TOWARDS FLIPPING THE ESL CLASSROOM FOR LEARNER-CENTREDNESS AND LIFE-LONG LEARNING

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Abstract

Learning in this digital era is no more confined to the school environment nor the four walls of the classroom. It is no longer constrained by space and time. One of the clearest directions to emerge from innovation is a shifting of focus to the student and away from the teacher or educational provider. This is best encapsulated in two complementary learning approaches: life-long learning and learner-centred learning, which share a common focus on the learner. Life-long learning has undergone cycles of recognition of varying intensity, building on the rationale originally articulated by UNESCO of a vision of continuous education throughout an individual's lifespan, where the whole of society is seen as the learning resource. This paper explores flipping the ESL classroom as one of the ways of ensuring learner - centredness and life-long learning.

Keywords: Flipping, ESL, Learner-centredness, life-long learning

The 21st Century education has witnessed tremendous innovations in both theory and practice. The common denominator amongst all these is the emphasis on learner centredness only realisable through active learning strategies in which the traditional role of the teacher as the all-knowing is reduced to that of a facilitator and guide, directing and eliciting knowledge from learners. Many of these strategies are emerging and being tried out, Flipping or blending the classroom is one of such strategies or approaches. This paper would explicate the concept of the flipped classroom, its principles, criticisms and challenges and its implication in the ESL classroom. The position of this paper would be hinged on constructivists' theory of learning.

Flipping

Flipping is often defined simplistically as school work at home and home work at school. It is also known as inverting a classroom. The flipped classroom describes a reversal of traditional teaching. This approach seeks to preserve the value of lecture while freeing up precious class time for active learning strategies. Flipped classroom is a form of blended learning which brings interactive engagement pedagogy to classrooms by having students learn content, usually at home, and homework is done in class with teachers and students discussing and solving questions (Lage, Platt and Treglia, 30-31). Flipped classroom is also known as backwards classroom, inverted classroom, reverse teaching, and the Thayer Method. Abeysekera and Dawson (2) define the flipped classroom as a set of pedagogical approaches that:

- move most information-transmission teaching out of class;
- use class time for learning activities that are active and social; and
- require students to complete pre- and/or post-class activities to fully benefit from in-class work.

According to them, the traditional pattern of teaching has been to give students the task of reading textbooks and work on problem sets outside school, while listening to lectures and taking tests in class. In flip teaching, the students first study the topic by themselves, typically using video lessons prepared by the teacher or third parties. In class, students apply the knowledge by solving problems and doing

practical work. The teacher tutors the students when they become stuck, rather than imparting the initial lesson in person,

Traditional Versus Flipped Teaching

Hake (64) states that in the traditional model of classroom instruction, the teacher is typically the central focus of a lesson and the primary disseminator of information during the class period. The teacher responds to questions while students defer directly to the teacher for guidance and feedback. In a classroom with a radically traditional style of instruction, individual lessons may be didactic and content oriented. Student engagement in the traditional model may be limited to activities in which students work independently or in small groups on an application task designed by the teacher. Class discussions are typically centered on the teacher, who controls the flow of the conversation (Ryback and Sanders, 87).

According to Abeysekera and Dawson (1), the flipped classroom intentionally shifts instruction to a learner-centered model in which class time explores topics in greater depth and creates meaningful learning opportunities, while educational technologies such as online videos are used to deliver content outside of the classroom. In a flipped classroom, content delivery may take a variety of forms. Often, video lessons prepared by the teacher or third parties are used to deliver content, although online collaborative discussions, digital research, and text readings may be used.

Flipped classrooms also redefine in-class activities. In-class lessons accompanying flipped classroom may include activity learning or more traditional homework problems, among other practices, to engage students in the content. Class activities vary, but may include: original document analysis, debate or speech presentation, current event discussions, peer reviewing, project-based learning, and skill development or concept practice. Because these types of active learning allow for highly differentiated instruction, more time can be spent in class on higher-order thinking skills such as problem-finding, collaboration, design and problem solving as students tackle difficult problems, work in groups, research, and construct knowledge with the help of their teacher and peers. A teacher's interaction with students in a flipped classroom can be more personalized and less didactic, and students are actively involved in knowledge acquisition and construction as they participate in and evaluate their learning (Bergmann and Sams, 7).

English as a Second Language (ESL)

English as a second language (ESL) refers to teaching English to students whose first language is not English, usually offered in a region where English is the dominant language or one in which English has an established role (e.g., India and Nigeria). In contrast, English as a foreign language (EFL) refers to teaching English to students whose first language is not English, usually in a region where English is not the dominant language. English as a second or foreign language is the use of English by speakers with different native languages. Instruction for English language learners may be known as English as a second language (ESL), English as a foreign language (EFL), English as an additional language (EAL), or English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). While English as a second language (ESL) is often used for non-native English speakers learning English in a country where English is commonly spoken, English as a foreign language (EFL) is used for non-native English speakers learning English in a country where English is not commonly spoken. The term ESL has been misinterpreted by some to indicate that English would be of secondary importance. However, it simply refers to the order in which the language was learned, consistent with the linguistic terminology of second-language acquisition. The term, ESL, can be a misnomer for some students who have learned several languages before learning English, The terms, English Language Learners (ELL) and more recently English Learners (EL), have been used instead, and the students' home language and cultures are considered important (McArthur, 23-25, Gundeison, 35)

Learner-Centeredness

One of the clearest directions to emerge from innovation in the educational sector is a shifting of focus to the student and away from the teacher or educational provider. It is a shift from a teacher-centred approach to a more learner-centred approach. This is not just a semantic shift, but involves

actually putting the learner's needs at the centre of activities. Leaner-centredness is achieved through activity-based learning. Activity-based learning is a model of instruction that focuses the responsibility of learning on learners. To learn, students must do more than just listen: they must read, write, discuss, or be engaged in solving problems. Activity based learning relates to the three learning domains referred to as knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSA). In particular, students must engage in such higher-order thinking tasks as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Activity-based learning engages students in two aspects - doing things and thinking about the things they are doing (Fulton, 12).

Life-Long Learning
Life-long learning is the "ongoing, voluntary, and self-motivated" pursuit of knowledge for either personal or professional reasons. It not only enhances social inclusion, active citizenship, and personal development, but also self-sustainability, as well as competitiveness and employ ability. Life-long learning is defined as "all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective" (Strayer 171). It is often considered learning that occurs after the formal education years of childhood (where learning is instructor driven - pedagogical) and into adulthood (where the learning is individually driven - andragogical). It is sought out naturally through life experiences as the learner seeks to gain knowledge for professional or personal reasons. 'Knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it' (Strayer, 171-193).

The concept of life-long learning has become of vital importance with the emergence of new technologies that change how we receive and gather information, collaborate with others, and communicate. During the last fifty years, constant scientific and technological innovation and change has had a profound effect on learning needs and styles. Learning can no longer be divided into a place and time to acquire knowledge (school) and a place and time to apply the knowledge acquired (the workplace). Instead, learning can be seen as something that is on-going from our daily interactions with others and with the world around us. It can take the form of formal learning or informal learning, or even self-directed learning. A learning approach that can be used to define life-long learning is heutagogy (Strayer, 177).

There are several established contexts for life-long learning beyond traditional "brick and mortar" schooling:
• Home schooling which involves learning to learn or the development of informal learning patterns;
• Waldorf education which teaches children to love learning for its own sake;
• Adult education or the acquisition of formal qualifications or work and leisure skills later in life;
• Continuing education which often describes extension or not-for-credit courses offered by higher education institutions;
• Knowledge work which includes professional development and on-the-job training;
• Personal learning environments or self-directed learning using a range of sources and tools including online applications.

Challenges and Criticisms against Flipped Classroom
Nielsen (34), Ryback and Sanders (88-90), Berrett (29), Wilson (193-199), Fulton (12-17) adduce reasons against flipping:
• An effective flip requires careful preparation. Recording lectures requires effort and time on the part of the teacher, and out-of-class and in-class elements must be carefully integrated for students to understand the model and be motivated to prepare for class. As a result, introducing a flip can mean additional work and may require new skills for the teacher. Increased preparation time is needed, as creating high quality videos requires teachers to contribute significant time and effort outside of regular teaching responsibilities. Therefore, time is a frequent, if not constant, barrier to flipping.
• Students, on their part, have been known to complain about the loss of face-to-face teaching, particularly if they feel that certain assigned video lectures are available to anyone online. Those who see themselves as attending class to hear lectures may feel it is safe to skip a class that focuses on activities and might miss the real value of the flip.

• A variety of barriers exist for teachers who want to experiment with innovative teaching approaches, and the move to a flipped classroom is not an easy transition for many teachers. As a survey found, they may not be supported by their department head, dean, or academic leader. In some cases, they are not rewarded or recognized for taking time to develop innovative approaches to teaching. And finally, they may not receive funding/support to embark on a full-course redesign.

• Even where students embrace the model, their equipment and access might not always support rapid delivery of video. For some of them, there exists a 'digital divide'. Not all families are from the same socio-economic background; and thus, access to computers or video-viewing technology outside of the school environment is not possible for all students. This model of instruction may put undue pressure on some families as they attempt to gain access to videos outside of school hours.

• Additionally, some students may struggle due to their developing personal responsibility. In a self-directed, home learning environment students who are not at the developmental stage required to keep on-task with independent learning may fall rapidly behind their peers.

• Flipped classroom leads to increased computer time in an-era where adolescents already spend too much time in front of computer screens. Inverted models that rely on computerized videos do contribute to this challenge, particularly if videos are long.

• Additionally, flipped classrooms that rely on videos to deliver instruction suffer some of the same challenges as traditional classrooms. Students may not learn best by listening to a lecture, and watching instructional videos at home is still representative of a more traditional form of teaching.

• Funding may also be required to procure training for teachers to navigate computer technologies involved in the successful implementation of the inverted model.

• Students and/or parents might resist the approach or lack the motivation to do the pre-class work that would first expose them to course content.

Theoretical Framework: Constructivism

Constructivism's central idea, according to Hoover (1), is that human learning is *constructed,* that learners build new knowledge upon the foundation of previous learning. This view of learning sharply contrasts with one in which learning is the passive transmission of information from one individual to another, a view in which reception, not construction, is key.

Hoover identifies two important notions orbit around the simple idea of constructed knowledge. The first is that learners construct new understandings using what they already know. There is no *tabula rasa* on which new knowledge is etched. Rather, learners come to learning situations with knowledge gained from previous experience, and that prior knowledge influences what new or modified knowledge they will construct from new learning experiences.

The second notion is that learning is active rather than passive. Learners confront their understanding in light of what they encounter in the new learning situation. If what learners encounter is inconsistent with their current understanding, their understanding can change to accommodate new experience. Learners remain active throughout this process: they apply current understandings, note relevant elements in new learning experiences, judge the consistency of prior and emerging knowledge, and based on that judgment, they can modify knowledge.

He goes on to state the implications of constructivism for teaching. First, according to him, teaching cannot be viewed as the transmission of knowledge from enlightened to unenlightened; constructivist teachers do not take the role of the "sage on the stage." Rather, teachers act as "guides on the side" who provide students with opportunities to test the adequacy of their current understandings.

Second, if learning is based on prior knowledge, then teachers must note that knowledge and provide learning environments that exploit inconsistencies between learners' current understandings and the new experiences before them. This challenges teachers, for they cannot assume that all children understand something in the same way. Further, children may need different experiences to advance to different levels of understanding.

Third, if students must apply their current understandings in new situations in order to build new knowledge, then teachers must engage students in learning, bringing students' current understandings to the forefront. Teachers can ensure that learning experiences incorporate problems that are important to students, not those that are primarily important to teachers and the educational system. Teachers can also encourage group interaction, where the interplay among participants helps individual students become explicit about their own understanding by comparing it to that of their peers.

Fourth, if new knowledge is actively built, then time is needed to build it. Ample time facilitates student reflection about new experiences, how those experiences line up against current understandings, and how a different understanding might provide students with an improved (not "correct") view of the world.

In summary, the primary idea of constructivism is that learners "construct" their own knowledge on the basis of what they already know. It posits that learning is active, rather than passive, with learners making judgments about when and how to modify their knowledge and the teacher's role is that of facilitating the transfer of knowledge to the student via creating a learning environment conducive to active and interactive participation in the learning process by discovering, constructing, practising, and validating acquired knowledge via active exploration and interactive social collaboration with others.

Implications for Teaching and Learning the English Language

The flipped classroom constitutes a role change for ESL teachers, who give up their front-of-the-class position in favour of a more collaborative and cooperative contribution to the teaching process. There is a concomitant change in the role of students, many of whom are used to being cast as passive participants in the education process, where instruction is served to them.

The flipped model puts more of the responsibility for learning on the shoulders of students while giving them greater impetus to experiment. Activities can be student-led, and communication among students can become the determining dynamic of a session devoted to learning through hands-on work. What the flip does particularly well is to bring about a distinctive shift in priorities—from merely covering material to working toward mastery of it, meaning that students come to class able to use the software and prepared to do creative projects with their peers (Wilson, 193).

In a traditional lecture, students often try to capture what is being said at the instant the speaker says it. They cannot stop to reflect upon what is being said, and they may miss significant points because they are trying to transcribe the teacher's words. By contrast, the use of video and other pre-recorded media puts lectures under the control of the students; they can watch, rewind, and fast-forward as needed. This ability may be of particular value to students with accessibility concerns, especially where captions are provided for those with hearing impairments. Lectures that can be viewed more than once may also help those for whom English is not their first language.

Devoting class time to application of concepts might give teachers a better opportunity to detect errors in thinking, particularly those that are widespread in a class. At the same time, collaborative projects can encourage social interaction among students, making it easier for them to learn from one another and for those of varying skill levels to support their peers (Berrett, 28).

Conclusion

This paper has explored the concepts of flipping as an emerging trend that can be applied in the ESL classroom. It has explicated both the benefits and the challenges/criticisms that go with flipping as well as the implications; and tried to situate the idea of flipping within the theoretical framework as propounded by the constructivists.

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