

Comparing Traditional and Flipped Classroom in an EFL Reading Course - Engagement and Autonomy

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Abstract: This paper investigates the comparison between traditional learning and flipped learning in an elective reading course for 40 non-English majors in a university in China learning English as a foreign language. The findings show that 75% of students prefer flipped teaching and the engagement of 87.5% students in the classroom activities has increased. However, 17.5% of students prefer traditional learning and 47.5% of the students did not often watch the pre-class vocabulary videos before the class, which indicates low learner autonomy. Finally, implications of the survey are discussed.

Keywords: Traditional classroom; Flipped classroom; EFL reading; Engagement; Autonomy

1. Introduction

The effectiveness of traditional teaching is higher in transmission of information, but it might lead to learning difficulties because the students do not take part in classroom activities actively (Fathi, & Rahimi, 2020). Flipped teaching is a promising (Li, & Li, 2022) pedagogy in which the traditional teaching mode is reversed by introducing brand-new concepts and subjects in the pre-class phase and more in-class time can be used for customized and cooperative study (Shahnama, Ghonsooly, & Shirvan, 2021). This learning mode is effective because it enhances student-centered study and autonomous learning (Amiryousefi, 2017; Challob, 2021; Turan, & Akdag-Cimen, 2019). To learn a foreign language successfully, as much in-class engagement as possible is needed for the students to master the target language more effectively (Turan, & Akdag-Cimen, 2019). Many studies have shown that flipped learning can effectively improve the students' learner autonomy (Tsai, 2019; Challob, 2021), the students' willingness to participate in oral activities (Abdullah, Hussin, & Ismail, 2019) and engagement (Chen Hsieh, Wu, & Marek, 2017; Gu, Tang, Liu, & Xu, 2022; Li, & Li, 2022; Steen-Utheim and Foldnes, 2018). Autonomous students are supposed to learn independently and take charge of every aspect of learning, such as the manner, time, and quantity of materials to be studied in a certain period of time (Challob, 2021). Research shows that whether flipped learning is successful lies on the students' sustained engagement in activities (Jang, & Kim, 2020).

In the research field of flipped learning, just a few studies were done in English as a foreign language (EFL) field and more are required (Amiryousefi, 2017; The systematic review of Turan and Akdag-Cimen (2019) showed deficiency of research in the area of benefits and challenging aspects in foreign language teaching with flipped learning method. This article tries to survey the merits and challenges of flipped mode in EFL elective reading course for non-English majors in China.

2. Methodology

This project used qualitative research method with purposive sampling used in the study of Dikilitas and Yayli (2018) by surveying participants who showed their willingness to take part in this study from a Chinese university. The students' perspectives on the flipped way of learning vocabulary in EFL reading elective course were gathered with several open-ended questions (see the Appendix), following the pattern of Dikilitas and Yayli (2018). In this study, the students are mentioned by numbers (i. e. S1, S2, S3, ..., S40). Altogether 40 out of 42 students have taken part in the open-ended questionnaire, representing 95.2% response rate (Falola, Ogueyungbo, Adeniji, & Adesina, 2022). Two classes of non-English majors have chosen an elective reading course in a Chinese university, with one class of 18 students and the other 24 ones. The age of these students vary from about 18 to 21 (from freshmen to junior students). The first 8 weeks of the elective English reading course (altogether

16 weeks) was in a traditional mode, and the last 8 weeks was in a flipped mode.

	Traditional mode (Weeks 1-8)	Flipped mode (Weeks 9-16)
Before class	No homework	1. Preview the text; 2. Watch the vocabulary video
In class	1. Vocabulary explanation 2. Analysis of difficult sentences 3. Text analysis	1. Group discussion of comprehension questions 2. Group report 3. Group discussion of the teacher's questions 4. Group report

The students' views collected in the questionnaire helped inquire into the following research questions:

(1) Can flipped classroom in EFL elective reading course improve the non-English majors' learner autonomy?

(2) Can flipped classroom in EFL elective reading course enhance the non-English majors' classroom engagement?

The questionnaire was finished anonymously with the students' native language: Chinese. Then all the answers were translated into English verbatim.

3. Findings

Our data shows that of the 40 students in the survey, 30 preferred the flipped learning. Besides, 3 liked both the traditional and the flipped learning. 7 students preferred the traditional one.

3.1 Advantages of flipped classroom:

In this study, 31 out of 40 students have mentioned that the flipped classroom has many advantages:

S2: "We could dig out the deep meaning by ourselves and understand the text better."

S3: "It engaged the students in learning and the English class became much more interesting."

S4: "The thinking of the students was more active and divergent; the students felt more relaxed, free and open-hearted without the tedious pressure in the traditional classroom."

S5: "The students could discuss about their own opinion on the reading text which improved the vitality and engagement."

S6: "It is freer and the students had more opportunities to discuss and communicate with each other, which could enhance text comprehension."

S7: "It is more reactive and relaxing."

S8: "It is more student-centered and the students could have more autonomous learning opportunities."

S9: "It improved the students' learning initiative."

S10: "It makes the students feel more relaxed in class, and asking questions in English can also enhance the students' speaking skills."

S11: "The efficiency of reading comprehension has been improved because as long as one student in a group has some thoughts about the question, the other students can comprehend the text very quickly through discussion."

S12: "It is more interactive and more interesting."

S13: "It is more effective, more diversified and more energetic."

S14: "It can make the students feel more engaged and more willing to learn and discuss the questions. Besides, long time discussion in class can boost the harmonious relationship between the group members and make the class more interesting."

S15: "It can make the students more willing to learn, have more opportunities to exploit their potential, and engage individual students to voice their thinking in English."

S16: "The students have opportunities to practice their spoken English. The process of discussing and reporting is quite funny, and some questions are very interesting as they can stimulate us to think in English and our ability of expressing English has been promoted."

S17: "With more opportunities for discussion and expression, it indeed has given me opportunities to think about how to organize language and apply expressions. I can have more opportunities to think and learn when listening to other students."

S18: "The students can practice reading skills and discussion skills. Besides, the students can learn about the other students' thinking mode."

S19: "It has promoted the interactions between the teacher and the students and made the classroom more vivid. Also, it has cultivated critical thinking and the English speaking proficiency."

S20: "It can practice the students' autonomous learning ability."

S21: "It is more flexible. Through discussion, I can know different ways of solving problems and thinking from the other students."

S22: "It can give the students opportunities to express their opinion and practice the speaking skills."

S23: "It can stimulate the students' thinking and improve their willingness to learn English."

S24 likes speaking English and likes to have the initiative in flipped learning.

S25: "The students can engage in the learning and answer some questions, and they can be more focused and more willing to use their brains."

S26: "It can really engage me into learning. I can think about how to locate the specific place of a question's answer and how to solve a specific reading problem."

S27: "The students could learn more vocabulary, exploit their own potential and improve their comprehensive English proficiency."

S28: "The students could be more engaging in understanding reading questions. Besides, the students could learn in a more comprehensive way, practice their ability of expression and enhance their courage to face the other students when answering."

S29: "There are more interactions and learning initiatives for the students which enable them to learn more earnestly."

S30: "It can enhance the students' spoken English."

S31: "It has enabled the student to learn with particular emphasis according to his/her level of understanding toward the text."

S33: "The students can learn to finish reading independently and solve the reading problems all by themselves."

3.2 Weaknesses of flipped classroom:

15 out of 40 students have mentioned the weaknesses of the flipped teaching in elective course.

S1: "If the members within one group lack initiative in discussion, the whole group might always be inactive. Besides, flipped classroom is not friendly to the students who did not preview the texts well."

S6: "A certain group might only discuss about its own question and ignore the other groups' questions."

S12, S33, S34, S36 & S40: "With fewer instructions from the teacher, the students may not comprehend the text well."

S24: "The students may get distracted."

S32: "There is more learning burden of previewing."

S35: "A lot of detailed grammar phenomena were not touched upon, and in many cases the students did not know how to express accurately in English."

S37: "It is more difficult to focus when the other students talk. There is more pressure of homework."

S38: "The feedback of listening and speaking practice was not enough."

S39: "It is not so relaxing."

3.3 Learning autonomy on vocabulary videos

	× text × vocabulary video	√ text × vocabulary video (or seldomly)	× text √ vocabulary video	√ text √ vocabulary video (or mostly)
Number of students	0	19	0	21
Ratio	0%	47. 5%	0%	52. 5%

Reasons of not or seldomly watching the pre-class vocabulary videos

The students reported different reasons why they did not or seldomly watched the vocabulary videos recorded by the teacher:

Students	Reason 1	Reason 2	Reason 3	Reason 4	Reason 5	Reason 6
	prefers learning the vocabulary in his/her own way	not directly useful for in-class discussion	too much homework/ feeling lazy	The videos are boring.	too difficult	forgot to watch
S1, S3, S5, S33, S37	√					
S4		√				
S6	√		√			
S7			√			
S8				√		
S10, S40			√			

Students	Reason 1	Reason 2	Reason 3	Reason 4	Reason 5	Reason 6
	prefers learning the vocabulary in his/her own way	not directly useful for in-class discussion	too much homework/ feeling lazy	The videos are boring.	too difficult	forgot to watch
S11	√			√		
S12, S13						√
S15			√			
S16			√			√
S30				√	√	
S32			√			√
S34, S36	√		√			

3.4 Classroom engagement

Of the 40 students, 5 reported that their engagement in speaking English in class did not improve, while 35 students thought that they engaged more in flipped class teaching than the traditional one.

The reasons why engagement did not improve are followed:

	Reason 1	Reason 2	Reason 3	Reason 4
Student	poor spoken English	shyness	being afraid of making mistakes	only 2 hours of elective English course per week
S1	√			
S12	√			
S34	√			
S36	√	√	√	
S38				√

4. Discussion and conclusion

4.1 Improvement of autonomy

For text previewing task, 100% students in this study tried to finish it autonomously.

However, as for the task of watching the video for vocabulary learning, only 52. 5% of the students finished it in an autonomous way. This result confirmed the perspectives of Lee and Wallace (2018) that a large proportion of Asian students greatly depend on the teachers as the primary transferors of information.

4.2 Improvement of engagement

87. 5% of the students in this study reported that their engagement of in-class speaking activities has improved. 10% of the students did not engage in the in-class group discussions actively because of poor spoken English. 2. 5% of the students showed low interest in participating the classroom oral activities because he/she thought that this elective course does not have enough teaching hours to improve his/her speaking English.

4.3 Implications

For EFL reading courses, it would be a good idea if the students could have flipped learning, as 75% of the surveyed students preferred the flipped mode. Besides, for the students who preferred traditional mode, the teachers could combine some traditional learning with flipped mode for these students. For the lower-medium level EFL students who are especially not good at listening and speaking, more encouragement should be done to promote their engagement in in-class discussions, and preparation of oral discussion can be added. As 47. 5% of the surveyed students did not autonomously watch the pre-class videos for vocabulary learning, more future research could be done in this area to improve their autonomy.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

1. Do you prefer the traditional teaching mode in the former half semester or the flipped teaching mode in the latter half semester? Why?
2. Do you always preview the reading text and watch the video for vocabulary learning before class? Why?
3. What kind of learning strategies do you have in the pre-class stage which can help you prepare for your in-class learning? (for example: How many times do you watch the video? When do you choose to watch the video? Do you pause when you watch the video? How do you preview the text?)
4. Do you think the requirement to have vocabulary dictation can help you recite and learn words autonomously?
5. Has flipped classroom helped you be more willing to engage in classroom discussion and be more willing to speak English in class? Why? (Did you like to express yourself in English in previous English courses? How about now? Why?)