

A Qualitative Investigation of Students' Perceptions of Flipped learning

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Abstract

Along with technological progress, the flipped learning model has emerged as an alternative to conventional teaching methods. The present study attempted to investigate the students' perceptions of a flipped learning classroom experience relative to a non-flipped or conventional classroom. A total of 23 Iranian EFL learners, assigned to two groups, participated in both treatments. During the first five weeks, while group A took part in the non-flipped classroom, group B received flipped instruction. After the midterm, during the next five weeks, the teaching methods were reversed. To collect data, the participants were interviewed in-depth about their impressions of language learning experience. The qualitative analysis of interviews and student-created portfolios revealed four themes: flipped or non-flipped, technology, group work, and student-teacher relationship. Overall, learners had contrasting views about flipped learning.

Keywords: Flipped classroom, Students' perceptions, Bloom's taxonomy, Iranian EFL students

Introduction

Educators introduced several innovative language teaching models such as the flipped learning classroom to improve the quality of language instruction (Obari & Lambacher, 2015; Alhamami, 2018; Zainuddin and Halili, 2016). This pedagogical approach has attracted researchers who are looking for alternatives to conventional methods. In flipped learning classrooms, teachers reverse traditional homework and class lecture; the learners acquire knowledge at home and put the knowledge into practice in the class (Bergmann & Sams, 2012). Teachers are increasingly using the flipped learning strategy with various methods (Flipped Learning Network, 2014) and with respect to a wide array of activities inside and out of the classroom, it can include different implementations; however, findings have not yet converged to a single implementation model to best engage students and promote language learning. Additionally, the number of studies addressing the potentials of flipped learning relative to more traditional teaching forms in general (Hsieh, Wu & Yang, 2017) and specific language skills in various contexts in particular is lacking.

In this paper, the authors investigated the EFL students' perceptions of the learning experience in a flipped classroom contrasted with a conventional or non-flipped classroom. A review of the literature reveals that a large part of the researches has focused on quantitative studies or mixed methods followed by quantitative approaches (McLaughlin et al. 2014; Wilson 2013). All in all, the results of previous researches made us curious to undertake a qualitative research to discover answers for the following question:

Q. How do students perceive the differences between the flipped learning and conventional classroom?

Review of the literature

Theoretical foundations of flipped learning

The Bloom's taxonomy and constructivism are two theories that underlie flipped learning classroom. The bloom's taxonomy consists of six levels arranged in order. First, the learners do their best to recognize and recall information presented by the instructor, and understand the main concepts and principles of the lesson contents. Then, learners interpret the information, summarize and demonstrate their understanding. Third, they put the knowledge gained from previous stages to practice in actual situations. Fourth, learners solve problems, share ideas with their classmates, compare their answers with others, and make a summary. Fifth, the students evaluate their learning and decide how successfully they achieved their goals. In the last stage, they design, construct and develop new concepts (Anderson et al., 2001). In the flipped learning model, students practice remembering and understanding prior to class time through teacher-created video lectures, readings, and other materials. Then, they practice higher skills of applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating inside the classroom when participating in peer and group activities such as discussion, and other learner-centered activities.

Flipped learning complies with the Constructivist theory of Piaget and the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky in that teachers scaffold learners inside the classroom, motivate them to study and prepare at their own pace outside the classroom (Hamdan et al., 2013). According to these theories, humans construct knowledge through their interaction, engagement, and collaboration with the environment and other people. From Vygotsky's view, learning occurs when more competent people such as peers or teachers assist students within their zone of proximal development. In a flipped classroom, the instructor monitors and supports learners who work individually and in groups inside the classroom. Moreover, students perform problem-solving tasks by applying the knowledge they have developed through watching videos or listening to audios. In line with Piaget's theory of cognitive development, learners in the flipped learning try to make sense of reality or construct new knowledge through experiment with the environment. Their experience enables them to develop mental representation or schemata.

Previous researches

The findings of studies investigating the effects of flipped learning on the perception of EFL/ESL learners are contradictory. Touchstone (2015) showed that students in the flipped classroom reported that they learned more and enjoyed the course more than those in a traditional classroom. Also, Choe and Seong (2016) conducted a study to explore the students' perceptions of the flipped classroom in a Korean university English course. Over half of the students felt that the flipped classroom model aided their studies, gave them more opportunities to communicate in English and helped them have a deeper understanding of the course content. However, some students reported dissatisfaction with the flipped classroom. Hsieh et al. (2017) reported that

flipped instruction using written and oral material enhanced the participants' motivation and made them more active in class. A research in language classroom was conducted by Evseeva and Solozhenko (2015) through which they attempted to evaluate the efficiency of flipped classroom in language pedagogy. The study showed that the use of flipped technology in the learning process enhanced students' motivation and improved their academic performance.

Vaezi et al. (2019) examined EFL students' and teachers' perceptions about the role of flipped teaching in the university context. The findings of research revealed that a majority of students held positive attitudes about their experience in the new model. In the same vein, Haghighi, et al. (2018) conducted a study to investigate the impact of the flipped classroom on EFL learners' participation, and perception. The results suggested that most participants enjoyed the flipped learning experience. Besides, Bell (2015) investigated the students' and teachers' attitudes and beliefs about flipped learning approach. The results showed that students gained comfort during the in-class activities and felt confidence because they can adjust their time in learning outside of the classroom. Finally, Basal (2012) implemented a flipped classroom among EFL university learners in a reading and writing course. He concluded that the perceptions of the majority of the participants towards using a flipped learning model were positive.

Meanwhile, some qualitative studies have investigated the perception of learners about flipped and conventional classrooms. The qualitative project by Nguyen et al. (2018) attempted to investigate students' perceived challenges when attending a flipped English grammar class. The findings highlighted that students encountered several challenges when attending the flipped classroom including difficulty in self-regulated learning, heavy learning workload, delayed support and insufficient ICT resources. In another study, Nguyen et al. (2016) analyzed the interviews and identified three themes within the flipped classroom. The themes included learning outcomes, interaction with the instructor, and preparation. In a study by Steen-Utheim and Foldnes (2017), students were in-depth interviewed about their learning experiences in a mathematics course. The analysis revealed commitment to peers, being recognized, feeling safe, instructor relationship, physical learning environment, learning with peers and using videos as the categories conducive to students' learning.

Aghaei et al. (2020) employed a narrative inquiry, using data from interviews and observational field notes in a flipped classroom. Findings of the study showed that the students found flipped activities time consuming and blamed inadequate outside-classroom infrastructure and teacher's unavailability for flipped out-of-class class activities. Fauzan and Ngabut (2018) aimed at finding out about EFL students' perceptions on the implementation of flipped learning in a writing class. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of questionnaires showed that students had positive perceptions. Finally, Tawfik and Christopher (2015) analyzed data from a problem-based flipped classroom particularly using videos for self-directed learning. After an in-depth analysis of interviews, they identified relevance, teacher as facilitator, self-efficacy, and reciprocal learning as main themes.

Methodology

Participants

The researchers selected a number of 23 EFL male students, ranging between 19 and 23 years of age, from a private English institute in Iran. They had studied EFL in secondary school for at least six years. Based on an Oxford Placement Test administered by the institute, they assigned the intermediate-level learners who scored between 12 and 22 (total score=30) to two classes, namely, class A and class B. Then, the researchers divided the participants into 4 groups in each class.

Data collection tools

We utilized two instruments in this study: interviews and students' portfolios.

Interviews included one question:

Q. How did students perceive the flipped and non-flipped learning experiences?

Besides, the participants recorded a portfolio of their activities including the types of materials they used, the time they allocated to each activity during the preparatory stage at home, and an audio summary of lessons.

Design

The researchers applied the concept of flipping strategy to his groups in ten weeks. The same teacher instructed participants in both the flipped and non-flipped teaching classrooms. They employed a counter-balanced design in the current study. During the first five weeks, the teacher administered the non-flipped model in class A and flipped learning in class B. After the midterm, during the next five weeks, the teacher swapped the teaching methods, namely, he instructed class A via flipped model and the second class through the non-flipped mode. To control for factors of instructor and subject matter, the same teacher taught the similar topics in both classes.

Procedures

The researchers chose the Telegram application for online interaction between teachers and participants of the study. In the flipped classroom, the teacher delivered an audio lecture to students to instruct them how to perform at home. The instructor introduced only one topic every week. The topics of audios which lasted for two weeks included "work-life balance", "an interview about listening skill", "a design presentation", "a digital detox podcast", and "joining a gym". The learners had to carry out certain pre-class activities that aimed to engage learners in lower-level thinking skills of remembering and understanding. Inside the classroom, they participated in various peer and group activities in the flipped model. Additionally, the students had to keep a portfolio of the activities and materials during the pre-class stage. On the contrary, the learners in the conventional classroom didn't listen to audios at home. In fact, the instructor did not inform them about the lesson topic in advance. He played the audios and explained the lesson content in the classroom. Detailed description of the instructional procedure is illustrated in table1.

Table 1. *Phase-specific procedures for flipped learning*

Phase	Participants	Teacher
Multiple-choice vocabulary pre-test		
One On-line and off-line self-directed study before the class	Participants listen to audios prior to class time	The teacher delivers instructional audios to the participants.
Two On-line assignment	Participants record an audio summary of the	The teacher listens to learners' audio recording and provides feedback on their

	audios and deliver it to teacher	pronunciation
Three On-line individualized assessment	Participants take on-line individualized quizzes	The teacher creates multiple-choice and short-answer tests, and delivers them to participants
Four Classroom participation	Learners take part in different face to face, pair and group activities	The teacher asks participants to use certain vocabularies in pair and group activities. He provides feedback on their pronunciation and vocabulary use and clarifies their misconceptions

Data analysis and Results

Because the study aimed to find out about the students' perceptions of the flipped and conventional language classrooms, the authors carried out a careful analysis of semi-structured interviews consisting of one open-ended question as well as student-recorded learning experience portfolios. Before their final exam, the authors interviewed the students individually, and audiotaped and transcribed the interviews. To elicit data about the flipped and conventional learning experience, we analyzed the contents of the interviews and students' portfolios. Detailed analysis and interpretation of data revealed several themes. Finally, authors compared the themes with previous research findings, and develop four themes. The themes include flipped or non-flipped, group work, technology, and student-teacher relationship.

Discussion

From the analysis, we developed four themes recurring in the data. In this section, we present and discuss these as our main results. Additionally, we used excerpts from interviews to illustrate the participants' answers.

Flipped or non-flipped

The participants held contrasting ideas about both modes of learning. Majority of students believed that in-class tasks and practices in the flipped classroom were interesting but they were not necessarily helpful for enhancing language knowledge. Most of them thought flipped learning was fun, but if you want to cope with exams, the conventional learning is more helpful. For one of the students, both traditional and flipped learning were effective, but he preferred the first one as he was used to it throughout his schooldays. He argued that the conventional method helped him learn the course content more steadily and enhance his performance. A few participants thought they would learn better in traditional learning since the teachers' explanation could directly contribute to their final score.

They continued flipped learning was not directly helpful because spending too much time on out-of-class preparation and in-class activities was frustrating and time consuming. Additionally, they couldn't easily recall vocabularies when they took online quizzes before they participate in class activities. Whereas, in the traditional classroom, they received classroom quizzes after teacher lecture so they would recall words easily. With regard to instructors'

explanations in the face to face context, almost all of them agreed when the teacher explained, they could understand clearly because he was available to correct their answers during the lecture. Besides, when the teacher told them the Persian meaning of words, provided them with synonyms and antonyms and checked their pronunciation, they could memorize them unconsciously.

A few of participants thought the flipped learning didn't help him meet his needs because he couldn't manage to regulate his learning; consequently, peer and group activities inside the classroom were not conducive to changes in his language knowledge.

S10: I think the flipped classroom is not very good because students don't know how to study by themselves. I think flipped learning is good for active learning not for good scores.

They liked the conventional classroom because they argued when the teacher explained about the textbook contents, they didn't need to participate in class activities, so that they could spare time to prepare for quizzes in class.

S3: you have to do many activities in the flipped classroom so you don't manage to read material in class. I think my grades improve in the regular classroom because I need just to read the book in class.

Finally, they expressed dissatisfaction with the flipped learning because they believed performing out-of-class activities would occupy their time, and put a burden on them as well.

Technology

Majority of students had positive views about receiving audio files through the Telegram application.

S10: I like telegram because I use it all the time. I message my friends when I am studying.

Student1: working with telegram is easy. Also, it is not expensive

They had Telegram installed on their phones and they could communicate with their friends easily and share files with them. When the teacher asked them whether they enjoyed listening to or watching lessons at home or in the classroom, almost unanimously, they favored listening at home. In general, they could pause and rewind the audios as many times as they wish at home so they could take notes easily. They thought when they were listening to audios at home, they could reflect on the contents and self-pace their learning. However, one of the students argued when he reflected on a word or something in the audio and couldn't work out the answer, he would lose track of the information in the file, even after several rewinding. On the contrary, following the teacher's pace of speaking and taking notes was not always simple in the conventional classroom. Additionally, due to time management or other issues at large, the teacher couldn't pause and rewind audios countless times in the classroom.

S12: sometimes when I tried to find an answer to the problem, the audio had proceeded and I lost that point. But, in the regular classroom, you could ask the teacher to clarify the point.

Sometimes, background knowledge, cognitive or metacognitive strategies matter. Individuals could not manage to reach a conclusion, or even if they found an answer, they couldn't decide whether their solution was correct or not. So, the learners still needed to seek support from his teacher or classmates. In general, participants expressed positive attitudes towards Telegram and the online platform for content delivery and assessment. However, almost all participants confessed they were seduced by distracting contents one or more times when

searching for materials on line. Mostly, students performed online homework because either the teacher required them to do so or they had to contribute to their groups. Only a few of them believed individualized preparation through the internet, and installed application improved their performance.

Group work

When the author asked them about their reasons for group commitment in the flipped learning context, they stated they were obliged to contribute to or collaborate with their groups or peers to complete shared activities. They viewed class participation in the other class differently.

S2: I felt it necessary to take part in class activities because I belong to a group. I help my group and my group members contribute too. But in my regular class, nobody knows if I come or not.

Learners in the flipped classroom had to form groups before they commence the course, and the teacher reminded them to work with their group members, but they could work in groups or individually in the conventional class. Some students thought group membership or commitment necessitated shared responsibility and sense of belonging. After they formed their groups, they felt a sense of community and they could work out the problems significantly.

S1: We tried to work as a group not in person. We formed a community to discuss problems and it was fun.

They mentioned that they could talk, ask questions, and discuss with their classmates. They could share their experience and sometimes explain to them better in their own terms. This echoes Vygotsky' (1978) zone of proximal development. Besides, students felt a sense of achievement if they could instruct others. Finally, when they become a part of a group, their classmates recognize them as individuals; consequently, they put their best to practice or appear helpful to their group.

Student-teacher relationship

Some students stated positive points about recognition by the teacher. Because the teacher, circulating around the class, frequently called upon them to do various activities, they became more visible, so they felt more confident to raise questions or initiate a conversation with him. But, in the regular classroom, they were routinely listening to the teacher' lecture, but he was not always available as in the flipped classroom; so that, the participants thought the teacher didn't care about them, or it was not natural to ask questions even when many of them were wandering about the same issue.

S3: I didn't feel embarrassed to ask questions in the flipped classroom, but I always felt discomfort asking questions in my regular classroom. I think it doesn't matter whether we ask questions or not.

Students have contrasting views about their relationship with their teachers in the flipped and traditional classrooms. Majority of participants remarked that they almost couldn't reach the teacher in the regular class, but they could easily contact with their teacher in the flipped classroom because he was always moving around the class.

S6: we liked it when he moved around the class and talked to us. As the course continued, I found it easier to ask questions.

The students didn't like the strict teacher-student relationship in the conventional classroom. Routinely, the teachers were transmitting information via direct instruction to students. However, students expressed positive opinions about their teacher in the flipped classroom. They thought the close relationship with the teacher created a student-centered environment for optimized learning. In their opinion, the teacher was a facilitator and guide in the flipped learning environment whereas he was the knower of information in the conventional classroom. In general, due to their close relationship with the teacher, the students could ask questions or initiate a conversation with him or their classmates comfortably. On the contrary, they described their relationship with the teacher a disciplined one that always instigated feeling of discomfort and anxiousness.

Conclusions

We found certain indications that learners thought conventional or regular classroom was still more helpful for language learning. We found out that most of them got used to conventional teacher's lectures in the classroom and they were reluctant to study lesson contents before class time. The students still liked to take quizzes after teacher explanations in the classroom because they thought teacher comments would suffice to achieve high scores. Additionally, doing out of class preparation and in class activities was a waste of time and burden to learning. From the results of interviews, we found out it was difficult for students to practice self-paced active learning in flipped learning. They commented that they had to prepare for class activities because the teacher forced them to do so, and they were obliged to contribute to their group as well. Such findings indicated that since students didn't have deep interest in what they were engaged in, learning became frustrating for them. Additionally, due to the lack of learning strategies and prior knowledge, the majority of students had low self-directed learning readiness for the flipped classroom. However, there were certain promising points about the flipped learning experience including the lively and fun learning context in the classroom, a sense of commitment and contribution to the group, the sense of belonging to the group, and the close teacher-student relationship.

Limitations

There are certain limitations of this study that need to be acknowledged. At the time of the study, random sampling was impossible due to the nature of course registration. It was not feasible to conduct this research with larger sample size. The study could be replicated with a larger number of participants to confirm that the results were not biased by sample size. Replication qualitative or mixed-method researches are required to make generalization of the findings beyond the context of the present study.

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