A Study of the “Flipped Classroom” Mode in English Language Teaching of the University

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Abstract. Confronted by the dilemmas of traditional English teaching mode that teachers find it hard to motivate students’ English learning interests and there is much room for students to improve their comprehensive abilities, this paper touches upon the application of “flipped classroom” mode in English language teaching in universities. The author traces back its origin and development; Then she analyzes the advantages of such a new teaching mode, providing specific measures to well apply it in English Language teaching. Finally, the author puts forward a series of challenges for its further development in China’s Universities.

Introduction

The English teaching reform in China’s universities has been undertaken for more than a decade and there is no denying that teaching is as important as learning, so cultivating students’ self-learning abilities has become an essential aspect of teaching. However, the traditional teaching mode can’t largely motivate students’ interests, let alone the preview of lessons by students themselves. Besides, the traditional English teaching mode can’t offer students enough time to carry out mutual communication in English. Instead, they have to spend more time listening to teachers’ lectures with infrequent responses. Generally speaking, such a traditional teaching mode can’t achieve the ideal teaching effects and it is urgent task to carry out a radical reform.

As the information age has provided rich teaching resources, the teaching concept, teaching content and teaching approach need to be updated. The “flipped classroom” mode emerged as a new trend in English language teaching. To a large extent, such a mode can compensate for the shortcomings of the traditional one, for it can best display the perfect integration of modern technology and teaching. In English language teaching, the “flipped classroom” mode enables teachers to make the rearrangement of teaching content so as to ensure enough language input through micro-lessons by self-study before class. The in-class activities can also help students to focus on English language output, increasing their mutual interaction and promoting their language skills.

The Origin and Development of the “Flipped Classroom” Mode

The concept of the “flipped classroom” has its origin in a senior middle school of Colorado in the United States, where two chemistry teachers first applied such a teaching approach. Early in 2007, due to students’ absence for one reason after another, these two teachers filmed and uploaded several videos concerning the key points of those missed lessons. These videos were vividly presented with PPTs, pictures and teachers’ charming voice, arousing students’ interests and receiving widespread support. Gradually such a teaching mode began to be widely applied in that school and the teaching video played a dominant role in pre-class for students’ self-study. Owing to students’ online preview of each lesson with the aid of video before class, teachers may spare more time in class to guide students to work out some tough problems. Such a teaching mode earned the widespread concern in America.

It was not until the establishment of Khan Academy that the flipped classroom teaching approach could enjoy its everlasting popularity and vitality among the public in American society. With an
abundance of teaching resources online provided by Khan Academy, a great many teachers began
to take good advantage of those teaching videos for students’ preview before class. In class,
teachers would like to focus on enhancing students’ practical abilities and interactive
communication. In a sense, such a teaching mode thoroughly changed the traditional one in which
teachers could dominate the whole class, students doing the homework after class. Whether in terms
of teaching ideology or teaching effects, such a mode gained more advantages than traditional ones
and began to spread worldwide.

The Features of the “Flipped Classroom” Teaching Mode

Nowadays, a large number of universities in China encourage the application of “flipped
classroom” in most courses. The educational authorities also advocate holding various contests in
the form of micro-lessons. Compared with the traditional teaching mode, the flipped classroom has
its own particular features.

Firstly, it is a student-centered teaching mode, for it has attached great attention to enhancing
students’ comprehensive abilities. According to Eric Mazur, a renowned professor in Physics of
Harvard University, knowledge absorption and internalization rather than message transfer should
be considered as a priority concern in the teaching process. However, in traditional teaching mode,
teachers tend to spend more time on message transfer and little time on students’ mutual interaction,
communication and collaboration, ignoring the individual difference. While the flipped classroom
pays more attention to knowledge internalization in class, in which teachers organize kinds of
activities to get students widely engaged to further enhance their comprehensive abilities.

Secondly, the “flipped classroom” helps to increase the chances of interaction and
communication in class, and further enhance their English language competence. According to Wen
Qiufang, a prestigious professor in English Language teaching and research, language output is both
the motive and ultimate goal of a language acquisition. Learning a language is not purely the
theoretical study. Instead, students need a number of practical exercises to acquire the linguistic
rules to further strengthen their applied skills. For years, the traditional teaching mode couldn’t
provide enough chances for students to demonstrate their language competence in class. Besides,
teachers always focus on the text analysis, vocabulary and grammar study, overlooking the design
of some oral tasks or other oral activities in class. For the flipped classroom teaching mode, chances
for students’ language output with teachers’ help will be greatly increased.

Thirdly, the “flipped classroom” mode offers an ideal platform to reorganize, integrate and utilize
useful teaching resources. With the help of abundant online video resources as the references, the
horizons of both teachers and students are largely broadened. Furthermore, teachers’ role of
transferring knowledge has fundamentally changed, for students can get more information through
online self-study to reestablish their knowledge system. In a sense, students’ initiative abilities and
self-study abilities are unwittingly enhanced.

Application of the “Flipped Classroom” in English Language Teaching

The design of class activities is the key factor of the successful application of the “flipped
classroom” mode. Only when the following factors such as class atmosphere, students’
collaboration, knowledge exploration and mutual communication are fully considered, can students
be highly motivated. Once they are willing to take part in class activities, it is better to realize their
knowledge internalization.

To better prepare for the teaching process, teachers should put forward a series of
thought-provoking questions according to their teaching experience and students’ feedback of the
micro-videos so as to guide students to have a group discussion, hold a debate or make a class
presentation. All these activities require students to search material from their own knowledge
structure and develop meaningful language output, thus students can be motivated to quest for more
knowledge, perfect their knowledge system and further promote their comprehensive abilities.
Taking the group discussion as an example, students can not only deepen their understanding of
certain issues, but also improve their English language competence, communicative competence, mutual cooperation and interpersonal relationship. Besides, the form of teamwork enables students to be relaxed to communicate with their peers, exchanging sparkling ideas from different perspectives.

As for the assessment system, there should be a greater difference than before. When working out a specific assessment criterion, teachers should consider about the multi-dimensions including the specific aspects and various assessment modes. To ensure the objectivity and justice of the assessment system, teachers alone are not suggested to be the judge of students’ class performance. Instead, teachers, classmates and the learners themselves should undertake the assessment task together. As for the assessment mode, the final exam should not play a decisive role any more. All these factors including students’ everyday performance, online study, class attendance, class participation, oral presentation, team assessment and students’ self-evaluation should be taken into consideration. The other aspects will involve the team spirit, innovation and critical thinking. The reasonable assessment system will help students to know better about their study, urging them to have a self-reflection of their learning strategy, attitude and result in order to realize the co-development of teaching and learning.

Challenges of the “Flipped Classroom” in English Language Teaching

As a new teaching mode, the “flipped classroom” does not only have its own advantages, but also confronts lots of challenges. As is known, the “flipped classroom” mode is the comprehensive application of internet resources, multi-media technology and teaching competence. Especially in such an Information era, teachers are no longer the ones who stand on the platform, lecturing with chalk and textbook in hands. The traditional role of the teacher has been greatly challenged. They are supposed to acquire abilities to take full advantage of rich internet resources, master the multi-media skills to make micro-lectures well designed and attractive to further motivate students’ interests.

For one thing, teachers should be ready to change their traditional concept, turning from a knowledge transmitter to an activity organizer, an instructor and a material provider. In class, teachers are supposed to develop students’ initiatives, bringing their abilities into full play. In such a case, it does not mean that teachers are not as busy as before. Instead, teachers’ tasks are much tougher, for they have to spend more time on doing research online, filming the micro-videos, preparing the PPT as well as designing preview questions and in-class activities. Furthermore, there are stricter requirements for teachers. As for the well-designed micro-lectures, teachers should highlight the key points with vivid pictures, and try their utmost efforts to arouse students’ interests.

For another, there is a tougher challenge of students’ self-study abilities. Due to years of exam-oriented education in Middle schools, students have accustomed themselves to the traditional teaching mode. In class, students always listen to teachers’ lectures passively and try to finish their homework after class. Such a teaching mode cannot highly motivate students’ interests and students are lack of initiatives and creativity. However, the “flipped classroom” mode requires that students should spend more free time on the preview of lessons to develop their self-study abilities based on the unique design of micro-lectures. After the digest of key points in micro-videos before class, students are able to get involved in the class activities such as discussion and communication. If students can’t get used to such a new teaching mode, its advantages can’t be displayed.

The well-equipped hardware facilities in universities are also the guarantee to ensure the application of such a new teaching mode. To make sure the successful filming of high-quality videos, universities should provide enough funds to realize the full coverage of campus internet.

Conclusion

The Information Age indeed has provided more opportunities for the educational reform in universities and “the flipped classroom” emerged as a new teaching mode, which is worth of an in-depth study. Even though it cannot completely replace the traditional one, its latent advantages
can never be overlooked and it is a matter of time to widely apply such a mode in English language teaching. However, there still exist a lot of challenges to fully display its advantages. For teachers, they need more time to construct a network of extensive learning resources and design suitable teaching strategies; for students, they need to cultivate their self-study abilities and enhance self-management, adapting themselves to such an explorative teaching mode. With the help of abundant internet resources and multi-media technology, as long as teachers and students cooperate with each other, the flipped classroom mode can be largely optimized.

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