To Flip or Not to Flip the English Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The twenty-first century multi-tasking, tech-savvy, digital natives are smarter than their smart phones, and if English teachers do not change the way they teach and what they teach, they will be no more useful than their smart phones. Lecturing is good if the purpose is to disseminate information so that students can satisfy Bloom's lower order cognitive abilities 'knowing' and 'understanding' information being imparted. However, it does not promote the higher order skills, such as analysing, applying, evaluating, and creating. Flipped classrooms can provide an ideal form for promotion of communication and critical thinking skills through interaction. The concept of flipping is understood as flipping lectures in favour of maximizing student talk/write time, flipping the responsibility of learning from the teacher to the learner, and flipping teacher's stationery position in favour of making it more mobile and dynamic in the class. Methods of flipping can either through replacement of lecture with video or through learners' enquiry to find the answer on their own with or without technological assistance.

Keywords: *Flipped classroom, blended learning, hybrid learning, learner autonomy, digital natives, podcasting, postmodern learning*

Introduction

Expressions like learner autonomy and learner-centred classroom unfortunately sound archaic and cliché without ever having them successfully tried in a sustainable manner in the Indian classroom of English language learning. It is chiefly because of the usurpation of the previous quality class time by the teacher who still culturally and colonially believes in teacher-fronted, -centred, and –dominated classroom 'delivering' lectures non-stop. Teachers continue to surprise learners in every class with learning content and it makes learners passive consumers and not active learners and explorers of new vistas of knowledge. Teachers' use of PowerPoint in the class helps them only to the extent that they can read from the slides instead of their memory. Incidentally, students get a chance to look at something else instead of the teacher's face and personality all the

time. Listening to lectures in language classrooms does not promote speaking, reading, and writing skills in learners. On the other hand, flipped classroom requires students watch pre-recorded short lectures online and shares responsibility for acquiring higher order skills through interaction and engagement in the learning process. It provides a truly paradigm shift to traditional methods of instruction that are not successful. Moreover, teachers experience frustration over their inability to help learners reach their goals. Teachers waste their time in classroom lecturing information which students can find out quickly in a relaxed manner at home. After all, teachers should adopt all means to maximize learners' time to use English rather than listening to lectures in English.

Review of Literature

There is astonishingly very little literature available on flipped classrooms though they have become a widely discussed topic in the Western academia. There is no standardized understanding of the concept, either. It is increasingly tried in STEM. Lutz-Chstian Wolff and Jenny Chan (2015) have successfully attempted in legal education in Hong Kong. They have discussed the pedagogical feasibility of flipped classrooms, stages involved in developing them, and evaluation of the same in the context of legal education. Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams (2012) have documented their personal experiences of evolving flipped classrooms and in fact, they are the fathers of this new teaching method. They are high school chemistry teachers and they created

it out of the concern for those students who missed their classes on account of their representation in sports and cultural activities for the institution.

Research Questions

The following research questions are addressed in this reflective study:

1. What is flipped classroom and how different is it from blended learning?

2. Does flipped classroom as an alternative to traditional lecture method have theoretical support?

3. What are the basic requirements for its implementation in the Indian context and how to overcome formidable limitations?

Theoretical Reflections

Flipped classroom is a postmodern concept that reflects the learning style of the present day students who are known as "digital natives" (Prensky). The rapid expansion of interactive computer-based and smart phones technologies has metamorphosed the way knowledge is created, stored, and disseminated. Technology has not only changed the modern way of life, but also teaching and learning styles. Students of all streams and disciplines grow up surrounded by technology. The extent to which they use laptops, iPads and tablets, smart phones, the internet, the Wi-Fi, YouTube, and social media indicates that technology appears to be a determiner of everything that they do. It has changed their way of learning from just reading prescribed textbooks and listening to compulsory

unsolicited lectures to learning by doing. They often depend on online resources rather than printed materials even for the conduct of research. On the other hand, many of their teachers are different from their students in the sense that they have not experienced 'digitalised socialisation' and that they have not succeeded in noticing learning habits and preferences of their undeclared postmodern students whose brain is differently wired. Flipped classroom can therefore help both English language teachers and learners adapt to the habits of digital natives.

Definitional Problems

There is no unified terminological and conceptual understanding of the term since it overlaps and shares with other models such as blended learning, hybrid learning, online learning, and podcasting. Though there is no single definition of flipped classroom that is acceptable to different theorists and practitioners, they all agree on the inner essence of theory and practice of the learning styles of digital-savvy postmodern learners. At the same time, it should be borne in mind that the term does not carry any technical meaning. It is sometimes referred to as "inverted classroom" (Lemmer: 463). The rationale is that flipped classrooms invert classroom activities with activities that normally take place outside the classroom.

Flipped classroom is similar to blended learning in the sense that both of them use in-class (face-to-face) and at-home (online)

learning. At the same time it differs from blended learning because of its inverted activities. Online explanation through audio and video recordings complements and supplements in-class learning in flipped classrooms through interactive and participatory activities. Hess (2013) argues that flipped classrooms do not replace face-to-face in-class teaching with online instruction. Flipped classroom students acquire content through short video lectures online at home and the subsequent class session focuses on analysis, application, and problem solving in order to deepen their learning. It therefore frees up the in-class time for more interactive activities while online activities in blended learning replace some of the in-class time. Since it is blending e-learning with classroom learning, it can be classified as a branch of blended learning.

Podcasting, on the other hand, does not compete with flipped classroom and blended learning. It is an e-learning tool as an additional learning resource. It is a technology that enables the distribution of digital media files both in audio and video formats for playback on portable media players. It does not replace lectures with online materials. According to Lonn and Teasley (2009), students use podcasts as review materials to prepare for online quizzes and examinations. They also note disagreement on the impact of podcasts on learning. In addition to using them as review materials, there is another finding that podcasts would be useful only if students took notes and listened to podcasts several times.

Genesis of Flipped Classroom

In 2007 two school Chemistry teachers in Colorado were worried about some of their students missing classes on account of their representation in sports, competitions, and other events. With a view to helping them, they recorded their lectures, demonstrations, and slide presentations and posted them on YouTube so that students who missed their classes could access. Since then flipped classroom has evolved to several variations with audio recordings, video recordings and online quizzes that students could take outside the classes, but they carried out pair work and group work since they become familiar with learning inputs at home.

Flipped Language Classroom

English language classrooms can be flipped. 'Flipping' means 'inverting.' Lectures and homework are 'flipped.' First of all, there is a philosophical shift. English language teaching classroom is flipped as English language learning classroom. Students become autonomous learners who first learn basic concepts individually by watching video lectures at home and do tasks collectively in the classroom. Teachers become 'facilitators' of learning in the classroom and lecture outside the classroom on video. Technologies bring instructional teaching home so that teachers can simply provide active learning in the class. Thus teachers and students effectively and willingly change their roles to become facilitators of learning and learners respectively.

Spoken English is the most desired and valued skill among educated and uneducated Indians alike. Sometimes, it becomes a measure of intelligence, efficiency, and capability. Ironically, ESL learners do not acquire this skill for want of classroom opportunities for practising speaking and listening together. Pedagogically it is true that there is no better way to enhance fluency than practising listening that leads to speaking. While students can learn at home all the fundamental concepts on listening and speaking through short video lectures, they can come to class prepared to use them in the class along with fellow learners. No language skill can be acquired either in isolation or with technological gadgets alone. Language is communal and therefore interaction is imperative. Teachers guide them and correct any bad pronunciation or grammar habits that students would have learnt elsewhere. Genre of writing can be learnt at home, but learners write in the class in consultation and interaction with fellow learners guided and corrected by facilitators. For instance, they can spend hours on developing paragraphs, or the body of leave letters, or resumes, note-making, or paraphrasing, or summarizing by virtually writing them and editing them in the class.

Apology for Flipped Classroom

ELT practitioners of the twenty first century cannot afford to ignore flipped classrooms if they agree that the present day learners are tech-savvy and their concentration period is relatively shorter. Flipped

classroom has several advantages over the traditional methods which have not borne the expected fruits of the efforts taken by both teachers and learners of English language communication. It is actively used in ESL classes though it was initially used in STEM branches. The following are some of the prominent theoretically advantages:

1. It provides improved learning experiences. It promotes active learning, increases interaction between teachers & students, improves collaboration among learners, allows flexible learning, fosters critical thinking, and enables learners realize their autonomy for learning.

2. As a flexible learning mode, it suits learning needs of digital natives who can access learning resources anytime anywhere and can study at their own pace leading to greater ownership of their learning.

3. It enhances IT literacy of both learners and facilitators through proper contextualization of acquiring/ facilitating English communication skills.

4. It leads to improved learning outcomes of the course by bridging the gap between the strongest and weakest learners with the weakest getting limitless opportunities to watch the lecture videos or suggested reading list. Every learner can consistently out-perform prior classes. Since time for interaction in class increases with minimal teacher intervention in the learning process, success rates in flipped classrooms are higher than in online courses where learners have to take up the lonely path.

5. Students can view and review learning materials (video lectures) at their own pace, steaming the learners into slow learners and fast learners is cancelled.

6. Teachers can make use of the class time to pay individualized attention to learners whereas it is the main drawback in the previous traditional lecture method that could not cater to the individual learners.

7. Facilitators can provide activities that promote communication skills which they could not introduce previously due to time and curricular constraints

8. Since the primary objective of ESL classroom is to improve and enhance communication efficacy of learners, flipped classroom learners can talk together and work together.

9. Learners' analytical and problem-solving skills can be honed while facilitators can assist learners solve problems. Group work enhances their understanding. Bloom's taxonomy of higher order skills can be improved through collaboration and interaction.

10. Learning theories support flipped classroom as technology enhancement helps to accommodate different learning styles and student-centred learning theories. For instance, adult learners are self-directed and would like to make

their own learning decisions and not to be treated like children. Learning occurs best experientially and learners learn best when they can relate new experience to past experience. Teachers should foster teachable moments of students being ready to learn. Above all, for adult learners, ESL education is problem-centred rather than subject-centred.

Requirements

There is no magic wand to make flipped classroom happen. There are a number of requirements on the part of all stakeholders: teachers as facilitators, students as learners, parents as shapers of their wards' future, and institutions as providers of facilities.

1. Transition from the traditional classroom to flipped classroom needs significant adaptations by learners and facilitators. Facilitators can start with flipping class in a week and gradually increase the frequency in tune with the learners' achieving the goal like increased language communication.

2. Flipping the classroom is not the delivery of a lecture on video. Even when video lectures are prepared for YouTube, they should not come from the internet. The contents of video lectures should be the explanation of fundamental concepts. For instance, they can include irregular verbs, or the major themes of a literary text, or stress rule.

3. Learners' cooperation is absolute and

they should therefore prepare (watching video lecture/reading) for class before they come to class and their preparation is essential to the successful flipped classroom.

4. Initial training sessions for learners should therefore be conducted on how at-home and in-class time would be spent. They should be encouraged for collaboration and raising questions. In other words, they are expected to do a lot of talking + listening and writing + reading. Even the LSRW order is inverted!

5. Teachers as facilitators should plan what to flip and not to flip. It depends on the learning outcomes of the course like enhancing fluency in spoken English, the knowledge, abilities, and skills students are expected to acquire from the course, the kind of activities that would help them achieving the learning goals.

6. As curriculum designers, teachers should redesign their course so that they can plan carefully units or parts of units that are best delivered by video lectures and that are best reserved for in-class activities. They should plan for optimizing the in-class time to enrich the learning experience rather than substituting in-class lectures with online modules. They should also plan in-class time in such a way that they do not teach students additional content.

7. In-class activities should include

teacher-directed questions, individual work, learner-directed small group work, presentations, problem-solving simulations, and brief-lectures.

8. Our-of-class or at-home content may include assigned reading materials that they can be requested to complete while watching video lectures online so that they can reinforce the learning experience.

9. Video lectures are the ones that run for a maximum of 20 minutes. Shorter ones are easier to edit, upload, access, grasp, retain, and recall. Institutions should provide the necessary technological support. Moreover, there can be collaboration between English departments and Computer Science/Application/Visual Communication departments.

10. Initially, teachers need to prepare a script before recording and practice the lecture with precision and clarity during the recording. They should check the lighting, sound and quality of recording before starting the production. Teachers need training to flip classrooms

Limitations

It is not uncommon for anyone to foresee some limitations when such an imported method is tried in the Indian context that is characterised by certain cultural and economic factors. However, they are not insurmountable. With the cooperation and involvement of the stakeholders, they can be gradually overcome. Some of the limitations that might hold the attempt back are

1. Not many students in the Indian context have access to internet technology in the sense that either service does not reach the rural areas or their economy does not allow them.

2. Necessary equipment or technology may not be available at many institutions. Many government institutions do not have proper basic facilities on campuses and therefore expecting the administration to provide technological assistance may hamper any innovations.

3. Indian culture respects teachers as gurus from whom knowledge flows and expects students to be obedient, passive receivers through listening. Hence, teachers themselves may not give up the position of the teacher in favour of the facilitator.

4. Parents in developing countries have concerns about increasing screen time to be spent by their young adults. They should encourage their wards to learn through video lectures.

5. As young adults, learners are also addicted to the social media and the internet for entertainment purposes, and therefore they should realize the importance of learner autonomy in the sense that they go to flipped classes as well-informed learners.

Conclusion

Class time will be really fun and enjoyable and it will engage learners in tasks that promote communication and critical thinking skills. It is learners' needs that decide the frequency of flipped classroom. They can sometimes learn interpedently; sometimes they may need teacher's intervention; sometimes they may need consultation from fellow-learners. It is not necessary to flip the entire course. Eventually, learners would realize the responsibility of their learning and the importance of learner autonomy. Teachers automatically become facilitators in a learner-centred, learning-directed classroom. English classroom can be flipped and therefore should be flipped!

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