# Evaluating a flipped intermediate Spanish course through students and instructor's perceptions

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*This case study examined students' and their instructor's perceptions and experiences in a flipped intermediate Spanish course which aimed to leverage class time for more interactive and communicative tasks to increase the use of language. Through student surveys and instructor interviews, this study found contrastive perspectives between the students' and instructor's experiences. Results from student surveys showed that their perceptions were lower but positive at the end of the course when compared to the start of the course. In contrast, the instructor had mixed perceptions before and after the course. Discussion of these contrastive perceptions and experiences are presented, as well as of online tasks and classroom activities. In addition, implications are presented in light of increasing our understanding of the affordances that flipped learning offers for language learning, learners' agency, and instructor's support.*

## Introduction

Language instructors who innovate their teaching practice should be concerned about students' experiences as well as perceptions when implementing a new learning approach that makes use of technology in the language classroom. In particular, when instructors implement pedagogical models that include computer-assisted language learning (CALL), instructors should evaluate how students react and feel about these innovative pedagogical practices. The evaluation of pedagogical approaches with CALL carries multiple implications that can

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impact their effectiveness in the learning process (Ballester, 2012). Overall, the evaluation of pedagogical approaches is done through end-of-course evaluations and final grades compared over time with traditional learning. However, these evaluations may not include students' perspectives as they experienced the learning materials in the new learning approach. Neither are these experiences contrasted with that of the instructors. Collecting student's lived experiences within the innovative learning approach can be valuable to develop understanding of students' own understandings of the second language (L2), their challenges in the learning process, their attitudes toward the innovations, and reactions to the demands brought about by the technology. For this reason, it is essential to consider students' individual and collective experiences and attitudes when implementing technology in the language classroom (Ayres, 2002; Ballester, 2012). Further, adding instructors' experiences can provide a more valuable evaluation of the pedagogical models from multiple and contrastive viewpoints.

One of the models that has recently been adopted in language instruction is flipped learning. Flipped learning, a mode of blended learning, redistributes the learning spaces so that explicit instruction is delivered online and more active learning strategies take place in the classroom (Bergman & Sams, 2012; Keengwe, Onchwari, & Oigara, 2014; Santiago, 2017). CALL can be integrated with flipped learning where learners can study grammatical content, vocabulary, syntactic structures, and other linguistic aspects (Egbert, Herman, & Chang, 2014) outside the classroom by themselves through online tasks and learning materials. Once learners have studied and developed a basic understanding of the online content, they are expected to engage in more active tasks in the classroom that foster the use of L2 to accomplish communicative goals. The classroom space is devoted to enhance active communicative activities where the L2 is put into practice (Kim, 2016).

The relationship between flipped classrooms and online language learning has pedagogical implications that need attention to maximize language development and use. These pedagogical implications relate to the use of technology for designing computer-assisted language activities (Chapelle 2009, 2017; Kern, 2006; Kern & Warschauer, 2000; Levy, Hubbard, Stockwell, & Colpaert, 2015), the role of the instructor in assisting learners in their language learning performance and interaction (Hubbard, 2011), the needs, characteristics and interest of learners (Oxford & Oxford, 2009), and the affordances of the flipped approach. Learning environments, such as the flipped approach, which integrate technology should be evaluated not only in terms of achievement and learning gains but also in terms of learners' perceptions and experiences to identify what materials best help learners in their learning process (Blake, 2008; Pardo-Ballester, 2012). Though the flipped approach in second language learning has been investigated, little is known about how students' and teachers' perceptions and experiences shape the way the approach is being understood and used. This paper reports on a case study that evaluated the flipped learning approach in a college intermediate Spanish course through students' and instructors' voices and experiences. This case study aimed to develop a deeper understanding of how students perceived the value of the flipped approach, and how they reacted to the demands of the online and classroom activities. In addition, this study reports on the instructor's perspective and experience in an attempt to relate and seek in-depth understanding of all participants' course experiences.

## Theoretical perspectives

This study was examined through the lens of flipped learning and a communicative approach to second language learning. These two approaches provided the foundation upon which the course was re-developed, and the online and classroom activities created.

### *Flipped learning approach*

Flipped learning is a pedagogical approach that aims to transform pedagogical practice by "[moving direct instruction] 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 learners as they apply concepts and engage creatively in the subject matter" (Flipped Learning Network, 2014, p.1). In other words, content material that is usually delivered in class in lecture format is moved outside the classroom. This content can be delivered through online instructional videos, interactive exercises, assigned readings, and other related activities intended to prepare learners with basic understanding of the subject matter (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Honeycutt & Garrett, 2013). Meanwhile, the classroom space is dedicated to reactivate the concepts studied online by engaging learners in interactive and collaborative work such as problem-solving, inquiry-based learning, project-based learning, study-based activities (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Egbert *et al.*, 2014; Honeycutt & Garrett, 2013; Tucker, 2012). By freeing class time, instructors can provide more personalized feedback, guide students in their deeper understanding of class concepts, gain insights into students' application of content knowledge, identify and address instructional challenges (Moraros, Islam, Yu, Banow, & Schindelka, 2015), and help learners develop skills and exercise control over their own learning (Hamdan, McKnight, P., McKnight, K., & Arfstrom, 2013; Strayer, 2012).

Flipped learning has been widely adopted in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines, shedding promising learning benefits. These benefits pertain to increased engagement in classroom activities and active application of learning into practice (Driscoll, 2012; Gilboy, Heinerichs, & Pazzaglia, 2015; MacLaughlin *et al.*, 2013; MacLaughlin *et al.*, 2014; Velegol, Zappe, & Mahoney, 2015), increased learning achievement compared to traditional lecture classes (Papadopoulos, Santiago-Roman, & Portela, 2010; Betihavas, Bridgman, Kornhaber, & Cross, 2016), increased interest and motivation in the course content and activities (Fautch, 2015; Vaughan, 2014), flexible access to content material outside the classroom (McCallum, Schultz, Sellke, & Spartz, 2015), and development of higher order thinking (Fautch, 2015). At the same time, related research has contested these benefits by arguing that flipped learning does not offer benefits for increasing academic performance or student engagement, but learning gains derive more from active learning used in class (Morgan, McLean, Chapman, Fitzgerald, Yousuf, Hammoud, 2013; Jensen, Kummer, & Godoy, 2015). This research has also found that flipped learning brought more challenges than benefits to students because they perceived an increase in their workload (Tune, Sturek, & Basile, 2013), struggled with self-regulatory behaviors, and felt that the lack of explicit instruction in the classroom hindered their learning (Boevé, Meijer, Bosker, Vugteveen, Hoekstra, & Albers, 2017).

Considering the benefits of the flipped approach, it can be argued that it is a catalyst to rethink second language instruction. It is possible to improve language learning experiences because this model is based upon a constructive alignment of course components **43**

supported through technology (Cowie & Sakui, 2015). Flipped learning can be a frame of reference in second language instruction because learning a language requires increased time and depth of processing, proceduralization, and automatization of declarative knowledge under adequate conditions (DeKeyser, 2015; Moranski & Kim, 2016). In addition, flipped learning can maximize a student-centered approach where learners not only practice the language, but actually become active and effective users of the language for functional and communicative purposes, provided that the flipped course is well developed and aligned to the course goals.

**Flipped learning in second language.** Flipped learning aligns well with research-based evidence of the conditions that promote second language learning (Egbert *et al.*, 2014). According to Egbert *et al.* (2014), these conditions include (a) opportunities for learners to interact and negotiate meaning in authentic tasks, (b) use language creatively, (c) have feedback and guidance in the learning process, (d) work in low-anxiety environment, and (e) develop autonomy. The flipped learning approach resembles many current teaching practices where direct explicit instruction is given prior to class so that class time is mostly dedicated to interaction, scaffolding, and development of agency (Moranski, & Kim, 2016). However, this apparent connection between flipped learning and second language instruction mostly results from advances in technologies that facilitate creating and delivering sophisticated instructional materials (Moranski & Kim, 2016) rather than from a reconceptualization of the learning environment as a space to maximize active communicative activities as well as a redefinition of student and teacher roles.

By and large, the existing empirical research on flipped second language learning has revealed some promising insights. Learners in flipped learning courses improved their language performance and communication skills (Lee & Wallace, 2017; Obari & Lambacher, 2015; Ishikawa *et al.*, 2015), and increased linguistic and lexical understanding (Kang, 2015; Moranski & Kim, 2016; Leis, Cooke, & Tohei, 2015) when their pre- and post-test scores were measured and compared to non-flipped courses. Further, learners demonstrated high level of engagement during application of content concepts (Egbert, Herman, & Lee, 2015; Hung, 2015; Ishikawa *et al.*, 2015), increased their motivation for completing language activities (Chen Hsieh, Wu, & Mark, 2016; Evseeva, & Solozhenko, 2015), had more flexible access to the content materials online (Ishikawa *et al.*, 2015; Hernández Nanclares & Pérez Rodríguez, 2014), and acquired technological skills (Egbert *et al.*, 2014). In particular, Moranski and Kim (2016) examined the impact of explicit grammar explanations of Spanish non-agentive *se*, given outside the classroom through video presentations, and guided practice, on a task-based class lesson. The task-based class lesson included a warm-up, pre-task, task, and post-task activities followed by a simulation of small talk in a particular context (e.g., happy hour). The results revealed that the flipped learning and the control groups performed similarly in recognizing the uses of *se*, and providing their metalinguistic information. The results further suggested that students in the flipped condition might have developed their L2 better because they had more time in class for meaningful interactions. The explicit grammar instruction outside the classroom had several implications. For example, studying the grammatical structures prior to class might have promoted consciousness-raising, enabling students to notice the use of structures and process the knowledge deeper. The results of this study were not statistically significant for the production task performed in class, presumably due to the reduce range of grading points in the task which could have created a ceiling effect in the scores.

In a related study, Egbert *et al.* (2014) explored flipped strategies in a seven-week Mandarin Chinese language course for teacher education students. The researchers delivered online instruction outside the classroom on vocabulary, writing character, speaking, practicing pronunciation, culture, and reading. Class time was used for discussions about class concepts, questions about writing, practice the language, discussions about culture, and work in pronunciation practice with peers. The results of this study showed mixed perceptions from students. On the one hand, several students complained about having to study the linguistic content online. On the other hand, none of the students complained about having the cultural topics online and discussing them in class. This study also highlighted the fact that some students struggled with pedagogical and technological aspects. This led the researchers speculate that flipped learning might not work well for all students. Contrastively, studies on flipped L2 instruction have found that students might not feel comfortable with the delivery of content online (Chen Hsieh *et al.*, 2016; Hernández-Nanclares & Pérez-Rodríguez, 2014). In these studies, students expressed their preference for the delivery of grammatical content inside the classroom in a teacher-led fashion. In addition, students required orientation for the expectations and understanding of the flipped model (Moranksi & Henery, 2017).

## A communicative approach within flipped learning

Considering that the flipped learning approach facilitates opportunities for active use of the language in meaningful and interactive activities, a communicative approach is particularly relevant for this purpose. A communicative approach involves learning processes and goals within the central concept of *communicative competence* (Savignon 1972, 2002). *Communicative competence* is characterized as strategies such as involving expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning in the L2 (Savignon, 1972, 2002). Each of these strategies seek to develop learners' ability to engage in interactions with other L2 speakers, convey meaning through coping strategies, take risks to use the L2, and use of linguistic and non-linguistic resources in communicative situations. A communicative approach places the learners at the center of the learning process and fosters their interaction in communicative situations where engaging in language tasks is more prominent than in grammar-oriented language activities (Dörnyei, 2011; Savignon, 2007).

A communicative approach can combine grammatical structures and functions of language to truly create communicative activities (Dörnyei, 2011; Littlewood, 2013). For Dörnyei (2011), this combination relates to maximizing explicit and implicit learning where focus on form and form-focused instruction, fluency and automatization, and formulaic language intersect and overlap. This communicative approach involves seven principles built upon research on instructed second language acquisition. These principles include: (1) personal significance, (2) controlled practice, (3) declarative input, (4) focus-on-form, (5) formulaic language, (6) language exposure, and (7) focused interaction. Each of these principles can relate to the flipped learning model as it allows for a systematic integration of explicit and implicit learning, focus on structural language, and emphasize active strategies for more engagement in communicative activities. Further, the flipped learning facilitates constructive alignment of outcomes, tasks, and assessments (Cowie & Sakui, 2015).

Communicative activities or tasks are theorized to place learners in realistic situations as close to real-world contexts as possible (Canale & Swain, 1980; Littlewood, 2013; Savignon, 2002) and promote the use of L2 for authentic communicative goals, rather than mere **45**

attainment of linguistic accuracy (Canale & Swain, 1980; Dörnyei, 2011; Littlewood, 2013; Savignon, 2002). In this regard, in a flipped L2 class the content related to grammar and vocabulary is delivered online, while communicative activities in class vary in scope by combining form, meaning, and purpose. The challenge for L2 instructors is to balance this combination so that learners' linguistic knowledge is brought into actual practice and use without falling into rote memorization and repetition drills. With the flipped approach, L2 learners can access to linguistic content by themselves, leading them to understand and process grammatical and lexical content more effectively as they have time to revisit the content multiple times(Cowie & Sakui, 2014, 2015; Moranski & Kim, 2016) before they actually use the L2 in highly communicative and interactive tasks with their peers and instructor (Egbert *et al.*, 2014).

The mixed perspectives and results of the studies in flipped L2 calls for more research on this type of approach, specially to gather students' and instructor's perspectives and experiences to further our understanding of its effectiveness, processes, and implications for language learning. This study aims to fill this gap by examining how students perceived their learning experience in the flipped course, and how the instructor experienced teaching such a course. The research questions that guided this study include:

1. How did students and instructor perceive the flipped course in relation to online preparatory assignments, in-class communicative tasks, and flipped format to achieve the course learning outcomes?
2. What online preparatory assignments and in-class communicative tasks were most useful to accomplish the communicative learning goals?

## Methodology

This study adopted an embedded case study design (Yin, 2014) with two units of analysis, (1) students, and (2) instructor in order to have a closer examination and better understanding of the phenomenon under study (Lazar, Feng, & Hochheiser, 2010; Yin, 2014). This case study utilized mixed methods for data collection and the main data sources included quantitative data from student surveys, and qualitative data from the instructor interviews. The study was carried out within the Department of World Languages and Culture (WLC) at a Midwestern university in the United States.

### *Participants*

The participants in this study come from a convenience sampling of 23 students (N = 23) and one instructor in an intermediate Spanish class. These participants were enrolled in the first flipped course offered in the WLC. The intermediate level corresponds to a 4th semester of college Spanish. There were 16 females and 7 males. The majority (19, 82.61%) were 18–20 years old. Almost all students (22, 95.65%) had English as their first language. In addition, the majority of students (17, 73.91%) reported having between 2–3 years of studies in Spanish language. Students' demographic data is summarized in Table 1. The course instructor, Evelyn (pseudonym used to protect her identity), was a lecturer teaching Spanish for several years at the WLC. Evelyn reported using technology in her language classes regularly.

Table 1. Students' demographic data

| Students' Demographic Data | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| *Gender* | | |
| Male | 7 | 30.43% |
| Female | 16 | 69.57% |
| | | |
| *Age* | | |
| 18–20 years old | 19 | 82.61% |
| 21–23 years old | 3 | 13.04% |
| > 23 years old | 1 | 4.35% |
| | | |
| *First Language* | | |
| English | 22 | 95.65% |
| Other (Korean) | 1 | 4.35% |
| | | |
| *Length of Spanish Studies* | | |
| 1 year | 2 | 8.70% |
| Between 2 and 3 years | 2 | 8.70% |
| More than 3 years | 17 | 73.91% |
| Other | 1 | 4.35% |
| Missing | 1 | 4.35% |

## Context of the flipped Spanish course

The intermediate Spanish course had been offered in a hybrid format in prior years where students attended class in person two days a week, and met with the instructor online on two other days. This format seemed ineffective because students did not get much communicative practice, and the instructor spent most of the class time clarifying and explaining grammatical points (personal communication with program coordinator, Fall 2016). Therefore, the course was re-designed using the flipped model in Spring 2017 to offer a more effective approach to help learners achieve the course communicative goals. These goals were based on the intermediate level of the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). The flipped model was used to optimize class time in order to increase communicative and interactive activities that promoted language development and functional use of Spanish. The flipped course included online preparatory assignments and in-class communicative activities. The online assignments included activities delivered through the online learning platform Connect/LearnSmart, which accompanies the course textbook *Más* (Pérez-Gironés & Adán-Lifante, 2014). On this platform, learners completed online activities that focused on skill development for basic understanding and competence of grammar, vocabulary, and awareness of Hispanic culture. These activities included tutorials, interactive grammatical activities, practice and use of vocabulary in context, and practice listening and readings skills through short excerpts and passages. For example, students watched a video description of activities that a person was doing, and later completed conjugation exercises in order to practice the use of grammatical structures (e.g., **47**

present perfect indicative and subjunctive is illustrated in Fig. 1). Additionally, students completed an online quiz after every chapter. The preparatory assignments required a time investment for the equivalent of one contact hour (50 minutes).



Figure 1. Example of an online grammar activity in Connect/LearnSmart (example of present perfect shown here)

The classroom space was used to promote interaction and communication where learners completed meaning-focus activities, and engaged in peer and small-group work. Among these activities were "A Conversar" (Time to talk), a daily ice-breaker activity to set a friendly and livelier environment for the communicative activities; "Discute con tu compañero" (Discuss with a partner), an activity based on questions and answers to elicit follow-up questions and reactivate linguistic features; "Actividad del libro" (Textbook work), a grammar-focused activity to bring attention to linguistic features; "Situaciones" (Role-plays), an activity based on roles learners needed to perform to simulate a real-life situation; "Ahora te toca a tí" (It's your turn), a double-focus activity where learners worked individually first, then with a partner. The individual activity aimed to give the learners some space to be creative with the language as they write questions or ideas for further discussion with partners; and "Cultura" (Culture), an activity for learners to think critically and compare-contrast aspects of Hispanic culture and their own culture. Through these communicative

activities, learners were expected to reactivate the grammar and vocabulary, and cultural knowledge in more context-based situations. They were also expected to revise the use of language while engaging in communication and interaction with peers. The class met three times per week for 50 minutes each. Additionally, students had homework assignments to reinforce language knowledge and practice.

## *Data collection procedure and analysis*

An online pre- and a post-course survey was used as an alternative to using a single post-course measure in order to discover differences in the course attributes (Vamosi, Pierce, & Slotkin, 2004), as well as to gain a better understanding of whether learners' experiences and perceptions varied in the flipped format (McLaughlin *et al.*, 2013; Urdan, 2010). The survey had three scales related to (1) online preparatory assignments, (2) in-class communicative tasks, and (3) flipped learning format. These scales had specific criteria on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). The scale for online preparatory assignments was based on the computer-assisted language learning (CALL) task appropriateness by Chapelle (2001), the in-class communicative tasks were based on the course learning outcomes, and the flipped format was based on previous flipped learning research and learning outcomes of the course. The post-survey included two additional questions for rating the usefulness of online and in-class activities. Internal reliability of the criteria in each scale was calculated with Cronbach's alpha. The CALL criteria (language learning potential $\alpha = .92$, meaning focus; $\alpha = 87$, authenticity; $\alpha = .88$, practicality; $\alpha = .85$, learner fit; $\alpha = .82$, impact; $\alpha = .89$), in-class communicative tasks (active tasks; $\alpha = .73$, feedback and scaffolding; $\alpha = .92$, communicative performance; $\alpha = .98$), and flipped format (flipped instruction; $\alpha = .94$, learning outcomes; $\alpha = .88$) measures were all reliable.

Two one-hour semi-structured interviews were conducted with the instructor to collect her reflections and experience (Lazar *et al.*, 2010), as well as her attitudes, actions, and feelings (Maxwell, 2012; Patton, 2005). These interviews were based on previous research on CALL evaluation (Chapelle, 2001; Jamieson, Chapelle, & Preiss, 2005; Jamieson & Chapelle, 2010), and on communicative approaches within CALL (Sarfraz, Mansoor & Tariq, 2015). These interviews had ten open-ended questions focusing on the online preparatory assignments, in-class communicative tasks, and flipped learning format.

The analysis for the survey included descriptive and inferential statistics. The analysis for the open-ended questions and interviews involved identifying codes and themes related to the CALL criteria.

## Results

The results of this study are presented separately for each research question, (a) how did students and instructor perceive the flipped course in relation to online preparatory assignments, in-class communicative tasks, and flipped format to achieve the course learning outcomes, and (b) what online preparatory assignments and in-class communicative activities were most useful to accomplish the communicative learning goals.

### Students' and instructor's perceptions of the online preparatory assignments, in-class communicative tasks, and flipped format

**Online preparatory assignments**. The results of the descriptive statistics revealed that students' perceptions in pre- and post-course survey differed for each of the CALL criteria. The results of a paired-samples *t*-test indicated that students' perceptions were significantly higher in the pre-survey for *meaning focus*, $t(23) = 2.26$, $p = .03$, for *practicality*, $t(23) = 2.53$, $p = .02$, *learner fit*, $t(23) = 2.29$, $p = .03$, and *impact*, $t(23) = 257$, $p = .02$, when compared to the post-survey. Student's perceptions of *language learning potential* and *authenticity* were not significantly different. Table 2 depicts the descriptive as well as the *t*-test results.

Table 2. Descriptive and t-test results of the online preparatory assignments

| | Pre-survey | | Post-survey | | Paired-samples *t*-test | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Criteria | M | SD | M | SD | t | p |
| Language learning potential | 4.32 | .73 | 3.79 | .88 | 2.07 | .05 |
| Meaning focus | 4.26 | .60 | 3.85 | .78 | 2.26 | .03* |
| Authenticity | 4.22 | .77 | 3.91 | .95 | 1.21 | .24 |
| Practicality | 4.39 | .68 | 3.85 | .82 | 2.53 | .02* |
| Learner fit | 4.30 | .67 | 3.80 | .93 | 2.29 | .03* |
| Positive impact | 4.26 | .64 | 3.82 | .73 | 2.57 | .02* |

Note. * significant at <.05

Although the instructor, Evelyn, was not new to teaching in a blended format, she was new to teach in a flipped format. She commented in the pre-course interview that "I hope that [the online activities] will instill the bug of learning the language on their own, and that ultimately my expectation is that they will be able to communicate better." For example, for *language learning potential* she stated that "all the online and all the resources that are offered are more to get [grammar] basic knowledge." Evelyn, also pointed out that the online assignments included video tutorials and vocabulary exercises that would help students understand how to use the language in context rather than memorizing it. She commented that, "[it] uses that word in sentences, and then it uses that word in a paragraph with different meaning. It really shows them not to memorize but to use that word in different settings and even in paragraphs." At the post-course interview, Evelyn indicated that though the online assignments were used to provide explicit instruction on grammar and vocabulary, these might not be a sufficient condition to enable student to use the language in communicative activities. For *meaning focus* she pointed out that the online preparatory assignments presented the grammar and vocabulary in context rather than in drilling exercises. According to Evelyn, the online assignments included simple tutorials with "five or six exercises, short ones, just to make sure that they have learn it and then it brings them to more complex exercises." Evelyn said that the adaptive nature of the online assignments allowed students to practice with several exercises until they reached the goal set by the instructor. At the post-course interview, she commented that she perceived her students came to class more prepared and managed to make connections between linguistic content and language uses. Evelyn emphasized that the online tasks allowed her students to use grammar as well as vocabulary in context because,

[students would] see that they have to choose that word in a definition. They were reading, they were making connections. Then, they would have to see that word in a paragraph. It's giving them different inputs of the same words and in an example of how it's being used differently instead of memorizing.

Evelyn's perceptions of *authenticity* were not as positive at the start of the course as they were at the end of the course. She indicated that the online tasks might not reflect real-life tasks, arguing that some students might not be ready to deal with language or activities using Spanish for realistic and authentic situations. For the criterion *practicality*, she indicated that students would have resources available in case they needed them for completing the online assignments. She said that "[w]e have the [language center] here with computers that provide a quiet place to work if they need to." Students would also have the technical assistance from the textbook publisher and Connect/LearnSmart tech support team. As for *learner fit*, Evelyn initial perspectives were very positive because the online platform adapted the tasks to each learners' progress. At the post-course interview, she pointed out that the online cultural activities were presented at a higher level of students' linguistic ability. This high-level content led students to struggle with understanding the topics, figuring out meaning of unfamiliar words, and making connections to their own culture. Lastly, for *positive impact*, Evelyn mentioned at the pre-course interview that she expected students to become more independent in their learning. She hoped that students used the online time better and take advantage of all resources available there. Then, at the post-course interview, she claimed that the online assignments gave students "the freedom of starting [work] at home when they want." However, she argued that this type of work was not for every student because "it takes a very organized student to be able to do that."

**In-class communicative tasks.** The descriptive statistics revealed that students' perceptions in pre- and post-course survey also differed for each of the criteria in the in-class communicative activities. A paired-samples *t*-test revealed that the mean differences were not statistically significant for any of the in-class criteria. Table 3 presents the results of the descriptive and *t*-test results.

Table 3. Descriptive and t-test results of the in-class activities

| Criteria | Pre-survey | | Post-survey | | Paired-samples *t*-test | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M | SD | M | SD | t | p |
| Active learning tasks | 4.35 | .70 | 4.30 | .70 | .36 | .72 |
| Feedback & scaffolding | 4.46 | .63 | 4.35 | .73 | .76 | .45 |
| Communicative performance | 4.59 | .60 | 4.48 | .60 | .71 | .48 |

Evelyn's initial perceptions of the communicative activities in the pre-course interview related to having students interact with peers as much as possible after they had mastered the skills online. She mentioned "challenging students to create" with the language in class. She believed that the communicative activities would be conducive to students' language development. She pointed out that these activities would lead students to "[be] interacting among themselves instead of spending only half an hour with me online, as it happened with the hybrid one. I think it really increases the amount of time that we are **51**

interacting, with the [flipped format]." In fact, Evelyn would engage students in peer communicative activities followed by her scaffolding. She said, "all the communicative [tasks] in the classroom, they do it with a partner. A lot of partnering activities… and of course, after the partner activity, I always check." Later, at the post-course interview, she pointed out that not all the in-class activities worked well because she had to provide direct and explicit grammar instruction before students could actually use Spanish in the activities. For example, Evelyn explained that, "Sometimes I [needed] to explain grammar from zero because there are some, for example, subjunctive… the if clauses, and other topics that I know, even though [students] try, they are not prepared."

**Flipped format.** Descriptive statistics results revealed that students' perceptions in the pre- as well as in the post-course survey differed for each criterion in the flipped format. The results of a paired-samples *t*-test revealed that students' perceptions of the criteria *learning outcomes t*(23) 2.70, *p* = .09 were higher in the pre-course survey than in the post-course survey, but not for the criteria *flipped format*. Students' perceptions of the course learning outcomes Table 4 depicts these results.

Table 4. Descriptive and t-test results of the flipped format

| Criteria | Pre-survey | | Post-survey | | Paired-samples *t*-test * | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | M | SD | M | SD | t | (p) |
| Flipped format | 4.24 | .66 | 4.01 | .65 | 1.79 | .09 |
| Learning outcomes | 4.25 | .69 | 3.83 | .70 | 2.70 | .01* |

Note. * significant at <.05

Though Evelyn had taught the same course in the hybrid format before, she was new to teaching in the flipped format. She expressed being curious about how the flipped format would work and how her students would adjust to it. At first, Evelyn shared mixed perceptions, First, Evelyn thought that the flipped format would "help the students to improve the language learning and their fluency in the class." However, she was "concerned that a system like [flipped] is not for every student. Some students need to come to class daily and listen to the instructor more." In addition, she believed that the success in a flipped class would depend on students' learning styles and characteristics. In fact, she contended that in a flipped format, students needed to be more independent in their learning, focused on the timetables, and persistent to perform independent work. She argued that,

> Not everybody is ready to study the grammar on their own. It takes a very dedicated student. For some students they get it, that they have to study before coming to class … They struggle at the beginning until they realize this is it.

At the post-course interview, she held more positive views on the success of the flipped format. The flipped learning format appeared to be a beneficial model for Evelyn as she stated that the preparatory assignments gave students "the tools and the resources to come to class prepared, and it allowed me more class time to do communicative activities." She highlighted that students were prepared to reactivate the language knowledge developed online. She commented that, "when [students] came to class, they could make more connections, they could discuss more topics with their classmates. I think they activated [a

different system].” She claimed that the classroom space allowed students to communicate more fluently in Spanish. This is illustrated in the following argument, “are they able to communicate and make themselves understood? Yes! So that’s the point. I think with the flipped format, they do that. They reached that point.” Evelyn also claimed that “because of the flipped approach” students potentially became more fluent in Spanish and understand it better, “otherwise we wouldn’t be able to do that.” Furthermore, Evelyn claimed that providing support and scaffolding to students was paramount in the flipped model because students were expected to actively use what they learned online. Thus, for her, success in the flipped learning involved academic as well as emotional support to students.

## Usefulness of online preparatory assignments and in-class activities

**Online preparatory assignments.** The results showed that students perceived the online assignments in very different proportions for accomplishing the communicative learning outcomes (Fig. 2). While 45% of students rated vocabulary quizzes (LS Palabras) as the most useful activity, 45% rated listening practice (Connect Escuchar) as the least useful. 50% of students perceived grammar quizzes (LS Gramática) as somewhat useful, and 40% rated vocabulary practice (Connect Palabras) as somewhat useful. While 30% of students rated grammar tutorials as somewhat useful or the least useful (Tutorial), 30% also rated them as the most useful.
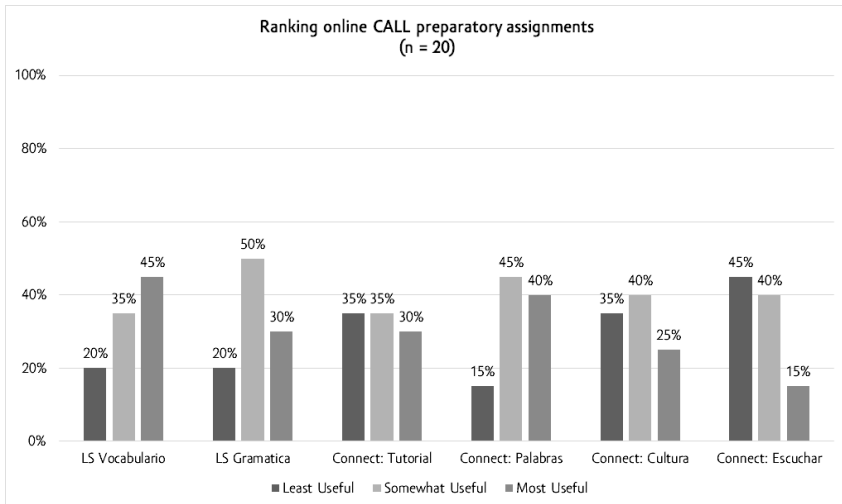


Figure 2. Learner’s perceptions of the usefulness of CALL preparatory assignments

**In-class communicative activities.** The results showed a strikingly positive perception of all in-class activities (80% or above) (Fig. 3). In fact, students perceived that the communicative activities promoted communication, revision of grammatical points, and use of language for fun such as in games. Activities such as grammar review and pair speaking showed the highest rating for usefulness with 95% and 90%, respectively. These results

suggest that students considered the interaction with peers as very useful. Students also rated peer evaluation and feedback (55%) and culture activities (65%) as moderately useful.
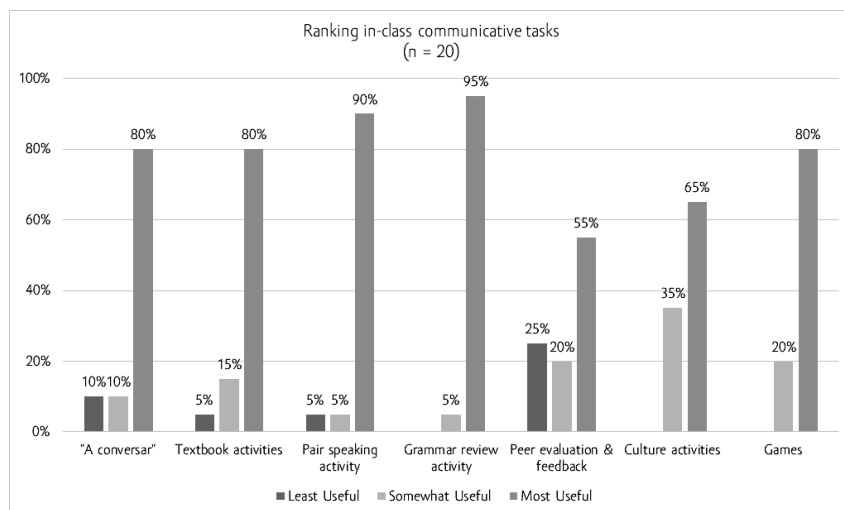


Figure 3. Learner's perceptions of the usefulness of in-class activities

## Discussion

This case study examined students' and their instructor's perceptions and experiences in a flipped Spanish class. These perceptions are combined to show the contrastive results, and implications.

First, the results showed that students' perceptions of the online and in-class activities, as well as of the flipped format were higher at the beginning of the course than at the end of it. It might be speculated that, with the new learning approach students had overly higher expectations or preconceived ideas before they actually took the course (Urdan, 2010). Although these perceptions differed significantly for the criteria *meaning focus, practicality, learner fit, and impact,* and *learning outcomes*, the overall perceptions at the end of the course were positive and above average for all the scales measured in this study. These results might reflect students' more realistic perspectives about the online and face-to-face components of the course. Presumably, students might have realized that learning in the flipped environment required more independent learning, and readiness to effectively extract maximum benefits from the learning environment (Chen Hsieh *et al.,* 2016; Collins & Muñoz, 2016) and meet the demands of the course (Urdan, 2010). In addition, the instructor's mixed perceptions contrast with students' overly positive perceptions at the start of the course. Despite the instructor's predisposition to the flipped approach, she was concerned about students' readiness to learn in this approach. These contrastive perceptions seem to suggest that the nature of the flipped approach requires students to be persistent, committed, and able to strategically organize their time, set their goals, and manage the freedom to study by themselves. In other words, students are to develop agency and self-regulation behaviors to benefit from the flipped model. These perceptions might also suggest that

instructors require to provide more effective scaffolding and learning support. Alongside, these results might also indicate the need to orient students with the learning environment, tools, and resources (Collins & Muñoz, 2016; Moranski & Henery, 2017), which involves setting clear expectations, and facilitating support throughout the course.

Second, students' and their instructor perceived that the flipped learning approach facilitated an opportunity to not only develop linguistic knowledge of Spanish, but it also provided a space to use the language for more communication and interaction. The interaction activities involved students asking questions to each other about a topic or prompt suggested by the instructor. Student also worked in small groups (3 or 4 students) to share ideas about topics from the textbook and discuss related aspects to their own experiences and life, such as practices to take care of the environment. Students, according to the instructor, were able to share their opinions and relate to existing knowledge they had on several topics. This implies that students were able to connect their learning to their existing knowledge or experiences.

The flipped learning approach appears to have addressed the need for a more effective approach to foster speaking in Spanish in class. On the one hand, the online activities involved controlled practice of structures, linguistic, lexical, and cultural knowledge which aided in developing the interlanguage and automatization of Spanish structures. These activities provided students with extensive and intensive exposure to grammar and vocabulary to develop linguistic accuracy (Gleason, 2013), thus, setting the foundational knowledge that students needed and that were expected to use in the classroom. Thus, the pre-communicative nature of the online assignments allowed learners to focus grammatical and lexical structures of Spanish before they actually communicate. On the other hand, the classroom turned into a space to foster communication and interaction. Both, students' and instructor's perceptions suggested that students could use Spanish in more contextualized communication, and interaction. Each in-class activity was targeted to expose students to functional uses of Spanish by engaging them in spontaneous, interactive, and authentic uses of Spanish in conversational-like style. Yet, if students failed to use the expected target grammar or vocabulary, they were still able to negotiate meaning, convey their ideas, and make themselves understood by using other linguistic resources that they had already proceduralized. As it has been previously suggested, engaging learners in communicative activities promotes their fluency, proceduralization of linguistic and lexical knowledge, and communication skills (Moranski & Kim, 2016). These communicative activities were leveraged through the flipped approach while charging students with the task of developing language knowledge outside the classroom.

Third, the fact that some students needed explicit grammar instruction in class calls into question several aspects involving the seamless integration of online and classroom activities, as well as effective feedback and scaffolding. Students' struggles with understanding and using particular grammatical structures is relevant because it showed the complexity of integrating grammar exercises in communicative tasks. These struggles might also be an indicative that students faced difficulties learning on their own, self-regulating their learning processes, and developing their communicative competence with the available linguistic resources. Though the main goal of the flipped model in this study was to promote the use of Spanish for communicative purposes, teaching grammar was relevant for students to build the skills and tools necessary to communicate. Previous studies on flipped learning have also found that students preferred lecture-based grammar instruction (Chen Hsieh *et al.*, 2016; Egbert *et al.*, 2014) as they had difficulties adjusting to independent work **55**

outside the classroom. One could also inquire about more effective ways to help students bridge the online and in-class tasks so that they better activate the linguistic knowledge when communicating. Furthermore, the perceived difficulty that students had with making connections between some cultural aspects of the Hispanic world and their own world is of particular interest. Contrary to other studies that have embedded cultural knowledge into linguistic activities and established a closer connection between online and in-class cultural activities (Morales Rios & Ferreira Cabrera, 2008), this case study showed that online cultural activities had more complex language and topics that challenged students' linguistic ability, leading them to show little interest and apathy during the discussions of cultural topics in class. Presumably, these cultural activities were at a higher level and might not have been of personal significance to students. Thus, careful selection of online cultural activities is needed to increase meaning focused and language development (Dooly, 2011), as well as gather students' interest and attention.

Lastly, students' perceptions of the usefulness of the online and in-class activities were mixed. For some students, vocabulary assignments were more useful than grammar assignments; for others, grammar tutorials and exercises were among the most useful. This finding highlights many assumptions about the extent of students' skills to study and acquire grammatical content on their own (Cowie & Sakui, 2014). In addition, students perceived the communicative activities in class were mostly useful to the development of their communicative competence, speaking in particular. Students' perceptions suggested that they developed communicative abilities more from interacting with others than from practicing grammar exercises (Lee & VanPatten, 2003; Richards, 2005). The in-class activities appeared to be effective to engage learners in communicative tasks that promoted their fluency, proceduralization of linguistic and lexical knowledge, and communication skills (Moranski & Kim, 2016). The instructor's perceptions support the students' report in terms of the activities that seemed to have fostered fluency and active use of Spanish in class. From the instructor's standpoint, students felt more confident to speak, were able to connect many topics studied, and managed to use different ideas. Students seemed to like to be able to talk to other students and feel they were communicating in Spanish. Thus, the flipped approach provided the instructor with a space to implement activities that fostered communication and reactivation of linguistic knowledge. For this study, spending more time in class to actual use of the language seemed to be a positive and effective outcome of the flipped approach.

## Conclusion

The overall results indicated positive perceptions of the online assignments, in-class activities, and flipped format, although the results in the post-course survey were lower than in the pre-course survey. Flipping a second language course requires careful attention to language, pedagogy, and technology. It should go far beyond establishing mere connections between the online content and in-class activities, grammar rules and their uses, and active learning practices in the classroom. A flipped language course should address language learning as a dynamic and complex system that requires adaptations, pedagogical innovations, technological adoptions, and transformation of teaching and learning roles and practices. In L2 flipped learning, instructors become facilitators of learning experiences in communicative environments (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005) assisting students with feedback and providing scaffolding to reinforce outcomes. In this case study, it is necessary to

revisit the online activities and re-think how in-class activities help learners adapt to a new learning paradigm and instructors adopt more innovative scaffolding strategies. Students will need more guidance and support in their language use so that they feel empowered to not only take risks in using Spanish for communicative goals, but to develop their self-regulation skills to be successful in their learning (Dörnyei, 2011; Evseeva & Solozhenko, 2015). In this regard, flipped learning changes the pedagogy and promotes engagement in learning activities (Johnson, 2013).

Although previous studies have argued that learning gains in flipped learning resulted more from active learning strategies rather than from this approach (Jensen *et al.*, 2015), it can be argued that flipped learning for L2 instruction can be effective because it can help better fit the overarching goal of learning an L2: to communicate effectively and confidently with other speakers of the L2 (Willis & Willis, 2009; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, & Shimizu, 2004). Language learning is a developmental process largely mediated by the learner. Therefore, it is the learners' experience of using the language which enables them to develop a grammatical language system (Willis & Willis, 2009) and it is the actual use of the L2 that makes students use the language for authentic and real communication with others. The findings in this study aim to further our understanding of the potential of the flipped approach to leverage communicative opportunities and increase the quality of in-class interactions. Through flipped learning, learners can capitalize on their knowledge, be able to engage in deeper learning, ask questions, interact more meaningfully, and be empowered to use the L2 more spontaneously and confidently. The findings also contribute to our understanding of the complexities of balancing explicit and implicit learning, and the challenges for students and instructors when technology is integrated in the teaching and learning process requiring both, students and instructors, to become more technology literate (Cowei & Sakui, 2014).Yet, further research should examine learners' strategies for self-regulation in blended environments, and what strategies are being used to reactivate the knowledge learned online. In addition, instructor's predispositions and experiences facilitating a blended course should be examined to determine how their strategies in this environment affect learning.

The exploratory nature of this case study brings limitations in regards to the scope and design. The scope of the research study focused on a case of a single course with a small number of participants, therefore, it is not possible to generalize the results to a larger population of students. Further, the study utilized quantitative data from students' survey and qualitative data from the instructor. This data limited the interpretation of the results. Expanding the study to include a larger sample, and students' scores as well as qualitative data will help gather more insightful perspectives. Nevertheless, this study provided an evaluation of what was useful and what needs to be improved for future iterations of the course.

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