FLIPPED LEARNING AND ELT PRACTITIONERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract:
An offshoot of the global rise in digital learning is a growing disenchantment with traditional learning, where the teacher is perceived as the primary repository of knowledge. The search for a more effective teaching approach that is learner-centred has placed flipped learning on the front burner of educational research in developed nations. Studies on flipped learning have generated positive results from both teachers and learners. These, however, do not undermine the significance of mixed findings and the attendant challenges of its implementation across disciplines. This survey, therefore, is designed to fill the lacunae in the Nigerian context by seeking to determine the extent to which teachers of English language courses in higher education implement flipped learning in its reconceptualized form. Data was collected from 15 respondents using a researcher-structured questionnaire. The findings suggest that teachers in this category, to a large extent, do not implement reconceptualized flipped learning, most likely due to a lack of awareness of the concept. Practical ways to upskill digitally are suggested as a way forward.

Keywords: traditional classroom, digital device, flipped learning, pre-class activities, in-class activities

1. Introduction

An understanding of the pedagogical concept – flipped learning – entails looking beyond mere definitions. It requires some background information on its genesis, explanations of given definitions and its theoretical base. It is also necessary to spell out what it isn't to eliminate confusion of similar terms and misconceptions in view of its reconceptualization.

Flipping is a generic term. Any teacher who has ever given learners passages to read pre and post-class or homework to do outside school period has flipped their class

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to some degree, perhaps without realizing it. Teachers of English Language and Literature are not exempted, for they typically ask students to read selected texts or passages before class. The approach has been used in teaching for years, long before it was named (Brame 2013). Although the flipped classroom has many models, the contemporary approach is credited to two high school Chemistry teachers in Colorado, namely Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams, who began using recorded lectures in 2006 to help absent students catch up (Bergmann, Overmyer & Willie 2014). The result of the experiment showed that

> *"…the students who missed out on the lectures actually mastered the materials more effectively than the ones who were sitting in the classroom, listening to the "live lecture". So, step-by-step they stopped all live lectures, as they agreed that students only need them if they got stuck. They gave out the recordings for pre-class homework and turned the classroom lessons into interactive learning environments where time was dedicated to help explore a deeper understanding of the topics.*
> *Soon, the videos they published were discovered and used by other teachers and schools, so their approach - now named the Flipped Classroom - started to spread internationally"* (Cronin & Coakley 2018).

> *"The flipped classroom, therefore, entails "review of the lecture and text material prior to class, with class time spent on developing concepts and collaborative, active learning"* (Bates Almekdsh & Gilchrest-Dunnam 2017).

2. Defining Flipped Classroom

The flipped classroom is a complete reversal of the traditional classroom, where learners listen passively to direct instruction and highly structured content (Wilson 2021) and then are given homework or problems to solve alone based on the lecture. This informed the conception that the flipped classroom is literally the flip side of the traditional classroom. Its synonyms are inverted, reverse, inverse or backward classroom (Pesky & Maclaughlin 2017) or simply the flip (Arnold-Garza 2014). Regardless of the above notion, scholars disagree on the issue of definition.

Brown (2016) defined a flipped classroom as *"a model of delivering instruction that shifts lectures from a class time activity to an at-home activity and shifts 'homework' from an at-home activity to an in-class, critical thinking set of activities."* It tallies with an earlier definition by Lage, Platt & Treglia (2000), which states that *"inverting the classroom means that events that have traditionally taken place inside the classroom now take place outside the classroom and vice versa."* Although these definitions capture the rationale for using the nomenclature *inverted* or *flipped,* they are too simplistic and fail to depict the requisite tools and the fundamental nature of the activities. Prabaharan (2014) states, *"It is called a flipped class because what used to be classwork (the lecture) is done at home via teacher-created videos and what used to be homework (assigned problems) is now done in class…So the lecture is done for homework usually via a video or audio file, and the classroom time is spent clarifying and*

applying new knowledge gained." Thus, it can be argued that Bishop & Verleger's (2013) definition is weightier. They defined the flipped classroom as "*an educational technique that consists of two parts: interactive group learning activities inside the classroom, and direct computer-based individual instruction outside the classroom.*" The implication is that any model which includes a reading assignment but excludes the use of videos outside the classroom activities does not qualify as a flipped classroom today. Corin & Coakley (2018) equally maintain that it is a "*new pedagogic approach paired up with technology.*"

Although new technologies include a variety of materials such as podcasts, printable PowerPoint slides, PowerPoint slides with audio recordings, downloadable reading materials, and posters, the typical digital tool employed in a flipped classroom is the video. To eschew misconceptions that may arise from the inclusion of a digital tool and online resources in the current approach of the flipped classroom, Bergmann, Overmyer & Willie (2014) spell out what the flipped classroom is not:

- It is not a synonym for online videos.
- It is not about replacing teachers with videos.
- It is not an online course.
- It is not about students working without structure.
- It is not about students spending the entire class staring at a computer screen.
- It is not about students working in isolation.

Essentially, flipped learning is a type of hybrid learning that blends in-class education and online learning. None of the above definitions captures the multidimensional role the teacher plays in class. In the flipped classroom, the teacher ceases to be the authoritative repository of knowledge projected in the traditional classroom. Now, the teacher guides, moderates, motivates, assists, encourages, and engages the learner actively to attain a deeper level of knowledge. In light of this, the Flipped Learning Network (2014), a body of professionals, defines flipped learning as,

> "… *a pedagogical approach in which direct instruction moves from the group learning space to the individual learning space, 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.*"
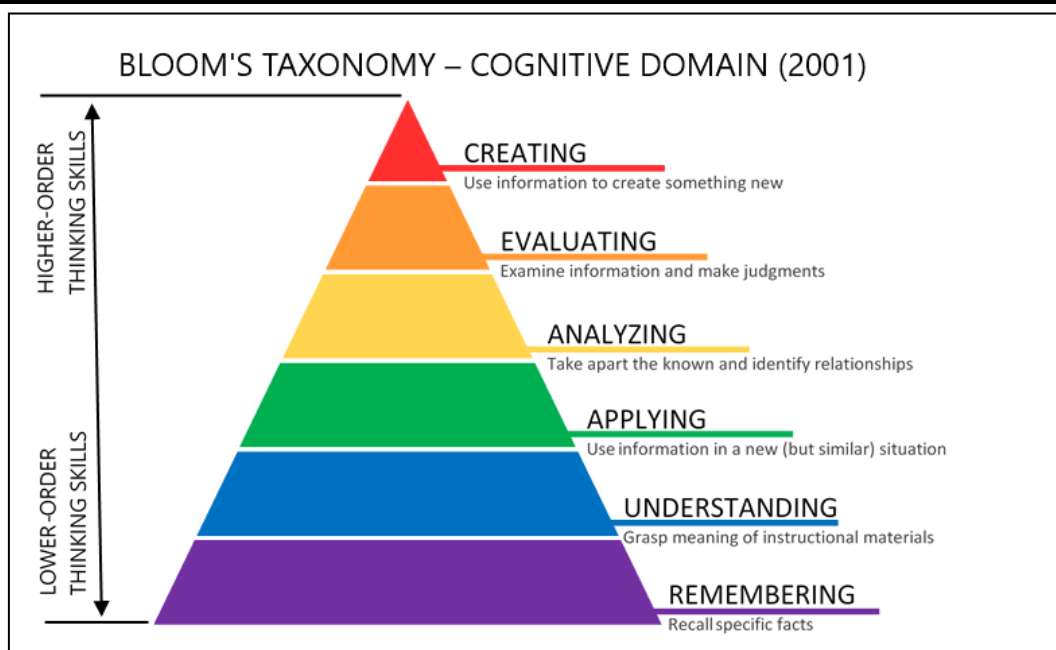
3. Flipped Learning and Traditional Learning

The Flipped Learning Network (2014) distinguishes between a Flipped Classroom and Flipped Learning. Flipping a class by giving out study materials or videos to students to review before a class does not necessarily lead to flipped learning. A requisite condition for flipped learning is the complete incorporation of the 'four pillars of F-L-I-P' in the learning environment (i.e. the physical classroom and the domestic learning space).

FLIP is an acronym for Flexible environment, Learning culture, Intentional content, and Professional educator – each pillar is a key consideration for the effective implementation of Flipped learning, as reviewed below.

- Flexible environment: Flipped Learning requires flexible environments. As in-class activities in a flipped classroom can vary from collaborative group work to independent study to research, educators often rearrange the physical space in a classroom to accommodate these variants.
- Learning culture: Flipped Learning requires a shift in learning culture. Flipped classrooms shift the focus from teacher-led to student-centred learning in order for learners to experience topics in greater depth through active, more meaningful approaches to learning.
- Intentional content: Flipped Learning requires intentional content. Educators evaluate which materials should be presented to students in advance and which content should be taught directly to help students "gain conceptual understanding as well as procedural fluency" through constructivist approaches.
- Professional educator: Flipped Learning requires dedicated, professional educators. The use of the flipped classroom approach, particularly with the presentation of materials through digital media and technologies, is not intended as a replacement for educators. Class time is crucial for the educator to determine if students have, inter alia, gained an understanding of a topic (Hamdan & McKnight, 2013).

Traditional classroom instruction lacks techniques that guarantee the engagement of students with the concepts they need to learn (Meylan 2021). Learners are first exposed to a lesson in class. They listen passively to the teacher's explanation of a concept and engage with the concepts on their own through homework. Thus, lower levels of learning, such as remembering and understanding, happen in class. At the same time, they are left to deal with activities that involve higher-order learning unguided outside of the classroom. Products of this approach are assessed based on how much fact or information they are able to cram and regurgitate for examination purposes. Consequently, learners are confined to the bottom rungs of cognition in relation to Bloom's hierarchy of learning.

Conversely, with flipped learning, students receive before-class lecture materials prepared or sourced by the teacher. They study the new materials at home prior to classroom lessons. It could be online reading materials or videos with foundational knowledge that require lower-order thinking skills like remembering and understanding. They absorb the content at their own pace, noting questions and grey areas. Thus, in-class activities are dedicated to feedback, hands-on work, higher-order cognitive tasks such as analyzing, evaluating and applying knowledge, peer instruction, and discussion in pairs or groups under the guidance of the teacher. These activities intersect with Bloom's higher-order thinking skills. Evidently, flipped learning emphasizes higher-order thinking skills during class time, while pre-class activities focus on lower-order thinking skills.

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Figure 1: Revised Bloom's Taxonomy sourced from Centre
for Instructional Technology and Training University of Floria (2001)

4. Upsides and Downsides

Educators link the emergence of flipped learning to a continuous quest for effective pedagogical methods. The rise of this unique combination is traced to the astronomical growth of the Internet and the World Wide Web (Bishop & Verleger, 2013). Prabaharan (2014) acknowledges that educational technologies are an important feature of the flipped classroom as they can be used to:

- **capture key content** for students to access at their own convenience and to suit their pace of learning (e.g. lecture material, readings, interactive multimedia),
- **present learning materials** in a variety of formats to suit different learners styles (e.g. text, videos, audio, multimedia),
- **provide opportunities for discourse** and interaction in and out of class (e.g. polling tools, discussion tools, content creation tools),
- **convey timely information**, updates and reminders for students (e.g. micro-blogging, announcement tools),
- **provide immediate and anonymous feedback** for teachers and students (e.g. quizzes, polls) to signal revision points,
- **capture data** about students to analyze their progress and identify at-risk' students (e.g. analytics).

    Although flipped learning is relatively new, available studies report improvement in student performance after adopting the approach in high school and higher education. The under-listed benefits to both teachers and students are synthesized from online sources:

- **Development of independent study skills:** Although the pre-class materials are often video content it enables learners to get used to the process of self-study.

Before class, they learn given concepts at their own pace and can replay content as often as they need to. Absent students are thus enabled to catch up. On the downside, failure to do the required out-of-class preparation poses obvious difficulties in class.

- **Effective time management:** Students gain an understanding of a concept prior to class so they can feel confident during classroom discussions and activities. Hence, a lot more can be accomplished in class under the instructor's guidance. In the process, students learn skills for self-regulating their school and work activities. However, some learners may find this stressful when out-of-class workload interferes with domestic matters.

- **Lessons are more engaging:** Since classroom time can build upon what is learned on one's own, attention is given to more in-depth class discussion. The interaction encourages pair/group work, promotes student communication skills, and builds a deeper understanding through hands-on activities that may generate "noise." This makes learning fun and more effective. Struggling students receive personalized guidance. A possible downside is that those who are accustomed to traditional learning or lecture methods may refuse to go with the flow.

- **Re-useable content:** The internet offers infinite resources that low-tech teachers can adopt or adapt for students' use, while high-tech teachers may opt to create their own audio and videos. Either way, this takes a lot of time and sacrifice on the part of the teacher. Fortunately, the contents can be reused or shared thus, much time is saved in the long run. Besides, present-day students are digital natives and can readily access online content, but the availability of digital devices to learn with could be a challenge for some teachers as well as learners from relatively poor economic backgrounds.

Although available literature maintains that the effectiveness of flipped learning has gained traction, it is uncertain if it outperforms the traditional lecture method because available studies were conducted across many different contexts and disciplines. For instance, an examination of 46 articles on the effectiveness of flipped classrooms in medical education showed mixed results on different learning outcomes, including the effect, perceptions, attitude changes, and change in knowledge after using the flipped classroom. Some results were in favour of flipped classrooms, and others suggested no differences (Chen, Lui & Martineelli 2017). Roehling and Bredow's (2021) review of 317 studies on flipped pedagogies in higher education shows that "*students in flipped classrooms performed better than those in traditionally taught classes across all of the academic outcomes*" examined. They hypothesize that flipped learning is better for skill-based courses such as language, technology and health science courses as against mathematics and engineering courses which showed minimal gains when flipped. North America, Australia, Middle Eastern and Asian Countries in Europe are regions that received worthy mention in the above review of related literature. Similarly, some researchers report mixed results with respect to students' perceptions of flipped learning.

Berret (2012) agrees that the humanities lend themselves to the flipped model, while Gannod et al. (2008), cited in Arnold-Garza 2014, disagree. They posit that the

flipped model is ideal for engineering, sciences, business and statistics because, in these disciplines, students need to comprehend underlying principles and theoretical concepts before they can engage in practical application or problem-solving. Overall, more student satisfaction was observed in flipped courses than in lecture-based courses. However, compared to courses that were fully flipped, courses partially flipped (that combined flipping and lecture-based) tended to produce better academic outcomes (Roehling and Bredow 2021). This is probably the reason why Crolin & Coakly (2018) wrote, "*There is no single way of applying the FC (flipped classroom) method as such…Discover what works for you!*" Their stance has a contrarian undertone that gives room for the blending of methods. In a conference paper, Prahanan (2014) mentions that lecturing is still important even though teachers' role in the flipped classroom "*focuses more on facilitation and moderation than lecturing.*"

Bishop & Verleger (2013) conducted a survey of 24 studies related to the flipped classroom. They eliminated some 11 studies that did not actually represent a flipped classroom in the in-class and out-of-class activities using the following criteria: out-of-class activities must include required video lectures; in-class activities must involve interactive learning activity, not lectures; the pre-class study material must be presented in audio-visual format, not as reading material. The elimination suggests that the successful implementation of a flipped classroom depends more on the instructor than other variables like age and students' academic level (Arnold-Garza 2014). This should be of much concern to individual instructors as well as the institutions they represent. Possibly there are teachers in the field who are yet to grasp the what, why, and how of using a flipped classroom. Indeed, Greens, Banas & Perkings (2017) made it clear that "*there is a paucity of research on flipping in the tertiary education context.*"

5. The Study

In light of the above, a study was carried out to find out the extent to which English language teachers in higher education integrate flipped learning in their lesson delivery in the Nigerian context. A researcher-structured questionnaire that contains 8 items on a 4 Likert scale was administered to 15 teachers who participated in a one-day training workshop for the English Language Teachers' Association of Nigeria (ELTAN) Imo State Chapter. Although membership to the association cuts across the three levels of education, only members in higher education were sampled for this study. Specifically, these are lecturers in Schools of General Studies and their counterparts in Departments of English and Departments of Primary Education. The data was analyzed using simple percentages.

Table 1: Summary of responses to the questionnaire in percentage

s/n	Questions	Al	So	%	Ra	Ne	%
1	I provide study materials for my students to prepare a day or two before class.	2	10	12 (80%)	3	0	3 (20%)
2	My students come to class prepared because they study the materials.	3	10	13 (86.67%)	2	0	2 (13.33%)
3	I provide study materials for my students basically in form of hardcopy (printed texts/ books/ handouts).	7	5	12 (80%)	3	0	3 (20%)
4	I provide study materials for my students basically in form of softcopy (unprinted texts/ online resources).	2	8	10 (66.7%)	4	1	5 (33.33%)
5	I provide study materials for my students basically in form of video.	0	1	1 (6.67%)	8	6	13 (86.67%)
6	I provide study materials for my students basically in form of audio materials.	0	6	6 (40%)	7	2	9 (60%)
7	I have easy access to online resources.	7	7	14 (93.33%)	1	0	1 (6.67%)
8	My students have easy access to online resources.	4	9	13 (86.67%)	2	0	2 (13.33%)

Keys: Al =Always, So= Sometimes, Ra=Rarely, Ne=Never.

Although 12 (80%) respondents always or sometimes provide study materials for students a day or two before class, 3 (20%) rarely do. 13 (86.67%) teachers admit that their students actually prepare for class by studying the given materials before class while 2 (13.33%) say their students rarely do. According to 12 respondents (80%), the study materials they provide for students are basically in the form of hard copy (printed texts/ books/ handouts), while 3 of the respondents (20%) rarely toe this line. Further analysis shows that the 10 respondents (66.7%) that provide learning materials in soft copy to students for out-of-class preparation rely on other online resources other than video recordings. Evidently, the teachers can and do implement flipped learning in its traditional or basic form. However, the reconceptualization of flipped learning entails the provision of online resources such as video and audio materials to learners for out-of-class preparation rather than reading materials in hard or other types of soft copy. Only 1 (6.67%) out of the 10 respondents (66.7%) sometimes provide video materials for students, while 6 respondents (40%) sometimes provide students with audio materials. This also fits into the flipped learning model. The data, therefore, suggests that the respondents do not implement flipped learning to a large extent. A probable reason for this could be attributed to a lack of awareness of the current concept of flipped learning.

Moving forward, 14 (93.33%) respondents concur that they have easy access to online resources. The same percentage maintain that their students always or sometimes have easy access to online resources. On the other hand, only 1 teacher (6.67%) has limited access to online resources, and only two say their students rarely have access to online resources. It is unclear if this is dependent on economic status, poor internet connectivity or insufficient technological skills on the part of the affected teacher and students. Hence, it is evident that access to the Internet does not constitute a hindrance to the

implementation of flipped learning among a majority of teachers. This implies that a basic requirement for flipped learning which is outside the control of both teachers and learners alike – availability of internet service – poses no challenge for the implementation of flipped learning in this context. The findings, therefore, indicate that the new concept of flipped learning is unclear to a majority of teachers in this category, as indicated in the literatures reviewed above. In the final analysis, the study shows that, to a large extent, the reconceptualized flipped learning is not implemented by teachers in the context under focus.

6. Recommendations

The following recommendations are made in respect of the above findings:

First of all, there is a need for a better understanding of the concept of flipped learning by English language teachers in higher education. Exposure to the British Council's free online courses, for example, can help teachers gain a better perspective of flipped learning in action. This is because the self-study courses typically feature short video recordings a learner can playback until they get the gist of the topic under review. This has the added advantage of enabling learners to develop higher-order thinking skills, e.g. analyzing, evaluating and creating. Teachers can equally take advantage of the interface between flipped learning and Bloom's Taxonomy to effectively design pre-class and in-class activities by organizing learning outcomes from lower-level to higher-level skills.

Appreciation of the advantages of flipped learning can serve as motivation to teachers to upgrade their digital skills for enhanced communication and lesson delivery using tech tools that digital natives typically find engaging. In view of the fact that tech anxiety alone can hamper a teacher's desire to upskill digitally, it is pertinent to state that teachers can and do learn from their learners, especially how to use technological devices. To maintain relevance in the 21st-century classroom, analogue teachers should seriously consider this and another practical route to upskilling. Furthermore, the ability to source for or produce simple video recordings for the flipped classroom counts for teacher professional development. The reusable value of digital learning resources is a significant advantage that makes the effort worthwhile and time-saving in the long run.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author
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