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FLIPPING THE EFL CLASSROOM

Abstract. The study explores EFL flipped classroom in a higher education setting. The results obtained in observations and questionnaires showed that the flipped classroom improved students' engagement in learning process and the teaching model was perceived positively by students. The study also identifies a number of drawbacks that need to be taken into consideration by teachers who are planning to use this instructional method in their classrooms.

Keywords: flipped classroom; EFL, student-centered learning.

Аңдатпа. Зерттеу жоғарғы оқу орындарында шет тілін оқытудағы аралас оқыту технологиясын қарастырады. Бақылау мен студенттердің жазбаша сауалнамалары (анкеталау) қорытындысы бойынша алынған нәтижелерде аралас оқыту технологиясы студенттердің оқу процесіне белсенділігін арттырып, оқыту моделі студенттер тарапынан оң қабылданғандығын көрсетті. Сондай-ақ зерттеу сабақты жоспарлауда аралас оқыту әдісін қолдану барысында ескерілуі тиіс бірқатар кемшіліктерді де анықтайды.

Түйін сөздер: аралас оқыту, шетел тілі, студенттерге бағытталған оқыту.

Аннотация. Исследование рассматривает технологию смешанного обучения иностранному языку в условиях высшего образования. Результаты, полученные в результате наблюдений и опроса студентов в письменном виде (анкетирование), показали, что технология смешанного обучения повысила вовлеченность студентов в процесс обучения, и модель обучения была воспринята студентами положительно. В исследование также выявляет ряд недостатков, которые необходимо учитывать при планировании использования этого метода обучения в своих классах.

Ключевые слова: смешанное обучение; иностранный язык; студенто-центрированное обучение.

The idea that lies behind the flipping approach is not new. It has been a common practice to assign readings and writing tasks for the homework in order

to have students prepared for the classroom discussion in language education. However, the access to the same information using digital technology is relatively new and little research has been conducted on how this could work in a language class (Brame, 2012). Therefore, the results of the study could be very helpful on how to flip language classroom.

The main purpose of this study was to find how flipping approach could be used in foreign language classroom. In order to investigate this issue, this action research project was conducted in an Academic English course at a private Kazakhstani university.

Literature Review

Bergmann and Sams (2008) are considered the founders of the flipping the classroom approach. However, they simply coined the term or made the idea popular as this approach had been introduced and utilized long time before. They introduced the idea of the reversed classroom in 2007 in Woodland Park, Colorado. Both were teaching chemistry and had an opportunity to observe the same problems during educational process. During the spring 2007 semester, Bergman and Sams started to record their classes and post them online. Their initial goal was to create online materials for students who did not or could not attend classes. The online materials helped teachers avoid wasting their time on re-teaching classes to students who had missed lessons. That was only the beginning of the method. Once the teachers saw that creating lectures for students who had missed class was effective, they began to think about using pre-recorded lectures for all of their students and then using class time for discussions of the lessons and lab experiments on the material covered in the lectures. Thus, the idea of “flipping the classroom” was born. In the 2007–2008 school year, Bergman and Sams presented pre-recorded lectures to all their students and spent their class time on discussion of students’ understanding of the materials and their individual needs. The researchers created video lectures so their students in chemistry and Advanced Placement Chemistry could work with them at home and spend the class time on practice (Bergmann, 2012). At the beginning, Bergman and Sams tried to record lectures and covered every unit. However, later they switched to the discussion of every subsequent unit and more detailed lectures.

Bergman and Sams’ idea was to have students watch lectures every other night and take notes on what they had learned and in class, students conducted laboratory experiments. This idea of a reversed class provided the instructors with more time to spend on experiments and to work on problems. Additionally, Bergman and Sams’ new approach allowed them to personalize their instruction and, despite the number of students they had in class, give individualized attention to every student who needed help (Bergmann and Sams, 2008).

This approach was called various names such as flipping the classroom, hybrid approach, and blended instruction. Even though there is no significant difference between these three terms, it is still worth making some distinctions.

Blended approach offers online and face-to-face learning. The online component includes exercises and additional information that is used in class. Hybrid approach is very similar to the term blended approach with the only difference the major part of the course takes place online. Last but not least, the flipping approach is another form of the blended approach. It expects students to study the material outside the class and the class time is used for practice and face-to-face instruction.

Whatever the name, all the methods contain the idea of increased teacher-student interaction in class (Bergmann, 2012). It is also important to note that when somebody says blended or reversed instruction it does not simply mean that technology is brought to class, but rather refers to the way the content is delivered to the students. Thus, “blended” is the perfect word to describe the content delivery process. When teachers deliver an asynchronous class or provide students with pre-recorded information to work with outside the class it is called “blended/reversed instruction” (Bergmann, 2012).

With the increased interest in the flipping the classroom philosophy, the need to test its efficacy has appeared. Some instructors who used or tried to use the method stated that the increased learning did not appear because of the reversed homework but because of the opportunity for teachers to spend more time with students on guidance and face-to-face learning.

A number of studies have been conducted to study the effectiveness of the flipping the classroom approach. Zhang and Han (2012) aimed at examining the utilization of this learning approach to Web-Based College English Teaching Platform (WCETP) in a medical university in China. During the study, two questions were raised. First, if there was a difference between the traditional way of learning and flipping the classroom in terms of students’ satisfaction? Second question asked, if there was a difference between the traditional way of learning and the flipping the classroom in terms of learners’ achievements? The findings of the study revealed that the flipping approach enhanced students’ language skills, improved their self-confidence in the language learning process, and promoted independent work. In their article Zhang and Han mentioned that students had preferred flipping the classroom approach to the traditional one. The statistical analysis that the authors conducted revealed that the use of the integrated approach presented even more positive results than was expected. The study has had an important reference value and practical significance for the English Education College.

In another study of an observation of flipping the classroom, Rogers and Tingerthal (2013) discussed the use of flipping the classroom approach and the difference between it and the hybrid method. Hybrid approach combines face-to-face classroom interactions with distance learning techniques to disseminate information to members of a learning community. Rogers and Tingerthal (2013) provided an overview of the literature in which they reported about various online platforms used for course delivery and discussed the lack of research on

how to deliver online courses to undergraduates. The authors mentioned two web-based platforms: Blackboard and Moodle that could be used in online teaching/learning process.

There has been little research that has been conducted on implementing flipping in the language classroom. That is why, a study of the use of this approach was interesting in terms of how the approach would work in a language classroom and in terms of the changes that took or could take place as a result of using the method.

Data and Methodology

The research project was based on the instructor's observations and a questionnaire survey, which was conducted among the students; the questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms at the end of the course. This survey helped to identify the difficulties students had faced during the course and teacher's observations allowed to identify if students had face similar challenges from the point of view of the teacher. The data was collected during one semester and involved 11 students.

The research was conducted in a form of an action research. The decision to conduct action research in the language classroom was made as it could help to see/understand what was going on in the language classroom and trace the changes in learning process if there were any. It also helped to answer the research question about the effectiveness of the approach and give an answer if it worked in the language classroom or not. The general idea of the action research was to find out if students could benefit from the use of the flipping approach in the language classroom. Language classroom required a lot of effort from students to succeed and blended approach became one of the opportunities to facilitate learning process.

To face the ethics and minimize any possible risk to the site, the following codes were used instead of the name of the institution (University), course (Academic Writing (AWC)) and the students (P1, P2, etc.). This research project was conducted in an AWC, a course usually offered to freshmen students by the University. The course length was one semester that meant three academic hours a week or 45 academic hours total. AWC is offered to the first-year students and aimed at building and developing students' skills in writing essays, particularly the discussion essay and the problem and solution essay. The students were expected to be of minimum B1 level English language students. According to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), this is an intermediate level of language proficiency. The class met twice a week and continued for 15 weeks. Besides the classroom instruction the office hours were offered to the participants in case they needed additional assistance. The instructor prepared the presentations in advance and video recorded them after that the recoded materials, presentations and readings were posted on Moodle so participants had access to them any time. Each presentation contained the information about one topic only.

For example, one of the topics that we introduced to students was “Logical Fallacies” —the presentation introduced the information about common fallacies students had. As all presentations, this one was video recorded using Jing, an online program that allows capturing video and still images, which was then shared on Moodle. That allowed considering various learning styles (Silver et al., 1997) the participants had and depending on their learning style they could read the material and go through the power point presentation or watch the video with the same materials presented via video recordings. The students were expected to watch/read materials for every class and in class they were practicing and discussing the information they received.

During class time, students discussed the questions they had and practiced writing paragraphs and other writing assignments. For example, the learners wrote first draft of the discussion essay in a class after a careful discussion of the essay structure and practice.

As the main focus of the study was to explore if and how flipping the classroom worked in an EFL class the course reading and writing materials were designed and arranged for students’ access to video and reading materials. Learners were expected to come to class and to apply the information they learned from the pre-recorded materials.

The course materials included the following:

- Recorded materials and documents for reading prepared by the instructor/me for independent study of students in advance and posted on Moodle, the electronic platform; and
- Moodle—an electronic website for work with prepared materials.

The electronic platform was primarily used with the goal to provide participants with the 24-hour access to the materials. This platform is flexible enough to be used in educational system and in language classroom in particular.

This study served as a good opportunity to observe and identify if the use of hybrid approach helped to improve the learning process or vice versa. It also helped to identify if students struggled during the learning process. During the classes we were observing, the participants and was trying to identify if there were any problems they faced. After the classes, we recorded short videos reporting on what had been going on in the classroom. During the classes, we focused on the challenges that participants of the study experienced, if there were any and how they coped with them. We were going round the class and having face-to-face talks and discussions about personal challenges and ways to overcome them.

In the end of the course, students were asked to fill in the questionnaire, which consisted of 15 questions. The questionnaire included questions about students’ computer literacy level, and about the experience of using the electronic platform that was utilized by the instructor during the course. Additionally, the participants were asked to indicate what they liked/disliked about class and explain why. Moreover, several questions were about the course

and the amount of work students had to perform. Free response questions asked in the survey-encouraged participants' recommendations, comments or suggestions. Open-ended questions provided participants with the opportunity to add/express opinions, recommendations and additional information that are of a big value for further study.

Data was collected with the help of the procedures described above and it was analyzed using descriptive statistics. To examine the responses to the questionnaire the information was categorized. Information from open-ended questions was organized by responses presenting the comments and recommendations from the participants. In addition to the questionnaire the observations' information was added to support or to refute the questionnaire's results. In order to provide the confidentiality and for ethical issues, coding for the participants was used. The results of the analysis are reported in the narrative form (tables, graphics) in the following section.

Table 1
The Flipped Classroom

Activity	Time	ARW 1
Warm up activity	5 min.	
Questions from the video home assignment	10 min.	Discussion of the video material on the essay structure
Guided and/or independent study	50–60 min.	Writing first draft of an essay

Whereas, in the traditional classroom (Table 2) a lot of time was usually spent on giving instructions and lecturing in the classroom. As a result, the distribution of time in traditional classroom between the lecture and discussion of the home assignment was not equal.

Table 2
The Traditional Classroom

Activity	Time	ARW 1
Warm up activity	5 min.	
Review HW	15–20 min.	

HW: checking up the paragraph that students had to write at home on the chosen topic.

Lecture: introduction of 30–40 min. new material

L: explanation of the essay structure.

HW: to write an essay by the next class.

In comparison to the traditional classroom, the flipping approach suggested less time spent on giving instructions and lecturing, and more time was devoted to the review of the examples and in-class practice. The use of that approach provided students with the online access to the lecture materials. This was especially important for those students who had missed the classes and needed explanation outside the classroom.

Discussion

This section focuses on the results of the survey that was conducted among the participants and teacher's (personal) observations of the classes and covers the information required to have a clear picture of the action research. The research question of the study was how flipping the classroom works in the language classroom? Figure 1 presented the results of participants' answers to the question regarding the amount of work students did while preparing for the classes. According to the participants' answers only one student was doing more than required for the class and another participant was doing less than was assigned and required. Besides this in the questionnaire participants answered the other open-ended questions. Some other questions reviewed participants' involvement in the course activities.

The results of the survey, illustrated by Figure 2, showed that only 45.45% of the whole class was actively involved into the course activities. Another 45.45% was only partially involved or, as they reported in the questionnaire, they were somewhat involved into the class work.

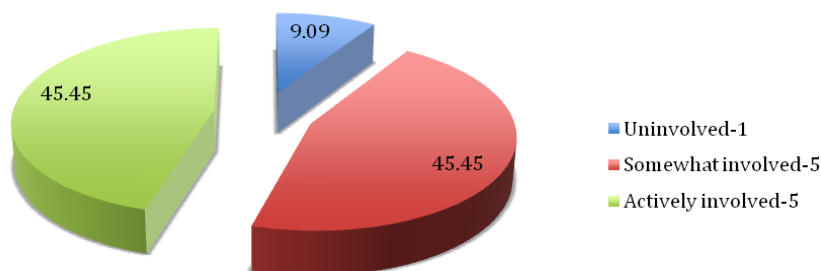


Figure 2. Students' involvement in the course activities

Thus, not 100% involvement into the class activities was closely connected to the lack of experience of working with the electronic platform. Later, when the participants learned how to operate it, they became more successful in their tasks completion. As teachers observers, we could see that in the works that they had submitted and in their class work, where they were working in a more independent manner, asking questions only in case they really needed help or teacher's assistance. The visual result of that hard work could be their final grades, which showed their achievements.

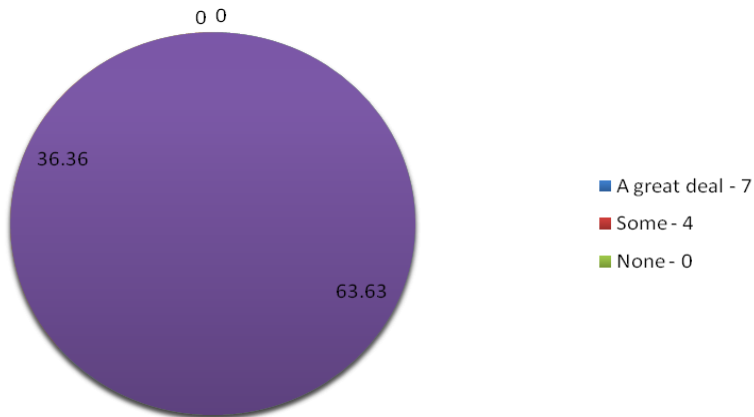


Figure 3. How much practical knowledge participants have gained from this course?

As seen in Figure 3, participants reported the improvement of writing skills and increase of knowledge after taking AWC with 61.1% of the participants reported that they have gained “a great deal” from the course and 38.5% of the students stated that they gained “some” knowledge. Those participants who were actively involved in all classroom activities and came prepared to class were more successful by the end of the course as they learned a lot and, as a result, the quality of the paper they submitted was very good.

From personal observations, P1 and P6, both of them passed IELTS before entering the university, did not succeed much, especially in writing the discussion essay. My expectation was that both participants would be more successful in writing discussion essay as they were already acquainted with the structure and had writing experience. The reality showed that both participants were in the list of the weakest participants as they both almost failed the course. And, it is difficult to say that they gained a lot of knowledge from the first half of the course. P8 experienced difficulties in working with Moodle in the first half of the semester and even though he was offered help he refused to admit that he had not understood the idea of watching lectures at home and practicing in class. P8 was the only one who had basic computer skills and that also could be one of the reasons why he did not succeed much. From observations, only by the middle of the semester he realized how useful the Moodle was and that he could find a lot of interesting and helpful information there. The main difficulty

from teacher's side was that P8 did not come to visit during the office hours despite the fact that he was invited to come for several times. Consequently, instructor could not help him much until he decided or realized that he actually needed my help.

On the other hand, a number of the participants have successfully completed the course and they were in the list of those who reported that they "gained a great deal from the course". One such student, for example, P5 (P5, personal communication, December 16, 2013), who took a UF course where he learned the basics of essay writing, and we could see him using the previous knowledge in the writing course and adding more knowledge that he was learning during the AWC.

Following the comparison of the L-drive and Moodle it is important to mention that a significant difference between these two was in preparation of the materials. When an instructor worked with L-drive it was possible to place the materials right before the classes and it was very convenient for the instructor and probably for learners as well. To work with Moodle successfully and to provide learners with the all necessary information, the materials were to be placed in advance so learners could have access to the information anytime, not to Word documents only but to videos as well. In addition, we have to mention that the biggest advantage of the Moodle was the opportunity of each participant to access their personal information, the platform allowed to enter grades and each participant could track personal information. The platform also allowed the teacher and learners keeping in touch via messages.

Another benefit of using Moodle in teaching AWC and flipping approach in general was the access to the video, audio and reading files 24 hours a day. That was very helpful not only for the instructor but for the students as well. The online access to the materials allowed participants to revise the information any time they needed, and to keep being informed in case they had missed the class. A third advantage of the flipping approach was that the time of teacher-student interaction had increased. Moreover, student-student interaction in class increased as well, that allowed participants to learn from each other apart for what the teacher shared with them. Such student-teacher and student-student interaction facilitated the creation of learning community outside the classroom, where the participants were helping each other to overcome difficulties and find answers to the questions connected to the course. The use of the approach allowed me to spend more time to work with students who were struggling and challenge the others. The results of that work were visible in the way when instructors observed participants applying their knowledge and demonstrating their ability to write a good discussion essay, for instance. To measure participants' success in writing course we relied on the course objectives and their fulfillment. The achieved results showed that the flipping approach worked well in AWC. The final advantage of using flipping approach in the language classroom was that it allowed students to have more control of what was learned

and what still required some work to be done. This action research was a step to the use of students centered approach in the university where it was conducted.

The use of flipping approach in AWC allows meeting students' needs and provides differentiated learning so all learners could gain knowledge without experiencing additional difficulties despite the difference in the preferred learning styles (Reid, 1995). The use of Moodle and a variety of the ways to present the materials to learners provided the latter with the more chances to succeed and some of the learner used that chance. However, to use the approach in the language classroom requires a lot of efforts, both, from teacher and students. To introduce the approach it is vital to plan the whole course well in advance and when prepare materials for the students consider the learning styles of the students. Additionally, both, a teacher and students are expected to be computer literate and to be able to utilize electronic platform. It is especially important as the use of the approach remodels the lecture classes into the active-learning classes. This is a long process where teacher plays the leading role and if the course and the course materials are not carefully prepared it could create additional burden for the learners (Danker, 2015). This leads to another challenge that instructor faces: utilizing this approach was time consuming. The preparation and posting the materials for the course took a lot of time before the semester started and during the semester the information was revised and if necessary changes were introduced so the learners could benefit from the use of the electronic platform and the materials posted there.

Limitations

During the study, several limitations were identified. The study reviewed the performance of one group only. Consequently, there was no opportunity to observe other groups of the same language course for purposes of comparing the effectiveness of the flipping the classroom methodology with traditional methodologies. However, since this was an action research study, it was acceptable to observe one group only and was not necessary to be conducted in bigger numbers. Besides this, the reliability of the study should be considered a limitation since one instructor used the flipping the classroom approach only. The last limitation was the short duration of the study as the action research covered one semester only.

Considering the fact that only one group was observed there is a room for further study. This could support the research findings or provide evidence against using hybrid approach in the language classroom. Considering the limitations describe in this research more flexibility could be provided in different areas when another research is conducted. Various factors and terms could be taken into consideration such as students' computer literacy and only advanced users will be involved or several groups will be studied and one of them will be a controlling group where traditional classes will be conducted.

Conclusion

The use of flipped classroom turned out to be a positive teaching and learning experience despite some challenges that both participants and teachers faced. In the time when Kazakhstani educational community strives to provide qualitative education and shift responsibility from teachers to students in order to teach the latter to be more independent and be able to work with various recourses without someone mothering them the use of flipping approach could be a good choice. The use of this format in the language classroom could be the first step towards student-centered approach and it gives opportunity to effectively communicate the not only in the way teacher-student but also student-student or teacher-student-students.

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