

Teaching English Academic Writing Skills through the Flipped Classroom Model and Team-Based Learning

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been increased interest of flipping the classroom, a student-centered instructional model that makes classwork done at home via lecture videos and homework done in class. The ultimate goal of the flipped classroom is to enable students to spend more face-to-face class time working with the teacher or peers on creative, interactive, and higher-order learning activities. On the other hand, team-based learning, also a student-centered pedagogical approach that has received considerable attention, shares the same goal of making the best use of class time by asking students to read preparatory materials outside the classroom.

This paper describes a project that combined these two approaches in the teaching of an English Composition course to help students develop their academic writing skills. Feedback from students collected through anonymous questionnaire surveys and their reflective writing suggests that most of them thought positively of this new format of learning and found the lecture videos made by Evercam, the in-class Q&A session using QuizMaker, and the individual quiz via Zuvio, very useful in helping them get familiar with different academic writing modes and skills. However, since they still had to spend time writing their own academic essays, some of them felt that flipping the class made the whole learning process even more time-consuming. It is hoped that the practice and outcome of this project will provide EFL teachers with a feasible framework or effective pedagogical model to integrate the flipped classroom and team-based learning in academic writing instruction.

Keywords: flipped classroom, team-based learning

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Introduction

Since I started teaching an *English Composition* course with a particular focus on academic writing, I have been looking for a more effective pedagogic model to increase students' engagement and interest, promote active learning, and attain better learning outcomes. Students taking this one-year course are second-year English majors, most of whom are not familiar with academic writing and find it very difficult and even intimidating, partly because it is so different from what they wrote in their previous English composition classes, and partly because they are required to follow principles of academic writing in English to complete six research-oriented writing assignments, including extended summary, article review, argumentative essay, synthesis essay, research proposal, and research report. To help these students get familiar with academic writing quickly, I first used traditional instructional paradigm, where students listen passively to my lectures on academic writing skills and modes in class and write their assignments at home. However, although this paradigm did enable me to deliver the course content and material efficiently to my students, many of them still felt confused and disoriented when they tried to use what they had learned in class to write their assignments and thus had to turn to me for help by asking me to explain the key concepts or principles to them over and over again. When I thought it was time to give up this pedagogic model that simply did not work, I heard about the flipped classroom approach and decided to redesign this course around this new instructional framework to make it possible for students to preview and review the course content at their own pace, at their own time, and according to their own needs.

The flipped classroom model, which inverts “where and when students acquire basic content (‘lecture’) and practice applying concepts (‘homework’),” has been gaining increased attention in recent years, especially in the higher education context (Wallace, Walker, & Braseby, 2014, p. 254). Though not looking exactly the same, most flipped classrooms follow a formula that requires students to “view a video or PowerPoint Presentation in preparation for follow-up activities in class” (Muldrow, 2013, p. 28-9). Since face-to-face lectures are made into digital video tutorials, flip teaching makes class time more productive and gives students “more opportunities to develop higher-order thinking under teacher guidance and with peer support as needed” (Hung, 2015, p. 82). As Goodwin and Miller also point out, one of the benefits of flipped classrooms is that they “alter the nature of homework by having students practice and apply their learning in the classroom, under the watchful eye of the teacher” (2013, p. 79). Thus, the success of a flipped classroom depends not on whether the pre-recorded lecture videos are good or bad, but on whether the precious class time freed up by the use of videos is used to increase students' active learning experiences in class (Brunsell & Horejsi, 2013).

To promote active learning and maximize the benefits of the flipped classroom model both in and out of class, Wallace, Walker and Braseby (2014) suggest that team-based learning (TBL) be integrated into the flipped classroom framework to create a more dynamic, student-centered learning environment for students to use the knowledge and skills acquired from lecture videos to work actively and collaboratively on the learning tasks and activities in class. By definition, TBL is “a teacher-directed method that promotes application of knowledge using small groups in a single venue” (Tan et al., 2011). TBL requires students to read preparatory course material prior to class

(Phase 1), take an Individual Readiness Assurance Test (IRAT) in class to assess their understanding of the knowledge and concepts in the material content before each student is assigned to a group that will complete a Group Readiness Assurance Test (GRAT) (Phase 2), and then work together to assignments that allow them to use what they have learned from the course material (Phase 3). Like the flipped classroom, TBL asks students to learn course content before class, but it “goes further by prescribing a specific structure for what happens during class,” which is why it should be used as “an effective in-class, instructional strategy” to ensure greater success of flip teaching (Wallace, Walker & Braseby, 2014, p. 263).

This paper describes how the flipped classroom and TBL were integrated and implemented in my teaching of an *English Composition* course as well as what my students thought of this new model of learning English academic writing.

Research Methodology

This study aimed to design an instructional framework combining the flipped classroom model and TBL for my teaching of academic writing skills in *English Composition* class and then investigate university students’ perceptions of and attitudes toward this new format of learning academic writing.

The participants of this study were 15 second-year English majors taking my one-year English Composition course at a Taiwanese university. They all had learned English for over ten years. The results of a simulated Test of English as International Communication (TOEIC) showed that they were all intermediate English language learners. None of the students had any flipped classroom experiences prior to the study, but they did not find TBL a brand new way of learning because they had been asked to complete various learning tasks or projects in pairs or groups since they entered the university.

The context, for which the instructional framework combining the flipped classroom model and TBL has been designed, is a one-year *English Composition* course aiming to teach students six academic writing modes: extended summary, article review, argumentative essay, synthesis essay, research proposal, and research report. The first three writing modes are taught in the first semester and the other three in the second semester. The students are required to submit one essay for each mode, and each essay has to be revised at least twice. The third draft of each of the first five essays has to be 1000 words long while that of the last one, research report, must be 2000 words long. The class met weekly for two 50-minute class periods during each of the 18-week semester.

As for the procedure, the digital lecture videos, all of which were narrated PowerPoint videos made with the help of Evercam, were put on the website called “powercam.fju.edu.tw” for the students to watch in advance of class. During class, the IRAT was first conducted by means of Zuvio, an online teaching platform allowing teachers to develop multiple choices and open-end questions and students to use digital devices like smartphones and tablets to answer questions immediately. Then, the GRAT was conducted using QuizMaker, a quiz builder software. After the students took these individual and group tests to check and show their understanding of the knowledge and skills acquired from the videos, they then put what they had

learned into practice by working collaboratively with their group members to complete application activities and problem-solving exercises on the course content and help one another get prepared for the essay writing process. Finally, they started to write the first draft of the essay individually outside of class and used the feedback from their peers to write the second draft.

Two instruments were used to collect both qualitative and quantitative data for this study. First, at the end of each of the two semesters, the students were asked to fill in an exit questionnaire on the platform Survey Monkey, an online survey service. Data from the two questionnaires were then analyzed and compared with the help of Survey Monkey. The second set of data came from the students' reflective writing about their learning experiences and was analyzed with the help of NVivo, a qualitative data analysis computer software package.

Results and Discussion

Feedback from students collected through questionnaire surveys and their reflective writing showed that most of the participants thought positively of the implementation of this new instructional framework in the writing course and expressed high levels of learning satisfaction at the lecture videos made by Evercam, the use of technological tools Zuvio and QuizMaker, and the process of cooperating and interacting with their peers to complete team-based learning activities in class. Besides, the lecture videos, as well as the in-class quizzes and activities, were all considered very useful in helping them get familiar with different academic writing modes and skills and increasing their confidence in writing academic essays.

Interestingly, some participants admitted that at first they did not like the idea of flipping the class, either because they were too busy to watch the videos at home, or because they believed that they would learn better from face-to-face lectures; however, their attitude gradually changed in the learning process, and at the end of the second semester, only one of them still insisted that the course should follow traditional teaching procedures, and that only face-to-face lectures help her learn well because she would like to get answers from the teacher immediately whenever she had questions about the course content.

It is also noteworthy that in their reflective writing, some students complained that flipping the class actually made the whole learning process even more time-consuming because they had to spend more time watching the lecture videos and writing their essays at home. Some of them also mentioned that their team members did not always remember to watch the videos in advance of class, which made it difficult for them to work together as a team to do well on group quizzes and complete classroom activities effectively.

Conclusion

Although flip teaching has received a lot of research attention, there are still very few studies that examine the use of the flipped classroom model in the second and foreign language-learning context, not to mention the use of TBL as a flipped class pedagogical approach (Engin, 2014). The strength of this study is its instructional design in relation to the flipped classroom model and team-based learning, together

with the use of technological tools. It is hoped that the pedagogical design and practice, as well as the findings of the study, will help expand the application of the flipped classroom model and team-based learning to English writing instruction and encourage English language teachers working in similar contexts to adopt this new instructional framework, together with applications of available technological tools, in their academic writing courses to transform their students' learning experiences.

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