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Research Paper

A Qualitative Investigation of Students' Perceptions of Flipped Learning

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Abstract
Along with growing technology, 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 contrasted with those of a non-flipped or conventional classroom. To this end, 23 Iranian EFL learners were assigned to two groups. During the first ten weeks, non-flipped teaching was applied to class A and flipped learning to class B. After the midterm, during the next ten weeks, the teaching methods were reversed. The students were interviewed in-depth about their impressions of the learning experience. Also, a questionnaire and students' portfolios were used to draw comprehensive conclusions. The qualitative analysis of data revealed four themes: flipped or non-flipped, working with technology, group commitment, and student-teacher relationship. Overall, learners had contrasting views about learning in the flipped classroom. In general, they preferred non-flipped classroom.

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

Introduction

Educators have 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 looking for alternatives to conventional methods which spend considerable time explaining lesson contents, and they have insufficient time to practice the language. 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, but research findings have not yet converged to a single implementation model for the flipped classroom to best engage students and to promote learning (O'Flaherty and Phillips, 2015). Additionally, they have carried out limited studies on potential of the flipped classroom to offer a significant improvement over more traditional teaching forms in general (Hsieh, Wu & Yang, 2017) and the use of flipped learning in relation to specific language skills in various contexts in particular.

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

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

Review of Literature
Theoretical foundation of flipped learning

The Bloom's taxonomy and constructivism are among the theories that underlie flipped classroom learning. The bloom's taxonomy consists of six levels arranged from remembering at the lowest to creating at the highest level. 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 their ideas with their classmates, compare their answers with others, and make a summary. Next, the students evaluate what they learned and decide how successfully they achieved their goals. In the last stage, they design, construct and develop new concepts from what they acquired in previous stages (Anderson et al., 2001). In the flipped learning, students practice remembering and understanding prior to class time through recorded video lectures, readings, and other materials. They practice higher skills of applying, analyzing, evaluating and creating inside the classroom through tasks such as peer and group activities, storytelling, discussion, and other learner-centered activities.

Flipped learning complies with the Constructivist theory of Piaget and the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky. In both of these theories, teachers scaffold learners inside the classroom, require them to study and prepare at their own pace (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 competent people such as peers or teachers within their zone of proximal development assist the student. In a

flipped classroom, the instructor monitors learners who work individually and in groups inside the classroom. They perform problem-solving tasks by applying the knowledge they have developed outside of the classroom 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 to construct their own new knowledge through an experiment with the environment. Their experience enables them to develop mental representation or schemata in their heads.

Previous researches

The findings of studies investigating the effects of flipped learning on the perception of EFL/ESL learners are contradictory. The study by Webb, Doman, and Pusey (2014) in a Chinese University EFL Course revealed that students from both the flipped and non-flipped classrooms preferred traditional teacher-fronted instruction. 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 interaction enhanced the participants' motivation, making them more active in class. In addition, Prefume (2015) explored the effect of a flipped approach in a Japanese language classroom. The data suggested that students expressed favorable attitudes towards the flipped classroom approach. Also, Gross et al. (2015) examined the effect of flipped classroom model on student engagement and satisfaction. The finding indicated that high levels of student engagement and course satisfaction characterized flipped courses. Besides, Hung (2015) examined the possible impacts of flipping the classroom on English language learners' attitudes and participation levels. The findings showed that the flipped lessons helped the students attain better outcomes, and develop positive attitudes toward learning experiences. Additionally, Haghighi, et al. (2018) conducted a study to investigate the impact of the flipped classroom on EFL learners' achievement, participation, and perception. The results suggested that most participants enjoyed the flipped learning experience. Finally, the findings by Fraga and Harmon (2015) indicated that participants liked the flipped classroom model of instruction.

Very few qualitative studies have investigated the perception of learners about flipped and conventional classrooms. 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. The analysis of data from students in a business class by Findlay-Thompson and Mombourquette (2014) revealed both positive and negative views about flipped learning. Tawfik and Christopher (2015) analyzed data from a problem-based flipped classroom; they particularly emphasized 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

Design

The researcher applied the concept of flipping strategy to his groups in twelve weeks. The same teacher instructed participants in both the flipped and non-flipped teaching modes. A counter-balanced design was used in the current study. During the first ten weeks, the teacher implemented non-flipped method in class A and flipped learning in class B. After the midterm, during the next ten weeks, the teacher reversed the teaching methods; he instructed class A via flipped instruction

and the second class through the non-flipped method. To control for factors of instructor and subject matter, the same teacher taught the similar topics in both classes.

Participants

We selected a number of 23 EFL male students, ranging from 19 to 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, we assigned a group of intermediate-level learners whose grades were between 12 and 22 (total score=30) to two classes. Because our sample included two intact classes, the selection was not based on randomization. The researchers divided the participants divided into 4 groups in each of the classes.

Instruments

We utilized four instruments in this study: interviews, weekly quizzes, students' portfolios, and a flipped experience questionnaire.

Weekly quizzes

The teacher delivered five teacher-made tests including multiple-choice and short-answer questions to learners via the Socrative application at the end of each week.

Questionnaire

To measure the attitudes of flipped classroom participants toward the learning experience, researchers administered a researcher-made questionnaire in both groups. In consisted of 20 questions on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Two experts examined both content and face validity of the questionnaire. Finally, the reliability of the questionnaire was calculated to be a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .78.

Learner portfolio

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.

Interview

Interview included just one question as follows:
How did students perceive the flipped and non-flipped learning experiences?

Procedures

The researchers chose the Telegram application for online interaction between the teachers and participants of the study. Researchers also chose another application named Socrative to assess students in forms of true/false, multiple-choice, and short answer questions in real-time. The teacher could identify problems and then provide appropriate feedback to the class. In the flipped classroom, the learners listened to an audio lecture or read a PowerPoint presentation explaining what they to do at home. The teacher introduced only one topic every week. The topic of audios included "work-life balance", "an interview about listening skill", "a design presentation", "a digital detox podcast", and "joining a gym".

Learners listened to the audios in order to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words, check the pronunciation and spelling of new vocabularies, find synonyms and antonyms for unknown vocabularies, and collocations. Pre-class activities aimed to engage learners in lower-level thinking

skills of remembering, understanding and applying as defined by Anderson, et al. (2001). They had to keep a portfolio of the activities and materials during the pre-class stage. Each topic, within both classes, lasted for one week. At the beginning, the class expressed their questions about the issues they had noticed at home. Then, they engaged in sentence arrangement and communicative activities, pair and group discussion, role-play, and storytelling. These activities aimed to engage learners in higher-order thinking skills as defined by Anderson et al. (2001). On the contrary, the teacher in the conventional classroom didn't ask them listen to audios at home. In fact, the instructor did not inform them about the lesson topic in advance. The teacher played the audio and explained the content in the classroom. He explained grammar, unknown vocabularies, and answered some comprehension questions related to the audio. Then, the teacher replayed the audio, stopped after each sentence, and asked students repeat the sentences one after another. Next, the teacher checked the pronunciation and comprehension of the whole audio and lexical meaning. 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 audios and deliver it to teacher	The teacher listens to learners' audio recording and provides feedback on their 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

Results

Because the study aimed to find out about the students' perceptions of their experience in both flipped and conventional vocabulary learning classroom, the authors carried out a careful analysis of semi-structure interviews as well as a flipped learning experience questionnaire. The questionnaire included 20 items ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, and the interviews consisted of two open-ended questions. Before their final exam, the authors interviewed the students individually. Then, they audiotaped and transcribed the interviews. To elicit students' perceptions of flipped learning contrasted with conventional classroom experience, we analyzed the contents of the interviews and questionnaires. Detailed analysis and interpretation of data

revealed several themes. Finally, authors compared the themes with previous research findings, and develop four themes. The themes are: flipped or non-flipped, group commitment, working with 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. We provided excerpts from interviews to illustrate the participants' answers.

Flipped or non-flipped

The participants had adverse ideas about both modes 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 vocabulary achievement. 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 because it was the way they had experienced previously; they learn the course content more steadily and it enhances their performance. A few participants thought they would learn better in traditional learning since the teachers' explanation provided direct help to their final score. Flipped learning was not directly helpful because spending too much time on out-of-class preparation and in-class activities prevented them from memorizing words. Additionally, they claimed they couldn't easily recall vocabularies since they took online quizzes before class activities. But in the traditional classroom, they had classroom quizzes after teacher lecture so they wouldn't forget words. 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 help them correct their answers during the lecture. Additionally, when the teacher told them the Persian meaning of words, provided them with synonyms and antonyms and checked their pronunciation, they could memorize those words unconsciously.

A few of participants thought the flipped learning was not a good idea because they didn't have not equipped themselves with learning strategies for practicing self-regulated study. Therefore, due to week preparation, peer and group activities couldn't bring about changes in their vocabulary 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 participating in class activities, so that they could spare the 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 believed performing out-of-class activities would occupy their time, and put a burden on them as well.

Working with 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 or lectures at home or in the classroom, almost unanimously, they favored listening at home. In general, they believed 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, coming up with the teacher's pace of speaking was not always simple, so that taking notes in the conventional classroom. Additionally, due to time management or other issues at large, the teacher couldn't pause and rewind videos and audios countless times in the classroom. However, one of the students argued when he reflected on a word or something in the audio or videos and couldn't work out the answer, he would lose track of the strings of ideas in the file, even after several rewindings.

S12: sometimes when I tried to find an answer to the problem, the audio had proceeded and it was past 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 may not manage to come to a conclusion, or even if they found an answer, they couldn't decide whether their solution was correct. So, the learner still needed to seek support from his teacher or classmates. In general, participants expressed positive attitudes about Telegram and the online platform for content delivery and assessment. However, almost all participants mentioned being seduced by distracting contents one or more times when searching for materials on line. Mostly, students performed 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 technology in general and audios and videos in particular improved their performance.

Group commitment

When the author asked them about their reasons for group commitment in the flipped learning context, they stated they were obliged to contribute to their groups or peers and they had to collaborate with peers to complete group activities. They had different views about class participation in the other class. Such a feeling was not evident when they talked about traditional learning.

S2: I felt it necessary to take part in class activities because I belong to a group. I go to 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 is in line with

the zone of proximal development concept by Vygotsky (1978). Besides, students felt a sense of achievement if they could explain instruct others.

When they become a part of a group, their classmates accept to recognize them as individuals; consequently, they put their best to practice to appear helpful to their group.

Student-teacher relationship

Some students stated a positive point 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, and 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 adverse perceptions of their relationship to their teachers in the flipped and traditional classrooms. Majority of participants remarked that usually their teacher was not available in the regular class most of the time. 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-center environment for optimized learning. In their opinion, the teacher was a facilitator and guide in the flipped learning environment while 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 discomfort and anxiousness.

Conclusions

We found certain indications that learners thought conventional or regular classroom was still more helpful for vocabulary learning. They did not think the flipped learning could enhance their word knowledge. We found out that most of them got used to conventional teacher 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 and doing out of class preparation and in class activities was a waste of time and burden to learning. They didn't like self-regulated pre-study of textbooks. From the results of interviews, the researcher found it was difficult for students to adapt to self-pace 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 a 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 and lack of

preparation 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; they all seemed to be emotional rather than cognitive.

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