Flipping the Classroom for higher Education Learners to Improve Productive and Receptive Skills

Invertir la clase con estudiantes universitarios para mejorar las destrezas productivas y receptivas

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Resumen: This study examines the ability of Tourism students to deal with customer complaints by using the flipped classroom approach combined with the implementation of the online *VoiceThread* programme. The study was carried out with a group of 49 EFL students in the Degree of Tourism at the University Complutense of Madrid. The study was carried out in 3 phases: (1) students were provided with audio material containing some useful expressions related to customers' complaints. This material was made available on the Virtual Platform (Campus Virtual) so students could consult it as they needed before the following class. (2) In the computing room, students were asked to listen to a customer complaint and to give a solution by recording their own voices. (3) In order to gather students' opinions about this experimental activity, students were asked to fill in a *Google form* questionnaire. Overall, the results of the study have shown the positive impact of this method on the teaching/learning process in the EFL classes for Tourism students, contributing to their motivation and development of their professional skills.

Keywords: Flipped Classroom; EFL; Tourism; Customer Complaints; Professional Skills.

Abstract: Este estudio examina la capacidad de los estudiantes de Turismo para abordar las quejas de clientes utilizando el enfoque de aula invertida combinado con la implementación del programa en línea *VoiceThread*. El estudio se llevó a cabo con un grupo de 49 estudiantes ILE en el Grado de Turismo en la Universidad Complutense de Madrid. El estudio se llevó a cabo en 3 fases: (1) a los estudiantes se les proporcionó material en Campus Virtual con expresiones útiles relacionadas con las quejas de clientes, que los estudiantes debían consultar antes de la siguiente clase. (2) En el laboratorio de idiomas, los estudiantes debían escuchar una queja de un cliente y darle una respuesta satisfactoria mediante grabación de su propia voz. (3) Para recabar información sobre la opinión que tenían de esta actividad experimental, a los estudiantes se les pidió que cumplimentaran un cuestionario Google. En general, los resultados del estudio han demostrado el impacto positivo de este método en el proceso de enseñanza/aprendizaje en las clases de ILE para los estudiantes de turismo, contribuyendo a su motivación y al desarrollo de sus habilidades profesionales.

Palabras clave: Aula Invertida; ILE; Turismo; Quejas de Clientes; Habilidades Profesionales.

I ntroduction

Technology is growing and the classroom is evolving. These are all facts and this reality is penetrating deeply into tourism management (Buhalis & Law, 2008). Thus, flipped classrooms are becoming more important as digital technologies are expanding rapidly (Delich, 2005), and it seems to better respond to the learning needs of students living in today's ever more conected world. Particularly, flipped classrooms have been found to provide many advantages to teachers and students, such as maximising students' time to interact with their classmates and instructor (Davis, 2016), increasing students' level of achievement as well as their interest and engagement with the contents (Fulton, 2012), mitigating levels of anxiety (O'Flaherty and Philips, 2015), or representing an "added learning experience" (Murphy *et al.*, 2017: 167). However, while most studies have shown the pedagogical benefits of flipped classrooms, further research is needed on the way flipped learning can contribute to the development and improvement of communicative and vocational skills, which are central pillars in tourism curriculum and language courses design (see, for instance,

Fidgeon, 2010; Musarat *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, this study shows an experimental activity aimed to develop tourism students' linguistic and pragmatic competences for dealing with complaints using the online *VoiceThread* programme.

1. Theoretical background

1. 1. Flipped classroom in higher education

The Flipped Classroom Model is described as a methodology where students are provided with "instructional resources to use outside of class so that class time is freed up for other instructional activities" (Enfield, 2013: 14). This is the main tenet of the model introduced by Mull (2012), simplistically summarised by the Flipped Learning Network (2014, n.d) as "school work at home and homework at school".

The strengths of the model have been summed up in the following four features or pillars making up the acronym F-L-I-P, namely: it is flexible (F) as it allows both students and teachers to establish their own timelines, provided enough time is devoted to the optimal preparation of the flipped class. Secondly, it involves a new learning culture, which moves from a traditional teacher-centred class to a learner-centred approach. In turn, this helps develop students' autonomy and responsibility for their own learning, one of the main tenets of the Common European Framework of Reference (2001), among others. Third, flipping the classroom also involves an intentional choice of content, focusing on central aspects that are accessible to all the students in the class and explaining such content in a clearly structured, understandable manner. Finally, flipping the classroom necessarily involves professional educators, able to reflect on their practice so as to improve the way content is presented for students and knowing when to "step aside".

It is important, however, to make a clear distinction between the flipped classroom and flipped learning, as these terms are not

interchangeable. Thus, while it is possible for teachers to flip their classroom, this does not ensure that flipped learning will take place although the model has been proved to offer a great range of advantages that may benefit learning outcomes, also in higher education (cf. Berrett, 2012; Enfield, 2013; Galway *et al.*, 2014; Abeysekera and Dawson, 2015, among others). Among these benefits, Fulton (2012) pointed out that students engaging in flipped classes increased their levels of achievement and showed a higher level of interest and engagement with the contents. As pointed out by O'Flaherty and Phillips (2015) in their overview of research carried out in higher education, a constant finding seems to be that students often report lower levels of anxiety as they are allowed to work at their own pace, feeling prepared when they came to class, which in turn often lead to more interactive classes.

1. 2. The speech act of complaints

As opposed to other speech acts like requests or compliments, complaints have received less scholarly attention (cf. Trosborg, 1995; Murphy & Neu, 1996; Chen *et al.*, 2011). However, complaints are extremely complex speech acts that involve a high degree of face-threat and may thus endanger social relationships if not appropriately performed. In their seminal study on complaints, Olshtain and Weinbach (1987: 108) define this speech act in the following terms:

> In the speech act of complaining, the speaker (S) expresses displeasure or annoyance-censure-as a reaction to a past or ongoing action, the consequences of which are perceived by S as affecting her unfavourably. This complaint is usually addressed to the hearer (H) whom the S holds, at least partially, responsible for the offensive action.

Trosborg (1995: 311-312) also describes complaints as "an illocutionary act in which the speaker (the complainer) expresses his/her disapproval or other negative feelings towards the state of affairs described in the proposition (the complainable) and for which he or she holds the hearer (the complainee) responsible, either directly or

indirectly". In the case of a context like touristic service encounters (e.g. hotel receptions, guides), complaints are thus relatively frequent whenever customers' expectations are not successfully met. Students in the degree in Tourism have to be able both to identify complaints and to response to them appropriately. Responses to complaints have traditionally been treated in a number of studies, mostly under the topic "apology strategies" (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Olshtain & Cohen, 1983; Trosborg, 1995). In more recently studies, however, the analysis of responses to complaints seems to have shifted from face-to-face encounters to online encounters such as e-commerce, where strategies may be linguistically different (cf. Davidow, 2003; Brewer, 2007; Gruber *et al.*, 2009).

As already pointed out, complaining can thus be considered a highly face-threatening act (FTA henceforth). FTAs stand for acts (either verbal or non-verbal) that intrinsically threaten face by their very nature. Goffman (1967) takes the concept from the English expression "to lose face" -i.e. to be embarrassed. Brown and Levinson (1987) further distinguish between positive face, which represents an individual's desire to be approved of, accepted, admired, liked and validated by others and negative face, which refers to an individual's right to freedom of action and their need not to be imposed on by others. In the case of complaints (and especially in service encounters like those a graduate in Tourism may eventually face), face-threat is manifold since it can affect the *addressee's positive face* –e.g. if the speaker expresses disapproval of the addressee; as well as the *addressee's negative face* by making the hearer do something –i.e. solve the problem. Furthermore, the speaker or customer also can threaten their own negative face when they have to perform a speech act they might consider as embarrassing and their own positive face by appearing as unlikeable to the addressee. Hence, dealing appropriately (and satisfactorily) with customers' complaints becomes crucial to EFL students in the degree in Tourism.

2. Methodology

2. 1. Context and participants

The site for the study was a second year compulsory course in the Faculty of Commerce and Tourism at the University Complutense of Madrid. The author was the instructor of the course, which took place in the winter of 2018 and lasted for four months. There were 64 students in the class (14 males and 50 females). These students had studied English for about seventeen years and at the beginning of the course their level was between B1 and B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. The participants in this case study were 49 students out of the 64 students enrolled in the course "English II".

2. 2. Procedure

The study was carried out in 3 phases. Following a flipped classroom approach, the first phase took place before class. First, the teacher assigned an online powerpoint presentation containing useful language tips recorded over the ppt presentation which included the main aspects (linguistic and pragmatic) characterising complaints in English and their response. This presentation was made available on the Virtual Platform, the site to communicate teacher and students, so that students could handily consult it any number of times before the on-site class.

Next, during the on-site class in the language laboratory, students were asked to listen to a complaint from a customer and to give a suitable solution recording their own voices. The means to achieve this was through *VoiceThread*, an interactive, multimedia slide show tool that enables users to hold conversations and helps promote group discussions. The teacher created a "voice" named "Dealing with complaints" in her *VoiceThread* account and recorded her voice imitating a customer complaining at a hotel reception. Then, she sent the link to this "voice" to the students who had previously created their own account. They were also instructed to listen to the complaint and to

give a suitable solution using the useful language tips they had learnt by recording their own voices. Then, they should save the recording once the task had been completed.

Finally, in order to gather students' opinions about this experimental activity, students were asked to complete a *Google form* questionnaire consisting of four sections. Section I asked students for some personal information (age and gender) and, in general terms, if the experiment has helped them become more fluent; Section II comprised six sub-headings on the contribution of the task to developing productive and receptive skills: (1) *This experiment has contributed to the improvement of my overall listening skill*, (2) *This experiment has allowed me to become more aware of pronunciation*, (3) *This experiment has allowed me to become more aware of intonation and sentence stress*, (4) *This experiment has helped me become more fluent*, (5) *This experiment has contributed to the improvement of my grammar knowledge*, (6) *While taking part in this experiment, I learnt new vocabulary*; Section III focused on whether students found the activity motivating and innovative; Section IV consisted of four open questions: (1) *What did you like most about this experimental activity?*, (2) *What did you like least about this experimental activity?*, (3) *In your opinion, what are the advantages or disadvantages of this type of experiment?*, (4) *Would you like to do another experimental activity like this in your English course? Explain*. For Sections II and III a Likert scale was used ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).
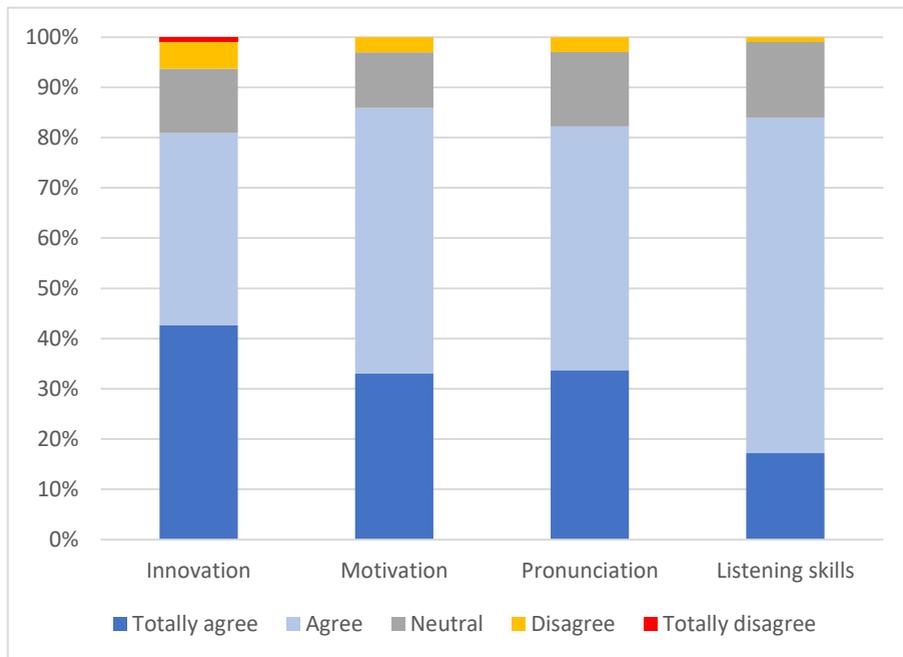
3. Results

A quantitative and qualitative analysis was conducted on the basis of the surveyed students. More specifically, the analysis will focus on the questions where students overwhelmingly chose either 5 or 4 points in the Likert scale -i.e. 5 corresponding to "I strongly agree" and 4 to "I agree"). Future research will deal with the remaining questions of the survey (i.e. questions number 4, 5 and 6), where students' answers were mostly neutral (i.e. they chose answer 3 "neutral" in the Likert-scale). Additionally, these six questions reflect quantitatively

what the students have freely commented in the open questions of the survey. There is, thus, a strong degree of correlation between the percentages obtained and students' free contributions.

As shown by results (see graph 1), the aspect that was most positively evaluated by students was the innovative character of the activity (86.7% of the students either totally agreed or agreed in this respect), closely followed by its motivating nature (82.8% of the students either completely agreed or agreed that the activity was highly engaging and motivating). Third, students highly rated the pronunciation (79%) and listening skills (40%). The latter correspond to the development of productive and receptive skills. Graph 1 below shows the students' answers to each of the four categories. As reflected by the graph, students remained more neutral only in the case of their listening skills and pronunciation, where 14.9% were not sure whether these had improved or not. This might be due to the fact that, although they were listening to the powerpoint, they also had written support except for the practice itself, where they actually had to listen to a customer complaining and respond accordingly.

Graph 1
Students' responses to the questionnaire

Source: own elaboration

These results reflect the students' comments in the first open question (1) *what the students liked most about the experimental activity*. This question was answered by all the students and their comments show that they found the activity motivating, useful, practical and very innovative, different from other usual activities and a new way to learn English, as illustrated by the following examples[1].

(1) It is an innovative activity.
(2) It's a different way to practice English. It is a good idea to be able to hear us [sic]
(3) It is very useful because you can hear yourself speaking English and learn how to solve pronunciation problems.

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[1] All the examples are taken from the data. No editing or corrections have been made to preserve their authenticity.

(4) This activity it's cool [sic] and thank's [sic] to this activity I don't have stress to speak.

(5) I liked that it was a different type of class where i [sic] could practice by my own. Also it was motivating because i thought that after i [sic] recorded my voice, someone else was going to listen to me, so that made me try to be more focused on what i [sic] wanted to say and how i said [sic] it, because i [sic] think that in this situation it's very important the entonation [sic] due to the person is not seeing you [sic].

In reference to the **contribution to developing productive and receptive skills**, the students felt really comfortable recording their voices and listening to the instructions from the teacher and they appreciated the fact that they could freely expressed themselves, which, in their view, contributed to improving their English level, especially their overall listening and speaking skills, as well as the acquisition of new vocabulary and grammar knowledge. The fact that they could record their answers over and over again and listen to what other students had recorded, let them check their mistakes and correct them becoming at the same time more aware of pronunciation and, in general, enriching their English level.

Results show that students seemed to be supportive of this teaching task. Interestingly enough, an unexpected finding was that, many of the students liked very much the fact that they could develop their future professional skills in a practical way, as the following examples show:

(6) The fact that I can solve some problems of the customers.
(7) I have learned to answer a customer.
(8) The fact that i [sic] felt it was a real experience.
(9) Be able to attende [sic] to a real situation in a hotel.

By contrast, the second open question *What did you like least about this activity?* was answered by 34 out of the 47 (72.3%) students

and for 10 of them nothing was wrong with this experimental activity. The most common claim, showing their shyest side, went to the fact that they had to record themselves and other students could listen to them, as the following examples show:

(10) Everyboody could hear me.
(11) I had to record myself.
(12) For the shameful [sic] people it is difficult to speak English.
(13) Recording my voice in the middle of the clase [sic], because i [sic] am a little bit shy.
(14) I was a bit embarrassed.

For some students the difficulty of managing the application and the fact of talking to a computer and not to a person were the weak points of this experimental activity, as the following examples show:

(15) The web page is really confusing.
(16) Have to make an account and can not [sic] freely enter the application.
(17) It is very troublesome.
(18) I would prefer the face to face conversation because when i [sic] have to record myself my pronounciation [sic] and fluently gets [sic] worst.
(19) Answer to a computer and not a person.

Other difficulties had to do with noise problems in the classroom. 2 students pointed out:

(20) The noise around.
(21) I couldn't concentrate very much because the other classmates were talking too.

On the question concerning *the advantages and disadvantages of this type of experiment*, all the students answered it and for most of

them there were more advantages than disadvantages and the reason they mainly highlighted was the fact of dealing with real situations, as the following examples show:

(22) I only see advantages, because it seems to be like real life, and i [sic] think that's important fo rus, because we need to get used to these types of situations.

(23) I think it has more advantages than disadvantages. For example, you can learn more vocabulary and how to speak correctly at [sic] some situations.

The positive answers concerned some of the comments in the first open question *what the students liked most about the experimental activity* as for the innovative, practical and motivating character of this type of activity and regarding the contribution to developing productive and receptive skills.

(24) It's funny and new for us.
(25) Innovative application.
(26) Improve pronunciation.
(27) You can practice listening, the pronunciation and vocabulary.
(28) I just found advantages. We improve our speaking.

Interestingly enough, a surprising finding was that, some students were aware of the fact that the use of such tools as *VoiceThread* lets teachers listen and assess large groups, as can be seen in the following example:

(29) It allows the teacher to listen and evaluate the whole class as one. And also listen the pronunciation of each student.

In line with the beneficial character of the tool, another positive opinion was as follows:

(30) It is a good point of this tool to save the recording so that you can choose the best one to submit.

As it has already been pointed out above, at the beginning of this article, among the benefits of flipped learning, it is worth noting that students appreciate being able to work at their own pace without pressure which in turn leads to a higher level of interest and consequently to a more effective learning as can be seen in this comment:

(31) You work individually and everyone has its own rhythm.

Similarly, the students' responses concerning the disadvantages of practicing with this activity coincided again with the ones in the first open question. The students claimed that:

(32) If there is more people doing the same thing, i [sic] find it difficult to concentrate.
(33) You can get nervous and do it worst than you actually could do if you were not recorded.
(34) The only drawback I find is that we do not really practice with real people.

Regarding the last question on the questionnaire *Would you like to do another experimental activity like this in your English course?*, 32 students out of 36 who answered this question, answered positively, highlighting the fact that *VoiceThread is really good for learning and improving speaking* [sic] and that *it is a lot fun* [sic] *to learn with it, different from others* [sic] *devices*. The two negative answers were related to the fact that *talking to a machine and not a real person do not motivate me* [sic].

Conclusions and pointers to future research

In conclusion, results show that using the flipped classroom with these activities had a positive impact on students' learning. It contributes to developing productive and receptive skills while enhancing motivation. Certainly, students found *VoiceThread* to be an innovative, practical, helpful and motivational approach in the English classroom as well as an effective tool that allows them to participate and collaborate in many ways at their own pace. Unlike a live classroom discussion, where students are forced to think quickly and respond in front of a group, *VoiceThread* makes it possible for students to contribute to the discussion at their own pace and only after they have clearly formulated the thoughts and ideas they want to share. In essence, *VoiceThread* automatically creates wait time for students and allows them to dictate how much time they need to respond.

In this respect, shyer or less confident students may benefit from this tool. With *VoiceThread*, they no longer have to compete with their peers to respond during a class activity, which in turn provides them with increased opportunities to contribute.

Besides these advantages, another benefit of *VoiceThread* is that it is specifically designed to promote the collaborative development of knowledge by providing students the opportunity to share their voice, quite literally, and express opinions regardless of their ability. This is a perfect example of the kind of epistemological shift from more traditional classroom instructional practices that Dede (2008) argued is possible through the effective use of Web 2.0 technologies.

As students participate in these collaborative environments, they learn how to interact, communicate, and express themselves both confidently and respectfully as digital citizens (Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel, & Robison, 2006). In addition, online tools like *VoiceThread* allow students to participate in learning communities beyond the walls of their own classroom to engage in conversations around topics of mutual interest (Yildiz, McNeal, & Salika, 2009).

However, despite the relatively high percentage of points 4 and 5 on the Likert scale in almost all the questions of the questionnaire, we still have to explore the remaining questions of the survey, where students' answers were mostly neutral, namely, in the case of their fluency, the improvement of grammar knowledge and the acquisition of new vocabulary. These findings would enable us to offer a broader and complete view of all the components taking part in this experiment which we hope to address in the near future.

Lastly, with this study we pretend to have provided our contribution to the area of ESP studies and to offer teachers interesting practices and effective tools to improve the productive and receptive skills.

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