



The Flipped Classroom: Is it Applicable to the Japanese Classroom?

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While the “flipped classroom” is an educational approach that is quickly becoming well established in the U.S. – enough to warrant an academic conference in its eighth year (“FlipCon15 - 8th Annual Flipped Conference July 13-15, 2015”) – the term and concept are just beginning to be heard in Japan. Before jumping in and mimicking the trend across the Pacific, it would be beneficial at this stage to first determine to what degree this learning model will be applicable to the Japanese classroom. If not in full, perhaps there are concepts from the approach that can be adapted for use in Japan. In order to determine this, the Bunkyo University English Education & Research Association held a workshop on January 25, 2014. This paper reports on the methods and findings of this workshop.

The Flipped Classroom

The flipped classroom is 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” (“What is flipped learning?”, 2014). In other words, in a traditional classroom, a teacher would present new content during classes and then assign problems based on that content for homework. In the flipped class, students watch or read new content for homework, and then complete problems based on that homework during class time when the teacher is available for help. So, activities carried out in the classroom and at home are reversed, or “flipped”. Many associate the flipped learning model with the utilization of videos distributed through the Internet in order to present the new content. However, a flipped classroom can also be carried out utilizing paper-based materials for this same

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purpose (Bergmann & Sams, 2012).

The concept started with a paper published in 2000 (Lage, Platt & Treglia). Two high school chemistry teachers, Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams, were early adopters of flipped learning and published a book introducing methods, benefits, and problems (2012). In 2011, Clintondale High School was the first school to utilize the flipped method as a school-wide policy (Rosenberg, 2013).

Bergmann and Sams (2012) summarize the benefits of flipped learning. In particular, using video over the Internet allows students to stop a teacher's lecture in order to take notes, or go back and listen again to something that they do not understand. It also helps students who must be absent for several classes, while also allowing advanced students to look ahead to future lessons. Second, assigning exercises based on the lectures during class time instead of as homework increases student-teacher interaction. The teacher is available when students need him or her the most – that is, when they realize that they do not understand. Teachers get to know their students better, and can spend more time with the students who need the most help. It is also easier for students to get help from their peers, because they are all together in the classroom when they are trying to solve problems. Other benefits include increased concentration on the lectures because students listen on their own time, fewer classroom disruptions because students are mostly working on their own problems during class, and higher transparency because parents and the community can also see the teacher's lectures

via the Internet.

Demerits include the time necessary to create the lessons. The format is different from what a teacher has been teaching at the front of the class, so each lesson must be rethought-out. When creating video-based lessons, equipment and knowhow is necessary in addition to time and planning. The method also takes time for both teachers as well as students to become accustomed to. Bergmann and Sams stress that the first year may not be successful. Finally, understanding and support need to be acquired from administrators and parents.

The Workshop

Participants in the workshop included eight Bunkyo University students in the teacher-training program, one student from an outside university, three education professionals (one each from junior high school, high school, and university), and two interested members of the community. In-house foreign language faculty and assistants were also present. The workshop started with a lecture to introduce the concepts and methods of the flipped classroom. The participants then took part in two activities: brainstorming the feasibility of implementing the flipped classroom in Japan, and planning a flipped-classroom lesson based on current teaching materials used in Japan.

Activity 1: First, participants brainstormed the feasibility of implementing the flipped classroom in Japanese schools. The largest barrier found was the difference in daily schedules of students. Many commented that a junior high school or high school student

would have no time to watch a video at home for homework, especially if they were in a sports club. It depends on the school, of course, but there seemed to be a consensus that students were expected to do most of their learning during class time. While an American high school student may expect two to two and a half hours of homework a night, Japanese high school students might return home with only time to eat and bathe, before trying to get at least a few hours' sleep. This is exacerbated when students also attend cram schools, or private after-school classes, in which case they may not return home until eleven p.m. or even much later. In the U.S., watching videos would take the place of working on worksheets of problems. But in Japan, watching videos would be an additional assignment for students who are already overloaded.

In connection with this, some expressed concern as to what would happen if a large percentage of students had not watched the video of the teacher's lecture in time. Bergmann and Sams (2012) suggest having two computers available at the back of the room for students who have not completed the assignment. However, workshop members felt that a much larger percent of the class might not complete the assignments, either willingly or not so, and even if the hardware requirements are met the class could possibly end up with students all watching their teacher on screens. This would be little different from watching the teacher make the same explanation in person, as would happen in a traditional classroom. The lack of evening time availability of students in Japan might have even wider ramifications.

Others were concerned about the time it

would take teachers to prepare the videos, as teachers in Japan hold a variety of responsibilities in addition to their classes that keep them busy late into the evenings. Building up the new lesson plans and videos, even if desirable, may end up only being a dream for those struggling to keep ahead of an already busy schedule.

A further concern unique to Japan would be the official change-over of the national curriculum. In certain years, the curriculum guidelines for schools are renewed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). When this happens, all textbooks are rewritten and released. New textbooks can be completely different from their previous editions, or just slightly updated. For a teacher using video lessons, these videos would have to be updated to match the new textbooks and new curriculum. So even if a teacher does build up a stock of videos to utilize for the flipped method, this work would have to be repeated every few years.

Only one benefit was brought up in the workshop. One group felt that the flipped method would foster a more active attitude toward learning. Japan is known for passivity in the classroom, where students are not required to do more than simply absorb what the teacher is saying. Having students download the lessons and look on their own time would not only require physical action from them, but also take them out of the group mentality. Listening to the lecture on their own time would make it personal, and the ability to pause and go back would pass onto them the responsibility of understanding the content. A coaching atmosphere in class would

also encourage individual exploration, as opposed to a lecture style.

Japanese students are also known for not asking any questions in class. If students are given the time at home to generate questions, and even prepare how they will ask them, perhaps this method might encourage question-asking and more active participation in class.

Activity 2: In the second activity, each group was given different units from commonly used English textbooks at the junior high school and high school levels. They were also given a worksheet on which to plan a flipped classroom lesson. In particular, groups were told to decide what to include in the pre-class homework, and what to do during the 50-minute class on the unit. Then, they were to decide the format (video or paper) for the pre-class homework.

Conversations were quite animated, and all members became involved in the groups' discussions. However, as the end of the workshop started to draw near, it was obvious that none of the groups had started writing on the worksheets. After calling time and inquiring about this, groups responded that the activity was much harder than they had expected. There were many more aspects that needed to be considered before adapting a traditional Japanese lesson in English to the flipped model. An educator in Japan deciding to utilize this method may also find that the planning is more complicated than they had foreseen.

Discussion

The barriers to flipped learning in Japan

are real and need to be addressed directly. Just because the method is finding success abroad does not mean it will find the same success within the Japanese educational system. Applying the techniques and advice of foreign experts on flipped learning to a Japanese classroom may turn out to be a mistake.

However, as Bergmann and Sams (2012) relate, each teacher needs to adapt the ideas to their own situation. The Japanese educational system may require even more adaptation in order to find success. The core of the flipped classroom idea is to rethink what is done in the classroom, and what is done at home. This is a good opportunity for teachers in Japan to reevaluate the content of our classes. In doing so, we may find a new variant of our own of the flipped classroom approach.

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