Brief Report

SUCCESSFULLY FLIPPING THE ESL CLASSROOM FOR LEARNER AUTONOMY[1]

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One of the most significant current discussions in education is that of the flipped classroom. According to Bergmann and Sams (2012) and Strayer (2007), a paradigm shift from the traditional educational model to a pedagogy-centered approach has received considerable attention, and extensive research and practice have been carried out in the field of classroom flipping (Fulton, 2012; Moravec, Williams, Aguilar-Roca, & O'Dowd, 2010; Pierce & Fox, 2012). Research on classroom flipping, however, has mostly focused on general subject areas, such as biology (Moravec et al., 2010), mathematics (Fulton, 2012), and pharmacotherapy (Pierce & Fox, 2012), rather than language learning. Therefore, its effectiveness in the English language teaching (ELT) setting still remains untapped. This paper introduces a flipped classroom model for an adult community English language program in the United States in 2013. A new course structure was designed by combining Nation's (2007) "four strands" approach and Strayer's (2007) theoretical framework of flipped learning. As the semester came to an end, a positive impact on learner autonomy among the ESL students was witnessed. Based on this experience, this paper aims to present a theoretical model of flipped learning in second language acquisition by exploring how the model provides a platform for successful language leaning and results in the significant development of learner autonomy.

Keywords: cooperative activities, educational technology, flipped classroom, learner autonomy

This paper is based on a five-week summer intensive English as a second language (ESL) course that the author taught in 2013 in an adult community English language program at a private graduate institution on the East Coast. The program provided ESL courses to adult international learners with diverse backgrounds and varying English proficiency levels. Likewise, the Advanced Level 5 (A5) students in the program showed significant levels of diversity, with a total of 14 students from nine different countries. Due the limited time frame, the students wanted something beyond what people usually expect from ESL courses, and they aimed at making the best of their summer course.

To meet her students' expectations, the instructor had to devise ways to satisfy students' needs and wants within the time constraints. This paper seeks to explain how the instructor attempted to solve this problem by exploring the following questions:

1. Is the class flipping model applicable to second language acquisition?
2. What does an A5 class structure look like?
3. Did the class flipping model foster A5 learner autonomy?

Theoretical Model

Nation (2007) suggests an ideal language course would consist of four equally balanced strands: Meaning-focused listening and reading; language-focused instruction; meaning-focused speaking and writing; and fluency development activities. Unfortunately, most English teachers face obstacles, such as limited class time (Gandara, Maxwell-Jolly, & Driscoll, 2005); therefore, they end up focusing on one or

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two strands. Nation and Newton (2008) point out in their book, *Teaching ESL/EFL Listening and Speaking,* that fluency development has remained the most neglected component among the four strands. English instructors, however, should not make light of the development of fluency, since the fundamental purpose of language is communication. In their comprehensive usage-based theory, Tomasello (2009) put a strong emphasis on the actual usage conventions of a target language. Nation and Newton (2008) claim that "If the items that have been learned are not readily available for fluent use, then the learning has been for little purpose" (p. 153). Nation (2007) also states:

> [G]iving equal time to each strand is an arbitrary decision. It has been suggested that the time given to the strands could change as learners' proficiency develops . . . At the higher proficiency levels, fluency development could take a greater proportion of the time. (p. 8)

The adult community English language program divides its courses into four levels: *beginner, intermediate,* and *advanced,* with each level further divided into six levels, and *advanced studies* as the highest level. Advanced Level 5 (A5) is the third highest level. Considering the high English proficiency level of A5 students, allocating slightly more proportion to fluency development can be justified. Therefore, the following elements were considered in designing a syllabus for A5 students: (a) equal engagement in all four strands, with activities to enhance fluency development in particular; (b) creative ways to overcome time constraints; and (c) an effective use of students' intrinsic motivation. One condition merits emphasis here: Although Nation (2007) clearly points out that fluency development includes listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, the A5 in the course mainly focused on fluency development in speaking. This was an inevitable choice that resulted from the limited time frame and the reflection of the needs analysis, in which all the students (100%) indicated they would like to focus on speaking.

Another emphasis of the course was autonomous language learner training rather than a dramatic language improvement, which was considered highly unlikely given the short time frame. In their book *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning*, a collection of different perspectives on learner autonomy, Benson and Voller (2014) quote the Collins COBUILD English language dictionary to define the term *autonomy* as "the ability to make your own decisions about what to do rather than being influenced by someone else or told what to do" (as cited in Benson & Voller, 2014, p. 4). This was the exact goal of A5: To train students so they would know how to learn English effectively and independently. Therefore, there was a need for learner training. Learner training is critical for effective language learning (Chamot & Kupper, 1989; Wenden, 1986) and for learner autonomy (McDevitt, 1997), because it provides students with the guidelines for more systemic ways to master target language input. Without proper training, it is highly likely that students, even the ones with high motivation, would not know where to start and would become easily lost even if they have abundant materials to study. For example, many adult English learners choose the TV news for authentic language input, but are often discouraged by an unfamiliarity with the news content and the linguistic difficulty involved (Bahrani & Sim, 2011). By providing effective ways to use the authentic materials, sources, and techniques for language learning that were already available and accessible, students were expected to continue their study after they returned to their home country. Therefore, A5 was designed to introduce active self-study strategies for language learners and establish a guidepost to locate supporting materials, both contextual and linguistic.

After several attempts to integrate the theory and the practice of language learning, the instructor decided that a flipped classroom model, an emerging trend in the educational field, would be implemented to maximize A5 students' learning opportunities both qualitatively and quantitatively. According to the definition from the Flipped Learning Network (2014), a flipped classroom is explained 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.

Basically, students are provided with out-of-class instructional materials electronically and are expected to read, study, and review them independently. They spend in-class hours practicing and mastering the learning objectives. In this way, a flipped classroom can provide extensive and intensive language input to students, while students study materials at their own pace. Strayer (2007) suggests a conceptual framework of a flipped classroom in the following diagram (Figure 1). He claims that the learning environment in the flipped learning model is influenced by the "extensive use of educational technology outside of class" and "active learning during class time" (p. 15).

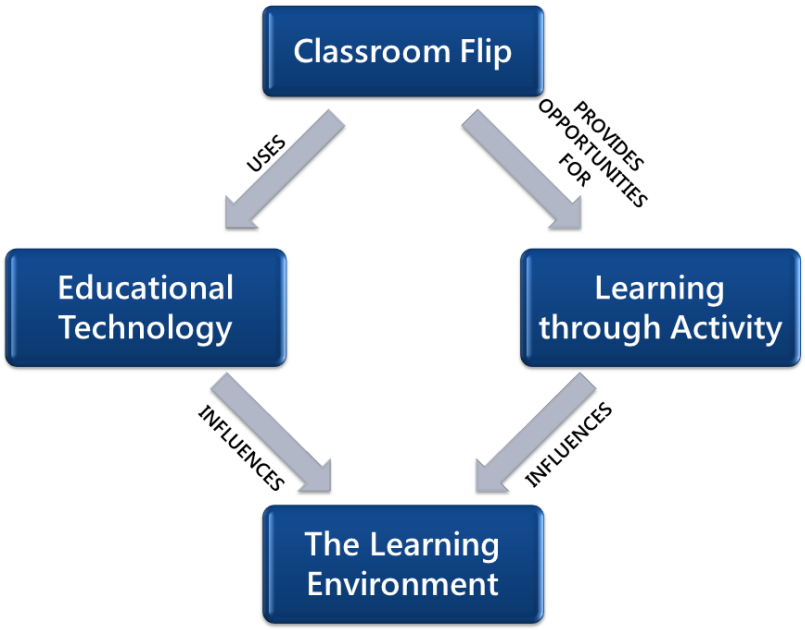

Figure 1 *Theoretical framework of the flipped classroom.*

From Strayer, 2007, p. 15; used with permission.

By combining Nation's (2007) four strands and Strayer's (2007) flipped classroom model, a new class structure was designed for A5, as shown in Figure 2.

For the educational technology, A5 used a course website, Google Voice, where a wide range of meaning-focused and language-focused input was provided; in addition, Google Voice was used to offer extra opportunities for meaning-focused output. Students could digest input at their own pace while spending in-class hours on cooperative activities, which provided meaning-focused output and fluency development. Using this structure, the instructor could create a well-balanced language learning environment outside of class that guaranteed intensive and extensive contact with the target language. In class, students had ample opportunities to practice what they knew and what they had learned. This

Methodology

This section describes the operationalization of the theoretical model discussed in the previous section. After an introduction to the students of A5, a detailed description of the course structure follows.

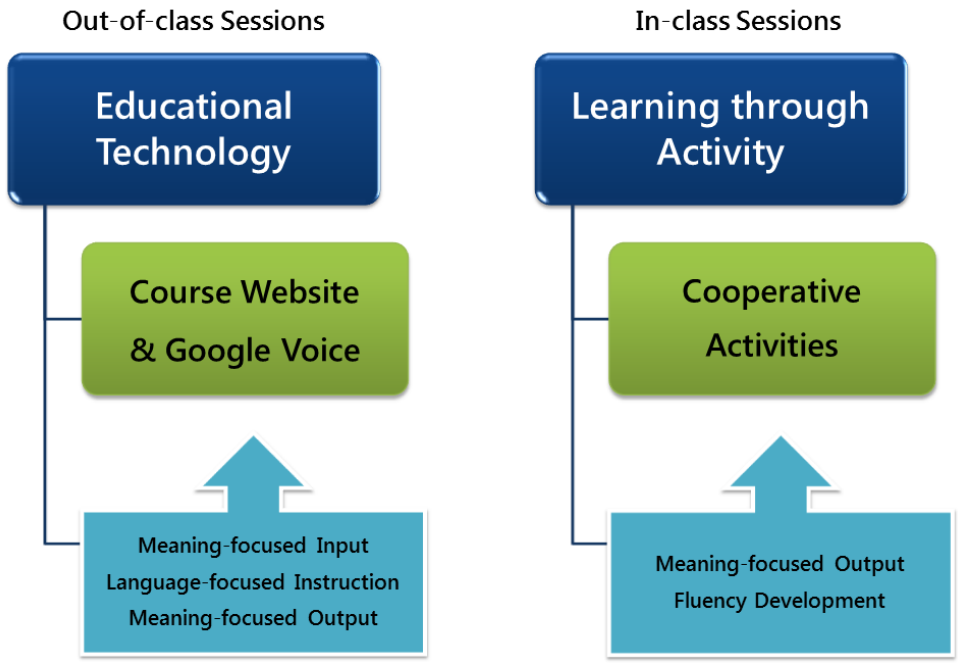

Figure 2 *A5 class structure.*

Students of Advanced Level 5

There was a total of 14 adult students from nine different countries in Advanced Level 5 (A5) in the Summer B semester. Five students were native Japanese speakers, and three were native Spanish speakers. Two students spoke Chinese, and one spoke German as a native language. One student spoke Portuguese. One student was a native Turkish speaker, and one was a native Vietnamese speaker. During the five-week intensive course, students attended class for 2.5 hours from Monday to Friday, covering materials from Units 5 to 8 in *In Charge 2* (2nd ed.) (Daise, 2002), a theme-based textbook organized into five sections—reading, speaking, listening, grammar, and writing. The instructor taught from Mondays to Thursdays; Friday classes were taught by four students from the TESOL Certificate Program at the graduate institution as part of the curriculum. The Friday instructors were usually in charge of the reading and listening sections of each unit, which meant that the instructor covered the rest—speaking, grammar, and writing, and a unit test—one each day. Since Friday classes did not implement the flipped classroom model, this paper excludes Friday sessions.

A needs analysis conducted on the first day of the class documented strong student motivation to learn English and a high expectation for language improvement. It took more than 35 minutes for all the students to complete the 15-item questionnaires. In two previous semesters the instructor taught, students spent less than 20 minutes on similar questionnaires. When answering the multiple-choice questions on their most problematic English skills, six students (43%) not only marked the options, but also explained their anxiety and frustration in detail. Students also spent a large amount of time answering the short essay question, "What other things do you want your teacher to know?" Seven students (50%) expressed their specific expectations and needs, and three of them (21%) reported to the instructor that they had to return to their home country in the middle of the semester; thus, they wanted to receive truly intensive training. This was not surprising, though, considering the fact that volunteer

students generally have a high level of motivation, and relatively lower levels of anxiety and more specific learning goals were expected (Black & Deci, 2000).

In addition, the needs analysis showed that all the students had home Internet access on their own laptops or mobile devices, such as smartphones and tablets. When asked about their familiarity with technology, six (43%) students answered they were not really familiar, and four students (29%) indicated that they were moderately familiar. Three students (21%) indicated they were quite familiar, and the remaining student (7%) claimed to be was very much familiar. This influenced the construction of outside-class sessions, which are described in the next session.

Class Design

Divided into four parts, this section first examines how technology provided a platform of active learning outside of class. The second section reviews the in-class sessions that focused on learning outcomes. The third section provides a description of the final project, and the last section reports the development of the learner autonomy of A5.

Outside-class session: Course website and Google Voice. Outside-class sessions aim to help students explore multiple methods and tools that can expose them to meaning-focused input. The development of technology and the Internet has obscured the boundary between ESL and EFL learners, as EFL learners now have access to authentic materials from the target culture. Therefore, the ultimate goal of A5 was to empower students to continue their English learning by helping them use resources that were available on the Internet or in the media. Without fully recognizing it, students familiarized themselves with various methods of language learning and learned strategies to use the methods. Their progress was witnessed during the final presentation, which will be discussed in the third section.

The first task was to identify a platform for a course website that would meet students' needs. The initial plan was to use a course website as a digital community where students could interact with one another and study collaboratively during the out-of-class sessions, maximizing both language input and output. Therefore, class management tools with built-in interactive features, such as Canvas by Instructure, were considered. Practical problems, however, brought the plan to an impasse. As mentioned earlier, although most of the students viewed classroom flipping in a favorable light, they were concerned about their unfamiliarity with technology and wanted the course website to be as simple as possible. The five-week time constraint was another issue: There was not enough time for the students to receive technology training. If it is a burden for the students to use the interactive features because of their low technological fluency, there is only a remote possibility that they will determine the best ways to use the technology.

As a result, Google Sites was selected as a course website, because four students already had prior experiences with the site from their previous semester, as many instructors in the program also used it. Also, because of the flexibility Google provided in customizing the site layout, the instructor could design a simple course website that gave students access without needing to log in. Once the course website was created, all course materials were posted, and supporting materials (such as a glossary of metaphors, idiomatic expressions, and cultural references) were posted as well, so that students could master the core content before they came to class.

A significant difference between the usual flipped classroom and A5 is that A5 used prevalent media content, such as YouTube videos and TEDx Talks, to meet three criteria; contextualization, authenticity, and sustainability.

The first criterion was contextualization. To achieve this, the instructor included carefully chosen materials within a target theme from the textbook to provide repeated use of contextualized vocabulary. Several researchers have also pointed out the effectiveness of repetitive and contextualized linguistic items (Brinton & Gaskill, 1978; Washburn, 2001). These items enable students to experience new

vocabulary repeatedly and identify their usages in rich contexts. Contextualized materials also foster students' content knowledge, which facilitates linguistic comprehension.

The second criterion was to enhance the authenticity of the target language. Nikula (2002) states that input from academic contexts usually fails to provide sufficient pragmatic knowledge, due to a lack of authenticity. Authentic multimedia allows English learners to access a wide range of linguistic resources and genres that textbooks cannot provide, which can "stretch the boundaries of the classroom" (Sherman, 2003, p. 2). In addition, researchers have suggested that authentic input not only enhances linguistic competence, but also teaches English learners about social practices (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986; Norton & Toohey, 2001). They also stress that both linguistic knowledge acquisition and social practices are indispensable factors for successful language learning, and should be introduced for this reason. Consequently, multimedia content provides what Smith (1997) called "virtual realia"—digitalized simulations of the target language culture.

The last criterion for materials selection was sustainability. As discussed at the beginning of this section, the main goal of A5 was to help students continue their studying after the five-week course was over. Therefore, it was critical that students had continuous access to the target input. The questions considered were: Can students still access the qualitative and authentic sources after the semester is over? Is the content reliable and does it present up-to-date cultural and linguistic features? It was expected that if the instructor introduced the source for the input, along with effective learning strategies to master it, it is likely that students would autonomously pursue their own learning.

In addition to meaning-focused input, students spent a considerable amount of out-of-class time on meaning-focused output by using Google Voice to compensate for the loss of interaction from the class platform. At the end of each unit, a comprehensive topic was assigned to the students, and the students were required to produce an oral presentation on that topic using Google Voice. Google Voice was the main method of meaning-focused output that responded to students' low familiarity with technology. Using any configured phone, students could call the instructor's Google forwarding number and leave a voice message. Then, mp3-downloadable voicemail messages were delivered to the instructor's gmail account, and the instructor uploaded them onto the course website.

Google Voice produced an unexpected phenomenon among students. They began to use it as a barometer of their pronunciation development. It is noteworthy that there was no direct instruction given for pronunciation from the instructor because of the time constraints. The students, however, were already aware of the accurate pronunciation of newly learned words and/or expressions from constant exposure to the given media content on the web. Students listened to their oral presentations, identified their own mistakes with pronunciation, and submitted new drafts that attempted to fix their problematic areas.

The uploaded voice files played another critical role by increasing motivation. The example of Student A demonstrates this. Within 48 hours, she had produced a total of three drafts responding to the topic "Should we allow teenagers to use a smartphone?" When her first and last drafts were compared, no dramatic change in her pronunciation was found, and a significant improvement in her speech rate was noticed. It had taken one minute, six seconds for Student A to complete the first draft; she, completed her third draft in 50 seconds. Of course, fluency development should not be misinterpreted as simply producing faster target language items (Schmidt, 1992) or repetitive drills of target language structures (Duff, 2000). Student A's shortened speech rate was caused by smoother linking sounds and intonation, while still maintaining clarity and a natural rate of speech.

Student A was also able to clearly perceive the improvement herself. As she did, everything changed. She was excited by her own progress, which became a huge motivating factor for her and increased her enthusiasm in submitting oral presentations.

Cooperative activities for in-class sessions. The second emphasis was on in-class activities that augmented meaning-focused output and fluency development. Assuming that students studied an adequate amount of input, activities for the automatization of newly learned items were required—that is,

it was vital to provide students with plentiful opportunities to reproduce what they had learned. For this reason, in-class sessions mainly consisted of cooperative activities, which can be performed by one key player, rather than group activities. According to Kagan (1994), cooperative learning has five principles: positive interdependence, individual accountability, equal participation, simultaneous interaction, and group processing. All these principles are also fundamental for autonomous learning, because cooperative learning increases students' responsibilities to maximize their own and each other's learning (Sachs, Candlin, Rose, & Shum, 2003).

Therefore, cooperative activities comprised a large proportion of in-class sessions. Each day, students were required to use what they had learned from the materials uploaded on the course website via various cooperative activities (see Appendix A for a sample activity). Sometimes, students were assigned a piece that formed a "jigsaw" with the other student pieces, so that they could present their segment to the group to synthesize the information. On other occasions, students studied target grammar rules by watching YouTube tutorials and gave lessons to each other through cooperative activities. In this way, students replaced the traditional role of the teacher by becoming active presenters of content, which placed the primary responsibilities for learning on the students themselves. In addition, especially when studying grammar items, each student reproduced what he or she had mastered at home in their own way, creating various interpretations of the given input. When the class studied conditional sentences (such as those including the conditional *if,*[2] the instructor deliberately selected two YouTube videos that explained the target grammar structure differently. One video divided conditionals into three categories: first conditionals, second conditionals, and third conditionals; the other video added zero conditionals for a total of four categories. Students were asked to select only one video and study the grammar rules it featured. When students came to the class next day, the instructor had them teach these grammar rules to their partners, using inner-circle and outer-circle activities. This resulted in a heated discussion among students who had watched different videos as they tried to explain what they had learned. The debate ended when the students realized that they were discussing the same grammar rules, but with different labels. During the discussion, the instructor noticed students' simultaneous—and accurate—replication of words, phrases, and expressions from the YouTube videos. Through repetition with different partners, students reproduced the grammar lessons by using the terms and example sentences from the tutorial videos. The quality of their reproductions improved, along with their oral fluency, The students expressed great satisfaction with cooperative learning, because of the level of output they produced and their increased fluency.

Final project for learner training. In accordance with program policy, the instructor administered unit tests as a tool for formative assessment (constituting 45% of the students' final grade) and a final exam (30%) for a summative assessment.[3] The tests needed to be synchronized with the evening A5 class, so they were designed to evaluate target language items from the textbook. The instructor, however, felt impelled to provide an opportunity for students to witness how well prepared they were to study English independently in the form of a final project, since the ultimate goal of A5 was training students to become autonomous learners of English. Although it was an ungraded project, all the students agreed with the idea, and it was decided that it would take place on the last day of the semester.

The topic of the final project was related to the first day of the semester, during which students talked about their study plan and ways of taking full advantage of being ESL students. Students were expected to make a presentation with practical suggestions on the topic, which was "How should ESL students learn English in America?," by introducing authentic and practical materials with self-study strategies to their classmates. Students had two weeks to prepare their 20-minute presentation, using out-of-class sessions by interacting with their partners online and offline. Supporting materials for making an effective presentation were provided on the course website during a preliminary session.

[2]The conditional *if* was not one of four grammar items from the textbook, but was covered to satisfy students' requests.
[3]Other criteria for grading were class participation and attendance (10%) and homework assignments (10%) and Google Voice (5%).

The final presentation was intended to play a role as a summative assessment tool—not for language proficiency but learner training. Accordingly an analytical rubric for self-assessment and a checklist were designed to offer more direct guidelines. On the day of the presentation, the students presented practical and useful learning strategies with strong information literacy skills, demonstrating that they knew where and how to locate relevant tools and materials on the Internet. In their presentation, titled "Learning Language: Language barriers and Cultural barriers," for instance, Team A talked about the importance of learning English with cultural references. Their suggestion to alleviate this issue was to watch American TV shows with Hulu, a website that streams a large selection of TV shows and movies on demand. Team A then encouraged their classmates to apply the language items and cultural references they consequently learned from Hulu in real-life situations and social practices by using event-listing websites such as Club Free Time. Directly after the final presentation, the students exchanged their experiences wih how A5 had changed them and how much confidence they had gained from it.

Successful development of learner autonomy. As mentioned earlier, the students had practiced the means of autonomous English learning with carefully constructed materials and activities. At the end of the semester, the signs of development of learner autonomy were identified.

The first indicator of fostered learner autonomy was derived from Google Voice submissions. This was a low-stakes assignment, constituting 5% of the students' final grade. It was not the instructor's intention to overwhelm the students with an excessive workload outside of the classroom; the main purpose of Google Voice was to create more opportunities for meaning-focused output. So the instructor encouraged the students to submit one draft for each topic to receive full points. Topics were assigned on weeks 2, 3, and 4, and a total of three drafts were requested at the end of the semester. All students submitted at least three drafts, and the average number of submissions per student was 4.28. Half of the students submitted more than four drafts, with an average number of 5.57 submissions for each of these students; the highest number of submissions from an individual student was eight One student, who returned to her home country in week 3, also participated by reviewing a topic and its supporting materials on the class website and sending a voice file to the instructor.

Another positive impact on learner autonomy was observed during the final, ungraded project. The students actively and voluntarily contributed their time and effort, and searched for resources and technological tools that were authentic, practical, easily accessible, and sustainable; they were inspired by their progress, which reinforced their motivation. This final project demonstrated the successful development of students' learner autonomy, introduced innovative changes into students' attitudes toward learning, and enhanced their language abilities.

Discussion

The course structure of A5 proved that Strayer's (2007) theoretical framework of classroom flipping can be successfully implemented into English learning. By using both in-class and out-of-class sessions, the instructor was able to create expanded learning opportunities to ensure a well-balanced distribution of Nation's (2007) four strands. The students exposed themselves to English outside of the classroom with the assistance of technology. The class website worked as a platform for supporting materials, with various modes for meaning-focused and language-focused input. Google Voice facilitated meaning-focused output. After digesting the target items at their own pace, students attended classes to learn through cooperative activities. Several cooperative activities were routinized as another means of providing meaning-focused output as well as opportunities for fluency development. Because the flipped classroom structure requires students to be actively engaged in learning in parallel with leaner training, the development of learner autonomy could be observed.

Although the A5 course structure demonstrates the positive implications of classroom flipping in language learning both theoretically and practically, some uncertainties should be considered regarding learner autonomy. First, the sustainability of learner autonomy is unclear. Although the instructor used

two indicators (Google Voice submissions and the final presentation) to determine the impact of classroom flipping on learner autonomy, these indicators lose their reliability in a different time frame. The five-week time constraint was the biggest drawback for students; at the same time, however, it also stimulated students to make the most of their time in class. The semester ended when students' motivation was at its peak, which explains their active participation. There is no guarantee that students would have maintained the same level of leaner autonomy by the end of a longer semester.

Another uncertainty is raised by the cause of learner autonomy. There is a possibility that there were hidden factors beyond the flipped classroom structure itself that influenced learner autonomy. One aspect that can be considered is the students' high motivation. As shown in the needs analysis, the students in A5 presented a high level of prior motivation, and it is unclear how the class would have developed with students having a lower initial motivation. If the learner autonomy of A5 can be attributed to students' motivation rather than the class design, the effectiveness of classroom flipping becomes inconclusive.

In addition to learner autonomy, another practical limitation for the instructor was the workload. The instructor did not generate her own content, but it took almost the same amount of time to prepare class materials as it otherwise would have. Approximately four hours of preparation time was spent daily on searching, evaluating, and contextualizing the content on the course website. Teaching the same course every semester requires an initial investment of time and effort, since the content can be recycled with slight modifications, gradually lightening the workload. Teaching a different level each semester, however, presents significant challenge for the instructor.

Conclusion

The A5 summer B semester signified an important turning point for both the students and the instructor. Strayer's (2007) class-flipping model was shown to effectively facilitate Nation's (2007) four strands in the ESL setting. Pairing cooperative activities in class with technology outside of the classroom allowed the instructor to cover all four strands as intended. Google Voice and the final project indicated a positive impact on learner training and autonomy. Although there are still several major drawbacks to be resolved, the flipped classroom model clearly demonstrates significant potential for use in language classes. More extensive research in this field is imperative.

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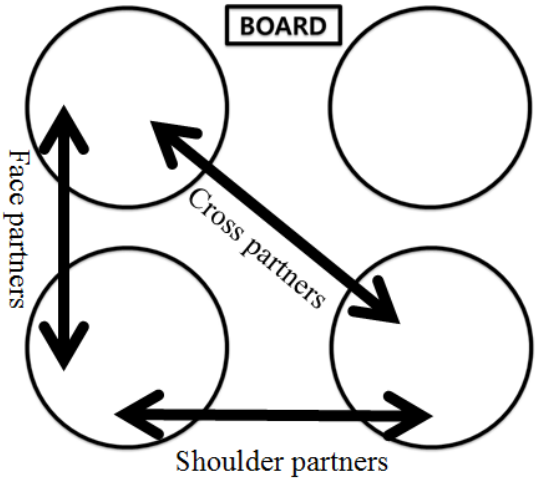
Appendix A

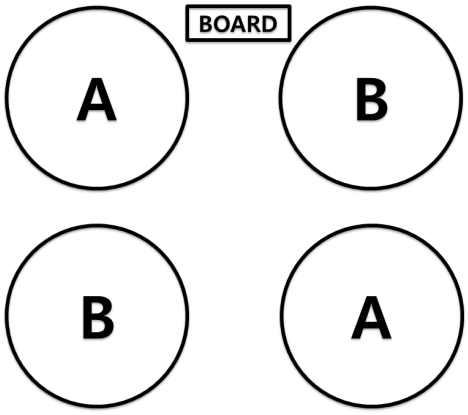
Daily Activity 1

Materials: The teacher prepares two new reading materials (readings A and B), ensuring that the readings contain vocabulary from Unit 4 and supporting materials on the course website. Highlight the words and expressions that students should focus on (the teacher can make this a "jigsaw" activity).

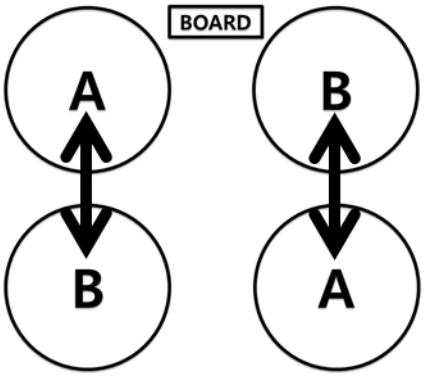
1. Students form a group of four and sit so that each student has a face partner, shoulder partner, and cross partner.



2. The teacher distributes the readings. Students have 2 minutes to read the material carefully. They can talk to their cross partners for better comprehension.

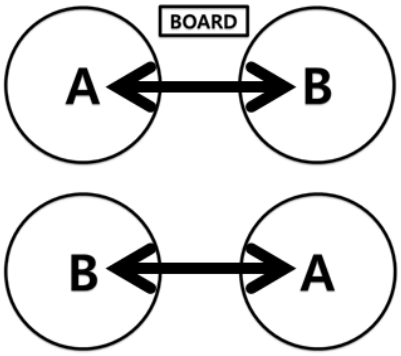


3. Students with Reading A have **1 minute** to explain what they have read to their **face partners.** They need to do their best to reconstruct the story as much as possible, using the highlighted vocabulary in their explanation. The students then **switch roles.** This time, students with Reading B have 1 minute to explain what they have read to their face partners.



4. The teacher gives students **30 seconds** to read the article again to gain more information and organize their story.

5. Students with Reading A have **50 seconds** to explain what they have read to their **shoulder partners.** They need to do their best to reconstruct the story as much as possible, using the highlighted vocabulary in their explanation. The students then switch roles. This time, students with Reading B have 50 seconds to explain what they have read to their shoulder partners.



6. When students are finished, they **exchange readings** with their shoulder partners. Have students **compare** the readings and what they have heard from the two different partners.

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