



An Attempt to Foster and Enhance Students' Speaking Skills by Using VoiceThread Videos within a Flipped Lesson Plan

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ABSTRACT

My testimony presents a description of an in-class flip lesson plan that uses VoiceThread videos, and which was applied in two different courses of the Academic English Program at the University of Los Andes. First, I provide a general overview of the teaching context. Next, I describe the pre- and in-class activities. Then I present my insights and perceptions about the teaching interaction dynamics and learning culture, which shifted from teacher-centered to student-centered and thus generated a radical change in my students' attitude and behavior. Subsequently, I explain some aspects to be considered for future practices. Finally, I provide an overall conclusion.

KEY WORDS

flipped approach, VoiceThread multimedia tool, active-collaborative learning, classroom environment, professional educator

Uma tentativa de promover e aprimorar as habilidades de fala dos alunos usando vídeos de VoiceThread em um plano de aula invertido

RESUMO

Meu testemunho apresenta a descrição de um plano flip em sala de aula que usa vídeos VoiceThread, e que foi aplicado em dois cursos diferentes do Programa de Inglês Acadêmico da Universidade de Los Andes. Primeiro, apresento uma visão geral do contexto de ensino. A seguir, descrevo as atividades pré e em aula. Em seguida, apresento meus insights e percepções sobre a dinâmica de interação de ensino e cultura de aprendizagem, que mudou de centrada no professor para centrada no aluno e, assim, gerou uma mudança radical na atitude e comportamento dos meus alunos. Posteriormente, explico alguns aspectos a serem considerados para práticas futuras. Finalmente, apresento uma conclusão geral.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

abordagem invertida, ferramenta multimídia VoiceThread, aprendizagem colaborativa ativa, ambiente de sala de aula, educador profissional

Un intento de fomentar y mejorar las habilidades de expresión oral de los estudiantes mediante el uso de videos VoiceThread dentro de un plan de lección invertido

RESUMEN

Mi testimonio presenta una descripción de un plan de lecciones invertidas (*flipped lesson plan*) en clase que utiliza videos VoiceThread y que se aplicó en dos cursos diferentes del Programa de Inglés Académico de la Universidad de Los Andes. Primero, proporciono una descripción general del contexto de enseñanza. A continuación, describo las actividades previas y en clase. Luego presento mis ideas y percepciones sobre la dinámica de interacción docente y la cultura de aprendizaje, que pasó de centrarse en el maestro a centrarse en el alumno y, por lo tanto, generó un cambio radical en la actitud y el comportamiento de mis alumnos. Posteriormente, explico algunos aspectos a considerar para futuras prácticas. Finalmente, proporciono una conclusión general.

PALABRAS CLAVES

enfoque invertido, herramienta multimedia VoiceThread, aprendizaje colaborativo activo, entorno de aula, educador profesional

INTRODUCTION

The working opportunities I have embarked on throughout my life have given me wide ranging experience with different kinds of learners and learning styles. I have always been interested in helping others learn according to their needs as learners and individuals. In addition, I have also seen the value of keeping a record of my significant experiences because I have always learned from analyzing them and passing them on to others. This text in particular reports on my experience after designing, applying and analyzing two speaking projects carried out using a VoiceThread video multimedia tool within a flipped lesson plan. The projects were conceived to enhance and foster the speaking skills of students in two different English levels I teach at the University of Los Andes, in the Languages and Culture

Department, in Bogota, Colombia. Additionally, I present my teaching insights and conclusions, derived from reviewing the students' feedback and my own notes and reflections.

The flipped lesson plans described in this text were based on the general principles of Flipped Learning. This approach has been defined by the Flipped Learning Network as “a pedagogical approach in which direct instruction moves from the group learning space to the individual learning space, and the resulting group space is transformed into a dynamic, interactive learning environment where the educator guides students as they apply concepts and engage creatively in the subject matter” (Flipped Learning Network, 2014). The four pillars that determine the real practice of flipped learning are: 1. *Flexible Environment*, being able to adapt to the specific physical and cognitive spaces of the students in their learning processes; 2. *Learning Culture*, which means shifting to a student-centered approach; 3. *Intentional Content* that involves active learning and conceptual understanding to maximize classroom time; 4. *Professional Educator*, that is, to engage in a learning culture and a self-improvement professional network that includes as the main principles reflection, significant feedback and positive criticism.

On the other hand, VoiceThread is a Web 2.0 tool that gives voice to students by allowing them to take part in asynchronous online speaking activities through the use of audio, video, and text (Mango, 2016, p.38). By using VoiceThread, pupils can write comments on a discussion session, and also add audio and video comments by using the doodle tool, which allows them to point to their main ideas or clue words. Additionally, a PowerPoint slide or image can be inserted as background to the comments or video provided (Negash & Powell, 2015). Because of the system's wide spectrum of uses, the number of research articles on VoiceThread is on the rise.

In the following section I present: First, the main aspects of the teaching context of my pedagogical experience; secondly, the description of the pre-class material made to introduce my lesson plans and the detailed activities I carried out; thirdly, the insights this experience has given me into my teaching practice as a professional; fourthly, I suggest some aspects to be considered in the future; and, finally, an overall conclusion is provided.

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE TEACHING CONTEXT

English 5 Course

The Academic English Support Program at the University of Los Andes aims to help undergraduate students complete academic tasks in English and to use the language effectively in professional situations outside the university. English 5 is the 6th course in the Basic Cycle that the Academic English Support Program offers. Students come from various majors and are expected to have an exit level of B1 in speaking skills. They receive an 80-minute class every day from Monday to Friday. The course aims to develop a stronger set of reading skills in comparison to other skills. Consequently, and because of time constraints,

teachers need to foster speaking skills beyond the classroom. The materials used are a language textbook called *Pathways, Listening, Speaking, and Critical Thinking* from National Geographic Learning, and the *English 5 Integrated Academic Skills* for reading comprehension, a book designed by language teachers from the university.

English 7 Course

English 7 is one of the intermediate skills cycle courses that focuses on language learning and aspects of spoken language, including pronunciation. Students come from various majors and receive an 80-minute class from Tuesdays to Fridays. Mondays are devoted to the blended learning component of 1.5 hour autonomous online work. The course aims to develop some awareness of the main obstacles to intelligibility, and fosters self-evaluation and autonomy within the frame of learning and memory strategies. The material used is the *English 7 Student Book*, designed by teachers from the University of Los Andes.

DESCRIPTION OF THE TEACHING LESSON PLANS

Lesson Plan English 5

To help students foster their speaking skills, teachers ask them to prepare for the course a speaking project that usually consists of giving a live short presentation. I decided to approach the project differently and designed instead a flipped lesson plan that consisted of making short videos using VoiceThread. I divided the projects into Speaking Task One and Speaking Task Two. The project unified grammar and vocabulary by developing some topics that I gave to the students; the final products were the videos created according to the assessment checklist I made with step by step instructions.

Speaking Task One

This lesson plan was focused on the content of the course book unit we were studying. The topic of this unit was the brain, so I asked students to create an individual two-minute video in which they explained what they did on a daily basis to help their brain work better, and in which they referred to facts they had identified about their own brain and body. For this video they had to use specific grammar and vocabulary covered in class. For the first topic they had to use infinitives after certain verbs, and for the second topic they were asked to use the conditional with the present tense (first conditional). Both topics had to be written in a short script that students were following as guidance; however, they were not allowed to read it in front of the camera.

Speaking Task Two

This lesson plan was focused on launching an awareness campaign to fight hunger in Colombia, mainly in Bogota. This two-minute video was intended to make students practice grammar topics such as the conditional with the future tense (second conditional), gerunds as subjects and objects of the sentence, and imperatives. I also asked them to use some transition words to connect ideas and some language related to chart/graph descriptions to explain statistics or numbers. They also had to write a short script of the main content they were presenting. Group dynamics in this Speaking Task Two involved students being asked to work in groups of two or three.

Peer Feedback Section

After finishing each task, learners were asked to watch some of their partner's videos and to provide feedback. This was essential because students were asked to give thorough feedback as a relevant aspect of their speaking project. In their assessment checklist, a score was given for this part, and this score counted for their final grade in the project. I asked them to give a general and positive comment on their partner's videos, emphasizing its strengths. Then, I asked them to check grammar and pronunciation aspects. Finally, I asked them to check the spontaneity of the speaker, tone of voice, and clarity. In Speaking Task Two, I asked them to write a general positive comment and engaging discussion questions based on the content presented in their partner's campaign.

Lesson Plan English 7

In this level, students are usually asked to write a summary of a text called *Memory*, written by Heather Robertson (1991). In order to help them do it more accurately, I decided to give them a specific note-taking format commonly known as Cornell. This system has a two-inch column on the left-hand side of the page, and 3-4 blank lines at the bottom. I assigned this pre-class activity as mandatory homework, and the quality of their summaries was therefore assessed. In previous experiences with the project, students were also given some questions to answer in advance, based on one of the Guided Speaking Projects presented in their books, which also relates to the main points of the reading. Some of the pronunciation contents such as intonation and word stress were presented using free video resources from the internet.

My previous experience with video projects in English 5 led me to consider doing something similar, adapted to the content I was teaching in this course. Consequently, students were asked to make a two-minute video based on their notes of a text called *Memory*, which explains some of the brain's encoding, storage, and retrieval mechanisms. Additionally, I asked them to work on six specific English pronunciation sounds that required

reinforcement. To guide their speech, students also followed the Guided Speaking Organizer, called “Remembering and Forgetting,” provided in the book. Later, after receiving valuable feedback from one of my colleagues who is widely experienced in this area, I was able to incorporate some positive changes in the project, such as focusing students on more specific vowel sounds by asking them to choose only one sound presented in a minimal pair structure. In addition, I split the video into two parts, the first one as one-minute individual talk, and the second one as a one-minute dialogue with a partner. To guide their speech during the individual talk, students follow a general Guided Speaking Organizer, “Guide to Speaking VoiceThreads,” provided in the students’ book. For the dialogue, students were asked to organize the information as a conversation between an expert, or language teacher, and a student asking for advice on how to improve his/her pronunciation.

Peer Feedback Section

In the previous experiences of the project in English 7, I had asked the students to give mutual feedback according to some parameters related to spontaneity, pronunciation, and content. These parameters were included in a checklist that students had to consider as part of their project. In the improved version of the project I only asked students to write the peer feedback using the Guided Speaking Self-Evaluation Worksheet provided in the textbook. In addition, I provided them with the teacher’s feedback throughout the process. I noticed that by giving these two short video opportunities and through the valuable feedback from their peers and the teacher, students were able to feel more confident and aware of their weaknesses and strengths.

Teaching Insights

The pedagogical experience described in this text results from my own experience and reflection about playing both roles: teacher-student. When I was taught how to use VoiceThreads in class and how to implement the flipped learning approach, I discovered innovative ways to learn, and, consequently, different ways to teach. For instance, the hands-on activities I had to do as a student reinforced my ideas about the relevance of active learning. Indeed, when the time came for me to implement the theory I had learned, I realized how long it took for me to learn certain aspects, such as the settings to create a VoiceThread, or the different variables to keep in mind when designing a flipped lesson plan. I felt anxious and dissatisfied when something did not turn out the way I had planned or expected; this situation helped me to put myself in my students’ shoes and sympathize with them.

Before this experience, I used to teach the previously described content based almost exclusively on the course book. It tended to be teacher-centered because most of the time what I did was to go over the book pages and explain the relevant grammar and vocabulary. I noticed that students became bored and lost interest. I felt frustrated because I could not

see a link between my own interests and emotions as a teacher and those of my students. I noticed that when explaining the main grammar points in the customary way, my pupils could only stay focused for a couple of minutes, and then became completely absent minded. Looking at their cell phones was clearly more interesting than looking at their teacher explaining something that had no connection to them. The same happened with the short live presentations they had to give to their partners. I had to insist too many times on the importance of showing interest and respect for their classmates. Additionally, the pacing of my lesson planning was also affected because, as I noticed, giving instructions or explaining a topic took me longer than expected. Since most of the students were not paying attention to me, I had to repeat the same thing several times.

When I started to implement my new way of teaching, all the pre-class activities I had designed helped me to use time more efficiently, especially in the long run because I was able to use these materials for other classes. For instance, when it came to delivering instructions, I was able to recycle the different “User Manual” presentations that I had made, as well as the short video tutorials explaining the step by step process on how to make videos using the multimedia tool. I also made videos with the main grammar points. This material also fostered students’ autonomy because if they wanted to advance in the project they had to be responsible for watching or reading the material. I also discovered the value of providing learners with real example videos of what I expected their final product to be, since I was playing the student’s role by modeling exactly how I wanted them to work.

In general terms, the teaching dynamics changed because I was moving the main teaching content from the central point of the class to a secondary place. This new learning culture boosted students’ desire to ask meaningful questions in class while they were working, or to find by themselves the answers to their own questions instead of having me give them answers they did not need. This time, it was the students who were raising their hands to ask for help. My role as a teacher was transformed because now students were engaged in the tasks thanks to the fact that they had the starring role and were the center of the activity. I was like a side coach who helped them out with their difficulties, questions, or doubts. Therefore, I had more time to give constant feedback to my students by observing them, taking notes, paying attention to their needs and making adjustments when necessary. I also had the chance to use a different method of student assessment, a formative one, that helped me see them from a different perspective, and we could all together see more clearly what needed improvement, whether in the teaching instruction or in the students’ performance.

I truly believe that finding a connection between their daily academic work and their own learning goals is a very important skill that, as teachers, we should help students to acquire so that they can become more aware of what they do (Gilliland, 2020). Therefore, giving them meaningful tasks and asking them to reflect on what they were doing were essential elements in the project’s development. For example, when students completed their projects, I created an anonymous survey in Google drive to gather valuable information about their perceptions. After analyzing students’ answers, I realized that they provided very positive feedback on the various aspects I was asking them to consider. For instance, they mentioned that they were able to become aware of the mistakes they were making, but at

the same time they could see how much they had progressed. I perceived that the main goal of autonomous learning was taking place because my students were looking at themselves reflectively within the attitude of *stepping back* from their academic tasks.

From the first day of classes I explained to my students that the most important aspect we should look after in our class was to preserve a safe and supportive atmosphere so everyone could feel self-confident, especially when making mistakes. To me, it is the core of any learning process because the emotional dimension is its backbone. In my own learning experience, it has been essential to feel supported and welcome, and in particular to be accepted the way I am, with my weaknesses and strengths, as any other human being. I noticed that setting this tone in class contributed to having a very positive attitude among students and towards the class. I proved my perception when I read some of my students' feedback: *"It was a great atmosphere where I can participate, learn new vocabulary and other skills;" "I know people and the teacher always help me when I need it."* Additionally, in order to foster a more self-confident and low-anxiety atmosphere, I gave my pupils the possibility to work and practice their speaking skills beyond the classroom. In fact, some students who did not feel confident with videotaping themselves in class were allowed to do this specific part outside of class, whether on campus or at home. A student said: *"The main thing, personally, you lose the pressure to speak in public and you achieve a more pleasant and uninterrupted exposure."*

Moreover, to enhance an active and collaborative learning practice, I allowed them to work in groups (Abeysekera and Dawson, 2015). Most of them pointed out that teamwork made the process more enjoyable and easier to carry out. The principle of *competence, autonomy and relatedness* that is essential when you want to flip a class was also evidenced (Talbert & Bergmann, 2017). In fact, when I asked them about the most positive aspects of the speaking project, many students said things like these: *"The positive aspects were the group work, the improvement of my pronunciation and above all the personal growth;" "The fact that it was in groups and we [they] can help us;" "It was great. To practice making videos in groups allows to develop more skills."* Furthermore, students expressed their positive reaction to peer feedback because they had their classmates' point of view and impressions, not only the teacher's. They were given the chance to see each other and compare themselves to the whole group in a constructive way. In addition, there was a space for self-assessment to make students reflect on the effort each one of them put into the project. Regarding this point, some students said: *"I could practice my speaking, and compare my speaking level with my classmates."* (Evaluating Skills); *"Yes, it's always important see the way other people see our attempts to talk in English, because is a way to see what kind of mistakes do we have."*

All in all, I have evidenced in my own teaching practice all the four pillars of the Flipped Learning approach: The *Flexible Environment*, because the videos that I used were available when needed. In fact, during the current COVID-19 pandemic I have continued to prove that it is well worth using them in class. A *Learning Culture*, because my classes shifted into a student-centered modality. The *Intentional Content*, due to it being an active learning process within a maximized classroom time, and the *Professional Educator*, thanks to the self-improvement professional network I have had at the university.

ASPECTS TO CONSIDER FOR FUTURE PRACTICES

I noticed that some students had to deal with technological difficulties, for several reasons such as the kind of computers they had, or the browsers they were using. I consider constant feedback and support by teachers to be a must during the process.

Some students didn't watch the video tutorials I created or didn't read the instructions carefully; consequently, they had to ask too many questions to the teacher or peers to know how to handle the VoiceThread tool; and some of them did not place the videos in the right location. I think that this situation evidences that autonomy needs to be taught as well; therefore, accountability actions that guarantee students' commitment is essential to avoid frustration along the way.

Although creating a video script helps students clarify some doubts about grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation, some students tend to read it in front of the camera. Consequently, playing the student's role or showing the expected results may contribute to getting the big picture of what the students should attain.

Some students prefer to videotape themselves outside the classroom, but university policies don't allow students to take the computers out of the classroom. Therefore, we can favor shy students by asking them to videotape themselves at home or to bring their own laptops so that they can find an appropriate place to record themselves.

If students do not use headphones or earplugs, sometimes the noise in the classroom interferes with the clarity of the video sound. It is absolutely crucial to provide them with the necessary materials, or to ask them to bring them to class to assure sound clarity.

If students do not take advantage of the class time given for the project, their academic load does not allow them to finish their tasks successfully. Thus, it is necessary to make it explicit that the teaching dynamics must change from a responsive learner attitude to a responsible learner one. (Mehring et al., 2018, p. 21).

Additionally, I could infer that having students being exposed to the VoiceThread videos multimedia tool for a longer period of time increases their chances of taking advantage of all the resources at their disposal. In fact, the more they were exposed to it, the more they became familiar with it. For instance, the use of the doodle tool that helps students point out some aspects in the video while they are talking was not fully used the first time they were making their videos. However, when they were making the videos in the following tasks, they started using it appropriately. Consequently, frequent brief opportunities to have students exposed to the tech tool increase their proficiency in using it.

CONCLUSION

I consider that the main conclusion I can draw from this pedagogical experience is that I felt immersed in a growth mindset atmosphere, that is, my students and I were given the chance

to do our best, to work hard regardless of mistakes we might make in the various roles we were playing. I am sure this kind of testimonial might also change other teachers' mindsets and give them different ideas about how to teach any given topic. (Dweck, 2006)

The open communication we had during the process allowed us to see each other as members of a learning community. We, as a community, valued working hard individually and in groups, practicing in front of the camera several times; getting feedback from the teacher and from peers; and *stepping back* to listen to each other and watch the videos with a constructive critical point of view.

As to my own experience, if I compare my starting point of this teaching practice with the achievements at the end of this experience, I can see that there is a line that connects them due to the VoiceThread videos, the flipped approach, and my own reflection because they have given me a self-directive process. I have learned in a proactive way, within my teaching exercise, even during these difficult pandemic times. In Zimmerman's and Pintrich's words, I have experienced: "self-generating thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that are oriented to attaining goals" (Talbert & Bergmann, 2017, p. 47)

Last but not least, being immersed in a supportive and enhancing academic atmosphere has contributed enormously to my professional growth and teaching experiences. In fact, the insights and ideas taken from my colleagues and coordinators have given me inspiration to innovate and continue my professional growth. I feel thankful and honored to pass on this testimony to others.

The following annexes are available here:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/14hJThjilO2nXk-AHg4pPTFpIrljAoV_7V/view?usp=sharing

- Annex 1:
Tutorial screenshots and written instructions in the English 5 project.
- Annex 2:
Written instructions and assessment checklists in the English 7 project.
- Annex 3:
Feedback Format on My Partner's Videos - English 5
Peer Feedback Speaking Tasks 1 - (2 parts) English 5
- Annex 4:
Picture of pages 99 and 87 from the English 7 book for Pronunciation - Guide to Speaking VoiceThreads.
- Annex 5:
Previous peer feedback questions and new peer-feedback format in English 7
- Annex 6:
Screenshots of the Google forms of students' feedback on the project

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