THE IMPACTS OF THE FLIPPED CLASSROOM MODEL
ON TEACHING IELTS WRITING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a small-scale qualitative research project in a private educational context in Vietnam which aimed to investigate the effectiveness of the flipped classroom model as an innovative approach to preparing students for the IELTS Writing test. Previously, the lion's share of the teaching time was used to deliver the content of the lesson, and only a small amount of time was dedicated to practice and discussion. The learners had low level of engagement, and their performance progressed negligibly. This innovation was intended to combat the problems of time constraints and students' disengagement in teaching IELTS writing by flipping part of the class home for the students to self-study. This approach freed up more class-time for practice and interaction, and thus allow the teacher to tackle knowledge at a much deeper level and increase the students' engagement significantly.

Keywords: Flipped classroom; writing skills; learners' autonomy; motivation; IELTS.

1. INTRODUCTION

This research investigated the impacts of the flipped classroom model on the teaching of IELTS writing skills for students in a private test preparation class in Danang, Vietnam. The class was comprised of mainly university students taking the IELTS exam for different purposes such as meeting the school graduation prerequisites, studying abroad or improving job prospects. During the IELTS writing lessons, the teacher often faced the problem of time constraints as the majority of in-class time was used covering content and there was very little time for discussion, practice and feedback. Since in-class talking time tipped sharply in favour of the teacher, the students often showed signs of disengagement and progressesed very

slowly. In order to tackle the aforementioned problem, I flipped part of my classroom home to have more teacher-student time for interactive and collaborative activities. This study investigated the impacts of this approach on my students' learning by addressing the two research questions below:

1. How did the students engage in the flipped classroom?
2. Why did the students engage in the flipped classroom?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definition

According to Mehring (2018), the flipped classroom model is an innovative educational approach in which the common teaching materials featuring the instruction of new knowledge are viewed outside of class schedule as pre-class tasks, freeing in-class time for more practice and discussion.

The typical approach to flipping a class is by creating lecture videos which are similar to those of the Khan Academy. Through watching the videos students can engage inself-study at home prior to the lessons. This can give them more time for interactive and collaborative tasks in class. However, it is important to note that technology is not a prerequisite to flipping a class as the center of this model is about pedagogical changes rather than technological ones (Jeffrey Mehring & Leis, 2018).

2.2. Benefits of the flipped classroom model

2.2.1. Time saving

To begin with, parts of the lectures were assigned to students to view at home so that more in-class time was saved to focus on practice and interaction, which directly addressed my problem mentioned earlier in this paper. By doing the pre-class tasks, the students were better prepared to take part in the discussion in class while the teacher could have more time to customize the lesson to suit the students' needs, which could result in improved engagement and higher productivity (Jeffrey Mehring & Leis, 2018).

2.2.2. Self-paced learning

Another benefit of flipping a class is that the students were more in control of their own learning, meaning that they could pace their study

according to their own schedules and ability, thus promoting learner autonomy (Little, 1991).

2.2.3. Self-studying and Scaffolding

Moreover, regarding the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978), there are areas of knowledge that students can learn without aid while there are parts that they often need help to comprehend. As a result, this model aligns well with this theory in the way that it moved the simple language items to pre-class tasks and leaved the more complex knowledge to be tackled in class together with the teacher and peers.

2.2.4. Tackling higher order thinking skills

Another theory that the model is based on is Bloom's Taxonomy of educational objectives (Krathwohl, 2002). This taxonomy highlights the need to promote learning goals that involves higher ordering thinking skills (application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation) to achieve deeper learning. However, it is important to note that the more complex skills can only be acquired once the prior ones, namely knowledge and comprehension, are achieved. Therefore, this flipped classroom model focused on the tasks which require higher levels of cognitive thinking in class and shifting the lower-level ones home. This rearrangement built the foundation upon which the higher learning objectives were more likely to be achieved.

2.3. Drawbacks of the flipped classroom model

2.3.1. Technological problems

Given that the core value of the flipped classroom lies in pedagogical changes, technology, in fact, does play an integral role in the implementation of many innovations including this research, and thus problems can surface if there is a lack of technological resources and know-how (Mehfring & Leis, 2018). As a result, I decided to add a preparation stage to my flipping process in which I gave my students an introduction and a demonstration of the technology being used and asked them to sample it to see if there were any problems.

2.3.2. An increase of workload

Mehring (2015) suggests that an increase in the amount of work for both teachers and students can hinder the success of the model. A similar opinion was seen in the study of Nguyen (2018). In combating the problems of inadequate communicative English language competency among first

year university students in her school, heavy syllabus and the lack of language practice in class, she adopts the flipped classroom model in lessons which focus on writing and speaking skills. Although the study reveals that the students show development in all of their four English skills and the new approach is highly appreciated, the overwhelming increased workload hindered the progress of some. Therefore, I decided to limit the pre-class tasks to just watching curated videos and/or doing tasks on readily available materials instead of creating new ones, which, in turn, helped to reduce a significant amount of workload for both the students and the teacher. They were also encouraged to take note of questions that emerged in the self-study time and bring them to the class for clarification. The in-class time was used to check the students' comprehension of the pre-class tasks, lecturing the complicated parts of the lesson, practicing writing and giving feedback on students' writing. After class, the students were given written assignment and a small reflection based on their experience in doing the pre-class tasks and the in-class activities (as demonstrated in the diagram below)
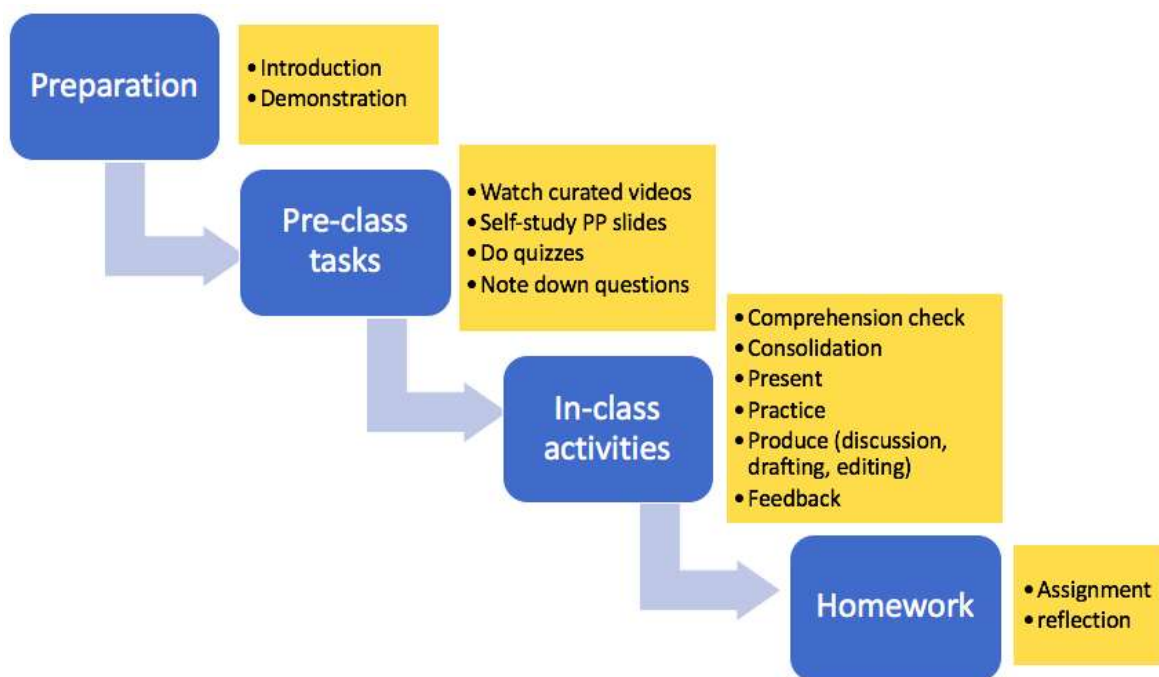
(the flipping process)

2.3.3. Learners' autonomy

Another key issue emerged from the literature is the problem of learners' autonomy. Humphreys & Wyatt (2014) conducted an action

research to discover students' perceptions and experiences with autonomy in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program at an international university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Smith and Palfreyman (2003) categorize autonomy into the 'weak' form and the 'strong' form. The former is said to be top down as it assumes that there is a lack of autonomy among learners and that they needed training to be more autonomous. In contrast, the latter is referred to as being bottom-up which takes into consideration individual's current capacity, engages them in the creation of autonomy-ignited conditions and accompanies them in the reflection on their own experience. In the first phase, the university adopted the 'weak' approach towards learner autonomy via means of independent self-study time at the self-access center provided by the campus. The results were rather disappointing as the students show a very low level of improvement in autonomy. The reasons were that they did not thoroughly understand the concept and the learning goals, and they did not feel pressure to be autonomous. In the second phase, a 'strong' approach was adopted in the form of independent learning journal (ILJ) in which the students have to plan, track and reflect on their learning process towards effective and autonomous learning with instructions and teacher support. The data shows signs of improvement in students' autonomy and awareness about independent learning, yet the trial period was limited to 5 weeks so that the evidence for gains might not as strong as expected. Overall, it appears to me that to achieve learner autonomy, a combination of both strong and weak approach is needed because learners need to be actively involved in the process and there should also be consistent communication so that they can clearly understand the concept and the goals, but they also need the requirements from the teacher to increase the pressure to change from the students. Therefore, the preparation process is of paramount importance to my flipping process so that the students know how to engage in this task productively. Besides, I am aware that I need to communicate with students constantly to scaffold them throughout the process but also have to incorporate assignments, pre-class tasks responses and reflections into the formative assessment to raise the need to be more autonomous among the students.

3. METHODOLOGY
3.1. The research context

The research context is in a private IELTS preparation language class in Danang with 11 Vietnamese students whose age were between 19 and

31. Some of them were at university while others had either full-time or part-time jobs. These students study IELTS for multiple purposes such as to pursue higher education overseas, to graduate or to enhance their job prospects. At the beginning of the course, their English level was around pre to low intermediate and their aims were to get IELTS band 6.0 or higher. Despite their roughly equal overall language ability, their level in each of the 4 skills (writing, reading, speaking, listening) varied greatly. More specifically, three of the students had much lower writing skills compared to others in the class. The research duration was in 1 month, and the class met twice a week with each lesson lasting about 2 hours.

3.2. The research methods

In conducting this research, I chose to adopt a qualitative method approach. An action research (AR) design was used as it is very 'context specific'. The teacher is also the inside change agent and the impacts of the research is immediate to the specific context, which invigorates positive changes and provide an insight into the situation (Burns, 2010). The variety in students' socio-cultural backgrounds means that how they experienced, reacted to and perceived the innovation could be very different, or in the words of Hinchey (2008), 'multiple realities exist simultaneously'. Therefore, when it comes to recording such detailed and rich information, it was rather difficult to gain in-depth understanding merely through numerical data, and thus qualitative methods were chosen. The second rationale is that this study aimed to find out why things happened in order to improve the teaching practices rather than looking for what worked and what did not, it seemed that qualitative methods were most suitable for this research purpose.

3.3. Data Collection

To ensure the quality of the data collected, three research methods were adopted, namely students' journals in the form of audio recording, teacher's observation field notes, and semi-structured interviews.

3.3.1. Audio recording

The students were required to audio record their experiences with the pre-class tasks including their thoughts about the pre-class tasks and what they did during that self-study time. The files were then submitted to Google

classroom (The LMS used) together with their answer to the pre-class quizzes so that I could collect them electronically. All the journals were organized by names and for the latter analysis process.

3.3.2. Observation field notes

With respect to the observation field notes, I often made quick notes in Vietnamese about what was happening in the class on a separate notebook either while the students were discussing among themselves or after the class finished. If the students said something important during the lesson, I quickly jotted it down on the journal and came back to wrote it more carefully when the class finished. I made sure that the notes were just the description of what I saw happening in the class, and not my interpretation of the actions that I encounter during the teaching time. I also used some prepared questions regarding the engagement of learners with the in-class learning activities as my semi-structured observation guide. This allowed me to take notes of what happened during the class activities in a systematic way while still allow rooms for the recording of unexpected but important issues.

3.3.3. Interview

For the interviews, a pre-structured set of questions was asked in both types of interviews. Follow-up questions were also asked when I saw potentials for further investigating regarding students' opinions about the effectiveness of the flipped classroom model and their engagement with it. In addition, I also listened to the students' audio journals beforehand and noted down any information that needed further clarification and brought them to the interviews. These questions will be asked as if they are issues emerged from the majority but not individual to protect the privacy of the participants. I also took notes during the interview about important information so that when the participants finished the discussion or giving the answer, I could ask them follow-up questions. These notes helped me to refer back to the data better during the analysis process.

3.4. Data analysis

The triangulation method and 3 pre-set categories, namely learning strategies, competence and learner's autonomy, and motivation were chosen to analyze the data. First, I went over all the data collected from the journals and noted down the key points from the responses of each student after each lesson and code them according to the pre-set categories. I then compared the data of each student from his/her very first lesson until the last

lesson to see if there were any changes in his/her experience with flipped classroom model throughout the researched period. At this point, I made a comparison between the students to see whether there were similarities or differences between their experiences and then compared the data collected from the journals with my observation field notes to look for tendencies or patterns if there were any. While the observation field notes and the journals gave me information regarding how and why the students engaged with the flipped class, the interviews provided data about the students' perceptions when it had finished. Therefore, I also triangulated between the data collected throughout the research and the data collected at the end of it to see if there were any consistencies or conflicts. Finally, I put together all individual and group responses to each interview questions to explore the relationships and the connections in the data.

4. KEY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research has shown that motivation plays a vital role in the engagement of the students, meaning that the more motivated the students were, the more engaged they were with the flipped classroom model. Interestingly, those who were motivated but less competent in their writing skills seemed to engage more with the model compared to those who were better at their writing skills but lacked motivation.

4.1. Motivation and Teacher support

On the one hand, the fact that students successfully engaged with the innovation is largely attributable to the motivation that I created by encouraging them consistently and the extra time in class that I could utilize to personalize learning and tackle the knowledge at a much deeper level. As the students studied part of the lecture beforehand, I was able to brief through the knowledge quite quickly and only occasionally, had to stop to explain some trickier parts to the weaker students. The majority of in-class time focused on the higher-order thinking skills, which were built upon the lower level layer in Bloom's Taxonomy (Krathwohl, 2002). It is observed that towards the end of the research period, the students asked more questions during practice and feedback time and some of them even attempted to explain to others how they had understood the problem being discussed. Some of them claimed that because the teacher appeared to be very

attentive and accommodating, they felt more comfortable asking questions to clarify the knowledge.

4.2. Motivation and in-class activities

Moreover, the stronger students could act as apprentices to the weaker ones, allowing them to reteach what they had understood to others, thus strengthening their understanding while allowing them to realize areas that they were not really clear about. Compared to their previous language learning experiences, the interaction period in the flipped classroom was longer so they could be able to discuss more and negotiate meaning with others in the class, thus gradually creating a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Since "knowledge is dependent upon human perception" (Hinchey, 2008, p.20), without meaning negotiation and interaction, students could misunderstand the knowledge, leading to more troubles later. Therefore, thanks to the freed-up class time, more feedback and interaction could be taken place to enforce students' skills and understanding of the lesson. Finally, the gap between the strong and the weak was narrowed as the weak had more time to research on their own time at home in preparation for the main lessons

4.3. Motivation and Students' competency

On the other hand, the varying ability in writing skills made the pre-class tasks either too challenging for the weaker while too easy for the stronger. The students with stronger writing skills showed little interests in the pre-class tasks since some of them only completed the quizzes just before the main class and one even requested in his recorded journal if he could skip the pre-class tasks as they were too easy for him. Additionally, during the in-class sessions, some of the stronger students occasionally started talking to each other while the teacher was explaining some areas relating the pre-class knowledge to the weaker ones. This suggests that while the increased workload had little or almost no impact on the students' engagement, the difficulty of the tasks being assigned did. This is quite different from the suggestion by Mehring (2015) which indicate the potential drawbacks of the increased workload on students' engagement. In fact, the tasks being not challenging enough to some of the students lead to them being bored and feeling indifferent with the self-study time. Easing the students in the flipping process does not mean giving them too easy work so

that they did not take it seriously as they should. It showed that I tipped more in favour of the weaker students while neglecting the needs for a more challenging work from the stronger ones.

4.4. Motivation and Learners' autonomy

Learner's autonomy is another obstacle. Even though, the majority of the students often finished pre-class tasks before the main lesson, some of them still missed the tasks occasionally. They explained that they had family issues or up-coming exams at university. Clearly, those pre-class tasks were often of secondary importance to the students when it comes to task prioritizing. Even though, as Smith and Palfreyman (2003) suggest, there was a combination of both strong and weak approach towards learners' autonomy in my research, the use of top-down autonomy was not strong enough to pressure the students to complete their pre-class tasks on time. As suggested by some students during the interview, I could impose a small fine when one did not complete his pre-class work and used this money as rewards for the diligent students.

5. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there was a clear correlation between motivation and students' engagement in the flipped classroom and the less competent students engaged with the model more when being given tasks that were challenging enough. The extra class time used on practice and interaction clearly resulted in students' deeper understanding of the knowledge, which in turn contributed back to their motivation to try harder and engage in the learning process. However, all students regardless of their level should be taken care of equally, meaning that they should also be given challenging enough work to handle so that they could make better use of their self-study time. Being a practitioner-researcher, one should be more aware of the subjectivity when making intervention decisions because many personal assumptions re not reliable, which could lead to counter-productive attempts. In the words of Hinchey (2008), "multiple realities exist simultaneously" so keeping oneself impartial and evaluating the situation as objectively as possible are of vital importance to the quality of the teaching. This aligns with the conclusion made by Littlewood (2000) that Vietnamese students want to contribute more to the lesson than being just 'obedient listeners'. In fact, in this context, the students were very willing the take the lead to learn by

asking questions, to support their friends through peer-discussion and coaching and to grow by welcoming more challenging tasks. Teachers could try out ways to shift more of the lecture to home to save more time to tackle higher order thinking tasks in class.

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