Flipped Learning Activities for Virtual Classes
by *Andrés Villalba*

As an English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher, I started using technology in 2006 when I had to teach Aviation English to a group of pilots in Argentina. In my lessons, I made use of walkie talkies, flight simulator software, and audio files on mobile phones (they were not smartphones just yet). That experience motivated me to share my practices with other teachers, showing different ways to use technological devices that in most cases had not been created for educational purposes. Almost 10 years later, I came across the flipped learning methodology, which I have adopted as the basic model for most of my lessons and that has resulted in very useful and enriching activities for online learning, which became the normal mode of teaching for nearly all teachers during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic.

Since the beginning of 2020, education has extended from the physical space into virtual formats. Teachers have become familiar with different and innovative ways of presenting their lessons in this new bimodality, and most have learned to feel confident when interacting virtually with students to help them acquire content and develop language skills.

I personally consider that flipped learning represents the evolution of the application of technology in the classroom in order to teach (and learn) a language as well as other subjects, and to get students to practice writing, reading, listening, and speaking. Before implementing flipped learning—and especially implementing it in a virtual classroom—it's important to learn the principles behind the methodology as well as how to plan, organize, design, and create motivating and student-responsive activities.

The Benefits of Using Flipped Learning

Flipped learning is a framework that enables educators to reach every student. In a traditional classroom, during class, teachers usually lecture and lead activities, and then as homework students do further enrichment and reinforcement activities. Basically, the flipped approach inverts the traditional classroom model by introducing course concepts before class, allowing educators to use class time to

- guide each student through active, practical, innovative applications of the course objectives;
- increase time learners spend interacting and communicating, building rapport among students and with students;
- focus on more demanding activities; and
- explore the topic in more depth, deepening subject understanding through group interaction, classroom discussion, and problem-solving activities.

All of these benefits apply to both in-person and virtual flipped classes. By applying the methodology, teachers can integrate into activities resources, such as songs, images, and documents, directly from the screens of learners' smartphones or tablets. Flipped learning also provides the opportunity to give students individual space and to encourage learning autonomy, favoring a student-centered approach.

Markham (2011) introduces the concept of having students interact cooperatively and use digital tools to produce high-quality products. Bergmann and Sams (2015) believe that flipped learning "enables students to take ownership of their own learning and allows for more interaction time between teacher-student and student-student. It also means the class becomes student-centered, rather than teacher-centered, and makes the class easier to differentiate" (p. 5).

In order to design flipped activities and plan their application, teachers must be aware of four pillars: flexible environment, learning culture, intentional content, and professional educator (Flipped Learning Network, 2014). The strategies I provide in this article consist of an integration of activities and tools (technical devices and apps) that respect the four pillars:

- **Flexible Environment:** The activities can be used either in the physical classroom or in the virtual classroom and for the different stages in a lesson plan.
- **Learning Culture:** The activities are student centered; once you have shown students how to use the tools, they will be in charge of completing the tasks at their own pace, and, as they can access the available material any time, they will be able to revisit the contents and lessons as needed. This is a way to foster the autonomy our students need for future studies contributing to their learning culture and habits.
- **Intentional Content:** For flipped learning, perhaps more than with traditional learning formats, you have to plan your lessons very carefully. Much of the content, conceptual and procedural, must be prepared, adapted, curated, and designed for specific purposes.
- **Professional Educator:** This is one of the most important pillars because teachers who feel confident to innovate in methodologies and practices are more likely to obtain successful results.

Ways to Use Flipped Activities for the Different Skills

To begin, I'd like to remark that activities developed under the flipped learning model are also supported by other relevant learning models, such as computer-assisted language learning, language and content integrated learning, and collaborative learning.

The strategies presented here have been used to practice and evaluate the four macro skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) by making use of phone apps, computer software, and websites. They consist of traditional activities enhanced by the use of simple, friendly technology that teachers and students can manage easily, resulting in products that are meaningful for our students.

Focusing on the Macro Skills

English language teachers generally deal with the language as an integration of different aspects, such as culture, general knowledge, authenticity in materials, relevance to students,

grammatical elements, and the use of vocabulary. However, there are moments when teachers have to focus on specific aspects of the language to help students improve their communicative competency and achieve both accuracy and fluency.

The following examples, used for practice and in some cases for assessment, respect the two spaces proposed by flipped learning: the individual and the group spaces.

> **The individual space:** This represents that place (at home/the library) before class where teachers present material for students to meet, learn, and understand new content, techniques, and procedures. This material usually consists of a video, a tutorial, or information uploaded on a platform that has been designed by the teacher.

> **The group space:** This space, the "classroom," which has now been moved to virtual video meetings (synchronous class time), is where the students put into practice what they learned in the individual space. Teacher and students get involved in more dynamic, interactive activities while using simple tools, such as a chat box, and complex tools, such as voice recognition apps or software.

Reading and Listening

Individual Space

Reading: As a way to enhance reading comprehension activities with the use of technology, you can present a text in a traditional way, posting it on a website, sharing it during a Zoom meeting, or otherwise projecting it in the classroom. In this space, you can explain the different ways to analyse a text to understand the topic. They explain and show how to apply skimming and scanning or how to spot and mark nouns, verbs, adjectives, and so on to be used in sentences/answers.

Listening: Like reading, listening is a receptive skill, so the same strategy can be used, but instead of showing a text, you can show a video or play an audio file.

Group Space

Students can use the chat box, an email, a [jamboard](#), or a [Google form](#) to answer questions about the reading or listening text. (When using Google forms for evaluation purposes, you can set the form to respond to students with immediate feedback/correct answers.) Ask your students to apply the techniques learned before class and, by getting immediate feedback, you can also provide recommendations and observations to improve reading and listening strategies.

Although the activities will be done by the whole group, there are two important outcomes in this space: You will have the opportunity to give general feedback to the class and specific feedback for individual students. And, as each student will be using their own laptops or phones, they will be able to do the activity at their own pace. Some students will finish soon and can continue with other tasks and other students will be able to reread the text or replay the files as many times as they need.

Writing

In order to practice writing, one of the most motivating and useful strategies that can be used is the collaborative writing process, or peer assessment.

Individual Space

This strategy starts with showing and explaining the sections in a piece of writing according to the type of text the class is addressing (a description, a letter, a narrative, an essay, etc.). You can record your screen, remarking on main ideas, formulas, the guiding/starting sentences in the introduction, plot, and so on. Students can practice by writing draft copies or by completing some models.

Group Space

For this skill, present the assignment with a worksheet configured in the format of three text boxes.

In the first box, the student will write their composition. In the second box, a peer will write comments, corrections, and recommendations the first student should follow to improve the composition. Finally, in the third box, you will provide the final feedback and the grade, if necessary (See Figure 1).

This activity and the worksheet format can be adapted and presented in a printed version or used directly as a collaborative file/board. When students use an electronic tool to write something, they can contact and communicate with students outside the class, for example, the same level/course in another school. Students can also send their compositions to each other for observations, recommendations, or for peer assessment.

Figure 1. Collaborative peer review example.

Speaking

Individual Space

I remember when I was studying to be a teacher and I had to improve my pronunciation. I used to record my speech on a cassette to know what I had to correct and improve. Well, now there are many kinds of software that can show, or dictate, what you are saying on the screen. Speechnotes.co, an open site for note-taking and dictation, is very helpful for oral practice. For the most fruitful use of the tool in this strategy, teach students how to use such a note-taking site or app before class time.

With Speechnotes.co, as you enter the site, you can click on a microphone and the site will type and show everything that you are saying. You can also listen to a text you input by clicking the speaker button.

This tutorial can be attached to a text and the corresponding task, for example to explain the topic, summarize, or give an opinion. The speech students prepare will be used in the group space during synchronous class time.

Group Space

You and your students can use the site to see what students have just said (or what they said during their individual space time) and then correct their pronunciation. I personally use it to register my students' oral presentation, and with that I can evaluate the vocabulary used, the grammar, the connectors, and other linguistic features according to the different levels of the language.

Conclusion

The integration of flipped learning activities has proved particularly relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the whole world trying to cope with extraordinary teaching and learning demands. The pandemic and the importance of virtuality as a complement to face-to-face learning have led to a new concern: innovation. Flipped learning and technology must be integrated to improve our students' experience in EFL class.

References

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