

Enhancing the Communicative Competence of Professional Students Using Flipped Classroom Strategy

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ABSTRACT

The Flipped Classroom strategy provides support and strength to English language teachers in developing the required language skills and communicative competence among professional students. Flipped learning in the context of blended learning generates curiosity among classroom teachers, professional researchers, and educators today. Flipped classrooms promote a process of education where classroom activities and take-home assignments are usually reversed. The primary purpose of this research is to outline how this strategy is used in language teaching and discusses its practicality and applicability in the context of a language classroom for developing learners' language skills. Along with this, the researcher mentions the findings drawn from the practical experience of implementing it in the language classroom. Apart from this, the research shows the role technology plays in enhancing learners' academic performance, enthusiasm, and process of learning. The paper concludes with notable results that might motivate teachers, researchers, and professional educators to employ the strategy in their regular teaching and practices to bring transformation in their daily routine to enhance the communicative competence of their students.

Keywords: Communicative competence; Flipped classroom; language skills.

Introduction

Flipped classroom strategy (FCS), a crucial component of blended learning (BL), has attained global prominence as a significant change agent in the field of education these days. It is not only a revolutionary shift in education but also makes the process of teaching and learning interesting and engaging both for teachers and the taught. BL promotes virtual and face-to-face learning for making teaching and learning a joyous experience as stated by Graham (2006). The growing reputation of FCS is determined by the modern world's academic requirements;

diversifying sources of learning and necessities for graduates of higher educational organizations. Moreover, FC bridges the skills gap by transforming the graduate students into qualified, competent, and skilful manpower with an unending zest for the continuous professional and personal growth that the present-day job market requires.

It is a fact that today's graduates, who aspire to get jobs, are expected to put the theoretical inputs into practice efficiently while performing their jobs instead of mugging up theoretical content alone. This process will

be further strengthened through the flipped classroom as it prioritizes and promotes reading, researching, examining and obtaining up-to-date information on the part of students whenever it is needed. Stating the same point, Evseeva (2015) reported that FC assists in the transition from “education for life” to “lifelong learning”, which is understood as a continuous and self-motivated search of knowledge for different purposes either professional or personal. Fischer (2012) believes that, in a flipped classroom, learning is not restricted or divided into a particular place and time to attain information and development of skillset. The process of lifelong learning provides great scope for continual professional and personal growth for students as future specialists.

In addition to this, what makes FC popular is the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in the process of education. Sharing a similar view, Trucano (2005) states that the combination of ICTs equips teachers and the taught, bringing a paradigm shift in the process of teaching and learning from being highly teacher-centred to a learner-centred classroom. The use of ICT has a lot of learning potential and opportunities to study at an appropriate time, pace and place.

Bergmann and Sams (2012) reported that “flipped classroom” is one of the prominent features of blended learning. The concept of flipped classroom/flipped learning was introduced by well-known educationalists of the USA, viz. Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams in 2000. The main purpose of the flipped classroom is to reverse the existing

traditional learning environment by moving lecture-based content to the online mode to be accessible outside the classroom. Further, it pushes assignments and activities which include the ones that have been usually considered homework, into the regular classroom. In a flipped classroom, learners watch online videos, listen to podcasts to develop their knowledge, participate in online discussions with their peers, or conduct basic level research at their homes while engaging in concepts in the classroom with the supervision of a mentor.

In addition to this, the philosophy of FC reflects Bloom’s taxonomy of giving more priority to the tasks to be carried out in classrooms which enhance higher order thinking (HOT) skills in learners and next priority to the materials to be mastered at homes to enhance lower order thinking (LOT) skills. A flipped classroom promotes HOT skills (creating new theories of learning, evaluating the concepts learnt by questioning and solving problems and analyzing their and others’ point of view in discussions and debates along with LOT skills, i.e. applying what they learn in solving tasks, understanding the material in the form of text, podcasts, video lectures and remembering the concepts given in the lecture notes at students’ convenient time in their homes.

Review of Literature

The objective of a section on the review of literature is to focus on scientific works related to the flipped classroom concept and its applicability in the context of English language teaching and learning.

According to Bergmann and Sams (2012),

the purpose of flipping a classroom is to flip the traditional way of learning, i.e. giving access to teaching content at students' homes online and moving of take-home assignments to the classrooms for peer-peer and peer-teacher interaction. The book, "Flipped Learning: Gateway to Student Engagement", which was written by Bergmann & Sams in 2012, attained new heights in flipped learning, with its innovative educational philosophy. It answers an intriguing question of what happens next — when a classroom is student-fronted and teachers are liberated to connect with students on an individual level. Flipping clubbed with realistic project-based learning pedagogy transforms everything. In addition to this, it presents a lot of motivating stories that emerged from the practical experiences of teachers across curriculum and grade levels. The role of flipped learning strategies in encouraging users and providing an ideal platform for the successful process of teaching and learning is presented in the last part of the book.

The recent literature produced by Bransford et al. (2000) reported the importance of integrating FCS in academic institutions for positive reinforcement of teaching and learning. They state that peer-to-peer assessment provides opportunities for learners to acquire knowledge and develop skill-set in the intended area. While presenting the concept of the flipped classroom, Evseeva (2015) opines that FC is the need of the hour to meet the changing times in the field of education and it is an equally competent and stimulating source of learning for teachers and students alike. The author presents the findings obtained from the practical experience of the teachers who

have implemented FC in their regular language classrooms. The review of recent literature on flipped classrooms reflects its positive impact on students' learning and motivation as well as improving their academic achievements.

Despite the fact that there is substantial research being conducted on FC, the implementation of FC in the process of teaching and learning the English language at the technical college level requires additional investigation.

Research Methodology

The present study aims at examining the efficacy of FCS in the context of the teaching and learning process at a professional college, i.e. Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Technology (MGIT) situated in Hyderabad, India. The study employs appropriate methods of research that are specifically designed to achieve the set objectives. Firstly, a systematic analysis of the literature review was done. It was followed by a review on the effective use of FCS in the field of education in addition to the researcher's personal pedagogical experience and analysis of the data collected.

The research objectives of the study are:

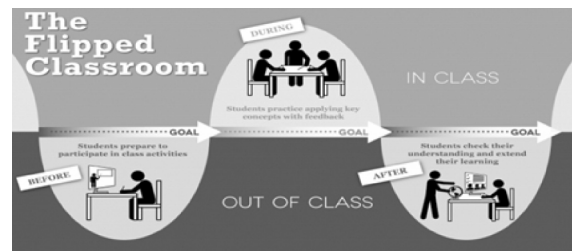
- To assess the effectiveness of the FCS in enhancing the communicative competence of the professional graduates
- To discuss the concept of the FC in the educational field
- To emphasize the kind of positive impact FCS has on the process of teaching and learning of English language

The present study was inspired by the scientific works of a few educators who have contributed and researched the concept of FC. To begin with, Holmberg et al. (2005) explored the issue of teaching foreign languages to learners using essential techniques and theoretical inputs of the flipped classroom. Eminent scholars such as Sharma and Barrett (2007) examined the philosophy of blended learning in the current educational scenario. Further, the effectiveness of Information and Communication Technology in the educational domain was reported by Kleiman (2004).

The Concept of the FCS

The concept of the FCS has become a buzzword across global academic circles in view of bringing a paradigm shift in teaching and learning. It has dramatically transformed the way content is delivered in traditional classrooms. With FCS, the content delivery is flipped to homes and take-home assignments are put to practice in classrooms with the peer group under the supervision of teachers. In a flipped classroom, students independently learn the lecture-based theoretical information beyond their regular classroom at their convenient time and pace in their homes. After acquiring the required content knowledge, students attend classes with confidence and engage in classroom discussions actively. Their involvement includes participating in debates, discussions, presentations and hands-on activities also strengthening students' learning and engagement beyond the fundamentals of the textbooks in their classrooms. Reporting additional information on this, Bane (n.d.)

stated that Figure 1 represents pre, while and post activities associated with the flipped classroom and it also presents how each activity is to be guided by the performance objectives for student learning.



(Figure 1)

The Model presented here is considered to be an effective alternative to the traditional classroom because of the possibility of productive interactions between teachers and the taught. Moreover, students can discuss their understanding of theoretical concepts with their peer group and teachers. Such interactions will be fruitful and encourage learners to involve in discussions and speak their minds. By doing this, learners are engaged in contributing their views with teachers and peer groups instead of a tedious monologue of the teacher's theoretical instructions. Subsequently, students will be equipped to take up in-class activities with comfort and enthusiasm.

It is a general practice that most traditional classroom lectures are often followed by loads of homework. Students find it demanding to complete it with minimal support and supervision at home which leads to mounting stress on students. Consequently, assignments are submitted late, incomplete or on time by copying from others to avoid unpleasant situations in class. But with the

advent of FC, homework was taken up enthusiastically by students in the classroom. The FC model assists in overcoming this problem by giving learners unlimited access to a variety of authentic resources. With this, learners get an opportunity to work in an e-learning environment independently or in groups while getting access to reading as well as audio-visual materials from their teachers. Learners' comprehension will be tested in the actual classroom when they attempt solving a variety of quizzes, reading materials and discussing topics with their peer groups.

In a recent article by Christiana Hoag (2018), published in the Associated Press, she stated that FCS is a novel model of teaching which believes in the reversal of lectures delivered by teachers in the class to home and homework to be done by students in the class. With this new set of learning, a variety of textual material, PowerPoint presentations, pre-recorded audio and video files are uploaded and given instant access to students instead of doing homework at home. While in the class, a lot of student's time is spent on completing assignments, answering quizzes and discussing and presenting their views independently, in pairs and groups. Meanwhile, the weak and shy students will be given personalized instruction and attention by the teachers which is not usually done in a traditional classroom. Prior to participating in the classroom activities, students engage with e-resources to examine their comprehension of the course content along with assessing other students' work.

Subsequently, students go through the course provided electronically, learn the content, evaluate their comprehension by answering

questions provided, apart from assessing their classmates' progress in assignments. Such consistent efforts will lead to bridge the yawning gaps between activities conducted in the classroom and the efforts put in by students at home to comprehend the materials provided. Hence, it can be stated safely that proper planning and integration of all the stages of the teaching and learning process is quintessential to make the FC fruitful and purposeful.

In addition to this, flipped classroom widens the scope for teacher-student and peer-peer interaction along with skill development and profound understanding of the subject. In other words, more teaching time will be gained, and subsequently, the intended objectives of teaching and learning will be accomplished. Active collaboration of teachers with students is observed during the in-class interaction and doubt clarification sessions which have led to improving self-confidence, content knowledge and problem-solving skills of the students. Along the same lines, Mazur et al. (2015) reported that, in the flipped classroom model, class time is always used for student collaboration, skill development, presentations, problem-solving – to develop a deeper understanding of the content. And it ensures that the course content is grasped well by students. Furthermore, Houston and Lin (2012) mentioned that teachers will be bestowed the responsibility of eliciting students' feedback, customizing their teaching to meet student's requirements, correcting some common errors students make and guiding them for improvement

Additionally, FC ushers changes in the attitude of the students. From being

indifferent and casual they become self-directed, self-controlled and self-responsible learners. It is identified that students teaming up with other students (i.e. peer-to-peer assessment, eliciting and providing feedback to their peers) is substantially increased. Reporting similar findings, Marsh (2012) said that collaborative projects promote cooperation, building trust and knowledge sharing among students. In other words, the role of students in the process of learning is transformed, from being passive listeners to active participants in the process of learning.

This apart, with the influence of FC, the roles of a teacher are gradually transformed to guide, facilitator, techno-savvy mentor and e-learning moderator. Being a guide, stimulating students to be more responsible about their learning is the motto of a teacher. Also, maximizing students' opportunities by directing them to learn and grow independently apart from minimizing teachers' involvement should be done by being a facilitator. A lot of practical problems of students should be solved by being mentors to students. Being techno-savvy, a teacher is expected to provide a student-friendly online platform where students can learn and share knowledge with each other. By being an e-learning moderator, a teacher should facilitate online discussion forums and chat groups, but not just lead them. Adapting the FC method in classrooms gives teachers an edge over other teachers providing ample scope for continual personal and professional development of teachers.

In view of the practical experience of implementing the FCS, the researcher would

like to mention that the sample group of students of the study belongs to MGIT (under the jurisdiction of JNTUH). They were all enrolled in the Advanced English Language Communication Skills (AECS) course and had varying levels of English language competence. Subsequently, different approaches and time frames were needed for students to master the course content of AECS and to fulfil the practical assignments. Further, all the students were provided with an exclusive support system through FC wherein they would be learning at their own pace, place and time for developing English language skills.

Integration of FC into the regular classrooms has witnessed several positive outcomes and fulfilled key objectives of the study. Some of them are enhancing English language competency and teamwork through online discussion forums/chat groups; participating in the in-class quizzes and presentations with renewed enthusiasm. Nevertheless, change is always resisted in the initial stages and it was witnessed in the form of a few challenges during the implementation of the FCS in the classroom sessions.

Firstly, the teacher participants felt they were overburdened in creating the online content, recording and uploading videos and providing additional learning materials for e-course content during their routine busy classwork schedule. Secondly, there was an issue found with the reliability of the classroom and electronic components of the course. Apart from the teachers, students were advised and counselled to get rid of their unnecessary fear of losing face-to-face communication with the teacher and peers

for some time. Along with this, they were briefed about alternative means of learning theoretical content, i.e. textual material, videos, online chat groups and discussion forums to communicate with teachers and their peers.

It implies that every phase of the teaching and learning process through FC should be logically integrated to bear fruit. Proper monitoring and assessment of all the activities, assignments and progress made by students in both face-to-face and e-learning environments are needed to motivate students for putting extra efforts into better learning.

Implementation of the Flipped Classroom

It is essential to emphasize the model of the FC implementation at MGIT to show how the present study was able to meet its specific research objectives. As mentioned earlier, the sample group of students belonged to the third year B.Tech., Computer Science Engineering (CSE) branch. The sample size was 76, of these 38 members participated in the face-to-face classes and the rest of the 38 students were given required support and activities on the Learning Management System Moodle (LMSM). LMSM is one of the most popular platforms of electronic learning among teachers and students in today's world. Moodle being a user-friendly, economical and affordable platform with potential scope for learning, its presence has become ubiquitous in education circles across the globe.

The implementation of FC into the regular classroom sessions was found to be productive and successful as reported by students and teachers in their feedback. Many

students felt they experienced a clear shift between a regular classroom (RC) and the FC. When prompted, they mentioned plenty of opportunities were provided in the FC to go back to a topic several times till it was understood thoroughly whereas in the RC it was impossible due to limited lecture hour time, fear of ridicule and inability to clarify doubts due to shyness. Moreover, learning about the topic before being discussed in the classroom was a rarity in their routine, but it is made compulsory in the FC. Additionally, they shared their participation levels have increased steadily in answering the quizzes, assignments in teams and pairs besides participating in classroom discussions which was not the case in their RC. Getting access to online reading material pushed them further to forming discussion groups, opening up with classmates and developing their confidence. Consequently, a good rapport with peer groups and teachers was built in this process.

Responding on how FCS improved students' communicative competence in English, they said that they were able to read, share, write, listen and watch essential information on topics such as technical presentation skills, report writing, group discussions, debates, case studies, role-plays and dialogues for everyday use. Information shared online by teachers was categorized systematically into textual materials, PowerPoint presentations, video and audio files besides follow-up tasks. Moreover, information was presented lucidly with useful illustrations such that it left very little or no room for doubts. In spite of this, some students had doubts which were clarified by their teachers and peers in discussion groups. Thus, students were

equipped with the requisite inputs which were further tested and reinforced during in-class discussions and quizzes.

Also, they felt they were positively influenced to be more responsible for their own learning and growth. When enquired, they shared an instance of how a classroom presentation was prepared and delivered meticulously through FCS. Firstly, they went through textual information, audio and video files on techniques of a professional presentation that were shared online by teachers at their homes. Secondly, they were paired up with others, decided the topic for presentation collaboratively, gathered essential information and shared the work equally. Thirdly, clarifications were sought through discussion forums on Moodle and prior practice was done before delivering it in the class. Finally, on the day of the presentation session, general questions on professional presentations posed by teachers were answered by individual teams eagerly and their topics were presented with ease and authority.

During the in-class sessions, most of the time was spent on expressing and seeking clarification from students on certain challenging issues pertaining to the use of appropriate vocabulary, grammatical rules and sentence structures besides fine-tuning their way of reporting and presenting the information. These are some of the many tasks which were carried out by teachers and students together to improve the communicative competence of the students.

The ensuing section on findings of the study reports the consistent progress made by students in their efforts to learn the language

for communication.

Discussion and Findings

The study intended to explore the efficacy of FC in improving the English language skills of the students employing a survey to elicit their feedback. The results of the survey found that the concept of flipping the classrooms has made the process of learning a better and joyous experience was reported by 88% of participants. It was opined by 83% that the key driving force of the course was getting accessibility to a variety of electronic course modules online. A majority (77%) of the students expressed that collaborative learning and more opportunities for communication between teachers and taught and peer groups were ensured and facilitated by the FCS. Development of self-confidence in learning and expressing language for academic and general contexts was reported by 90% of the students. By being part of FCS, 85% of them were of the view that they were well prepared, informed and focused on concepts to be discussed in the classrooms. Also, they mentioned that their way of structuring questions and responses improved apart from their involvement in classroom discussions. Another prominent finding was students who were part of FC were more equipped and confident besides showing improvement in English language skills than students who had access to just face-to-face teaching.

From the perspective of teachers, it was observed that their principal motivating factor to adopt FCS was scope for learner-centred teaching, opportunity to learn and deliver new ways of teaching and motivating students though there were some problems.

Further, it was mentioned by many teachers that designing electronic content and delivering them online for students improve their confidence. A sense of satisfaction was attained by teachers whenever they heard a word of praise from their students after making the necessary modifications in the course content according to students' feedback.

There was negative feedback reported by 23% of the respondents. When enquired, they reasoned out certain pertinent issues related to accessing the learning content online and others. Some of such difficulties include poor time management to submit tasks within the deadline; inability to balance personal work and academics; absence of face-to-face contact with the teacher while going through material online at home; lack of uninterrupted Internet connectivity and self-motivation.

Conclusion

Considering the findings of the study, it can be stated that the flipped classroom is not only a promising strategy but also generated interest in the students to learn and develop their communicative competence in English. Moreover, FCS being a highly resourceful, flexible and motivating strategy, it has become a successful means of bringing positive change in students. With the changing times, it has blended and brought both face-to-face and online teaching onto one platform for making teaching and learning innovative and interesting. Further, it has fulfilled the needs of those busy professionals and students who have limited time to attend college by giving them access to virtual learning and thus it has become more convenient, popular and flexible for

everyone. Nevertheless, there exist certain problems at the structural, technical and personal level while incorporating FCS in the process of teaching and learning the English language. Given these findings, it is essential to conduct further research to overcome the said problems and to enhance comprehension and expression of the English language for communicative purposes through the flipped classroom strategy.

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