were insufficient to advance to upper-intermediate classes. There were eight student participants from the preceding term. They share the same background with the nine students in the flipped classroom with the exception of a newly admitted Korean student who transferred to HTIC from a Korean university. The Korean transfer student attended the course from the second half of the term onward. Each class session met weekly for four sixty-minute classes for ten weeks for a total of 40 contact hours per term. The learning goals of the course are to speak in both conversational and formal styles about academic topics, read and understand academic topics, and think critically about academic topics. *Academic Encounters: Life in Society* (Brown & Hood, 2002) is the required textbook comprised of various topics from the field of sociology including marriage, family, peer pressure, gender roles, and the media.

Data Collection Procedure

First the participants completed a pre-course questionnaire. They then completed the same questionnaire along with additional questions added to elicit elaborations on their experience at the end of the term. The items on the questionnaire were explained to the students by the teacher in English before the students filled out the questionnaire. The students' course grades were compiled at the end of the term, and the course grades were then compared with those of a different set of students from the previous term, wherein students learned in a traditional, non-flipped context. The passing grade is 70% or C-. The passing course grade is determined by the CPP and is implemented in all CPP courses. Students in both terms were assessed on their class participation, written quizzes and tests, and midterm and final speaking evaluations. Each of these evaluations was completed by the same instructor. Statistical analysis and t-tests were conducted on the responses to the Likert-scale items from the questionnaires along with course grades to determine any statistically significance results. Further, analyzing qualitative data derived from students' responses to the open-ended questions on the questionnaire allowed me to gain insight into their perceptions regarding the flipped classroom strategy.

Findings

Students' Perceptions

Table 1 shows how students perceived their learning, engagement, and learning preferences. Many students selected *agree* to most of the statements on the pre-course questionnaire. After experiencing the flipped classroom setting, students changed some of their most commonly held responses. For instance, more students strongly agreed that the narrated PowerPoint videos enhanced their learning of the topics and their preferences shifted to learning new topics before class on their own. However, the *p value* obtained from the t-test revealed that these changes were not statistically significant. In contrast, a statistically significant difference was evident in terms of decreasing learning enhancement from the textbook. Perhaps the students heavily relied on the videos to learn new content given that the videos were more comprehensible to them and covered most of the content from the assigned section in the textbook.

When students were asked about their reasons for preferring the flipped framework, the most frequent response was that the content was "easy to understand." Other representative responses to the open-ended questions included the following: "…I had time to think and talk about the topic."; "We share our opinion. I like discussion in class. Yuki (instructor) always review in class. And we did pair work, so we can easy to understand."; "I could think about critical thinking, so I understand with own words."; and "Yuki (instructor) always helped me". It is evident that students appreciated how class time was used for review, pair discussions, and critical thinking activities. Some commented that there was adequate time to think and talk about each topic and that the instructor was approachable and helpful in class. These comments indicate that class time was used efficiently both for imparting a better understanding of content and for cultivating a student-centered learning environment. When asked about their reasons for liking the narrated videos, one student stated, "many photos and pictures made me understand topic

better". Another expressed the aid they received "cause of include voice", acknowledging the use of voiceover in addition to visuals. Furthermore, a few students wrote, "I can watch other presentation easily." and "I can review before tests.". Thus, these students recognized the convenience of being able to access videos online, an experience they would not have had in a traditional classroom. The overall results of the questionnaires reflect a positive perception among the students. Detailed responses to the open-ended questions are in Appendix C.

Table 1
Students' Perceptions of Flipped Classroom

Statement	Pre-course mean ± SD/ mode	Post-course mean ± SD / mode	*P value*
Lectures greatly help me learn the topics. / Video-lectures greatly helped me learn the topics.	3.44±0.53 / 3	3.66 ± 0.5 / 4	0.35
In-class discussions with my classmates greatly help(ed) me learn the topics.	3.5±0.53 / 3	3.44±0.53 / 3	0.68
I participate(d) in in-class discussions.	3.11±0.33 / 3	3.33 ± 0.71 / 3	0.35
When I have/had to read the textbook for homework, I read it before class.	3.67±1.41 / 3	2.78±1.09 / 2	0.05
Reading the textbook for homework helps(ed) me learn the topics.	3 ± 0.87 / 3	2.56±1.13 / 3	0.27
Overall, I prefer learning new topics in class and doing critical thinking questions for homework.	2.89 ± 0.93 / 3	2.44±1.13 / 2	0.27
Overall, I prefer learning new topics for homework and doing critical thinking questions in class.	3.33 ± 0.5 / 3	3.56±0.53 / 4	0.17

Notes. A two-tailed, paired (type 1) t-test was used to obtain p-value between the Likert-scale items. SD indicates standard deviation. Items are measured on a scale from 1 strongly disagree to 4 strongly agree. alpha is set at < .05. The Likert scale is 1-5: 1=never; 2=rarely; 3=some of the time; 4=most of the time; 5=all of the time.

Students' Academic Performance
The differences in performance between students in the flipped classroom and those in the non-flipped classroom were not found to be statistically significant according to the t-test. The close mean and the minimal variation between two the classes indicate that the flipped strategy did not

contribute to increasing academic performance. Hence, incorporating the flipped classroom strategy did not significantly enhance or degrade academic performance when compared to the traditional classroom.

Table 2
Students' Final Course Grades

	Non-flipped (n=8) mean ± SD	Flipped (n=9) mean ± SD	*P value***
Final course grade %	84.63±7.99	84.46±7.46	0.97

Notes. A two-tailed t-test with (type 3) 2 samples with unequal variance was used to obtain the p-value between the course grades. Alpha is set at < .05

Conclusion and Implications

This study found that the ESL students' overall experience with the flipped classroom strategy was positive. As the term progressed, changes in the dynamics of the classroom became evident. The flipped class structure, which included efficient use of narrated videos and class time, contributed to the ready comprehension of course content. Survey results confirmed that visual aids and voiceover in the videos effectively promoted comprehensible input. Class time was efficiently used for reviews, pair discussions, and problem-solving activities requiring critical thinking skills. Students also perceived the instructor more as a facilitator with whom students felt more comfortable asking questions. While the students seemed to favor the flipped classroom according to the qualitative results, the difference in the questionnaire results were nonetheless not statistically significant with one notable exception. That is, students' engagement with the textbook decreased over time. Furthermore, the study found no statistically significant impact on academic performance. This implies that students will perform similarly in either flipped or traditional contexts.

There were several limitations of the study which need pointed out. First and foremost, three of the participants who had already taken the course may have had an advantage over the other students. Much effort was made to include new content and ask different questions on handouts, tests, and in-class activities. Nevertheless, repeaters may have maintained an advantage if they already knew the answers to questions without having to read or watch the videos. The results, especially those with respect to course grades, may have had been more accurate if there had been no repeaters in the class. Another limitation was the number of participants. The study would have been more valid if it had been conducted with a larger group of students. There is also the possibility that the students' responses to the questionnaires could have been more accurate if the questions were asked both in English and in Japanese, as students' English proficiencies can vary. Further, since the quantitative data was not consistent with the qualitative data, it is possible that the questions in the questionnaires were inadequate for measuring students' perceptions. It is also possible that the course assessments were not generated in a broad

enough manner to reflect the true impact of the flipped classroom strategy. This raises the need for the revision of the content of assessments and questionnaire questions in future studies. Perhaps conducting interviews and focused group discussions with students or conducting student observations would reveal more information regarding their experiences in the flipped classroom. A final limitation involved the role or the value of the course textbook, which seemed to diminish with the employment of the narrated PowerPoint videos. By emphasizing the value of both the textbook and video through teacher practices, a precise investigation into the effects of implementing the flipped strategy can be undertaken. In future studies, the content in the videos should be carefully structured to supplement, not to replace, the course textbook or the primary material.

The study did not fully verify the extensive positive effects related to students' perceptions and student performance in flipped classrooms that was found in much of the literature. Nonetheless, the findings provided some insight into the potential of this pedagogical strategy in ESL content classes given that the results did not indicate major faults. Whether the flipped classroom strategy influences performance is still debatable. However, as Lockwood (2014) argued, instructors should not solely rely on the quantitative results as much as students' positive attitudes and the classroom environment, which cannot be easily measured. The student participants were not hesitant about utilizing technology and recognized the benefits of the flipped classroom: personalized speed for comprehension and class preparation, class time used for revision and active learning, instructor's role as a facilitator, and comprehensible features in the videos including voiceover and visuals. Further research with consideration to the limitations mentioned above can involve a variety of technological tools and innovative practices within the flipped classroom model to contribute to a deeper, more concrete understanding of its potential in ESL settings.

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Appendix A

Pre-/Post-course Questionnaire

Questions	Circle one 1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Agree 4. Strongly Agree
Lectures greatly help me learn the topics. / Video-lectures greatly helped me learn the topics.	1 2 3 4
In-class discussions with my classmates greatly help(ed) me learn the topics.	1 2 3 4
I participate(d) in in-class discussions.	1 2 3 4
Reading the textbook for homework helps(ed) me learn the topics.	1 2 3 4
Overall, I prefer learning new topics in class and doing critical thinking questions for homework.	1 2 3 4
Overall, I prefer learning new topics for homework and doing critical thinking questions in class.	1 2 3 4
When I have/had to read the textbook for homework, I read it before class.	1. Never 2. Rarely (almost never) 3. Some of the time 4. Most of the time 5. All of the time

Appendix B
Post-course Questionnaire

In this class, you were asked you to complete lecture notes for homework. Then in class, we reviewed the lecture and you worked on answering critical thinking questions with your partner.

1. Did you like this style? Yes / No
   Why or why not?

2. What did you think of the videos (narrated PPT videos online) made by the teacher?
   Good / Bad
   Why or why not?

Appendix C
Student Responses to the Post-Course Questionnaire

Did you like this style? Yes / No	Why or why not?
yes	yuki always helped me
yes	I can understand more about the topic; I can check
yes	I like to use PC; Internet is very good
yes	less students
yes	it is good to be willing to learn new topic because I think "be willing to learn" make you understand topic more
yes	because I had time to think and talk about the topic; I can ask you about the topics
yes	easy to understand
yes	We share our opinion. I like discussion in class; Yuki always review in class. And we did pair work, so we can easy to understand.
yes	It was easy to understand; I could think about critical thinking, so I understand with own words.
What did you think of the videos? Good / Bad	**Why or why not?**
good	I can understand
good	I understand easier
good	it is easy for me, so I could understand
good	I can watch other presentation easily
good	many photos and pictures made me understand topic better
good	many picture helped me understand
good	cause of include voice
good	We could easy to understand. We could compare about my opinion and these presentations
good	I could review before tests.

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