



ENHANCING LEARNERS' AUTONOMY THROUGH FLIPPED CLASSES

Valentina Gavranović

Singidunum University,
Belgrade, Serbia

Abstract:

The potentials which technology offers have made researchers and educators re-examine the traditional teacher-dominated pedagogical model, and move from instruction and knowledge delivered classes towards a new educational paradigm dominated by learner-centered approach. This paradigm shift in education involves the change of roles of both teachers and students, and is aimed at providing the context wherein learning takes place through active students' engagement and with the teacher's coaching guidance. In order to provide such a context, a flipped pedagogical model, as a key component of blended learning, has been proposed, and it is being implemented in a growing number of higher education institutions. This concept implies the reverse content of lecture delivery and students' work outside of classes. Students' active participation is particularly important in the process of foreign language learning, and flipped classes can enhance both students' and teachers' motivation, their creative and critical thinking skills, and they can also improve performance and communication skills. The emphasis is on the concept of lifelong learning, whereby learner autonomy is encouraged through the opportunity given to students to find, evaluate and analyse information themselves.

Keywords:

active learning, blended learning, flipped classroom, learner autonomy.

1. INTRODUCTION

The commonest higher educational model reflects the age when it was designed – the age of industrial revolution. However, modern society, affected by complex and growing social, cultural, technological and economic changes, imposes high demands on educational establishments to keep up with these new requirements. Never has it been so demanding to organise an effective and purposeful educational process which will prepare learners for real-life contexts and competitive labour markets. The growing number of educational institutions is searching for new teaching and learning models which will adequately respond to these new demands. One of the proposed models includes a shift from “education for life” to “lifelong learning” which is understood as “a continuous and self-motivated search of knowledge for different purposes” (Evseeva and Solozhenko, 2015: 206). Information and communication technologies

Correspondence:

Valentina Gavranović

e-mail:

vgavranovic@singidunum.ac.rs



have enhanced potentials for students' continuous professional and personal development, encouraging them to take responsibility over their own learning and become autonomous learners. The integration of information and communication technologies into the educational processes has promoted blended learning, a pedagogical model which combines the traditional face-to-face teaching and learning context with the experience of using learning technologies. It is being used in academic contexts and it was identified as "one of the top ten trends to emerge in the knowledge delivery industry" (Curtis and Graham, 2006: 3).

This paper investigates "flipped classroom", an important aspect of blended learning, and the possibilities it offers in teaching and learning environment. The aim is to present the rationale underpinning the flipped model, and explore the advantages of applying it in foreign language teaching and learning in higher educational contexts. The flipped model has been embraced by many higher educational institutions as a promising learning paradigm which can effectively face the current challenges in education (Scheg and Abigail, 2015: 61).

2. LEARNER AUTONOMY

The three main concerns of the European Language Portfolio are learner autonomy, plurilingualism and interculturality. David Little defines learner autonomy as "a capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action" (Little, 1991: 4). He also believes that learners develop their autonomy through "individual-cognitive" and "social-interactive" processes. To meet these challenges and demands, a new educational paradigm has been proposed, and it combines the elements needed to promote learner autonomy.

3. THE CONCEPT OF THE FLIPPED CLASSROOM

The concept was introduced and developed by American educators and chemistry teachers Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams in 2000, and ever since the model has been gaining in popularity among researchers and educators. The main pedagogical philosophy underlying this model emphasises the importance of relocating the main stages of teaching and learning processes, whereby the elements of the traditional classroom lecturing and homework done by students afterwards, outside the classroom, are reversed. Even though there is no strict and

unique form of applying it in educational environment, and as Bergman would say "there is no such thing as the flipped classroom" (Aaron and Bergmann, 2012: 5), there are several important aspects of the concept to consider.

The proponents of the flipped model believe that the starting point for educators in organizing learning process should include one important question: "What is best for my students in my classroom?" (Aaron and Bergmann, 2012: 5), and the idea of reversing teaching and learning activities stemmed from the needs of their students. They tried to help them achieve better results and gain deeper understanding of the subject matter by providing important input and stimulus in the most appropriate framework. This framework includes reversed elements of traditional lectures delivered by teachers during class time and autonomous students' learning taking place outside of classrooms. Attention is redirected away from the teacher, and in the focus of the educational process is the learner.

The main "flip" implied in this model refers to the organisation of teaching and learning processes and activities. Teachers post lectures and topic-related materials on-line before face-to-face class session. Students watch videos recorded or chosen by teachers, and read various materials related to the topic, including tests and on-line quizzes offering immediate feedback. On the other hand, in-class time is devoted to discussions, clarifications, open questions and a repertoire of various exercises (EDUCASE, 2012). The main idea of this approach is to maximize student's engagement. When students attend face-to-face classes, they are already familiar with the topic, its main concepts, theoretical background and they have some understanding of the subject matter (Evseeva and Solozhenko, 2015). Prepared and "equipped" with the basic elements of the lecture to be covered during class time, students are ready to be more engaged in class time work, and they are given a valuable opportunity to participate actively in the process of learning, thus taking responsibility over their own learning. The interaction during class time is more effective and efficient, resulting in deeper understanding of the subject matter. The important aspect of flipped model is "a distinctive shift in priorities - from merely covering material to working toward mastery of it" (EDUCASE, 2012).

The flipped model also implies significant changes in the roles of teachers and students, and it considerably alters classroom management. Students are not passive participants in the classroom, where they just sit in rows and listen to the lecture, delivered by knowledgeable and authoritative resources, but they actively participate in



the process of learning. They are given the opportunity to develop their own critical, creative and problem-solving skills and autonomy in learning. The role of the teacher is also considerably changed. Instead of being in the centre of attention during class time, the teacher takes on multiple roles – the ones of an educator, lecturer, instructor, facilitator, e-learning moderator, guide and a coach.

Flipped classes must be thoroughly planned and organized, and it takes much effort on part of the teacher who leads and monitors the whole process, but does not take control over learning. It is also important to explain students the concept of this model and develop it thoughtfully so that students could realise the benefits of its implementation.

4. BENEFITS OF APPLYING THE FLIPPED MODEL IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

The flipped model has been implemented in teaching different subjects, and foreign language teaching and learning is no exception. In a traditional educational setting, students are exposed to new language items, or a set of rules, and some of them successfully follow what is being said instantly the speaker says it, while others struggle to decipher some, or many of the aspects of the lecture. Those who show such learning difficulties do not have time to reflect upon some concepts, analyse them and capture their meaning. On the other hand, the flipped model allows students to work at their own pace, to stop, work on and process difficult linguistic concepts or ideas. Students get control over the flow of the teacher's lecture because they can stop the prerecorded video, and watch more demanding segments more than once. In prerecorded videos or carefully designed materials, students can also be instructed how to apply some rules in developing language skills, or they can be exposed to the target language items, texts and vocabulary before class time.

The great potential of the model is reflected in the way the class time is reorganised and repurposed. Although it may seem that the use of technologies in education can discourage students to attend classes, if properly organised and conducted, the flipped model enhances the importance and value of face-to-face communication. It emphasises how precious class time is, and how it can be used more effectively and meaningfully because students come to classes to discuss topics and linguistic concepts, ask questions and look for clarifications; students have the opportunity to develop their language skills more

extensively and interact with other students in hands-on activities (EDUCASE, 2012). One of the obstacles in mastering language skills, particularly the productive ones, lies in students' shyness and feeling of embarrassment when they need to express their thoughts and opinions in a foreign language. This challenge can be partly overcome if students come to classes already informed about the content to be covered, which can boost their self-confidence and self-esteem. Interaction among students can also enhance students' communication skills, and build on their emotional and social intelligence.

In-class discussion and student's questions can provide the foreign language teacher with a good insight in students' course of thinking, but also help the teacher detect common mistakes students have made and misconceptions they have created. The most widespread mistakes can serve as clues to the teacher what was delivered ambiguously, and make the instructor think how to improve techniques in order to deliver the content in a clear and more meaningful way. The flipped model, thus, encourages the teacher to reflect upon the effectiveness of his teaching and explaining methods, improving his skills and preventing the danger of getting into a monotonous circle of a daily teaching routine.

The way students learn a foreign language, and how successful they are, is largely determined by individual learning styles, which considerably differ among students. (Oxford, 2003: 1). In a traditional teaching context, the challenge to reach every student is imposed on teachers, and it takes lots of effort and skillfulness to achieve this goal. On the other hand, strategies applied in flipped classes and the use of learning technologies offer great possibilities to cater for a wide range of different learning styles (Lage and Treglia, 2000: 32). Furthermore, some students learn and interact better through face-to-face communication, while others benefit more through texting and e-mails (Aaron and Bergmann, 2012).

Another very demanding task imposed on teachers nowadays is to personalise student's education, which is often a painstaking and even impossible mission in the traditional educational settings with dozens of students sitting in rows, listening to knowledge delivery, with the aim of recalling the information on an exam (Aaron, 2012: 13). Aaron claims that students need teacher's individual help not when they teach them the content, but when they need clarifications of certain aspects of their delivery, and this is exactly what the flipped model advocates. "Flipping the classroom establishes a framework that ensures students receive a personalized education tailored to their individual needs." (Aaron and Bergmann, 2012: 6)



In the traditional educational framework, those who get most of teacher's lectures are the brightest and smartest students, while those students who fall behind can stay even further from those who excel, and thus the issue of mixed-ability classes is deepened. Flipping the traditional model encourages students of all abilities to develop their language skills, especially those who struggle most, and thus, if carefully designed and thoughtfully conducted, it can allow for real differentiation.

Flexibility is very important aspect of the flipped model and it allows students to choose when, where and for how long to consume the information delivered by the teacher. Modern technologies make it much easier because the access to the Internet and the subject matter related material is almost always available, and instructions are delivered when students are ready to process the new information and to correlate it with their existing knowledge.

Another beneficial aspect of this model is that teachers get to know their students better through flipped classes, and they can, accordingly, organise their classes in the future. Flipping thus allows for continuity and coherence of individual subjects. Classes are also transparent, which allows for a better correlation among related or different subjects, because this is an effective way to connect teachers themselves and allow them to synchronise and create a broader picture wherein they can position their own subject.

5. THE DOWNSIDES OF THE FLIPPED MODEL

Teaching foreign languages cannot be prescribed and instructed fully in a single pedagogical model. It requires a complex set of skills, knowledge, attitudes and pedagogical philosophies embraced by language teachers. The flipped classroom is an easy model to slip up and flip over, resulting in a poor performance. It requires careful preparation and meaningful organisation of in-class and out-of-class activities and tasks.

Flipping requires additional work for teachers because recording lectures takes time and effort, and flipping also demands from teachers to master new skills in the domain of digital literacies and classroom management (Bransford, 2000: 227). As far as students are concerned, they can misunderstand the concept of flipping, and misjudge the real benefits it offers in promoting learning and autonomy. Some of them could neglect face-to-face communication completely because they think they can

find all they need on-line. Others could also come unprepared to classes, and miss the essential aspects of lectures. Teachers have a demanding task to prepare students for flipping, and to present them with the benefits, but also with the drawbacks if they do not respect the rules underlying the model.

There are also some authors who believe that the flipped classroom does not enhance learning, and that the results it can yield can be even worse than when teaching and learning in a traditional educational framework. Atteberry is one of the authors who criticises this model and believes that the flipped classroom is overrated, that it is just a "fad" which does not improve students' scores and learning. (Atteberry, 2013)

6. CONCLUSION

Flipping the classroom elements can be effective for some topics and linguistic concepts, while some issues must be explored and discovered by students themselves. Certain contents can be best acquired by students if taught directly in a face-to-face, teacher-centred learning context. Techniques and models vary depending on different factors, and the teacher should make a sound judgment which ones to employ for the best results. The flipped model is just one of the ways teaching and learning process can be organised, and to cater for different students' needs it is best to find a nice balance of approaches and techniques (Muldrow, 2013: 31).

Flipping involves a comprehensive change in the class dynamics, and the philosophy underlying it says that teaching is "much more than good content delivery" (Aaron and Bergmann, 2012: 21). The development of powerful devices offers immense opportunities to adapt educational framework to the 21st century students, who grew up with the "always-on digital world". With the flipped model, all we do is speak their language. However, no matter what model instructors opt for, never should they neglect pedagogy underpinned. Even though Aaron was the proponent of the model which requires the use of technology, he says that "Pedagogy should always drive technology, never the other way round." (Aaron and Bergmann, 2012: 21).

The flipped model is a new educational paradigm dominated by learner-centered approach, and letting students have control over learning is one of the hardest things to do for many educators. But doing so, teachers show respect for and trust in "unique individuals who require a unique education" (Aaron and Bergmann, 2012).



REFERENCES

- [1] A. Evseeva, A. Solozhenko, "Use of Flipped Classroom Technology in Language Learning," in *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 206, 2015, pp.205-209.
- [2] B. J. C. Curtis, and C. R. Graham, *The Handbook of Blended Learning, Global Perspectives, Local Design*. San Francisco: Pfeiffer, 2006.
- [3] D. J. Bransford, *How People Learn, Brain, Mind, Experience and School*. Washington D.C.: National Academy Press, 2000.
- [4] D. Little, *Learner Autonomy: Definitions, Issues and Problems*. Dublin: Authentik, 1991.
- [5] E. Atteberry, *Flipped classrooms may not have any impact on learning*, USA.Today. Retrieved April 3, 2017, from <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/national/2013/10/22/flipped-classrooms-effectiveness/3148447>.
- [6] EDUCAUSE, *7 Things you should know about... Flipped Classroom*. Retrieved April 4, 2017, from <https://library.educause.edu/resources/2012/2/7-things-you-should-know-about-flipped-classrooms>.
- [7] G. A. Scheg, and G. Abigail, *Implementation and Critical Assessment of the Flipped Classroom Experience*. IGI Global: Hershey, 2015.
- [8] K. Bärber, and M. L. P. Cavana, *Perspectives from the European Language Portfolio: Learner Autonomy and Self-Assessment*. London: Routledge, 2012.
- [9] K. Muldrow, "A New Approach to Language Instruction – Flipping the Classroom," in *The Language Educator*, 2013, pp.28-31.
- [10] L. R. Oxford, "Language learning styles and strategies," in *Learning styles and strategies*. GALA, 2003.
- [11] M. J. Lage, and M. Treglia, "Inverting the classroom: A gateway to creating an inclusive learning environment," in *The Journal of Economic Education*, vol.31, no. 1, 2000, pp..30-43.
- [12] S. Aaron, and J. Bergmann, *Flip your classroom: reach every student in every class every day*. Washington, D.C.: ISTE, 2012.