

A Flipped Learning Approach to University EFL Courses

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BACKGROUND

Defining Flipped Learning

BL is a combination of face-to-face delivery and online delivery of learning materials and activities (Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003). Teachers interested in BL are searching for ways to make use of the rapidly expanding number of online easily-accessible learning resources. The increase in the use of technology to connect learning environments inside and outside the classroom has recently accelerated due to two developments in educational resources: the free online access to university courses via software, e.g. iTunes U, and websites such as Coursera (<https://www.coursera.org/>); and the sophisticated communication capability of mobile devices such as smart phones and tablet computers.

A promising response to these developments is the FL approach to the BL teaching methodology (Stuntz, 2013; Bishop & Verleger, 2013) which reverses the conventional patterns of classroom learning. Hamdan, McKnight, McKnight, & Arfstrom (2013) define the differences between FL practices and distance learning and BL courses by explaining that if the use of computers and online content does not alter conventional patterns of direct instruction in teacher-centered classrooms, it is not FL. In FL courses students are provided with outside-of-class online learning materials conventionally presented in class by the teacher. Classroom time is used for students to seek advice from the teacher and to help each other as they complete tasks which are usually done as outside-of-class assignments (Lage, Platt, & Treglia, 2000).

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Yarbro, Arfstrom, McKnight, & McKnight (2014) define FL 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” (p.5). FL facilitates active collaborative learning during class time by allowing teachers to respond to individual differences in the comprehension of course content. At the same time students are given opportunities to find learning methods and materials that suit their own learning styles (Lage, Platt, & Treglia, 2000) through engagement in project-based learning activities which include small-group discussion and problem-solving activities. Thus, FL has the greatest chance of success with small-sized classes that make peer interaction manageable and allow teachers to take on a coaching role.

The rationale of FL, the expectations for student participation in their own learning, and the role of the teacher should be explained and demonstrated to students in the early stages of a course.

Flipped Learning for Foreign Language Learning

Recent studies offer encouragement that an FL approach to language teaching should be further investigated through a classroom-based action research methodology. Stuntz (2013) reported that students in a FL CALL EFL course needed instruction and practice in the use of communication and study media such as Gmail and Google Docs to complete outside-of-class assignments. Improvements in these skills allowed for effective use of class time to discuss outside-of-class learning tasks with both their peers and the instructor. The collaboration resulted in higher quality task products. A Learning Management System platform can guide students through the outside-of-class online learning tasks (Sung, 2015). Student satisfaction can enhance motivation when FL

course learning task products are shared with the class and with members of a broader community via YouTube® (Leis, Cooke, & Tohei, 2015). Interactive communication with an international community can be achieved by engaging EFL students in video conferences with students in other countries (Kuhn & Hoffstaedter, 2015). Access to authentic language-use opportunities of this nature in FL courses may decrease in-class performance anxiety among students (Egbert, Herman, & Chang, 2014).

As teachers and students learn how to apply the on-going developments in educational infrastructure, they will discover effective combinations of what can be done best outside, and inside, of classrooms. The potential of FL rests on an assumption that students will use the learning materials before class, so that classroom time can be devoted to problem-solving tasks and analytical examinations of the learning materials. It is crucially important to sustain student engagement in outside-of-class online learning tasks.

Sustaining Student Engagement in Flipped Learning

As with any innovation in education initial mistrust must be overcome. In FL the doubts center on the online element of learning, especially if the outside-of-class work-load increases, and if the students believe that learning is best in face-to-face lecture courses. Moreover, online learning components can be perceived as risky by parents, teachers, and learners if there appears to be no immediate and significant improvement in achievement (Hess, 2006; Dixon, Osment, & Panke, 2009). Parsons (2011) reports that a feeling of being overwhelmed at having to adapt to a new learning environment and discover new roles without proper support can result in a poor understanding of FL course purposes. Thus, students may not stay involved long enough in the outside-of-class course components until a critical mass of satisfaction and achievement is reached.

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