Flipped Classroom for Practical Skills to Enhance Employability: A Case Study of Business Chinese

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ABSTRACT
This study reported on a flipped classroom approach used in a Business Chinese (BC) course in the UK. The research methods were 36 hours of classroom observation, two focused-group interviews (n = 6, 50 minutes each), triangulated with students’ feedback from National Student Survey (NSS). The class observation revealed that the Presentation-Practice-Production (P-P-P) model functioned well throughout the learning process: the presentation of new learning materials was digitalized in the form of PowerPoint in an official e-learning platform for students to preview before class. In-class hours were used for understanding, analyzing, evaluating, applying, and creating. Students analysed the positive and negative elements and applied the positive factors in practice. After class, students took their peers’ constructive feedback into consideration and created their own companies. The interview results illustrated that although students felt it was more work, they welcomed the flipped structure in that the mode of instruction was no longer a one-way flow of information, but in a variety of media: audio, video, websites, links, etc., and by setting up and running their own companies, students were no longer passive learners, instead they made full use of the available resources to become active agencies, responsible for their own companies. Students’ feedback from NSS showed students’ positive learning attitudes, as flipped classroom enriched their learning experience by practising business skills both in and out-of-class, and running their own companies inspired them to devote more effort to the learning process.

KEYWORDS
Active Learning, Business Chinese, Classroom Activities, Flipped Classroom, Ppt, Video

1. INTRODUCTION
In today’s digitalized mobile world, being online has become a normal part of university students’ everyday life, and therefore educators have devoted effort in order to guide students’ online activities to enrich their learning experience and to optimize their learning outcome. As such, a flipped classroom is gaining popularity in many disciplines (Alvarez, 2011; Leis, Tohei, & Cooke, 2015), including language education (Hung, 2015; Yang, Yin and Wang, 2018). Flipped classroom is a pedagogical approach in which content instruction normally conducted within the classroom is performed by the learners as homework, and classroom time is used for practice and application (McCarthy, 2016). Since students read the concepts and the related knowledge before class, content hours can be used

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for interactive learning for deeper understanding. This study is an attempt to apply flipped classroom approach to Business Chinese (BC) learning and to explore its effects and students’ attitudes towards this approach.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW ON FLIPPED CLASSROOM

Science database in Google Scholar was used to locate research papers on flipped classroom. The key words of ‘flipped classroom’ resulted in 5720 papers. The key words of ‘flipped classrooms for language learning’ narrowed the number down to 2276. By using ‘flipped classroom for learning Chinese’, 523 papers appeared. It is interesting to note that with the key words of ‘flipped classroom for learning BC’, 142 papers remained, however among the 142 papers, most are on business or finance and the rest are on Chinese, and none of the papers is on BC. After skimming the abstracts and reading the most relevant papers published in recent years, the key points in the literature are summarized from the following three aspects.

2.1. Flipped Classroom in General Courses

Flipped classroom is an inversion of the conventional teaching approach, whereby instruction taking place in the classroom is made accessible online and class time is devoted to students’ interactions for practice, that is, the normally in-class activities are now completed at home and “homework” activities are done in class (Alvarez, 2011; Leis, Tohei, & Cooke, 2015).

To be more specific, students are introduced to the course content prior to class by means of videos or podcasts or PowerPoints etc. for direct instruction so as to reserve class time for collaborative work and concept mastery. Course material is previewed by students individually, while classroom activities are devoted to group work practicing and fulfilling practical tasks and reinforcing the new material through discussion, debate, experiment etc. (Fischer, 2013).

The studies on flipped class spread across different disciplines, from different perspectives, with different research methods and with different results. For example, Baker (2000) required his communication students to read PowerPoint slides before class and discovered that students had learned from their peers through collaborative activities in class. In the same vein, Bergmann & Sams (2012) found that flipped classroom helped the students in creating inquiry and problem-based learning. By implementing flipped classroom, Mehring’s (2014) qualitative study demonstrated that students greatly benefitted from “the greater student-centred and active learning environment, the added amount of time participants spent preparing for the face-to-face class, and the significantly enhanced authentic and communicative learning environment” (p86).

From theoretical point of view, flipped classroom is commended for its socio-constructivist approach emphasising on active learning, inquiry-based learning and problem-based motivated learning. Such a learning approach can enrich students’ learning experience (Wilson, 2013), enhance students’ learning outcome (Flumerfelt and Green, 2013) and encourage learner-centred learning (Chen, Hsieh, Wu, and Marek, 2016).

From technological perspective, there has been a significant increase in the quantity and quality of resources available online, and a new digital landscape providing innovative opportunities for learning is emerging (Mehring, 2016). Consequently, students need a different period of time to learn theoretical material and fulfil practical assignments. The flipped classroom technology allows students to solve this problem by giving them the opportunities to choose the tempo, speed, and the volume of the content to study (Yeung and O’Malley, 2014).

Although digitalized technologies have made it possible to provide learning materials displayed in different modes, yet it is the tutor’s pedagogical experience that counts, including what materials to use and the way the materials are presented. If language tutors’ pedagogy can be well reflected by the new technology, flipped classroom can be an opportunity to raise the level of teaching practice and the status of the profession as a whole.
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