Chapter 7

Gain Time and Differentiate to Meet Student Needs in University Learning Environments: A Flipped Learning Approach

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ABSTRACT

Flipped learning is a way to regain lost time and provide support for students where they really need it. This became especially apparent in Interactive Two-way Videoconference (ITV) based distance courses where lost time and difficulties differentiating for students across multiple campuses created great frustration. Language educators are very accustomed to and comfortable with students working in groups and pairs, unlike other disciplines, to problem solve, think critically and develop content. This chapter discusses how Russian and Japanese instructors moved the “fact learning” parts of lessons to independent study while increasing opportunities for students to practice creating with the language in a supported teacher-guided environment. In the process, they regained lost time to focus on increasing student proficiency, addressed specific student misconceptions, and more easily differentiated instruction to meet student learning styles.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0824-3.ch007
INTRODUCTION

While most proponents of flipped learning focus on the idea of students doing homework in teacher-supported class environments and learning at their own pace at home, there is much more to flipped instruction for language learners. On a deeper level, flipped learning focuses on students building their lower order thinking skills of memorizing and understanding at home and instructors facilitating the development of higher order thinking skills (for example, creating with the target language in meaningful ways) during class sessions. Flipped learning is more than a buzzword, it is also a way to regain lost time in distance learning environments, make better use of class sessions in all environments, and provide support in order to differentiate for students where they really need it. This became especially apparent in the University of Wisconsin System Collaborative Language Program (CLP) classroom-based interactive two-way videoconferencing (ITV) distance courses. The learning environment for these distance courses has sparked some difficulties in need of resolution. For instance, lost language practice time due to technology-related delays creates great frustration, as does the struggle to differentiate for all students, some of whom are in a different physical classroom from the instructor. While these issues are not isolated to only distance courses and cannot be permanently resolved, the implementation of flipped learning has eased these burdens and has offered some very positive results overall. This chapter discusses how flipped learning has impacted distance and traditionally-taught Russian and Japanese language courses, and how this approach has impacted students’ ability to communicate effectively in the target language.

BACKGROUND

The focus of the CLP program is to diversify language offerings on small to medium-sized university campuses that cannot otherwise afford to offer a full array of language options to their students. Currently the CLP languages offered are Arabic, Chinese, Hmong, Japanese, and Russian. These languages are considered critical to addressing social, economic, and security needs of our state and our country. Students in the CLP program have chosen to take these languages that the Foreign Service Institute categorizes as level III and IV in difficulty on a 1 to 5 (easiest to most difficult) scale for speakers of English. That means that in order for native English speakers to reach a general professional proficiency level in speaking and reading, they need a minimum of 1100-2200 class hours in the language (Thompson, 2014). Through the CLP, face-to-face time for some students is in a classroom with a teacher physically present, while other students, together in a classroom at a
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