



ARTICLE

Investigating Learner Engagement in Flipped English as a Foreign Language Classroom

Yan Liu*

Foreign Language College, University of International Relations, Beijing, 100091, China

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: 12 August 2020

Accepted: 20 September 2020

Published: 30 September 2020

Keywords:

Flipped classroom

Technology

Learner engagement

EFL teaching

ABSTRACT

Flipped classroom is an innovative instructional method. Recent technological developments have given rise to the popularity of flipped classroom. This study reports the findings of a questionnaire survey that investigates learners' perceptions of flipped EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom, with a particular focus on their self-perceived learner engagement. The results of the study indicate that the learners generally have positive and favorable attitudes toward flipped classroom. Seventy-five percent of them consider flipped classroom useful in boosting their confidence in learning English and 50.6% think that they have become more interested in the course. Yet, it is also found that only 30.1% agree that flipped method has helped them to understand the course content more clearly. In addition, as high as 71.6% of the respondents agree that the flipped method can increase their motivation to participate in classroom learning activities, but only 44.9% believe that their engagement has been raised. While the results show that the students tend to accept this new teaching method, their evaluation of the actual effects of it is not as expected, which may be due to the lack of guidance and the weak connection between online self-study and classroom activities. Future studies are needed to explore how to strengthen these areas.

1. Introduction

For decades, researchers have been trying to introduce new technology into college EFL classrooms. Such attempts have been particularly obvious in the last two decades. The schools go to great lengths to buy cutting-edge facilities, in the belief that modern teaching equipment would naturally result in modern teaching means, which would naturally lead to improved teaching effectiveness. Yet, this is not always the case. One cannot rely on technology alone to improve

teaching effectiveness, instead, educators should also consider other aspects of teaching, learner characteristics, teaching plan, teaching content, learning environment, learners' prior learning experiences, and their familiarity with technology. The same is true for the flipped method, in which the traditional instructional sequence is reversed (Egbert, et al., 2018).^[5]

As a relatively new form of blended teaching, flipped classroom is gaining momentum as an innovative instructional method. The flipped method aims at

**Corresponding Author:*

Yan Liu, Associate Professor, Foreign Language College, University of International Relations, Beijing, 100091, China; Email: zinazina@126.com.

This paper was supported by "the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities" (Grant No. 3262016T45).

combining traditional classroom teaching and online learning and making the best use of both instructional modalities. While there exist abundant studies showing the effect of this method in engaging learners and promoting student-centered learning, research efforts are needed to examine if this method works for all types of learners, how they perceive the effectiveness of flipped learning, and what parts of the flipped method work, and not work.

2. Literature Review

Constructivist learning theory is the theoretical basis of flipped classroom method. Constructivists hold that knowledge is individually and socially constructed, and the learning environment should encourage active, reflective, contextualized, and cooperative learning, and the use of authentic tasks. In constructivist learning environments, students are often divided into small groups, which promotes active dialogue, interaction, team work, knowledge construction and problem solving. Teachers play the role of a consultant, a facilitator, providing guidance and support to learner's knowledge construction process (Khalil & Fahim 2017).^[12]

Flipped classroom, enabled by digital technology, comes with several instructional benefits. Learning goes beyond the brick-and-mortar environment, and learners can learn anytime, anywhere, and at their own pace. Classroom is no longer the only place where teachers and students can interact. The abundant digital communication tools and platforms (e.g., WeChat, DingTalk) allow students and teachers get connected and interact anytime, anywhere. Because of the increased interaction, teachers have a better chance of identifying the problems, struggles students have, individually or collectively. Teaching and learning become far more flexible than before.

The flexibility of flipped method demands higher on learners in terms of time management, self-discipline, learning ability, and metacognitive skills. More freedom comes with more responsibilities. With the increase of learner autonomy in the flipped method, students undertake the task of constructing knowledge rather than passively receiving the knowledge lectured by a teacher in classroom. This self-study session is usually done by watching video lectures in online learning system.

Learner engagement plays a critical role in the knowledge construction process. Engagement refers to students' active participation and involvement in classroom activities and learning process. It plays a vital role in the process of foreign language learning. Learning a new language requires a significant amount of passion, efforts, practices, and reflection. Learners need to actively interact with peers, practice using the target language,

not be afraid of making mistakes, and constantly reflect upon and analyze their own learning process and learning outcomes. All of these demands high level of learning engagement (Wang et al., 2014).^[14]

While there exist abundant studies on the use of technology in teaching, most of which focus on the comparison between new technology and traditional or innovative teaching methods (e.g., Hung, 2015),^[9] how technology is used in teaching (e.g., Blyth, 2018),^[3] or learners' attitudes towards teaching innovation (e.g., Farrah & Qawasmeh, 2018).^[7] Relatively less studies have examined how learner engagement is enhanced in technology-enhanced flipped learning environments. According to technological determinism, the use of technology alone is able to enhance or change teaching and learning effectiveness. Yet, empirical studies have revealed that this is not true universally; many attempts of introducing a new technology have ended in no significant effect (Kirkwood, 2009).^[10] In fact, technology cannot take the role of teachers. The flipped instruction is often assumed to be able to increase learner engagement and generate a high level of participation from students. Again, this is yet to be determined.

3. Research Design

3.1 Flipped Course Design

The present study was designed to determine whether the flipped classroom design could help to improve learner engagement. The course that was studied was Comprehensive English, which was taken by first-year and second-year non-English major in the university the researcher is employed. In order to help students better understand the meaning of and the way flipped classroom works, teachers of all classes spent a session in introducing this new teaching method, including the number and deadlines of term projects, the arrangements of quizzes, grading criteria, and the relationship between online learning and in-class meetings. It is expected that this orientation session helps minimize students' resistance to flipped classroom through a better understanding of this innovative instructional method and the autonomy and responsibility of learners in this learning environment.

The online learning system was designed by the colleagues of the researcher, including structure, selection and arrangement of learning materials, homework, and learning assessment. The school hired a company to build the platform following the teaching team's requirements. Only rigorously selected teaching and learning materials were used for the self-study. They include texts, pictures, audios and videos. "Students prefer a teacher explanation

than a peer explanation and there were concerns over the ‘trustworthiness’ of a peer-produced video tutorial” (Engin, 2014: 12).^[6] Most students seem to naturally trust teachers and their instruction.

Students are required to complete all reading, watching, and online exercises before the class meeting. To ensure the effectiveness of the self-regulated online learning, the course uses the pass-advance method that allows students move to the next section if they finish the previous section with a minimum of 80% accuracy on the quiz responses. To promote peer-to-peer interaction, teamwork is required in each unit requiring students to work in small groups and participate in online discussion on the e-learning platform or in their WeChat groups. Teachers also participate in the online portion through Q&A sessions, monitoring group work, and providing feedback on learning progress. The online learning is followed by class meeting, in which students meet, discuss, and share their learning through a variety of student-centered learning activities.

3.2 Survey Questionnaire

The survey was conducted by inviting all students who were taking the course to fill out an anonymous questionnaire. The questionnaire, designed by the researcher, was distributed at the end of the semester. There were eight questions that asked about students’ perceptions of the flipped EFL classroom, ranked on a 5-point Likert-type scale. A total of 217 questionnaires were sent out, 196 responses were received, and 176 valid responses were included in the data analysis.

The survey questions centered around how flipped classroom affected learning attitude and whether it could improve learner engagement. The questions were: 1) Do you agree that flipped classroom could help to boost your confidence in learning this course? 2) Do you agree that flipped classroom could help you to understand the course content more clearly? 3) Do you agree that flipped classroom allowed you to perform better in classroom activities? 4) Do you agree that flipped classroom has deepened and extended your learning of the course? 5) Do you agree that it was more convenient to practice newly-learned language points in flipped classroom? 6) Do you agree that you became more interested in this course after adopting the flipped classroom mode? 7) Do you agree that flipped classroom increased your motivation to participate in classroom activities? 8) Do you agree that flipped classroom was very useful and you are willing to continue using this teaching mode? In addition, if students had any comments or suggestions about this course, they could share in a textbox at the end of the questionnaire.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results of the Questionnaire Survey

The valid responses were graded by the researcher. Every question item was followed by five options, ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree” with values 1-5 assigned to each of them, respectively: “Strongly disagree” (1 point), “Disagree” (2 points), “Undecided” (3 points), “Agree” (4 points), “Strongly agree” (5 points).

Cronbach’s alpha was used to evaluate the internal consistency of the scale. The total Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the survey questions was 0.78, indicating good reliability overall. Content validity was confirmed by examining the matching degree between the survey questions and the survey goal. The survey questions can measure the respondents’ attitudes towards the flipped classroom approach from different angles, with a focus on its impact on learner engagement.

Table 1. Results of a Questionnaire-based Inquiry on Students’ Perceptions of Flipped Classroom

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean
Q1	10(5.68%)	19(10.79%)	15(8.52%)	70(39.77%)	62(35.22%)	3.88
Q2	53(30.11%)	50(28.40%)	20(11.36%)	31(17.61%)	22(12.50%)	2.54
Q3	38(21.59%)	59(33.52%)	31(17.61%)	27(15.34%)	21(11.93%)	2.62
Q4	14(7.95%)	26(14.77%)	15(8.52%)	61(34.65%)	60(34.09%)	3.72
Q5	16(9.09%)	31(17.61%)	31(17.61%)	64(36.36%)	34(19.31%)	3.39
Q6	27(15.34%)	36(20.45%)	24(13.63%)	43(24.43%)	46(26.13%)	3.26
Q7	12(6.81%)	21(11.93%)	17(9.65%)	68(38.63%)	58(32.95%)	3.79
Q8	12(6.81%)	15(8.52%)	20(11.36%)	73(41.47%)	56(31.81%)	3.83

As shown in Table 1, **question one on confidence** got a high mean of 3.88. In face-to-face teaching, students usually have little time allowed to think because, in most cases, teachers are engaged in their lecturing, following their PowerPoints, reading from their scripts, thus leaving students no time to question or reflect what they are listening to. This drawback can be effectively avoided in the flipped classroom method. When studying online, students can press the pause key whenever they need to, allowing them adequate time to think and reflect on the learning materials. In addition, they also have time to prepare and refine their answers, without the heightened anxiety of being called on by professors randomly. All these changes provide them with more confidence in learning English.

Unlike question one, **question two on grasp of learning materials** got a low mean of 2.54, which is

unexpected. When using the flipped classroom method, students have control of their own learning; the learning materials are also abundant in quantity and media types. Such design is meant to assist students to better understand the course content. However, more than half of them did not think this was helpful. An analysis of students' comments has identified three key reasons. (1) There is a lack of teacher's guidance in the learning process. Flipped classroom method demands high on learner's self-discipline, learning ability, and time management skill. Not all learners survive and thrive in this learning environment. (2) The task descriptions and assessment criteria are sometimes not clear, which might be frustrating for learners if they are not able to get immediate help. (3) Lastly, many students need to adjust to the flipped classroom method. As respondents of the survey shared, the classroom atmosphere seems "too relaxing" and unorganized to them. As a relatively new teaching method, it may take quite a while for both students and teachers to get used to the flipped classroom learning method and environment.

Question three on classroom performance also got a low mean, 2.62. Such a low mean indicates that they did not believe this teaching mode had helped them to perform better in classroom activities. Some students pointed out that online learning and classroom activities were only weakly connected and they also felt a lack of guidance when studying online. Such complaints were not unpredictable. In traditional classroom teaching, the most common practice includes transmitting target knowledge, doing exercises on the key expected competencies and organizing relevant task activities, all of which are clearly connected and targeted. In flipped classroom, however, students are expected to learn, all by themselves, new contents on the e-learning platform prior to attending class. In addition, the time elapsed between online learning and in class meeting may not help with the timely learning reinforcement, especially in the context of a second language learning. As some studies have revealed, the success of blended learning cannot be achieved without appropriately arranging online learning and classroom teaching (e.g., Ginns & Ellis, 2007)^[8].

A high mean was reported for **question four on deepened and extended learning** (M=3.72). The respondents agreed that they had benefited from the flipped EFL learning environment. For instance, mobile technology makes it very easy for students to obtain an infinite amount of information. For these EFL learners, learning English goes beyond reading and reciting textbooks. Students can learn from watching English movies, TV shows, listening to podcasts, music, and

joining in social media programs. English language learning becomes more fun, engaging, and effective.

The mean for **question five on flexibility of learning** was high (M=3.39). The online learning platform provides a learning environment where students can learn on their own, at their own pace, without the anxiety of being called on in the classroom. Many students indicated that they enjoyed the freedom, relaxation, and autonomy of online learning. In addition, when learning online, learners have more time to think and more opportunities to explore relevant learning materials, both of which help enhance the depth of learning and retention of learning.

Question six on interest in learning English got a high mean of 3.26. The flexibility of online learning also helps improve students' interest in learning English. As some respondents stated, the classroom meeting in the flipped classroom is no longer limited to reading and analyzing textbooks; instead, they can participate in sharing, discussing their homework, along with some fun activities. Some other students said they had always been interested in learning English so whether the class was flipped or not did not affect their interest in the course. There were also a few respondents who showed resistance to this flipped teaching method. For instance, some of them stated that they would have understood better and more quickly if teacher's explanations were available. It took them a lot of effort and time to understand the learning materials well.

A high mean was reported for **question seven on motivation for participation** (M=3.79). EFL teachers in the researcher's workplace have long been trying to create a learning environment where students have more opportunities to participate in interactive activities. But due to the common practice of lecturing, the dominant teaching method in the traditional classroom, student's participation of classroom activities is limited. Participants of the flipped classroom stated that the classroom meetings provide more participation opportunities because lecturing was no longer part of it. In addition, the tasks and activities of each class meeting are pre-scheduled, which students can prepare for. This is very different from the traditional classroom teaching, in which students are often called on off guard (Abdullah & Al-Mofti, 2017).^[1]

The mean score of **question eight on the usefulness of flipped method** was as high as 3.83, suggesting that respondents were in favor of flipped EFL classroom and seemed happy to accept the use of flipped method in English learning. This makes great sense when considering other questions with high means, such as confidence, interest, motivation, and deepened and extended learning. While the flipped method does not work for all students,

the majority of the students responded to the survey expressed they would like to continue their participation in flipped classroom learning of English.

As for the comment section, which was optional in the questionnaire, 41 respondents provided comments and/or suggestions, most of which focused on the instantaneity of communication and interaction. Eight of them wrote that it often took hours, even a day or more than one day, to receive a reply from peers or instructors on discussion board platform or WeChat group. In addition, there was very little online synchronous communication with instructors, who were usually unable to provide timely feedback. What's more, a great majority of the online exercises were graded instantly by computer, with no detailed feedback. Such learning assessments do not help learning and growing in a meaningful way. This disadvantage was also pointed out by the students, who said that the lack of teacher's guidance in the self-study process sometimes made them feel confused, frustrated, and defeated.

4.2 Discussion of the Findings

One of the most prominent advantages of flipped classroom is its expansion of learning time and space. Students log on to the platform wherever and whenever there is Wi-Fi. In this study, students did log on at different times of the day, ranging from early morning to late evening. But it was impossible for teachers to sit in front of the computer and monitor their learning or offer immediate feedback from dawn to dusk, which resulted in a serious lack of communication and connection between teachers and students. As a result, online learners may feel a sense of separation, isolation, frustration, which results in lower level of motivation and engagement in online learning.

Some students complained that, despite the shorter classroom time, the participation of a flipped classroom seemed to be more tiring. This makes sense because passively listening to teachers' lecturing does not require lots of effort on learners' end. In a flipped classroom in which lecturing is eliminated or minimized, students need to actively or are forced to actively participate in classroom activities. Teachers play the role of moderator, coach, and evaluator. In spite of the complaints, students affirmed the positive role of flipped method in encouraging active participation, collaboration in the course - a finding that is also found in other studies (Burke & Fedorek, 2017).^[4]

Findings from questions three and seven merit attention. It is quite interesting and surprising that 71.22% of the respondents thought flipped classroom motivated

them more to participate in classroom activities, while only 27.27% believed it did help them better participate. In other words, quite a few students thought they were more motivated to participate in classroom activities, but the increased motivation did not result in better performances. This could be partially explained by some of students' comments, including the weak and vague connection between online learning and classroom activities and the lack of teacher's guidance.

The findings also suggest that technology integration is not simply using various technical means. The true integration requires teachers and students to cooperate and figure out how to use technology in teaching most efficiently. Based on the analysis of flipped EFL classroom, the study described one way of using technology in EFL teaching and examined whether this teaching mode could help to improve learner engagement through a questionnaire survey. The analysis of the results showed that it did have some positive effect on the improvement of learner engagement and the enhancement of cooperative learning. At the same time, the analysis also found some problems, such as the lack of teacher's guidance in the online learning part, and the weak connection between online and offline learning.

Modern technology has many practical functions that can benefit education, such as "individualized interfaces, real-time access to information, context sensitivity, instant communication and feedback" (Papadakis, 2018: 348).^[13] Yet, no matter which teaching mode is adopted, flipped or not, no matter how advanced the technological means is, the ultimate goal is to improve teaching effects. To achieve this goal, increasing learner engagement is a crucial step. The findings from this survey study suggest that teachers must attach importance to the connection between student's online learning and face-to-face classroom meeting. Otherwise, the classroom teaching would feel disjointed. As shown in the questionnaire, despite the fact that the majority of students had completed the online learning before the class session, many of them still found it difficult to actively participate in classroom activities. Without teacher's guidance and appropriate teaching methods, flipped classroom may not lead to desired learning outcomes. Therefore, instead of assuming that students are capable of handling online learning and perform well in both online and offline contexts, teachers should take various factors into consideration when adopting flipped instruction, including "student characteristics," the learning materials students are expected to learn by themselves, and the connection

between online and in-class tasks (Kalogiannakis & Papadakis, 2019: 117)^[11].

5. Conclusion

This study looked into a group of EFL students' perception of flipped classroom method. The results show that this innovative instructional method can enhance students' confidence, interest and motivation in learning English. This finding is consistent with several other studies (e.g., Wichadee, 2017).^[15] For example, Blair et al. (2016)^[2] found that the use of flipped classroom failed to significantly improve students' grades as expected. In this way, it seems that, in spite of students' stronger confidence in learning the course and greater motivation to participate in classroom activities, the increase of learner engagement is not assured. To a large extent, it still depends on the teacher whether flipped classroom can generate the desired teaching effects. After all, it is the teacher who designs and carries out the teaching task. Therefore, when using the flipped teaching mode, teachers are supposed to skillfully design in-class activities during class meetings in order to use class time effectively.

As for the class meetings, here are some suggestions for those who have an interest in trying this flipped methodology. In order to connect the online and offline learning, the teacher can begin each class meeting with a brief review of the online learning part, including content and key language points. Special attention should be given to misconceptions, misunderstanding that students have formed in the online learning session. Learner-centered tasks and activities should be planned to create interactive discussions among students. It works best when a class meeting ends with the teacher's summary of course content and comments on students' class performances.

The findings of the study also indicate that teacher training in flipped method is much needed - this is critical to the success of a flipped classroom course. Given the novelty of the flipped method, many teachers may not be familiar with this pedagogical method. It is imperative for teachers who are interested in using the flipped classroom to get training, including the instructional benefits, theoretical basis, and the best practices.

References

[1] Abdullah, M.Y., & Al-Mofti, K.W.H. (2017). The impact of social support on EFL learners' motivation at Iraqi Kurdistan universities. *Modern Applied Science*, 11(7), 51. <https://doi.org/10.5539/mas.v11n7p51>

[2] Blair, E., Maharaj, C., & Primus, S. (2016). Performance and perception in the flipped classroom. *Ed-*

ucation and Information Technologies, 21(6), 1465-1482. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-015-9393-5>

[3] Blyth, C. (2018). Immersive technologies and language learning. *Foreign Language Annals*, 51(1), 225-232. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12327>

[4] Burke, A.S., & Fedorek, B. (2017). Does "flipping" promote engagement?: A comparison of a traditional, online, and flipped class. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 18(1), 11-24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787417693487>

[5] Egbert, J., Herman, J., & Chang, A. (2018) Flipped instruction in CALL: Exploring principles of effective pedagogy. [C] In B. Zou & M. Thomas (Eds.), *Handbook of research on integrating technology into contemporary language learning and teaching* (pp.1-14). Hershey, PA: IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-5140-9.ch001>

[6] Engin, M. (2014). Extending the flipped classroom model: Developing second language writing skills through student-created digital videos [J]. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 14(5), 12-26. <https://doi.org/10.14434/josotlv14i5.12829>

[7] Farrah, M., & Qawasmeh, A. (2018). English students' attitudes towards using flipped classrooms in language learning at Hebron University. *Research in English Language Pedagogy*, 6(2), 275-294.

[8] Ginns, P. & Ellis, R. (2007). Quality in blended learning: Exploring the relationships between on-line and face-to-face teaching and learning [J]. *Internet and Higher Education*, 10(1), 53-64. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2006.10.003>

[9] Hung, H. (2015). Flipping the classroom for English language learners to foster active learning, *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 28(1), 81-96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2014.967701>

[10] Kirkwood, A. (2009). E-learning: You don't always get what you hope for [J]. *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, 18(2), 107-121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759390902992576>

[11] Kalogiannakis, M., & Papadakis, S. (2019). Evaluating pre-service kindergarten teachers' intention to adopt and use tablets into teaching practice for natural sciences. *International Journal of Mobile Learning and Organisation*, 13(1), 113-127. <https://doi.org/10.1504/ijmlo.2019.10016617>

[12] Khalil, R.R., & Fahim, S.S. (2017). Assessment as a learning tool in a flipped English language classroom in higher education. *Arab World English Journal*, 7(4), 4-19. <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/xnmne>

[13] Papadakis, S. (2018). Evaluating pre-service teachers' acceptance of mobile devices with regards to their age and gender: a case study in Greece [J].

- International Journal of Mobile Learning and Organisation*, 12(4), 336-352. <https://doi.org/10.1504/ijmlo.2018.10013372>
- [14] Wang, Z., Bergin, C., & Bergin, D.A. (2014). Measuring engagement in fourth to twelfth grade classrooms: The classroom engagement inventory. *School Psychology Quarterly: The Official Journal of the Division of School Psychology, American Psychological Association*, 29(4), 517-535. <https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000050>
- [15] Wichadee, S. (2017). A development of the blended learning model using Edmodo for maximizing students' oral proficiency and motivation. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning (iJET)*, 12(2), 137-154. <https://doi.org/10.3991/ijet.v12i02.6324>