

TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON FLIPPING THE LANGUAGE CLASS: MORE THAN CREATING MATERIALS

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Abstract. *Higher education in the 21st century is distinguished by accelerating technological adoption, offering key challenges and new opportunities (NMC, 2015). This phenomenon has significant impact on teaching and learning, including the emergence of new trends such as the flipped classroom methodology. University leadership encourages the adoption of this methodology in both content classes as well as in language instruction. Creating a flipped classroom learning design implies that a teacher evaluates student learning needs and develops materials accordingly. The development of learning materials and resources by teachers also plays an important role in professional development (e.g., McGrath, 2013; Tomlinson, 2011). In response to these changing landscapes in higher education, a community of practice was established in the language department of the faculty of Social Sciences at the UEM, whose main objectives were to share materials, feedback, and experiences in order to establish best practices and improve resource development using the flipped classroom model. This article presents an exploratory, qualitative study of teachers' experiences and reflections in the application of such a model. The study highlights the strengths and challenges of using the flipped classroom methodology, offering discussion for future methodological considerations.*

Key words: Flipped Classroom, TEFL, Community of practice, Technology in the classroom, Teacher development

1. INTRODUCTION

A community of practice (CoP) is a “social learning space” composed of practitioners seeking to consolidate their professional development through social exchange (see Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). For second language teachers, these communities can help when implementing new practices, as more experienced and less experienced practitioners develop their knowledge together.

In this study, a group of teachers considered the need for creating a CoP so that they could support each other in their endeavor to introduce the flipped classroom model in their classrooms. This study reports on the CoP's conclusions about the strengths and challenges of implementing the flipped methodology following a teacher research approach (see Borg & Sanchez, 2015). In the next section, the literature regarding this methodology, as well as the implications of teacher research will be reviewed.

1.1. Flipped Methodology

In the flipped methodology, the traditional classroom gives way to a novel approach in which the teaching-learning process is inverted, extending beyond the confines of the physical classroom; students are first exposed to the material at home, prior to the class, allowing for more time to focus on activities that apply this knowledge in class (Lage, Platt, & Treglia, 2010). This methodology has been proposed for a variety of courses, including language courses (see Brame, 2013; Strayer, 2007), in which more time is spent on open-ended activities in the classroom, leaving grammatical drills and other explanations for students to work through on their own time. This methodology works well within the communicative approach since its ultimate goal is to devote classroom time to language communication (see Richards, 2006).

While the need for creating materials is a challenge when implementing this methodology, this can be a blessing in disguise since developing materials is clearly a form of professional development (see McGrath, 2013; Tomlinson, 2011). Moreover, the teacher needs to create assessment tools to assess students' knowledge of the materials, in addition to making sure that classroom time is utilized as effectively as possible (Brame, 2013).

The benefits of a flipped methodology have been discussed extensively in the literature. Some studies point towards better learning than in traditional courses (see Brame, 2013), whereas others do not show such positive learning outcomes, especially in terms of students' attitudes towards this methodology (e.g., Strayer, 2007; Webb, Doman, & Pusey, 2014). Nevertheless, teachers' attitudes in relation to this methodology are a less explored area (e.g., Webb, et al., 2014).

1.2. Teacher Research

Teacher research can be defined as "systematic self-study by teachers (individually or collaboratively) which seeks to achieve real-world impact of some kind and is made public" (Borg & Sanchez, 2015, p. 1). Within this broad definition, different methodologies are considered, such as action research (e.g., Burns, 2010) or exploratory practice (e.g., Allwright, 2003). Teacher research studies tend to have a qualitative nature, but need not be limited to such an approach. It has been suggested that teacher research does not need to exactly follow the guidelines for academic research; nevertheless, research quality is also expected (Borg, 2010).

One of the main benefits of teacher research is that it facilitates teachers' professional development, albeit not obviating its possible impact on other practitioners (Borg, 2010). An interesting dilemma is how teacher-researchers can "achieve the distance from their experience that is required to examine it critically" (Borg & Sanchez, 2015, p. 1). In order to be feasible and effective, the following characteristics are required: a) seen as relevant by the teachers; b) "teachers involved in decisions about content and process"; c) "collaboration and the sharing of expertise among teachers is fostered"; d) "collective enterprise supported by schools and educational systems"; e) "exploration

and reflection are emphasized over methodological prescriptivism”; f) “expert internal and/or external support is available”; and g) “classroom inquiry by teachers seen as a central professional learning process” (p. 6).

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In relation to the objectives of the study, the research questions examined are:

- 1) What are the strengths and challenges of implementing flipped classroom activities in the foreign language classroom?
- 2) Are there any salient aspects of the flipped methodology and its implementation that warrant further research or methodological considerations?

3. METHODOLOGY

The benefits of a teacher research approach, coupled with the lack of data concerning the implementation context of flipped classroom activities in a language department, have led the teacher-researchers to opt for a qualitative, exploratory design. Given the fact that this represents a novel research direction of the department and that the conditions of the working environment coincide with those described by Borg and Sanchez (2015), the authors felt that this design was optimal for the identification of salient themes to be explored further in later studies, as well as the development of the participants involved.

3.1. Scope and Participants

The scope of the study covers the implementation of the flipped classroom methodology within both the English Program (EP) and Foreign Language Program (FLP) courses by the language department of a mid-sized private university, which comprises roughly 40 teachers. Of this group, those teachers who were identified as having at least one experience in the creation and delivery of flipped classroom activities were selected to participate in the study. 8 of the 12 participants were also part of the teacher-research team.

3.2. Data Collection

The teacher-researchers opted for a Focus Group interview (FG) as the data collection required an approach that could inform “on a large range of behaviors, a wide variety of interactions, and comprehensive and open discussions” concerning teacher experiences of flipped classroom activities (Berg, 2001, p. 117). In total, eight teachers participated in the FG. Every member of the CoP proposed at least two questions to be discussed in the FG. After the FG, eight members of the CoP synthesized the themes they thought more relevant in the discussion. From these previous data analyses, four categories were established.

The FC was complemented by the analysis of six teachers’ reflections (TRs). These TRs were written after the teachers implemented the flipped methodology in their classrooms. Each teacher or group of teachers, i.e., one reflection was written by two teachers, reflected on the process of creation and implementation of their own activity. There is an extensive literature on the role of teacher reflective writing in the ongoing

personal and professional development of practicing teachers. Borg (2001) explains that a great deal of insight into the pedagogical and personal processes of teachers can be reached through reflective journaling, including assisting the teacher explore and address concerns in their practice. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step thematic analysis, two members of the CoP coded the TRs in order to identify the "patterned response[s]" of the participants, regarding their experience implementing the flipped methodology. Four main categories and numerous subcategories emerged in the TR data analysis. These data were then crossed with data collected via a focus group. The combined themes uncovered would then be considered for their potential as avenues for further research and methodological considerations.

4. RESULTS

After analyzing the FG, the common categories uncovered were: 1) motivation, 2) materials and resources, 3) objectives of the flipped classroom, and 4) time.

For the TRs, the categories that emerged in order of importance were: 6) learning design, 7) materials and resources, 8) student-activity interaction and 9) activity purpose and objectives.

Given the degree of overlap between the categories found in both analyses, the categories of the FG and the TRs have been organized in the following way in order to facilitate their discussion:

- A. Motivation and Student Activity Interaction
- B. Materials and Resources
- C. Objectives and Purpose of the Flipped Classroom
- D. Time
- E. Learning design

4.1. Motivation and Student Activity Interaction

In terms of motivation, both teacher and student levels of motivation were discussed in the FG and TRs. While teachers indicated that the flipped classroom methodology presented a significant challenge, as creating and adapting materials was not an easy task, they were motivated because they could set up the aims of their lessons in such a way as to optimize the design of the pedagogical process for both teachers and learners. Furthermore, some participants reported student recognition of teachers' efforts to break up the traditional classroom as well as a positive sense of active student participation, which can facilitate learning. Moreover, the novelty of the presentation of the new material seemed to positively impact student motivation in some cases as reported in the FG.

According to the teachers, some students seemed to have found the activities motivating and engaging. While not all teachers received formal feedback after the implementation of their flipped activities, some stated that the student response was positive because of their classroom behavior, i.e., increased participation. One reflection explicitly reported that students were engaged in the activity. Engagement seems here defined as "learner's active mental engagement with linguistic input" (Benson, 2011, p.87), which facilitates language acquisition (Cook, 2006). The rest of the TRs mentioned motivation, but not engagement. Nevertheless, both terms seemed to be closely related, being motivation and engagement mostly defined as active participation in class. Engagement is not yet a familiar term in the CoP.

The idea of disengagement, i.e., students' lack of participation and by extension of motivation, was also represented throughout many reflections. In fact, the analysis of TRs showed significant variance in the level of student participation across classrooms. Half of the teachers highlighted a low level of participation of students, implying low motivation, while the other half reported a higher level of participation.

4.2. Materials and Resources

Materials and resources were widely discussed in both the FG and the TRs. Some of the more popular tools used among the teachers were: *Youtube*, *TED-Ed*, *Powtoons*, *Quizlet* and podcast sites. These resources offered the most attractive formats for engaging students as well as the most accessible/usable interfaces for material development. These tools were also critically examined since teachers discussed the challenges and benefits of every tool.

While the teacher developed materials largely made reference to the use of video content, it was concluded in the FG that authentic texts, such as articles, have also proven to be an excellent content source for carrying out a Flipped activity. In addition, for most teachers, the best policy was to use the virtual learning environment provided by their own educational institution as a delivery system for the activities, since students were already familiar with it. Video links from different video database websites could also be embedded therein (e.g. *Youtube*, *TED-Ed*, *Vimeo*).

In the FG, teachers reflected on the marked difference between creating new lessons and curating existing material. Most teachers said that their own materials were more effective addressing classroom objectives, i.e., it was difficult to find an already created material that targeted the same goals. In the TRs, most teachers identified a need to create extra resources so students could understand how to carry out the activity. All teachers agreed on the importance of creating a quality, sustainable product that motivates and engages students.

4.3. Objectives and Purpose of the Flipped Classroom

The category “activity purpose and objectives” deals with pedagogical orientations of the flipped methodology, including such areas as promoting autonomous/independent, authentic, and project-based learning. The teachers of the CoP seemed to be influenced by these orientations, which come from progressive education movements that promote reflexive pedagogy over didactic pedagogy, or the transmission of knowledge from authoritative teacher to the passive student recipient. Didactic pedagogy “means to be told things rather than to find them out yourself” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015, p. 5). In contrast, authentic pedagogy, advocated by such theorists as John Dewey and Maria Montessori, promotes a student-centered, experience and interest driven learning approach. In this sense, teachers suggest that the flipped model offers positive experiences for learners, as it can help promote authentic and autonomous learning. Other teachers reported positive experiences using the flipped lesson within a project-based learning framework, characterized as “a dynamic classroom approach in which students actively explore real-world problems and challenges and acquire a deeper knowledge” (Edutopia, 2015).

4.4. Time

Time was frequently mentioned in the TRs and in the FG. This term had both a positive and negative value. As a weakness of implementing the methodology, a significant time investment in the search and retrieval of appropriate prefabricated materials, as well as in the creation of new materials was a recurrent theme that most teachers in our sample mentioned, both in the TRs and in the FG. A vast majority of teachers reported spending a large quantity of time watching tutorials and learning how to use new software in order to create their own lessons. However, the curation of existing content was also said to require significant adaptation in terms of lesson aims and level appropriateness, which also requires time.

Nevertheless, time was also reported as a strength in the activity design. One of the positive key points was that the lesson plan and/or resources created could be reused in future courses or by colleagues. Another positive aspect mentioned within this category was that learners could access the learning material at any time. This has been promoted as one of the most important advantages that flipped activities bring to the learning environment. As one teacher elaborates in their TR, “it is best to dedicate quality time to its production as an investment in the creation of a resource that can be used in the present, but also in future courses and among other colleagues in a transversal manner.”

4.5. Learning Design

The last category, learning design, was always present in the discussion. Links between this category and the previous examined categories can be easily drawn. The *learning design* category suggests that clearly defined learning outcomes, curriculum coherence and targeted student competencies are critical in the flipped classroom design. Teachers pointed out that a flipped design should take into consideration the learning outcomes expected to be seen in the classroom after engaging with the flipped activity at home. Teacher preparedness in the development of flipped resources was also a critical area that led to the strength or weakness of a particular learning activity. The need for making a proper pedagogical distinction between a flipped classroom activity versus a traditional activity was also very important for these teachers. Finally, design improvements were discussed by teachers as a way to identify, examine and possibly resolve weaknesses in the learning activity.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study clearly illustrates teachers’ perspectives on the implementation of a flipped methodology. Overall, this experience helped teachers of a CoP to better understand what designing a flipped classroom activity entailed, identified through strengths and challenges. This process of adapting, creating and sharing materials and ideas has the potential to serve as a tool of professional development for the teachers in the CoP.

The exploratory nature of the study allowed the CoP to reflect on how to carry out their future research projects. Two issues that came to the attention of the authors were: 1) the range of possible flipped activity types considered, i.e., for a whole class period or just an isolated activity, and 2) the different software used to create the activity. For future research, it might be important to narrow these variables so that the range of teacher experiences can be contrasted against different activity types being implemented. Moreover, others suggested variables potentially influencing student

learning and participation should be further explored, such as the motivating effect of the variable ‘novelty’ on various different factors that may influence teacher perception; as well as whether motivation and engagement are different constructs or not.

The nature of teacher-research also raised some ethical concerns within the CoP. The participants of the survey, the majority of whom also contributed to the writing, were asked to speak towards potentially compromising negative classroom experiences. Although consent to appear in this publication was granted by all participants, the double nature of the teacher-researcher makes maintaining the anonymity of the participants outside of the CoP difficult, despite all discussions being confidential. This situation does not happen in more “traditional” research.

To conclude, by analyzing and reflecting on the various strengths and weaknesses of the flipped methodology, the following categories identified in this preliminary, exploratory study as candidates for further research are as follows: a) Motivation and Student Activity Interaction, b) Materials and Resources, c) Objectives and Purpose of the Flipped Classroom, d) Time and e) Learning Design. The process of learning design was especially significant. As technological adoption becomes more prominent across all elements of university learning, the role of design perspectives in learning are beginning to make significant impact in learning sciences (Kress, 2010; Selander, 2013; Cope & Kalantzis, 2015). As Cope and Kalantzis elaborate, doing something “by design” implies a particular intensity of focus (p. 21). They argue that applying a design perspective means that teachers must “identify the range and sequence of epistemological moves that underlie their teaching. Teachers become designers as they select the range of activities they will bring to the learning environment, plan their sequence, and reflect on learning outcomes during and after the learning” (p. 22). The results, therefore, point to the idea that learning design was among the most significant factors in the success or failure of a flipped activity, and that teachers should consider these perspectives into their work as designers of learning in digital learning environments. Going forward, the CoP aims to identify the relationship between the key variables of the aforementioned categories, in hopes of reaching a deeper understanding of the factors that result in optimal flipped classroom designs.

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