

Flipped Learning in ELT: benefits, challenges, and practical applications

Ziyao Huang

The University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

1647961366@qq.com

Abstract. This essay offers a critical evaluation of the flipped classroom model within the realm of English Language Teaching (ELT). It argues that while the model's promise of active, student-centered learning holds significant potential, particularly for developing speaking skills in EFL contexts, its successful implementation is contingent upon addressing key pedagogical and logistical challenges. The analysis identifies the proliferation of activities and over-reliance on technology as two contentious aspects that can undermine learning efficacy. In response, the essay proposes a framework for quality assurance, emphasizing the cultivation of learner autonomy, the strategic design of in-class and out-of-class tasks, and the need-based integration of digital tools. The conclusion underscores that the flipped classroom is not a panacea but a transformative approach that requires careful adaptation to specific educational contexts to truly enhance English language acquisition.

Keywords: flipped classroom, English Language Teaching (ELT), EFL speaking skills

1. Introduction

This essay aims to critique the flipped classroom and its application in English Language Teaching (ELT) through three parts. The first part provides an overview of the flipped classroom, including its definitions, approaches, theoretical basis, strengths, and weaknesses, and accounts for its increasing popularity. The second part presents flipped learning in terms of its application in ELT with a special focus on the context of teaching English speaking to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. The third part discusses two controversial features of the application of the flipped classroom in ELT: more learning activities being introduced and technological assistance and proposes three ways to ensure the quality of flipped learning: raising students' self-discipline awareness, designing effective learning activities and adopting digital learning resources based on students' needs.

2. Overview of the flipped classroom

2.1. Definitions and approaches of the flipped classroom

The flipped classroom has been offered different definitions. Flipped Learning Network [1] defined it as "a pedagogic approach in which direct instruction that has traditionally taken place inside the classroom now takes place outside the classroom, so that the in-class group space can be better used for active learning with foci on knowledge application". Milman [2] offered a more detailed definition of the flipped classroom that teachers allocate finite class time for facilitating more interactive and cooperative learning activities but not introducing conceptual knowledge, which whereas would be done by multimedia (video lectures, vodcasts and so on). It can be summarised from the definitions that completing the flipped classroom includes an out-of-class phase and an in-class phase, or as divided by O'Flaherty and Phillips [3] divided, "pre-class asynchronous activities" and "face to face synchronous activities". Various instruments can be applied to facilitate the flipped classroom. In the out-of-class phase, new knowledge is instructed to students by providing digital learning material, which can be pre-recorded lecture videos by teachers themselves [4, 5], existing educational videos or websites [6, 7], reading lists and guides [8] and online exercise or gaming platforms [9, 10]. In the in-class phase, formative or summative assessments [11-13], group discussions and collaborations [14], and game-based activities [15, 16] are frequently employed.

2.2. Theoretical foundations of the flipped classroom

Besides being the inversion of the traditional teaching pattern, the flipped classroom can also be seen as a creation based on a wide range of educational theories. Active learning [17] is believed to support the design of the flipped classroom as it advocates class activities encouraging students' participation and activating their thinking, such as group discussion and collaborative learning [6]. It is also argued that Constructivism principles [18, 19], which propose that rather than passive receiving knowledge, learning is an active process during which students participate, explore and reflect by themselves, underpins the flipped classroom theoretically [20, 21].

2.3. Benefits and weaknesses of the flipped classroom

Theoretical foundations make the flipped classroom credible and science, and it is noticeable its advantages go beyond that. Firstly, the flipped classroom ensures that students grasp the autonomy of their study. Students can know what they need beyond teachers, and pre-class digital instructional materials allow students to pause or review according to their own pace of learning, which benefits their understanding of knowledge and ability of independent learning [21, 22]. It is also examined that students are more inclined to "take ownership for their learning" [23], which is exactly what is achieved by the flipped classroom. As catering to students' tendency, the flipped classroom could increase students' willingness and interest to participate, which would have a positive influence on their learning effect and academic performance. Secondly, through the flipped classroom, students' high-order skills can be cultivated and exercised. Low-levels of learning and high-levels of learning are derived from Bloom's taxonomy of learning [24]. The former refers to remembering and comprehending knowledge and the latter includes "applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating" [25]. It has been demonstrated that low-order contents that used to be instructed in class are delivered by pre-class activities so that the class time is freed up for high-order skills development [21]. As a result, students' critical thinking, problem solving skills and application ability can be enhanced. However, some weaknesses of the flipped classroom should be acknowledged. The first one is the flipped classroom takes it for granted that all students have access to digital devices [2], which cannot be achieved especially in remote areas or by those who are economically disadvantaged, thus, its implementation can potentially exacerbate educational inequality. Secondly, it cannot be promised that students are highly self-disciplined and have enough time to cover all the pre-class learning materials [2, 21]. Insufficient preparation could lead to inadequate participation in classroom activities, which would compromise the learning outcomes.

2.4. Reasons for the flipped classroom's increasing popularity

The flipped classroom has been widely adopted in all kinds of disciplines including both STEM subjects [26] and the humanities field [27]. Its popularity is not only due to the fact that it is an effective educational strategy based on a comprehensive consideration of its benefits and limitations, there are other factors as well. Firstly, the flipped classroom is a cost-effective option for educational institutions [3, 28]. On the one hand, educational organisations make use of eLearning to achieve cost reduction by "reducing instructional positions and downsizing facilities" [3]. On the other hand, moving teaching time of classroom to outside the classroom increases the shadow labour of teachers. Secondly, the flipped classroom coincides with the contemporary change in educational ideologies. Students are proposed to be centralised and have mastery of their learning, which enhances their responsibilities and initiative. This shift, to some extent, weakens teachers' position as the only source of knowledge, removes teachers from the higher hierarchy of education and transforms them from the role of domination to the role of supporting and promoting.

3. The application of flipped learning to english language teaching

3.1. Overview of the application of flipped learning to english language teaching

Among all the fields adopting the flipped classroom as an effective pedagogical approach, English Language Teaching (ELT) recognises it especially for its positive impacts on vocabulary acquisition [29], oral performance [30, 31], writing skills [32], reading comprehension [14, 33] and so on. In addition to contributing to the development of various essential skills in English learning, the flipped classroom is also applied in different contexts within ELT and examined to be beneficial. ELT encompasses a wide range of contexts, such as English as a Second Language (ESL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and so on. Applying the flipped model in ESL teaching has been researched empirically and the results present that it can enhance students' overall performance in English and independent learning and be well-perceived by students [34]. EFL is considered more difficult to conduct English teaching than ESL since the former cannot guarantee students' daily exposure to English environment as the latter. Fortunately, previous studies show that flipped learning in the EFL classroom also has positive impacts as it leads to higher scores and shapes participants to be more responsible and autonomous, additionally,

students are mostly satisfied with the flipped classroom and enjoy learning English following this strategy [30, 35]. ESP classrooms use flipped learning as well and it has been proved that it can increase students' self-efficiency, critical thinking and ability to build connections between existing ideas and new knowledge [36].

The wide application of the flipped classroom to ELT is not only out of its general strengths aforementioned in the former section which would apply to any discipline. The flipped classroom is argued to benefit ELT for a specific reason as it provides students with a great number of opportunities to exercise and engage. Language acquisition is known for its high requirements of practice and time, which can hardly be met by traditional teaching models due to the limited time while the flipped classroom makes it possible by engaging students in additional practices and activities [37]. However, the flipped ELT classroom is questioned about its effectiveness considering how arduous the L2 learning process is [38]. To minimize these issues, it is essential to introduce efficient technological assistance and effective learning activities, which requires teachers' endeavour [39, 40].

3.2. The application of the EFL flipped speaking teaching

The application of the flipped classroom to EFL speaking teaching has been a popular practice in the field of flipped ELT classrooms and will be elaborated on in detail. Mastering English speaking ability is significant for EFL learners since it is the tool to share ideas, express thoughts, cultivate communicative competence and keep oral communications with others both in academic and daily situations [41-43]. Learning English speaking can also be difficult to EFL learners because speakers cannot edit and revise the content they said as what can be done when writing and beyond knowing phonetic and lexical knowledge, speakers are asked to be sensitive to change in speaking styles considering different listeners and contexts as well [42]. Additionally, it is also argued that English learners' difficulty in grasping speaking skills may be caused by their few opportunities to put speaking into practice both inside and outside the classroom [44] and the language teaching process emphasising conceptual understanding more than practical implementation [45]. Overall, the intrinsic differences of English speaking from other skills (e.g., English writing) and the limitations of traditional language classrooms decide the difficulty of learning English speaking for EFL students. The former cannot be changed but the latter can be tackled by the application of the flipped classroom.

The way to conduct the flipped classroom EFL speaking teaching can be the conventional pattern of the flipped classroom: teachers provide pre-class materials for students to learn in advance and organise in-class activities for students' speaking exercises. In-class activities could be targeted on conversation, public speaking, English speech, and presentation, which are argued to be essential components of English as a foreign language speaking skills [46, 47]. Li [48] proposed another model of EFL flipped oral classroom, which can be compatible in particular to higher education. It divides flipped oral English classroom model into 1) process of before-class knowledge transfer, in which teachers offer new materials on digital platforms for students' autonomous learning so that students can complete the process of knowledge input, 2) process of in-class knowledge internalisation, during which teachers design tasks from primary level to complicated level for students to engage, so they can complete the phase of language use and the phase of comprehensive improvement, and 3) process of after-class knowledge expansion, which creates an authentic and open language environment for students' oral practice for them to complete phase of language consolidation and extension.

English speaking anxiety has been indicated as a common phenomenon among EFL learners [49] and the critical factor impeding their speaking performance [50, 51]. The flipped classroom is introduced in EFL speaking teaching in to address this issue. Abdullah, Hussin and Ismail [51] engaged 27 EFL undergraduate students majoring in English at Buraimi University College (BUC) in the course Advanced Communication Skills, which was conducted the flipped classroom model. The students were asked to take a questionnaire measuring their anxiety in English speaking performance three times as the pre-test, mid-test and post-test, write reflective journals and take interviews. After 12 weeks of the course, the anxiety level of English speaking of the participants decreased since more confidence was created by the pre-class preparations and there were more chances for them to practise English speaking, besides, they found the classroom interesting and motivating. However, this study did not include a control group, thus, it could not be decided whether the positive results were caused by the flipped classroom model or the course itself. A more persuasive experiment on the EFL flipped speaking classroom was conducted by Dariyemez [52], who divided 55 EFL freshman students majoring in English Language and Literature at a Turkish state university into 2 groups, with one experimental group of 28 students taking the course Advanced Speaking Skills in the flipped classroom and the control group of 27 students taking the same course but in the traditional class. A language speaking anxiety scale was implemented both as a pre-test and post-test for both groups. The comparison of results indicated students from both groups showed less anxiety when speaking English as they overcame their shyness, felt less nervous and feared less of making mistakes. The decrease in anxiety in the experimental group was more considerable than that in the control group as the flipped classroom allowed students to prepare their in-class speaking in advance and gain teachers' feedback through the online platform, which avoided speaking without preparation and receiving overt correction in front of classmates. In addition to addressing speaking anxiety, increasing oral fluency, complexity and accuracy is also a significant teaching goal in EFL speaking class, which the flipped classroom is adopted to achieve [31, 53].

The application of the flipped classroom to EFL speaking learning is frequently integrated with advanced technology. Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) technology is "a computer-based process of decoding and transcribing oral language usually into text form" [53], which can offer a great amount of practice, detect pronunciation errors, and give unbiased feedback [54, 55]. ASR technology has been integrated with an EFL flipped speaking classroom of 160 freshman students from 4 parallel classes in a Chinese public university by Jiang and others [53, 56]. All classes took the course College English taught in the flipped classroom model with two classes' teaching being assisted by the usage of ASR technology and the other two classes not. The results presented that with the integration of the flipped classroom and ASR technology, EFL students' oral language complexity, accuracy and fluency could witness salient improvement. However, it was also found that in the meanwhile of making sense of students' oral input, the adaptive artificial intelligence included in mobile-based dictation ASR application can escalate the students' fossilization of learner interlanguage as well since as long as it is trained enough, it would adapt to students' errors and stop rectifying them, which may hinder students' improvement. Besides, just as compensating for the shortage of human experts and providing a multi-level service [57, 58] in many other fields, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is used to assist the EFL flipped speaking classroom. Lin and Mubarak [58] employed AI-based chatbots in both in-class and out-of-class activities on two Oral-Aural Drill flipped classes in an English course in a Taiwanese university and found its positive influences on students' speaking performance and interaction behaviours.

4. Conclusion

Overall, the flipped classroom is an effective and popular educational approach in the field of ELT for its outstanding strengths: firstly, the pre-class online instructional materials allow students to grasp the autonomy of their study and absorb knowledge following their pace of learning, which can benefit their mastery of knowledge, ability of independent learning and willingness to study. Secondly, the in-class activities can cultivate students' critical thinking, problem-solving skills and application ability. Thirdly, the flipped classroom can enhance students' oral performance by relieving speaking anxiety and increasing oral fluency, complexity and accuracy, especially for EFL students, who find learning English speaking skills both essential and difficult. However, some limitations of flipped learning cannot be ignored. The first is that not all students have access to technological devices, which means the online teaching materials can be unavailable for some students, especially those in remote areas and in disadvantaged economic situations. Secondly, there is no promise that students are self-disciplined enough to cover all pre-class tasks and such insufficient preparations may lead to inadequate engagement in in-class activities, which could impact the learning outcomes negatively.

In addition to the overt advantages and disadvantages, there are some features of the application of the flipped classroom in ELT, which can be considered positive and negative at the same time. To begin with, the flipped classroom in ELT makes it possible for students to be exposed to a great number of opportunities to exercise their language use. It can benefit students as language acquisition has high requirements of practice which can hardly be provided by traditional teaching models due to the limited time, especially for EFL students who cannot contact the English environment in daily interactions. While on the other side, it can increase the work burden on students and teachers as the number of activities undertaken far exceeds that of the traditional classroom, as a result, the shadow labour of instructors and the mental pressure of students may increase, which can lead to energy deprivation and negative mood. Another controversial feature is the integration of advanced technology and the flipped classroom to ELT. It is admitted that technological platforms or applications can provide plenty of learning resources, make studying convenient and reduce teachers' workload to a certain extent, however, students need to spend much time and energy learning how to use them, which may not be proportional to the benefits brought on students' learning outcomes by them. Also, there is the possibility that the technology introduced into the flipped classroom may not be very effective and helpful for the students as it is only be adopted since cooperating with some technological companies can bring economic incentives. Thus, three things need to be done to guarantee the efficient application of the flipped classroom to ELT. The first thing is to raise students' awareness of being responsible for their own learning to ensure they cover all pre-class tasks. The second is that effective in-class activities should be designed so that the workload would not increase (too much) when offering students enough practice with their language. Last but not least, teachers and educational institutions should choose what is best for students' learning and development, in other words, they should use technological platforms or resources solely for the best educational effect, not out of instructors' interests.

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