

Flipped Learning: The Case of Professional English Writing Course

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Abstract

Recently the teaching trend is to keep up-to-date with the boom in technology. Flipped Learning, which is rated as one of the “top trends in educational technology” (Watters, 2012), has gained foot in the EFL/ESL classrooms only recently (Fahim & Khalil, 2015; Bauer-Ramazani, Graney, Marshall, & Sabieh, 2016). To follow the teaching trend, the researcher implemented the Flipped Learning in Professional English Writing course at a private Lebanese university. The aim of this paper is to describe the experience of flipping in this course and to report on this experience from the perspectives of both the student participants and the researcher herself. Using a case study design, the researcher used multiple data- collection instruments, namely a questionnaire, a focus group interview, and three semi-structured interviews. The collected data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The conclusions derived from the different analyses were triangulated. The findings reveal that a lot of the participants perceived Flipped Learning as beneficial in terms of helping them become more responsible of their own learning, more engaged in class activities, and hence more motivated to learn. However, a few students openly expressed their negative attitudes towards this new strategy. Despite the time and effort required to flip and monitor students’ work, the researcher enjoyed this experience and felt it rewarding in terms of students’ engagement and learning. The researcher recommends that Flipped Learning be used in other courses to turn passive, dependent learners into active, independent learners who could meet the demands of the 21st century.

Keywords: Flipped Learning, Flipped Classroom, Lebanon, higher education, professional English Writing, students’ perceptions, instructor’s perception

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Introduction

Flipped Learning (FL), a form of blended learning, is defined as “a pedagogical approach in which direct instruction moves from the group learning space [classroom] to the individual learning space [home], and the resulting group space is transformed into a dynamic, interactive learning environment where the educator guides students as they apply concepts and engage creatively in the subject matter” (Flipped Learning Network, 2014:1). Some educators refer to it as Flipped Classroom or inverted classroom; however, Flipped Learning Network (FLN) argues that these terms are not the same and cannot be used interchangeably. Flipped Classroom does not necessarily lead to FL unless four pillars are incorporated in the flipped classroom (FLN, 2014). The first pillar, which is a flexible environment, is about ensuring different learning modes to meet different learners’ needs, a flexible timeline for students to learn at their own pace, and flexible spaces which allow students to choose the place and time to learn. The second pillar is fostering a learning culture which shifts away from a teacher-centered approach towards a student-centered approach and which helps students become constructors of their own learning. As to the third pillar, intentional content is about identifying the materials to be taught in class and those the students can explore by themselves at home so that classroom time is maximized and used for active learning strategies. The last pillar is the professional educator whose role is to facilitate students’ learning; this educator is expected to be a confident planner, a facilitator, a mentor, a problem solver, an assessor, and a curriculum planner. Thus, FL is “more about a mindset: redirecting attention from the teacher and putting attention on the learner and the learning” (Bergmann & Sams, 2012:11).

With the boom in technology, FL is rated as one of the “top trends in educational technology” (Watters, 2012) and has invaded math and science classrooms in the past few years (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Hamdan, Mcknight, Mcknight, & Arfstrom, 2013). However, it has gained foot in the EFL/ESL classrooms only recently (Han, 2015; Fahim & Khalil, 2015; Bauer-Ramazani, Graney, Marshall, & Sabieh, 2016). This innovative strategy has shown to have several pedagogical benefits on students’ learning (Bauer-Ramazani, et al., 2016; Fahim & Khalil, 2015). To inject innovative, up-to-date teaching strategies, the researcher implemented the FL in one course, namely Professional English Writing (PEW), at a private Lebanese university. The aim of this paper is two-folded: (1) to describe the experience of flipping PEW course and (2) to report on this experience from the perspectives of both the student participants and the researcher herself.

Rationale for Flipping PEW Course

Several factors led the researcher to adopt FL in her course. As a social constructivist herself, the researcher believes that students should have an active role in the classroom and should be able to construct their own learning while working together with other peers. She also believes that to engage students in the classroom, lecture time should be reduced and replaced by more active learning strategies.

Learning about FL, the researcher found that this teaching strategy could help her realize her teaching conceptions in the classroom as the pedagogical benefits of FL match with those beliefs. For example, FL has shown to have several pedagogical benefits, most important of which are students’ ownership of their learning (Bauer-Ramazani, et al., 2016; Fahim & Khalil, 2015), more active learning strategies and content inquiry/analysis (Schmidt & Ralph, 2016), immediate support and guidance in

class (Bergman, 2010), real differentiation (Bergmann & Sams, 2012), students' engagement (Faculty Focus, 2015; Fahim & Khalil, 2015; Rayan, 2013; Fulton, 2012) and ongoing informal in-class assessment (Bauer-Ramazani, et al., 2016). As these benefits echoed the researcher's teaching philosophy, she adopted it in one of her courses hoping that it would yield the expected outcomes.

Description of the Flipped Experience

In this section, the researcher describes the context where flipping took place, the student participants, and the procedure she followed to flip her course.

Context

This study was done in a relatively small-sized private English speaking university in Lebanon, which consists of 3 operating colleges, namely College of Engineering, College of Business Administration, and College of Communication and Science Information System, besides Languages and Humanities Department, which is a service department offering all English, Humanities, and Social Science courses. More specifically, the FL was implemented in PEW course, which is a 3-credit required course for all the students at the university. This course, which aims to prepare students to be professional communicators in the workplace, instructs students on how to write different forms of correspondence, namely e-mails, memos, and letters as well as employment communication, namely a curriculum vitae, application letter, and interview. In addition, students are taught how to write different types of proposals and reports. Usually, the researcher employs task-based projects and collaborative learning in teaching these learning outcomes in a regular 15-week semester in the fall and the spring.

As this course was scheduled to be taught in a 10-week summer semester, four weeks of which were during Ramadan- the Muslim's fasting month- the researcher decided to implement FL in her course in order to reduce lecture time, to avoid having her fasting student fall asleep in class, and most importantly to realize her teaching conceptions .

Participants

In that summer course, 25 students (18 males and 8 females) were enrolled. They were of different majors, namely engineering, business administration, and graphic design. The students' proficiency in English ranged between good to advanced, and they were between 19 and 21 years old. As this was their first experience with FL, the researcher ensured that all the students in her course consented to participate in this experience. In more detail, students registered in the course were informed about the new teaching strategy to be adopted in the course in the first session of the semester. They were shown a video about FL in the class, and they were also asked to read a handout posted on the Moodle about FL prepared by Flipped Learning Network (FLN, 2015). While reading the handout and watching the video, the students were instructed to record any concern or question about FL to be discussed the next session.

On the next day, the researcher and the students had a face-to-face discussion of the new approach. During the session, the researcher answered all students' recorded questions, shared her expectations with them, and got their consent in writing to

ensure that the student participants understood their new role and responsibilities. Students were informed that they could change sections if they preferred the traditional teacher-led class. However, none of the students did so.

Procedure

To flip her class, the researcher revisited the content of the course to select the materials that can be flipped and that the students can prepare at home (c.f. intentional content), turned these materials into out-of-class activities for students to prepare at home in the form of videos, PowerPoint presentations, and handouts.

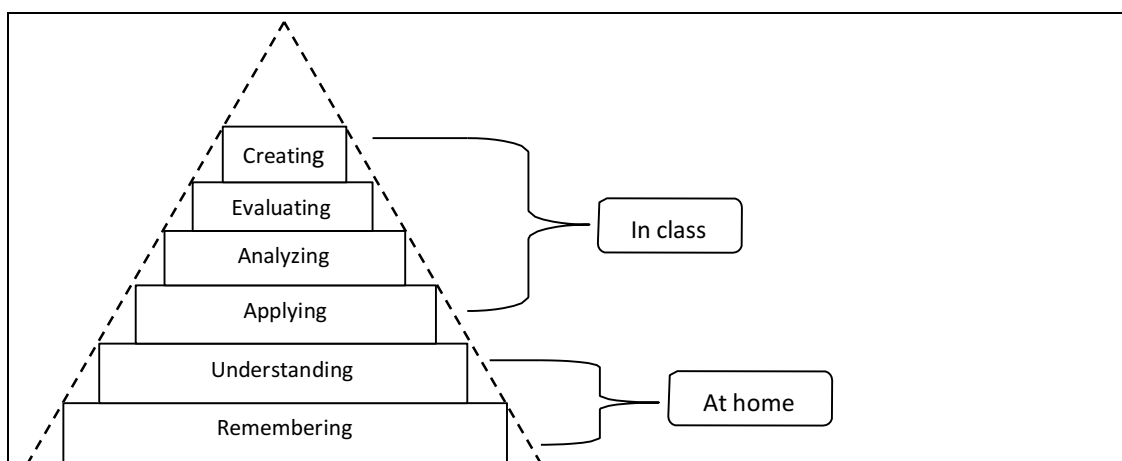


Figure 1: Adopted from Zainuddine & Halili (2016: 316)

Following Bloom's Taxonomy, the researcher ensured that the course materials that lie at the bottom of the pyramid, namely remembering and understanding, are flipped to be studied at home by the students freeing class time for higher order thinking and active learning strategies.

To ensure students' preparation for class activities, the researcher used to give them tasks to complete before class as short/answer questions, graphic organizers, and multiple choice quizzes. Students who used to fail to submit these tasks were considered absent on that day as this was agreed upon on their consent form.

Class or face-to-face contact time was dedicated for (1) group work/ discussions, student-student and student-teacher interactions to reinforce students' learning, (2) answering students' questions, (3) observing, diagnosing, and giving feedback to students.

The Study: Students' and Instructor's Perceptions of FL Experience

As a reflective practitioner, the researcher investigated the students' perceptions of the new teaching trend used in PEW course. She also reflected on her experience to determine what went well and what needed improvement in subsequent implementation of FL.

Methodology

Using a case study design, the researcher investigated the participants' perceptions of flipped learning and reflected on her teaching experience as well. The researcher used multiple data collection instruments, namely a self-completion questionnaire

consisting of 20 3-point rating-scale items, a focus group interview of 5 participants, three semi-structured interviews with student participants, and students' end of semester assessment of the course.

The collected quantitative data were analyzed statistically using SPSS (version .19) mainly for descriptive analysis while the qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The conclusions derived from the different analyses were triangulated.

Findings

Major findings of students' perceptions are presented in four themes; these include perceived benefits, students' attitudes to the new teaching strategy, learning environment, and instructor.

Perceived Benefits

The quantitative data reveal that a lot of the student participants perceived FL as beneficial to them in terms of helping them become more responsible of their own learning, more engaged in class activities, and hence more motivated to learn. It also provided them with greater opportunities to interact with their peers, and about half of them felt that FL improved their learning. Table 1 below gives more details about these findings.

Perceived Benefits	Percentage
More engaging than traditional class	48%
Greater opportunities to peer interaction	56%
Felt more motivated to learn	56%
Improved their learning	44%
More responsible for their own learning	72%

Table 1: Student Participants' Perceived Benefits of FL

The qualitative data were in line with the aforementioned findings. In more details, the students' mostly quoted benefits of FL were "feeling engaged in class activities", "studying at my own pace and whenever and wherever I want", "depending on myself", "responsible of my learning", "improving my communication as well as socialization skills", and learning from each other". These findings were also consistent with those presented in the literature (c.f. Bauer-Ramazani, et al. 2016; Fahim & Khalil, 2015).

Students' Attitudes towards FL

A lot of the student participants had a positive attitude towards the new strategy. In fact, most of the student participants would recommend it to a friend. More than half of the students liked self-paced study that the FL provided them. Only very few

disliked self-pacing themselves throughout the course. Almost one third of the student participants preferred a teacher-led lesson to video lesson. The same percentage did not like watching the video lessons posted on Moodle. Only a few participants agreed that the FL provided them less time to practice workplace communication skills (see table 2 below).

Students' Attitudes	Percentage
Would recommend it to a friend	64%
Liked self-paced study	52%
Preferred a teacher-led class	32%
Provided less time to practice workplace communication skills	16%

Table 2: Attitudes of Student Participants towards FL

The qualitative data echoed these attitudes. A lot of students expressed their enjoyment of the FL class, and they also expressed their preference to repeat the FL experience in other courses. In the focus group and in the semi-structured interviews, students described individually and specifically what they liked the most about FL. One participant said that he enjoyed group work in class and outside class as they used to divide the tasks on the basis of the group members' strengths and weaknesses. He added that this helped them achieve better learning outcomes. Another female participant stated that she liked being exposed to the learning material at home before coming to class as this helped her to study the material at her own pace, look up meaning of difficult words, and then further studying the material in class with her classmates. She added that "This strategy works best with students like me who feel shy to ask questions in class, and it gives them confidence in themselves". This is in line with Mclean (2017) who found that one advantage of FL is allowing introvert students to share ideas in group discussions. Another female participant commented that she used to enjoy the activities in class to the extent that she did not feel time in class; "Time passes very quickly in class". She then compared her experience in the FL class to that in a teacher-led class where lecturing was the mostly used activity, "I feel so sleepy and bored during the lectures".

However, a few students openly expressed their negative attitudes towards this new strategy and expressed their preference for a traditional teacher-led class. Probing why these students had such a preference, one male participant commented on the amount of work they were expected to do before class, "doing more work than I expected to do in a traditional class; it needs double the effort of a regular class especially in the summer".

Learning Environment

As the learning environment is one of the pillars of FL, the researcher investigated student participants' perceptions of the learning environment. Most of the participants were happy with the learning environment in the FL. A lot of the student participants found the classroom arrangement conducive for class activities. The seats were

arranged in groups of four. Comfortable furnishing was used, and a smart board was also installed in the classroom.

The majority of the student participants believed that the pre-reading material, videos, and presentations in the FL were sufficient. More than half of the student participants believed that class activities increased their understanding of the pre-studied material. The same percentage of the student participants believed that they had enough time to prepare the course material before class activities. About half of the student participant agreed that doing assignments via Moodle was convenient. None of the student participants found it otherwise (see table 3).

Learning Environment	Percentage
Classroom arrangement was conducive for class activities	68%
Pre-class material (videos, pp) were sufficient	72%
Class activities increased their understanding of pre-class material	60%
Had enough time to prepare before class	56%
Doing assignments on Moodle was convenient	52%

Table 3: Students' Perceptions of the Learning Environment

What the student participants uncovered about the learning environment during the interviews was in line with the quantitative data. One male participant described the pre-class material posted on Moodle as very helpful. He illustrated his idea by referring to the progress report assignment, "If it hadn't been for the sample progress report and the video posted on the Moodle, we would not have been able to write ours". Another female participant said that studying the material before class at her own pace and when she felt like was very helpful for her as it prepared her well for class and enabled her to participate in class activities as well as to seek clarifications of unclear concepts. Another male participant commented on the enjoyable, collaborative learning environment in class, "There was no competition among us, but more of a collaboration within our groups to accomplish tasks successfully". He added, "Sometimes, we used to compete as groups, which motivated us to work more".

Yet another male participant commented on the length of some of the videos they had to watch. He said, "Although the videos were very interesting and informative, some were too long especially the one on the literature review". The researcher agreed with the last participant's complaint about the length of video, which was 20 minutes long, as the literature advocates for as short videos as 10 minutes at maximum (Bergmann & Sams, 2014).

Instructor

One main contributor to the success of FL is the educated professor. That is why the researcher also investigated the student participant's perceptions of her role. The findings reveal that most of the students thought that their instructor was able to facilitate their own learning. The majority of the students agreed that the instructor

was able to engage them in class activities, to clarify difficult concepts during class activities, and to expand on the pre-reading material, videos, and presentations. Table 4 below provides further details.

Instructor	Percentages
Instructor was able to engage them in class activities.	72%
Instructor was able to clarify difficult concepts during class activities.	72%
Instructor was able to expand on the pre-class material.	68%

Table 4: Students’ Perceptions of the Instructor

During their interviews, the student participants commented on how helpful and available the instructor was to them. One male participant described the important role the instructor had played in FL class. He said, “She always made sure that everyone had prepared well for the class; she sometimes quizzed us especially at the beginning of the semester to make everyone prepare for class because without preparation, we would not have been able to complete the in-class activities”. Another participant said, “The instructor was always available for us during class and beyond class, during office hours”. One participant expressed her content getting immediate feedback on her group’s work in class from the instructor.

The Instructor’s Perceptions

The researcher recorded her perceptions in terms of the challenges she had faced while flipping and the benefits she observed on her students and in the classroom.

Challenges

The main challenge the researcher faced was training the student participants to be independent, responsible of their own learning. Although the student participants consented to do what their new role and responsibilities require them to do, quite a few of them did not prepare at home for the in-class activities at the beginning of the semester; these participants seemed to be used to teacher-led classes where they assumed a very passive role. Therefore, the researcher resorted to quizzing the student participants and grading them on these quizzes before they come to class to ensure that the student participants would be able to engage in the active learning strategies during class sessions. This meant more work and effort on the researcher to prepare pre-class quizzes and assessing the student participants’ work. Another challenge was finding as well as preparing suitable videos and/or online resources for student participants to explore before coming to class and designing class activities to promote higher order thinking. These challenges resonate with those

reported by Bauer-Ramazani et al. (2016: 434) “increased time needed to set up the tools ..., developing appropriate language and assessment activities, finding online resources ..., and designing tasks for critical thinking ...”.

Benefits

One of the most important benefits she found was increased student engagement during class, which is in line with what Faculty Focus found when surveyed 1,089 of its readers, “nearly three-fourths did see greater student engagement (74.9%)” (Flipped Classroom Trends: A survey of college faculty, 2015: 2). During almost all the sessions, students were busily and responsibly occupied with the class activities they had to complete in groups. In order to do so, they were using their notes, laptops, and even their mobiles to complete the tasks. Although a few students depended on their group members, they did learn together or helped each other to learn. In other words, mostly the class was like a beehive, where students were constructing their learning, and the researcher was assisting and guiding their learning. Another important benefit students were able to develop was completing tasks on time. Although many of them at the beginning missed the due dates for some tasks, by the end of the course all were able to demonstrate this skill by submitting their assignments by the due date. This is in line with Schmidt and Ralph (2016), who found that FL reduced the number of incomplete assignments in addition to increasing student engagement and improving their scores.

Moreover, a lot of the student participants demonstrated enough responsibility for their own learning. These students used to come to class having read the assigned chapter and/or watched the videos posted for them on the video. Many of them have developed their skills in note-taking and summarizing. Some visual participants used to create graphic organizers of the pre-class material. Similar to student participants’ perceptions, the researcher felt that the majority of the student participants were motivated to learn the course material; this was reflected in the questions they posed in class, the collaboration among the group members, and the number of visits to her office inquiring about or requesting feedback on their projects. Another observed benefit was the friendships that had developed among group members as a result of their collaboration.

Despite the challenges, the researcher enjoyed the FL experience and felt that the benefits she perceived on her students worthwhile the effort and time spent. That is why the researcher was motivated to implement FL in other courses in subsequent semesters.

Conclusion

The researcher cannot claim generalization of the findings due to two main limitations: (1) the sample size is relatively small, and (2) because the researcher is the instructor herself, this might have influenced the participants’ responses. However, the commonalities found among the different analyses contribute to the trustworthiness of these findings.

Despite these limitations, a lot of the students seemed to have enjoyed the FL class experience. They perceived FL as beneficial to them in terms of helping them become more responsible of their own learning, more engaged in class activities, and hence more motivated to learn. Although about half of the students felt that FL had

improved their learning, the researcher cannot confirm such finding as it was beyond the scope of her research.

Nonetheless, a few students openly expressed their negative attitudes towards this new strategy and expressed their preference for a traditional teacher-led class. Like everything new, this strategy is expected to be faced with some resistance. Student resistance was also recorded as a key finding in the literature, “while almost half [of the faculty surveyed] (48.75%) also noted some student resistance” (Flipped Classroom Trends: A survey of college faculty, 2015:2).

Recommendations

The researcher recommends that FL be used in other courses for the several benefits FL had on the student participants especially turning passive, dependent learners into active, independent learners who could meet the demands of the 21st century. This strategy, the researcher argues, can prepare the university’s culture for online learning.

The researcher suggests that flipping should not necessarily cover the whole course materials. Rather, instructors could start to identify one single lesson in their courses and try to flip it. In this way, they can experiment with this new strategy and see what works for their students and their courses as there is no single prescribed recipe to flipping.

The researcher also advises other instructors to use at first the abundant available materials online which were prepared by other educators and/ organizations. She encourages the interested instructors not to fear flipping or delay it just for the sake of lack of time to prepare their course materials or for the fear of technology. The researcher recommends the following websites among others for useful online sources:

1. Flipped Learning Network (www.flippedlearning.org)
2. you-tube (www.youtube.com)
3. TED-Ed (education@ted.com)
4. Tech Learning (www.techlearning.com)
5. Pow-Toon (www.powtoon.com)
6. Socrative (www.socrative.com)
7. Khan Academy (www.khanacademy.org)
8. Sophia (www.Sophia.org)

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