



Práctica oral en línea de expresiones de inglés de negocios mediante el Uso de Flip[®]

Online Oral Practice of Business English Expressions by Using Flip[®]

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Resumen

La productividad de los juegos de roles se ve comprometida en una clase de inglés para Negocios en línea con diez estudiantes de nivel pre-intermedio, debido a la pobre interacción entre ellos. Por consiguiente, se cuestiona cómo mejorar la práctica oral utilizando una aplicación de video llamada Flip[®] (anteriormente Flipgrid[®]). Se utiliza un método cualitativo de investigación empírica. Los resultados muestran que la práctica oral con Flip[®] no mejora, debido al miedo de los estudiantes de evidenciar sus errores. Sin embargo, Flip[®] permite la retroalimentación específica. Se requiere mayor investigación con estudiantes avanzados que pudieran tener más confianza al grabar.

Palabras clave: clases de inglés en línea, Microsoft Flip[®], práctica oral, aplicaciones de video

Abstract

Productivity of role-plays is compromised in a Business English online class of ten pre-intermediate students, due to the poor interaction among them. Therefore, the research question of how to improve oral practice by using a video-based application called Flip[®] (formerly named Flipgrid[®]) is stated. A qualitative action research method is used. Results show that oral practice after using Flip[®] is not improved, mainly because students fear making their mistakes evident. However, Flip[®] allows the teacher to provide students with specific feedback. Further investigation is needed to try the application with advanced students who may feel more confident when recording.

Keywords: Online English class, Microsoft Flip[®], Oral practice, Video-based applications

1. Introducción

When teaching a second language, learners should be provided with productive, purposeful, interactive, challenging and authentic speaking opportunities (Thornbury, 2005). Role-plays and simulations are normally the preferred activities to provide students with opportunities to learn target language with proven effectiveness (Zaidi, Rani and Rahman, 2017). However, in remote learning, decreased interaction among learners and reduced teachers' supervision (Mohammadi, 2010) have compromised the productivity of those speaking activities (Amirulloh, Damayanti, and Citraningrum, 2020).

That was the case in a pre-intermediate Business English online course with ten students in a private university in Mexico. The course book, *Business Result* (Grant, Hudson and Hughes, 2019), included the practice of key expressions through role-plays, but when students were set in pairs or teams in breakout groups for the activity, only a few students actively participated, and students not willing to communicate were seriously affecting those who did.

A qualitative study was conducted to answer the question: "how to improve the online oral practice of key expressions of pre-intermediate Business English students by using the application Flip®?". This research was based in several authors, like Amirulloh, Damayanti, and Citraningrum (2020), who have reported the use of Flip® (previously named Flipgrid®), a video discussion platform by Microsoft® for university students, focused on improving speaking skills in English.

A simulation and a role-play were re-designed for Flip®. Videos were recorded by the students in the application, transcripts were generated automatically by this platform, and downloaded by the teacher and a validation group to be assessed based on: range of expressions, accuracy, using functions and fluency.

Results showed that oral practice of key expressions after using Flip® was not improved and fluency decreased. Flip® tasks were challenging and students feared making their mistakes evident in their videos. However, Flip® gave the teacher the opportunity to actively listen to each student and to give them specific feedback. In addition, it was found that strong scaffolding is needed for students to complete the tasks in Flip® successfully. It is suggested that further research be conducted in the use of Flip® for advanced students who are more likely to overcome these problems.

This action research project is intended to contribute to online English teaching by emphasizing the need to evaluate applications for particular purposes and in specific contexts before integrating them into the virtual classroom. It is for the teachers to research and to decide, based on evidence, on the tools that will benefit their students better.

2. Research Method

2.1. Situational context

This research was conducted in a private college in Mexico, where a Business English course is mandatory for all students during their first two years of undergraduate studies.

The syllabus of the Business English course is aligned to the course book series Business Result (Grant, Hudson and Hughes, 2019), by Oxford University Press. Each unit of the book includes a fluency-based section focused on the practice of fixed expressions, which was the target of this research.

2.2. Participants

Ten students that integrated a pre-intermediate online course, were conveniently selected because they attended most of the sessions and turned in the required work on time, fulfilling the requirements. Students were all Mexicans, Spanish-speakers, in their first year of college; both male and female, around 18-20 years old, located in the cities of Guadalajara, León or Aguascalientes.

The researcher was the course teacher. A validation group integrated by the Head of the Teachers Department in campus Aguascalientes, the leader of the English Academy, and an outstanding student in level 3 supported the research.

2.3. Method

The method was a qualitative approach action research, based on an iterative cycle that implements a change in teaching techniques, motivates reflections on the changing process, and then propose another adjustment based on what was learned from reflections and finally reflects on the change again (McNiff, Lomax, and Whitehead, 2003).

2.4. Reliability and validity

A rubric was designed specifically, combining the institution's general oral production rubric, the one suggested by the publisher of the course book (Grant, Hudson and Hughes, 2019), and the sub-skills identified by Lackman (2010). Triangulation of results was made with the validation group.

2.5. Data collection techniques

Observation of videos and their transcripts.

2.6. Evaluation of data

Data was made by comparing the students results when they role-played in the online class, before action, to the results obtained when they used Flip® offline, after action. The comparison was made with the lowest grades of each category, because if Flip® proved to be effective in worst-case scenarios, would be productive in better conditions.

3. Results

3.1. Before the use of Flip®

The starting activity of the research was conducted online as specified in the course book, and was called “Making and Receiving Phone Calls” (Grant, Hudson and Hughes, 2019). The main aim was to talk on the phone effectively. The subsidiary aims were to learn key expressions and improve fluency, in order to get more autonomy.

Basically, students worked in pairs in breakout groups to prepare their dialogue, then, back in the main virtual room, they presented the result of these interactions to the class. Error correction was made at the end of the presentations by mentioning the main mistakes and eliciting the correct form from students.

The role-plays were observed and transcribed by the teacher. The transcriptions were assessed by the teacher and the results were triangulated with the validation group, using the rubric designed for this purpose. Four criteria were observed: range of expressions, that evaluated how many of the expressions were being used, accuracy in expressions, that checked if the expressions were used with the correct structure, using functions, which referred to coherence in the use of expressions, and fluency in the conversation. The level of achievement was graded as “insufficient”, “progressing”, “proficient” or “outstanding”.

In the role-plays, range of expressions was overall achieved as proficient. Accuracy was graded as insufficient in two out of the five transcripts, the use of functions was graded as progressing, and fluency was outstanding in all the role-plays.

3.2. First action using Flip®

Flip® was used for the oral practice of key expressions in a simulation activity, called “Giving a Research Report” (Grant, Hudson and Hughes, 2019), which was the first action. The main aim of the lesson was to give a short oral presentation to summarize, in a structured and effective way, the results of a market study. The subsidiary aims were to learn key expressions and improve fluency, towards a better level of autonomy.

Students had to prepare a research report using key expressions and recording the result in Flip®. Then, they were expected to watch their classmates' videos and to write a comment for the video they liked the most. The video with more comments would be acknowledged in class.

Students expressed their concerns about their classmates watching their videos. So, the teacher proposed students to use the filters available in the app to avoid being seen, but students were so reluctant to record their reports and make their mistakes evident, that the teacher decided to discard the interactive part of the task and activate the moderated discussion mode available in Flip®. By using this option, the teacher could be the only one able to watch the videos.

Preparation and production stages were completed offline by each student and feedback was provided by the teacher in a private comment directly in the application.

Only seven out of the ten participants recorded a video. The remaining three said they would record it later, but it never happened. Videos were between a minute and a minute and a half long, and students spoke directly to the camera using only background filters. Transcriptions of the videos recorded by students in Flip® were automatically generated by the application.

These transcriptions were observed and oral practice of key expressions was assessed by the teacher and the validation group, under the four criteria specified above.

There were two transcriptions in which expressions were not used at all, therefore they graded as "insufficient". Accuracy was graded as "progressing" and the use of functions improved to the proficient level. Fluency declined to the "proficient" level.

By reflecting on the first task in Flip®, it was judged that, even though oral practice had been challenging and purposeful, as Thornbury (2005) suggested, productivity was not achieved, so that the task lacked authenticity and it had not been interactive at all. In addition, it was imperative to consider students' fears, so, improvements were definitely needed.

3.3 Second and last action using Flip®

A role-play in pairs was chosen for a second Flip® task, in order to recover interactivity, so, action was taken again in the lesson called "Making and Dealing with Complaints" (Grant, Hudson and Hughes, 2019). The aim of the lesson was to make and receive a complaint and an apologize, and to offer a solution by phone. The subsidiary aims were to use key expressions, and to improve fluency.

Students had to work in pairs or groups of three, and they were allowed to choose who to work with. Then, the teacher created a group for each team in the application Flip[®], so that only those students working together would watch the videos of their fellow team members. One of the students in the team started the conversation by recording a first video and asking about the problem, the next student replied with another video to make the complaint, and the third student, or the first, in case of pairs, answered with another video sympathizing and dealing with the complaint. Each line of the role-play corresponded to a video. Finally, a feature of Flip[®] called Mixtapes, was used in good advantage, to make a single video integrating all the lines and making it look like a real telephone conversation.

The transcripts were again generated automatically in the application and revised by the researcher and the validation group, under the four criteria specified above.

Only one team followed the procedure of replying to a classmate's previous video in order to continue with the conversation, and therefore, obtaining a five-video threaded discussion. The others took turns to be in the camera and uploaded a video, so the goal was achieved. Despite of this accomplishment, the features of Flip[®] were not helpful.

Oral practice of expressions rose again to "proficient", however accuracy was graded as "insufficient" and the use of functions was graded as "progressing". These results were the same as before action, except for fluency that remained in the "proficient" level, instead of "outstanding".

4. Discussion

4.1. Why Flip[®]

The objective of this action research was to improve the online oral practice of key expressions of pre-intermediate Business English students by using the application Flip[®]. This video-based discussion application was chosen because it was originally created to provide each student the space and time for oral practice when virtual classroom did not allow it. For instance, if students had taken turns to give the research report to the whole group of the first Flip[®] activity, they would have had to listen to practically the same presentation ten times, which might have turned into a tedious process for them. And if they had work in teams in breakout groups, some of them might not have participated and the teacher would not have been able to give feedback to each student. Instead, giving each student the opportunity to submit the report offline through a recorded video, managing his own time to watch his classmates' videos, and receiving direct feedback from the teacher in the application seemed the right alternative. However, not everything went as good as expected.

4.2. Flip®'s ease of use

It has been documented (Jaramillo, 2019; Amirulloh, Damayanti, and Citraningrum, 2020; Lowenthal and Moore, 2020; Petersen, Townsend and Onaka, 2020) that Flip® is a user-friendly application but, in order to conduct the activities described in this action research report, the teacher had to be trained to use the administrator profile in the application through the material provided by Microsoft®. If Flip® is to be integrated as a tool for other Business English courses, a training course for the teachers is recommended.

As for students, even though they had already submitted a video when the first action was taken, most of them did not know how to reply to their classmates' video for the role-play, when the second action was in process. Students opted for easier ways to do the threaded conversation, like recording the video together or taking turns in the camera. If the features in Flip® are not taken advantage of, these actions will be equal to just recording a video with a cell phone cam and sending it to the teacher through other means, therefore, it is highly recommended that if Flip® is used, all the features are seized.

4.3. Task design

The simulation and the role-play activities in Flip® were designed following the principles of productiveness, purposefulness, interactivity, challenge, and authenticity suggested by Hedge (2000) and Thornbury (2005) for effective oral practice. Nonetheless, the students' concern about making their mistakes evident for other classmates impeded the achievement of full purposefulness, authenticity and interactivity.

Students' concerns about being on video had already been reported by Lowenthal and Moore (2020), but the reason had not been specified. It was discovered in this action research project that the students were afraid of making mistakes in the video that would be watched by others. In order to overcome this constraint, students could have written a script to be revised by the teacher and then could have had rehearsal with the teacher before recording, but authenticity could have been compromised.

Key expressions changed from lesson to lesson, but difficulty could be considered that remained equal, as the pedagogical goal and the sub-skills to develop in the three speaking tasks were the same, just in a different context.

Scaffolding for students to complete their tasks successfully was definitely needed, as reported by Difilippantonio-Pen (2020) and Edwards and Lane (2021). More scaffolding could have been provided in the preparation of the report, when the first action was taken. As said above, the reports could have been done in class, and once they were ready, the students could have recorded their videos with more confidence, and results could have been better. And in the second action, more support should have been given to guide students in the correct use of the application to create the threaded-form conversation.

4.4. Oral Practice

Oral practice was assessed based on four criteria that pointed to different speaking sub-skills identified by Lackman (2010). These standards were range of expressions, accuracy in expressions, using functions, and fluency in the conversation. Results were compared by using the lowest grade obtained in each criterion, because strong students could deliver outstanding and proficient outcomes, regardless the type of task, while ineffective progress in some students could be more evident in certain activities and more sensible to changes in the teaching practices.

A proficient use of a wide range of expressions was achieved in both role-plays, but not in the simulation task. Basically, in the role-plays, expressions helped students conceptualize and formulate their discourse, which are the first two stages in the speaking process, according to Thornbury (2005), leaving just the last stage, articulation, to them. In the simulation, students conceptualized and formulated their discourse with their previous knowledge and not with the new expressions, so perhaps, more controlled practice was needed before the simulation. As for accuracy and the use of functions, these attributes were better in the simulation because the content for the research report provided by the course book was detailed and precise, and there were less chances to diverge from the topic.

Regarding fluency, the best results were obtained when students performed in class, before action was taken. However, it is thought that students were reading their script. Amirulloh, Damayanti, and Citraningrum, (2020) reported an improvement in fluency when using Flip[®] in speaking tasks, due to the repetition needed to get the video right, but in this research, students hesitated, because they had to look at the camera, and they were not able to read if they felt nervous, and had limited time for their speech. In this project, it was proved that the Flip[®] tasks were actually more challenging than speaking in class, and, as said before, required more scaffolding.

4.5. Limitations of the research

This action research study was conducted with a limited number of participants and they were conveniently selected according to their attendance and homework record. Besides, students were not identified in order to verify their progress from one activity to the next, which implies that, for example, the transcript 1 for each activity were probably elaborated by different students. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized.

There was not a control group to compare results for the same activity with and without the use of the application Flip[®]. For future research, two groups of students can be selected with the same level of proficiency: one as a control group and the other one as the action research group, so that the use of the application is the only variable with an impact on the oral practice results.

Another important approach for future research is to work with students from different culture backgrounds, in order to look for strategies to develop students' confidence and to change their perspective regarding mistakes so that they recognize the value of peer correction in learning.

5. Conclusions

Overall, the online oral practice of key expressions of pre-intermediate Business English college student, was not improved after using the application Flip®. However, some advantages from the use of the application were identified and they are shared below.

Amirulloh, Damayanti, and Citraningrum, (2020) reported an improvement in fluency when using Flip® in speaking tasks, but in this research, fluency decreased. This was attributed to the challenge that recording a video represented for students, as they could not read, they had to control their nervousness, they were required to speak longer and they needed to be more spontaneous. Results could seem disappointing in this matter, but, actually, the constraints that students faced when recording a video were the ones while speaking outside the classroom and executing the task, which might actually be preparing them to overcome these difficulties.

The range of key expressions, accuracy and the use of functions remained stable before and after action. It was believed that the main reason for this was insufficient scaffolding. Difilippantonio-Pen (2020) and Edwards and Lane (2021) reported a great need of scaffolding for Flip® tasks and it was proven true in this research.

Lowenthal and Moore (2020) had already reported students' concerns about being on video but the reason had not been specified until this study, in which, it was found that students fear making their mistakes evident for their peers in the videos, and this seriously affects interactivity in the tasks. Due to this problem, in this action research, Flip® became a means for pre-intermediate students to deliver their production to the teacher for revision instead of what Jaramillo (2019) called a tool for creating engaging speaking tasks. So, further research is needed in order to look for strategies to show students the importance of error correction and peer feedback as part of their learning process.

Despite the results, the use of the application Flip® proved to have advantages: allows the teacher to listen to all the students carefully and give them specific feedback on their speaking subskills. It also allowed time in class for more practice. Flip® could be a successful alternative for the online oral practice of advanced students, who require less scaffolding and might feel confident enough to participate in an interactive way. Further research is suggested towards this direction.

The results obtained in this action research contribute to evidence: when integrating technological resources into teaching, it is crucial to consider, not only principles for effective tasks, and guides for material design,

but also students' needs, their background and the situational context. As said by Lowenthal and Moore (2020, p.36), "video, ..., is not a panacea. Rather, it is how video is used that matters the most".

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