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The “flipped-hybrid” classroom: A didactic technique for teaching foreign languages

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The objective of this investigation is to determine if the “flipped” model can be combined with hybrid learning in order to create the “flipped-hybrid” classroom. The flipped classroom refers to an educational model where the traditional practice of dedicating class time to direct instruction is inverted, so that students receive initial content instruction at home. In addition to this, students in this study’s “flipped-hybrid” classroom participated in synchronous online conversations with native speakers and engaged in pre-class activities, thus making a significant component of the course online. The participants in this study, which lasted the duration of the spring 2017 semester, included college level Spanish students. Results from this pilot study suggest that the “flipped-hybrid” technique is a viable alternative to the traditional classroom, provides students with additional opportunities to use the language in authentic situations, and encourages more spontaneous language use. A detailed description of the “flipped-hybrid” classroom and how it differs from a hybrid or a flipped classroom is included, as well as pedagogical implications.

Introduction

Foreign language educators often find themselves in situations where there is simply not enough time during class to teach, provide opportunities for language use, and integrate culture or community into the classroom. Some have found that the flipped classroom is the solution to this problem. In its simplest terms, the flipped classroom is about moving homework to the classroom and moving lecture to the home, so as to “flip” or invert the traditional classroom experience (Gerstein, 2012). While the flipped classroom has been implemented with success in the foreign language classroom (Bachelor, 2017; Torres, 2016), others have expressed concerns about student accountability, technology, and the perceived loss of an active teacher (Lo & Hew, 2017).

The purpose of this paper is to address some of those concerns by creating a new technique: the “flipped-hybrid” classroom. The flipped-hybrid

classroom is different from the flipped classroom in that the latter, in its most basic of definitions, only requires that the lecture take place outside of the classroom; however, nothing is prescribed in terms of that lecture (online videos, recorded audio, or simply pre-class readings), pre-class homework or activities (the earliest flipped classrooms required no outside-of-class homework), time spent online, or the use of the target language (Papadopoulos & Roman, 2010). The flipped-hybrid classroom attempts to create a more structured approach to flipped learning in the following ways:

- lectures take place online
- post lecture activities take place online prior to class
- class time is dedicated to “experiential exercises, group discussion, and question and answer sessions” in the target language (Gerstein, 2012)
- homework is online
- live conversations with native speakers take place online
- 25% of classroom experiences (lectures, post lecture activities, homework, and live conversations) occur online, thus meeting the hybrid threshold (University of Louisville, 2015).

In order to explore the effectiveness of the flipped-hybrid classroom, the present study piloted this technique in the spring 2017 semester. A control group was established for comparative purposes. Additional information about the research method, results, and pedagogical implications are discussed in the following sections.

Background and justification

Lectures, content, and background knowledge have traditionally been presented in class (Johnson & Renner, 2012). For the foreign language classroom, this may pose a particular problem. As the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages [ACTFL] (2010) explains, language educators and their

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students are to use the target language “as exclusively as possible (90% plus),” as this exposure allows students to develop language and sociolinguistic proficiency through comprehensible input. The issue at hand is that “[foreign language educators] are running into grammar-driven settings in which the first language predominates” (Crouse, 2012, p. 27), as many instructors worry that they themselves do not speak the target language well enough to be able to effectively teach grammar without using their first language (Curtain, 2013).

These were the main motivations behind a number of foreign language educators’ decision to flip their classrooms, according to Simon and Fell (2013). However, the idea of flipping the classroom occurred in many other subjects before eventually making its way to the language classroom.

While quantitative and rigorous qualitative research on the flipped classroom is limited, there is a significant body of information available from schools across the country, such as Byron High School in Minnesota, where around 30% of students were passing the state’s math exam; upon flipping their math classes, over 70% of students were passing the same state test (Fulton, 2012). Similar stories come from Woodland Park High School in Colorado, where, according to Bergmann and Sams (2012), chemistry teachers documented great improvement in retention and subject matter understanding, especially for student athletes who benefited from the flexibility the flipped design created. Finally, the teachers at Clintondale High School in Michigan expressed concern that lecture-centered teaching was simply not connecting to today’s student. As such, all freshman-level classes were flipped, which resulted in failure rates dropping by over 30% (Green, 2012).

While these documented cases are promising, the large majority took place at high schools and in core subject areas. Additionally, these cases were not followed by quasi-experimental studies or in-depth analyses in order to discover other potential variables. Some exceptions include the study by Torres (2016), where heritage learners of Spanish documented improvement in their writing skills. Likewise, Bachelor (2017) sought to flip his community college Spanish classroom by employing control and experimental groups. It was found that the flipped classroom students improved in oral communication skills and language spontaneity more than the students in the traditional classroom.

However, as briefly mentioned in the introduction, the flipped classroom model is an extremely vague concept that has been implemented differently across the board. According to Fritz (2013), teachers at the school he studied had interpreted the flipped classroom to mean simply that lecture takes place outside of the classroom and homework takes place inside the classroom. This led teachers at this school to record their lectures as video or audio on CDs or through the school’s learning management system, or to provide students with

pre-class readings that took the place of lecture. Some teachers then handed out what had previously served as homework worksheets and had students fill them out during class time with the help of the instructor and peers (Fritz, 2013). This idea does not lend well to the foreign language classroom, as teachers who strictly follow this model will create an environment where the target language is rarely used in meaningful ways.

Due to this interpretation of the flipped classroom by some, the researcher of the present study decided to modify this model in order to address the above concerns, and combined the flipped classroom with hybrid learning. A class is considered hybrid or “blended” when somewhere between 25–79% of class experiences take place online (University of Louisville, 2015). While the flipped model simply moves lecture to the home and moves homework to the class, a flipped-hybrid class ensures the at-home lecture is interactive and combines new information with follow-up questions and activities, all online. In the traditional classroom, homework is rarely interactive, so the flipped-hybrid technique keeps homework outside of the classroom and moves it fully online. In-class experiences are limited to partner activities, question-answer sessions, role plays, information gap activities, and any other type of activity that cannot be performed alone. Finally, class sessions are followed up with occasional synchronous conversations with native speakers online. All-in-all, the amount of online work is increased significantly so that 25% of class experiences occur online, thus converting the flipped classroom into an interactive hybrid classroom that shares flipped elements.

The study design, including the specifics of how the flipped-hybrid classroom was implemented by this researcher, is found in the following section, along with results of a pilot study of this new technique.

Methodology

The following research questions were written to determine if the flipped-hybrid technique is a viable option:

1. What effect does the flipped-hybrid classroom design have on a foreign language student’s ability to communicate effectively?
2. What effect does the flipped-hybrid classroom design have on a foreign language student’s summative test scores?
3. What effect does the flipped-hybrid classroom design have on the instructor’s ability to speak exclusively in the target language?

The pilot study took place during the entirety of the spring 2017 semester in two sections of SPAN 102, a second semester college-level Spanish course. A college in the Midwest of the United States agreed to participate in this study. Institutional Review Board authorization was granted, and among the two sec-

The “flipped-hybrid” classroom: A didactic technique...

tions of SPAN 102, thirty-seven (37) students chose to participate and signed consent forms, eighteen (18) in the experimental group (section two) and nineteen (19) in the control group (section one). The purpose of the control group was to determine if study results could be attributed to other variables, such as grammar and vocabulary lessons. For this college, thirty-nine (39) students were enrolled in SPAN 102 in the spring 2017 semester; as such, the thirty-seven (37) participants constituted 95% of the available population for this study's sample. Demographics for the groups were consistent with those of the college: the institution directly reported the following (2014): 5,286 students enrolled, 23% minority enrollment, 33% first generation student enrollment, 32% of students received financial aid, average student age of 24, and 16:1 student to teacher ratio.

Throughout the semester, the same content was provided in the two groups via the communicative teaching method by the same instructor, and the students in both groups took the same assessments. However, the second section of students, referred to as the experimental group, learned via the flipped-hybrid technique.

For this study, the flipped-hybrid classroom was implemented the following way:

- students received instruction at home via online tutorials on *MySpanishLab*
- students completed input activities and eText exercises online after the “flipped” video and prior to class
- in-class time was dedicated to communicative activities (task-based activities, meaningful exchanges, problem-solving activities, role-plays) and/or questions
- online synchronous conversations with native speakers via *TalkAbroad* enhanced the student experience, comprising an hour of conversation spread out over the semester.

As a significant amount of additional work was assigned to students in the experimental group (online lectures, pre-class videos, online homework, online synchronous conversations), on ground class time was reduced from four (4) hours weekly to three (3) hours weekly. Students received three (3) on ground credits and one (1) online credit, thus qualifying the course for hybrid classification per the institution where the study took place. The hour per week difference in the control group was primarily dedicated to lecture and input activities, class practices that the experimental group experienced at home.

During the study, the following instruments were employed in order to answer the above research questions:

1. Two oral exams (to answer research question number 1; quantitative component).
2. A final exam (to answer research question number 2; quantitative component).
3. An instructor journal (to answer research question number 3; qualitative component).

The oral exams were created by the course instructor and consisted of role plays with scenarios that were assigned to students randomly. 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 received between 50–64 points out of 100 for failing to contribute to the conversation, using monosyllabic answers, lacking enthusiasm or involvement, or making so many grammatical errors that speech was almost incomprehensible. An example of one possible role-play required students to exchange information with each other to decide if they were compatible roommates.

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 *preterit* conjugations (regular and irregular), the *imperfect*, the *preterit vs. the imperfect*, *reflexive verbs*, and *direct, indirect, and double object pronouns*. The results of the pilot study, along with pedagogical implications, are discussed in the following section.

Results

For Instrument 1 (the oral exams), an independent *t* test was used to determine whether two sets of scores were significantly different. This data set was used to answer Research Question 1 on the effect of this design on effective communication among students. The following was found, per SPSS:

Control group: $M=82.51$, $SD=14.60$; experimental group: $M=87.08$, $SD=11.03$; $t(35)=1.0697$, $p=0.2921$. According to SPSS, this difference is not considered statistically significant. However, it should be noted that scores in the experimental group were higher than scores in the control group. The experimental group oral exam average was 87.08%, while the control group average was 82.51%, a difference of 4.57%, which was considered notable by the course instructor.

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

Control group: $M=68.5$, $SD=13.41$; experimental group: $M=72.12$, $SD=18.95$; $t(35)=0.6737$, $p=0.5050$. As with question one, this difference is not considered statistically significant. Likewise, the experimental group average was 72.12%, while the control group average was 68.5%, constituting a difference of 3.62%.

For Research Question 3, the daily teaching journal from the experimental group noted that instructor use of the L1 (English) was slightly reduced, that L1 use by students was also reduced, and that the use of the target language increased slightly among students. The instructor also noted that the flipped-hybrid technique promoted an environment that increased student responsibility and supported a class where all students were engaged.

Pedagogical implications

The flipped-hybrid classroom produces results as equally positive as traditional teaching methods, considering that there was no statistically significant difference between the control and experimental group scores. Therefore, the flipped-hybrid classroom must be considered a viable alternative to the traditional classroom. While the differences were not statistically significant, students in the flipped-hybrid section did perform better in oral exams and in the final exam by approximately 4%, which would constitute a statistically significant difference in larger samples. Due to the improved assessment scores and the conclusions drawn from the journal, the instructor of this course plans to continue with the flipped-hybrid technique in subsequent semesters.

As a viable alternative, this study suggests that the flipped-hybrid classroom is superior in nature due to the approximate 4% difference in scores and to the conclusions drawn from the instructor journal: this design contributes to reducing the use of the L1 among teachers who struggle to explain grammar in the target language, and reduces the use of the L1 among students. Likewise, the use of the L2 among students increased, likely due to the hours' worth of live conversations with native speakers, thus contributing to increased spontaneity among students.

As with all studies, certain limitations exist, such as the data collection period (one semester), and the number of participants. Additionally, applying this design to other settings may not be appropriate, depending on the resources available to the instructor and students. For the present study, *MySpanishLab* was used for online tutorials and activities. These tutorials and activities were created by the textbook publisher. For institutions whose textbooks do not provide online resources, the course teacher would have to create all of his or her own lectures, online input activities, and online homework assignments, which would likely take a significant amount of time and dedication, or, if the new practice became a priority, could lead to adopting appropriate textbooks.

In conclusion, educators seeking to provide their students with additional opportunities to use the target language in meaningful ways should try to implement a version of the flipped-hybrid classroom. Additionally, bringing live conversations with native speakers to students provides them with a sense of

community that is often neglected in the foreign language classroom (Ferrante Perrone, 2015).

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The “flipped-hybrid” classroom: A didactic technique...

Abstract

The objective of this investigation is to determine if the “flipped” model can be combined with hybrid learning as to create the “flipped-hybrid” classroom. The flipped classroom refers to an educational model where the traditional practice of dedicating class time to direct instruction is inverted so that students receive initial content instruction at home. In addition to this, students in this study’s “flipped hybrid” classroom participated in synchronous online conversations with native speakers and engaged in pre-class activities, thus making a significant component of the course online. The participants in this study included college level Spanish students and lasted the duration of the spring 2017 semester. Results from this pilot study suggest that the “flipped-hybrid” technique is a viable alternative to the traditional classroom, provides students with additional opportunities to use the language in authentic situations, and encourages more spontaneous language use. A detailed description of the “flipped-hybrid” classroom and how it differs from a hybrid or a flipped classroom is included, as well as pedagogical implications.

Keywords: Flipped learning, hybrid learning, foreign language learning, Spanish as a foreign language

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