

Theory to Practice: The Impact of an “Imported” Flipped Classroom Model on Second Language Learners

Sana Butti Al Maktoum, Zayed University, United Arab Emirates
Fatima Salem Al Mohsen, Zayed University, United Arab Emirates
Amani Mohamed, Zayed University, United Arab Emirates
Laila Mohebi, Zayed University, United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

The flipped classroom model, designed to shift from lecture-based instruction to active learning, is examined in this paper via its recent adoption at a UAE higher education institute using an “imported” framework and pre-existing materials complicated by online delivery. The study examines the experiences of second-language learners ($n = 12$) through structured focus group discussions. Educators ($n = 3$) conducted 12 observations totaling 72 to 180 hours to evaluate the model’s appropriateness. Findings highlight discrepancies between the model’s theoretical foundations and its practical execution in this context, necessitating revisions to course materials, structure, and assessments to enhance inclusivity and equity for learners.

Keywords: flipped classroom model, active learning, second language learners, cultural context

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Introduction

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the challenges second language learners face when engaging with an “imported” flipped classroom (FP) model within a higher educational setting in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This research specifically seeks to identify the barriers that language presents in the utilization and effectiveness of the flipped classroom model, which was originally developed in a Western context and later implemented in the UAE. Although the Flipped Classroom model promises to transform learning from lecture-based to student-centered, enacting active learning that helps students understand concepts (Al-Samarraie et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2018; Doman & Webb, 2017; Hamdani, 2019; Mehring, 2016), other studies reported that the flipped classroom (FP) encourages engagement and promotes discussion in class (Lee & Wallace, 2018; Moradi et al., 2020; Ramnanan & Pound, 2017). While this model promotes a shift from teacher-led instruction to a more student-centered approach, encouraging active learning and greater student responsibility, the effectiveness of this shift may be compromised in a context where English is not the learners' first language. Additionally, the FP model under investigation is Western developed with ready-made materials, which can present unique challenges, such as fully engaging with the FP model. This study examines these challenges, focusing on how language barriers affect the adaptation and success of flipped classroom strategies in a non-native English-speaking environment. The flipped classroom model in this context is facilitated online; the lessons are done on a platform, and the sessions are recorded. Furthermore, the students are expected to interact and engage fully in class by pre-reading the material and engaging in various activities online, like polls, breakout rooms, and verbal contributions. Additionally, the activities are graded weekly without the knowledge of students. The latter has been enacted in the hopes of a more dynamic classroom interactions. Thus, the study is guided by two main questions: (1) What are students' experiences in an online flipped classroom model? (2) Are there any challenges to learning in the online flipped classroom model? The insights gained aim to offer guidance on adapting flipped classroom models to suit diverse student populations' linguistic and cultural contexts, ensuring that educational innovations are inclusive, accessible, and effective across different linguistic backgrounds.

Theoretical Framework

This study uses the integration of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theory and Constructivist Learning Theory in the flipped classroom model to explore how these approaches can enhance educational outcomes for second language learners. SLA Theory, which emphasizes the importance of input, interaction, and contextual use of language, is particularly well-suited to the flipped classroom model, where pre-class activities are structured to maximize meaningful language exposure. This framework allows learners to engage with language content prior to class, facilitating a more effective use of class time for deeper understanding and interactive practice (Ellis, 2003; Gass et al., 2008).

Constructivist Learning Theory posits that learners build their own knowledge through experiences (Piaget, 1954). Supporting the flipped classroom methodology, this theory suggests that students should first encounter new materials outside of class, which then allows them to expand upon this initial engagement through in-class activities. This is particularly advantageous for second language learners, who can adjust to new linguistic materials at their own pace before participating in complex discussions and collaborative activities in the classroom setting (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978).

The synergistic use of these theories addresses several educational challenges faced by second language learners. For example, learners often suffer cognitive overload when new language material is presented too quickly. By processing material at their own pace outside the classroom, students experience enhanced comprehension and reduced cognitive load, as posited by cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988). Additionally, active engagement is crucial for effective language learning and is maximized when students prepare before class, leading to more dynamic and participatory class sessions (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2013).

Methods

This case study sought to explore the flipped classroom model enacted in a higher Educational Institution. The research site is a federal institution located in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) with two campuses, one in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi and the other in the Emirate of Dubai. The institute was founded in 1998 and serves Emirati and non-Emirati female and male students. Higher education in the UAE depends on English-Medium as the mode of instruction (Zoghbor, 2014), including this study.

The study employs two data collection methods: focus group discussions and observations. Utilizing several forms of data helps triangulate the results and fulfill credibility. The first stage of the study was the focus group discussion with ($n = 12$) students (Table 1) selected based on convenience sampling, which is best suited for case studies (Cohen et al., 2018). While this method facilitated efficient data collection, it may limit the generalizability of the findings. To overcome this, the researchers utilized maximal variation method to get richer data (i.e, students from both campuses, various nationalities, and genders). The focus group protocol was guided by an outline wherein, first, the moderator highlighted the ethical convention, the right to withdraw, and the anonymity of their names; second, students introduced themselves, and the moderator asked demographic questions and school background experience. Later, the moderator guided the discussion on the students' experiences with the flipped classroom model.

Table 1

Description of Student Participants (names are pseudonyms)

Name	Gender	Age	Campus	Nationality	Background of School Type
1. Gelila	Female	20	Abu Dhabi	Ethiopian	Private
2. Desta	Female	18	Abu Dhabi	Ethiopian	Private
3. Abeba	Female	20	Abu Dhabi	Ethiopian	Private
4. Omar	Male	21	Dubai	Emirati	Private
5. Shamsa	Female	18	Dubai	Emirati	Private
6. Ismail	Male	19	Dubai	Emirati	Public
7. Zahra	Female	18	Dubai	Emirati	Public
8. Salama	Female	18	Abu Dhabi	Emirati	Public
9. Ahmed	Male	19	Dubai	Emirati	Private
10. Bedoor	Female	18	Dubai	Emirati	Private
11. Noora	Female	18	Dubai	Emirati	Private
12. Meera	Female	18	Dubai	Emirati	Private

Due to the small number of participants, data saturation was not achieved for the focus group discussion but was accomplished from observation. Indeed, the second stage was the semi-

structured observation, employed to discover other missed information in interviews (Moyle, 2002). The observations consisted of twelve observations of class recordings that ran for 60 to 90 minutes; the total observed hours ranged from 72 to 180 hours. Three observers took part (Table 2) and provided detailed observation notes.

Table 2
Description of Observers

Observer Number	Background	Teaching Experience
One	Technology and pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK)	Twenty years
Two	Translation and English Teaching	Ten years
Three	Inclusive Education	Nine years

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurrent themes and patterns (Figure 1&2). Furthermore, the researchers received ethical approval from the institution's institutional review board. To avoid any potential harm or negative consequences, the participation of students was completely voluntary, and the students had the freedom to withdraw from the study. Furthermore, the researchers cross-interviewed the participants so they had someone other than their instructor to whom they could express their thoughts freely. Moreover, the consent forms clearly assured the participants that this research aimed only to understand their experience with the flipped classroom approach.

Figure 1
Themes From Semi-structured Interviews

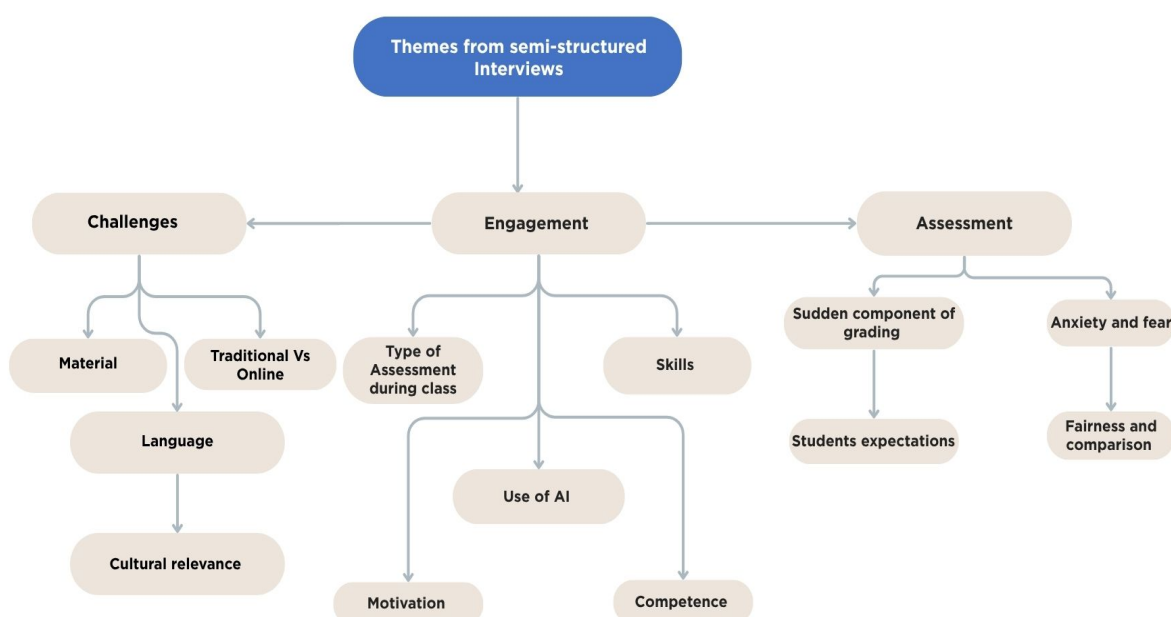
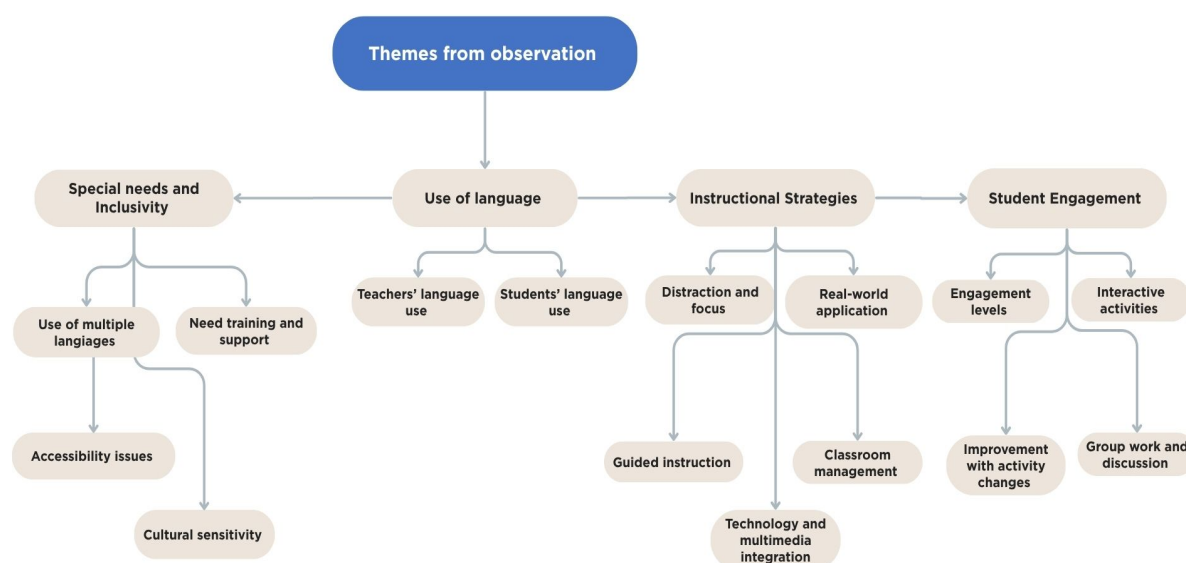


Figure 2
Themes From Observation



Data Sources and Materials

Four focus group discussions with ($n = 12$) students were recorded and transcribed. Some interviews were conducted in English or Arabic, and some in vernacular Arabic based on the participant's preference. The duration of the focus group discussions spanned, on average, 90 minutes. The transcripts were translated and shared with participants to validate or add additional information. Later, the data were analyzed, and to ensure trustworthiness, several techniques were used, such as member checking and confirming and disconfirming of evidence (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2009). The process of creating themes and coding followed Ryan and Bernard (2003), which includes detailed steps and results on linking the themes to a theoretical model. The data has been triangulated to add multiple perspectives and a richer understanding of the researched topic (Creswell, 2014). The data from the focus group discussion guided the observation as it emerged with themes on language and engagement of the students in the online setting. The observers were randomly assigned recorded sessions of two courses out of the four assigned to students to be viewed at their own time and pace. The observation protocol followed a semi-guided method with two scopes to focus on: (1) the use of language during the teaching (teacher) and learning (students) session, (2) describing students' engagement during the teaching session, and a third section where the observer can freely highlight any other topic. Further, the observers were given a brief introduction to the purpose of the study with no further details from the focus group discussions to avoid attentional bias to the lesson's content. Two observers provided an etic perspective as they had not instructed students in the FP model, and one provided an emic perspective to the observations.

Results

Students' Experiences

The selection of "Language as the Steering Wheel" and "Engagement - a Double-Edged Sword" as primary themes for this study is rooted in their critical relevance to understanding

the experiences of second language learners in the flipped classroom model. Language proficiency, a vital element of student interaction with educational content, serves as a pivotal barrier impacting both comprehension and engagement. Additionally, examining engagement as a nuanced, multifaceted theme reveals how it varies among students and is influenced by language barriers and cultural differences. Together, these themes provide crucial insights into the challenges and dynamics of implementing flipped classrooms in linguistically diverse settings.

Language as the Steering Wheel

The students discussed the use of language in the flipped classroom as a challenge in two ways: (1) as part of the pre-class preparation material and (2) during class discussions. The first is important to be accomplished as the method of teaching depends on the learners' participation and engagement. Shamsa explains, "I do the readings but I get confused, and I don't understand, if only the material was summarized to one or two pages so I can digest it before class." Ismail has also added his point of view and compared the level to high school, "The vocabulary is bigger and stronger, unlike in school, I use Google Translate to understand the words." Noora had the same but added her personal feelings, "I don't understand what I read, but I just keep reading reading, reading to satisfy my conscience." Ahmed and Abeba both commented on the amount of reading required and Abeba elaborated, "One thing I would recommend is making the workload a bit less for students to be more engaged because sometimes the pre-class work are really a lot that it takes up attention to finish the readings rather than understanding those things." Bedoor voiced other students' experiences as she narrated, "From my experience, there were students that did not know English so much. So when they are struggling, they were coming to us as students."

Engagement – A Double-Edged Sword

Another important theme that is the essence of flipped classrooms is the students' engagement. Indeed, the latter is the drive of the pedagogy and the means of success in flipped classrooms. The students commended the online mode for helping them engage as they reported on the "emoji functions" and "breakout rooms," but they were less keen on verbal contributions and polls as they are connected to assessments. On the other hand, the observers noted the tardiness of students, lack of participation during "breakout sessions," and overall disparities in engagement in activities within the lesson. Salama added another angle by saying, "How do they compare the students to each other in terms of participation? I mean, we are different. We are not the same." When asked about improving his skills and performance in the flipped classroom, Omar answered, "No, my grade is not that great!" As for Meera, she described her engagement level as she said, "Maybe at first, I feel lost, but once the professor goes through them. Yeah, it makes sense to me."

Observers' Notes

Similar to the students' voiced concerns, the observers mentioned the language level. Observer three commended the use of the mother tongue to help ease the lesson and using videos and discussions during class to clarify concepts. Furthermore, observer One noted the following, "the need for the teacher to probe extensively to get answers suggests that some students may require additional support or motivation to participate actively." Observer three mentioned that students were more engaged when discussing real-life situations rather than rigid concepts. In fact, the comment is highly critical given that the observer witnessed two

courses, one that had topics such as “executive function, disorders, etc...” and the second had concepts such as “heuristics, biases, deductive and inductive reasoning.”

The three observers noted another concern, which is inclusivity in the flipped classroom (see Figure 2). Observer one related it to cultural factors and the fact of lower participation by the female students. Observer Two noted higher productivity in writing tasks during lessons than in verbal communication. Verbal communication has been documented as a challenge for second language learners compared to other skills (Alrasheedi, 2020; Evans & Green, 2007; Hyland, 1997; Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). Observer three reported that the teaching mode was non-accessible for special educational needs students. Hence, this suggests a lack of engagement in the FP model; engagement is divided into three components: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Fredricks et al., 2004). The study's data, including students' narratives and observers' notes, show challenges in both. Behavioral engagement includes the aptitude to participate in and execute tasks and coursework. Emotional includes the stress level reported by students as engagement is connected to their everyday assessment during the online flipped class. The cognitive engagement was reported in the coursework and language level (Table 3). The challenge of online teaching has been documented in several studies in the United Arab Emirates with a similar population of undergraduate students for whom English is not their mother tongue (Al Maktoum et al., 2024; Mohebi & Meda, 2021).

Table 3

Engagement Division Based on Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris (2004)

Type of Engagement	Students' Views	Observer's Note
Behavioral	Coursework – load Attendance–technology issues Participation – cultural and linguistic	Tardiness
Emotional	Amount of stress Satisfaction of course	Teacher mediating – low participation and involvement from students
Cognitive	Attention issues Heavy workload	Challenge of concepts

Discussion and Conclusion

The FP model was introduced to renew the traditional teaching method in the higher education institute under study to involve students better and engage them in learning. Hence, the data of this study shows that disparities have been added among learners, mainly in the shape of language and overall competence, far away from the true meaning of the FP class. The inadvertent consequences of importing a model have been documented in the same context when gender and culture have not been integrated (Wagner & Bogiages, 2020). Moreover, Michael (2006) states that active learning is bound to context, learners, and the teachers' background and competence in teaching; he further adds, “Active learning doesn't just happen” (p.164). Furthermore, the FP material, like videos, is a way to give simple aids for conceptual and complicated theoretical concepts (Agirman & Ercoskun, 2022). Gauging the material to the student's level of English is an important factor in engagement and a way to have culturally responsive teaching (Banks & Banks, 2019; Gay, 2018; Villegas & Lucas, 2002); it is even more critical if the material is not relatable to the student's context. Additionally, Butt (2014) stresses the importance of aligning the course material to the course

outcomes and cautions on the burden and time spent to prepare and deliver a flipped classroom, making it an unsustainable approach in education. The latter is especially relevant in this context, as two of the students in this study revealed their intention to return to the traditional route rather than the FP classroom model. Thus, decision makers need to use empirical studies to attune the model to students' needs better. As such, students can describe their experiences with tangible examples that can be revised; examples are the quantity of materials, and the language used. The institute can dedicate a team of educators, like the observers of the study, that can alter and adapt the material to make learning accessible for all.

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Contact email: Sana.Almaktoum@zu.ac.ae