

The Usage of ICT Tools for Speaking in EFL settings

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Currently, the need for computer assisted language learning, including e-learning, has rapidly increased due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, many schools around the world started conducting classes remotely using the internet instead of traditional face-to-face instruction. Delivering class content online was a new challenge for the majority of instructors. Some instructors may have begun teaching online classes feeling concerned about the efficacy of online classes on students' learning outcomes. However, contrary to such instructors' concerns, some students seem to have taken online education positively, mentioning that they were able to speak in online classes more than in traditional classes. Hence, for some learners, online education can be more beneficial than the traditional method. However, it is not yet certain to what extent and in what areas online education is more effective than classroom education and vice versa; further research is needed in order to understand the whole picture of the impact of online education on learning. This paper aims to briefly outline the trends in English education and its reality in Japan, classroom factors that are related to speaking anxiety, and the efficacy of Information

and Communication Technology (ICT) on language education. Finally, I will briefly report on the effectiveness of the ICT tool called Flipgrid¹ in EFL settings.

It has been some decades since communicative language instruction became the primary teaching approach (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996). In the case of Japan, cultivating communicative skills in English has been strongly promoted by Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). For instance, an action plan designed to cultivate "Japanese with English abilities" (MEXT, 2003) was announced in 2003. This action plan aims to have junior high school graduates prepared to have basic conversations in English, and to have high school graduates capable of having daily conversations in English. In spite of such aims, as an English language instructor at the university level, I have observed the fact that few students are able to produce English utterances in the classroom.

According to the existing literature, the classroom environment may hinder some learners from speaking in class. For instance, group size was revealed to be an influential factor on learners' confidence (Cao & Philp, 2006). If the group size is

smaller, learners feel less anxious about speaking, whereas they feel more anxious if the size is larger. That is, talking in front of a larger size group could carry the risk of a loss of face by making mistakes (Cao, 2011; de Saint Liger & Storch, 2009). Making mistakes in the classroom means that learners may get negative evaluations in front of classmates not only by teachers but also by their peers, and such fears decrease their self-confidence in speaking in class. For some learners, the language classroom becomes a place associated with potential loss of face, rather than a place to practice the target language (Baran-Lucarz, 2015). As shown, the classroom is a unique learning environment that has multiple dimensions; whereas the classroom is a place where knowledge and skills are enhanced, it is also a place where output tends to be minimized in order to avoid a loss of face.

Because of the anxiety about loss of face caused by group size, some students might have a more positive attitude towards online education. That is, unless they turn their cameras on, they aren't viewed by classmates. The unique circumstances of online education may make students less anxious about loss of face. However, at this point, it is not realistic to conduct the entire curriculum through remote learning. Since many universities went back to traditional face-to-face learning styles after the summer vacation in 2020 in Japan, it is necessary for language instructors to prepare alternatives to prompt more output from learners and to make learners less anxious about speaking in real classrooms.

The existing literature has revealed promising outcomes using ICT tools such as Flipgrid (e.g., McLain, 2018; Petersen, Townsend & Onaka, 2020; Tuyet & Khang,

2020); Flipgrid helped learners to decrease the level of anxiety and to encourage output (McLain, 2018; Tuyet & Khang, 2020). Moreover, learners were found to have felt more comfortable speaking a target language after practicing it using Flipgrid than before. That is, the learners were able to see what their peers think by viewing other videos on Flipgrid, and sharing similar thoughts made them feel more comfortable and supported (Tuyet & Khang, 2020). Watching other students' videos made learners better able to understand their peers' utterances than in classroom settings, because they were able to watch the videos over and over until they understood. If such tools are beneficial for learners to reduce their level of anxiety and promote output, the tools should be strongly encouraged for in-class use. Unfortunately, it is not yet certain if similar positive outcomes can be obtained in EFL settings in Japan. That is, there are only a limited number of existing studies regarding the use of Flipgrid in EFL settings, especially in traditional face-to-face learning settings in Japan. Positive outcomes were revealed in Petersen et al (2020), indicating that Japanese EFL learners were able to manage discussions using Flipgrid with peers. However, further research is needed in order to find effective ways to integrate such tools into traditional classroom instruction.

During the online education period, I employed Flipgrid for some speaking assignments and as a presentation tool. Based on the concept of Flipgrid, I had originally planned on sharing Flipgrid videos among learners, having group discussions, and having question and answer sessions for presentations. However, in my classes, I did not observe any positive impacts in terms of decreased anxiety by using

Flipgrid. In fact, the majority of learners were unwilling to share their videos with each other. Even though they did not have to talk in front of classmates physically, such unwillingness may have been related to the fear of making mistakes and the resulting loss of face. Hence, in order to maximize the efficacy of Flipgrid and to prepare learners psychologically for speaking, some additional steps may be necessary for learners.

Getting to know each other before sharing videos could be one possible way to psychologically prepare students. If learners know who their audience is, they may feel safer speaking and sharing their videos. However, it is important to keep in mind that a higher degree of familiarity has both advantages and disadvantages. Familiar interlocutors were revealed to affect positively and negatively depending on learners; whereas familiar interlocutors make learners feel comfortable about speaking, such interlocutors also decrease learners' willingness to speak for some learners (Alemi, Daftarifard & Pashmforoosh, 2011; Baran-Lucarz, 2015; MacIntyre & Thivierge, 1995). That is, learners tended to be afraid of making pronunciation errors in front of familiar interlocutors, because pronunciation errors may damage a positive image of them that their classmates have (Baran-Lucarz, 2014; MacIntyre & Thivierge, 1995). Therefore, it is necessary for learners to practice and produce intelligible sounds and to be confident in pronouncing words and phrases in English. Thus, teachers may need to consider to what extent peers should get to know each other, and to integrate pronunciation instruction and practice into class content before sharing the videos.

Although the students in my class were unwilling to share Flipgrid videos with

each other, employing Flipgrid provided learners with opportunities to see themselves speaking English. By viewing themselves, they were able to notice subjectively how their utterances were produced. Whereas viewing their own videos might negatively affect the level of confidence in speaking and anxiety about speaking English, viewing them could make learners aware of points that they need to work on for next time. Thus, employing Flipgrid as a tool to practice speaking can be still beneficial to some extent, even if videos are not shared among learners.

Since the cultivation of learners' English communicative skills has been set as a goal in English education in Japan, it is necessary to provide opportunities for output and learning environments where learners can produce utterances with minimal anxiety. Since language cannot be acquired without output and class-hours are limited, employing ICT tools in class can be a beneficial way to promote development of language skills. Further research is necessary, because English education with ICT tools in Japan is still at an early stage.

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Appendix

¹ Flipgrid (<https://info.flipgrid.com>) was originally created as a video discussion tool so that videos can be shared among classmates and discuss a topic in depth.