

Twisting the Class: Are we ready for a Flipped ESL Classroom?

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Research Article

## **Twisting the Class: Are we ready for a Flipped ESL Classroom?**

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### **Abstract**

The world of work and education is rapidly being digitised. This transformation calls for revisiting pedagogies in higher education and analysing the potential of alternate methodologies and models. Flipped learning offers an excellent alternative to traditional classrooms in this scenario. Instruction and homework are swapped and learning happens beyond the four walls of the classroom as flipped classroom is a student-centred pedagogical approach. It also gives space to language instructors to introduce more input in the limited time available during the semester. The present research set out to determine the ESL instructors' readiness for implementing flipped classroom instructional model at higher education level in Pakistan by studying current practices and future prospects through English language instructors' perspectives. For this purpose, open-ended, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ESL instructors from two universities of Pakistan viz., COMSATS University, Islamabad, Lahore Campus (CUI) and Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi. The study found out that despite liking the approach, the instructors are not ready for flipping classes due to various factors, including students' overdependence on face-to-face instruction and not taking responsibility for their learning, the teachers' not being comfortable with the idea not preparing lessons accordingly. The solution lies in effectively and consistently implementing flipped learning, and for that, specific recommendations have been offered. The valuable insights will help to inform language instruction, curriculum design, and policy in future.

**Key words:** Flipped learning; Bloom's taxonomy; English language teaching; higher education; tertiary level

### 1.1. Introduction

Flipped or reverse classroom is a student-centered ([Ozdamli & Asiksoy, 2016](#)), and active ([Ozdamli & Asiksoy, 2016](#); [Toto & Nguyen, 2009](#)) approach that is a form of blended learning, combining online learning and face-to-face activities ([Bishop & Verleger, 2013](#); [Halili & Zainuddin, 2015](#); [Lean, Moizer, & Newbery, 2014](#); [Strayer, 2012](#)) in which learning material related to remembering and understanding is given to learners as home task before classroom interactive sessions that are conducted to carry out activities related to higher order skills of Applying, Analysing, Evaluating and Creating.

Teaching English is an integral part of higher education in Pakistani universities. Apart from English being the medium of instruction in all fields of study, all undergraduate students, notwithstanding what their major is, have to take 3 to 4 courses of English Language as compulsory modules during the four years undergraduate programs that equip them with the skills necessary for their academic and professional requirements. Moreover, it is taught as a major subject at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels too ([Shahzad et al., 2019](#)). However, sometimes it is felt that due to the time constraints, either the L2 input provided to students remains insufficient in the short span of a semester, i.e., 16 weeks or the learners do not get the opportunities for ample practice and reinforcement of the skills learnt during a semester, leading to low proficiency in many cases. Flipped learning seems to offer a promising approach in this scenario if implemented effectively since it leaves more time at the disposal of instructors and learners to utilise for interactive classroom activities; more teacher guidance and activities focussed on higher-order learning skills in the classroom as students have worked on the lower order skills at homes already.

While [Wang and Heffernan \(2010\)](#) make an overambitious claim that the use of traditional instructor-centred learning approach with the instructor as the custodian of knowledge is not relevant in this digital age, and [Zainuddin and Halili \(2016\)](#) recommend policymakers to implement the flipped classroom practices for higher education, we think that the effectiveness of other, non-traditional forms of learning, like flipped learning, needs to be tested, researched and established before making an overall change in the teaching-learning situation, especially in contexts like Pakistan where it has reached quite recently.

This study sets out to explore the potential prospects of implementing flipped learning at higher education level in Pakistan by exploring the flipped classroom readiness of English language instructors and learners through studying the perceptions of instructors involved in English language teaching at tertiary level regarding their utilisation of this approach; the challenges involved; and its prospects they see in the context of higher education in Pakistan.

To elicit data, semi-structured, open-ended interviews of instructors teaching at graduate and undergraduate levels at two universities were conducted till saturation, or the stage at which no new themes or information are found in the data occurred. The participants were thus 9 English instructors from COMSATS University Islamabad, Lahore Campus and 9 English Language instructors from Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi. The responses were analysed qualitatively after coding the prominent themes that emerged in the responses. The findings have important pedagogical implications, for they will enlighten the audience about how ready Pakistani teachers and students are for flipped teaching and learning. The study also offers recommendations about what needs to be done to effectively utilise flipped learning in English teaching at universities.

The objectives of the study were to explore the flipped classroom readiness of English language

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instructors and learners by studying the perceptions of instructors involved in English language pedagogy at the tertiary level regarding their utilisation of this approach, the challenges involved and the prospects they see of utilising this approach in the context of higher education in Pakistan.

### 2.1. Literature Review

Technological advancements in the twenty-first century have enabled people to easily access information through computers, and even smartphones (Fu, 2013) and to network with friends, instructors, learning content, free learning materials provided on web sites, online video lectures everywhere, in as well as outside the class through distance learning (Fisher, Ross, LaFerriere, & Maritz, 2017; Richter & McPherson, 2012). Hence, many educators have recently been experimenting with their methodologies to embed these tools and techniques at their disposal; and with flipping classes. Language teachers are no exception. In many cases, instructors make learners watch instructional videos out of the classroom and involve them in interactive learning in the classroom.

Flipped or reverse classroom is a student-centered (Ozdamli & Asiksoy, 2016), and active (Ozdamli & Asiksoy, 2016; Toto & Nguyen, 2009) approach that is a form of blended learning combining online learning and face-to-face activities (Bishop & Verleger, 2013; Halili & Zainuddin, 2015; Lean et al., 2014; Strayer, 2012). It encourages learners to make themselves ready for the lesson by reading articles, watching digital videos, presentations, and listening to podcasts, using learning management systems, using Web 2.0 technology and then taking notes, and preparing questions about their confusions or misunderstood things (Bristol, 2014; Staker & Horn, 2012). This is followed by in-class quality activities like collective problem solving, group working, interactive discussions and making an inference (Formica, Easley, & Spraker, 2010; Tucker, 2012). In a Flipped classroom, the students partake more actively than the instructor in the task at hand. The instructor plays the role of a facilitator, guiding, motivating, and giving feedback on learners' performance (Bergmann & Sams, 2012).

The concept of flipped learning is based on Bloom's revised taxonomy of cognitive domain (Zainuddin & Halili, 2016) that proposes six levels of learning. In executing flipped classroom, the lower levels i.e., remembering and understanding are practised outside the classroom (Krathwohl & Anderson, 2010). This leaves more classroom time during which the main focus is on higher order skills including applying, analysing, evaluating, and creating which are executed by learners under the supervision and guidance of teachers. Figure 1 demonstrates students' learning levels in a flipped classroom situation according to Bloom's revised taxonomy:

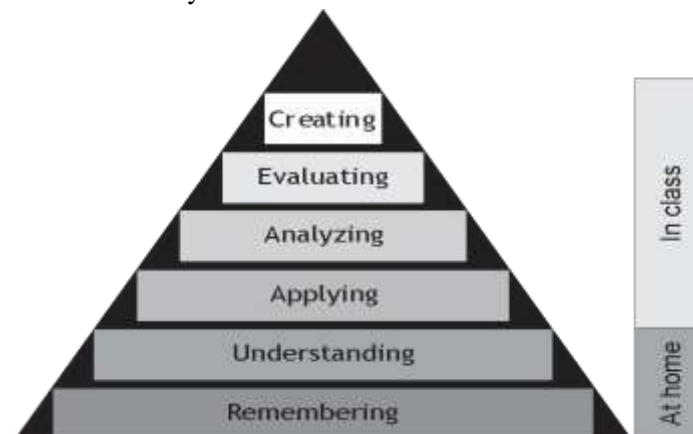


Figure 1: Bloom's Revised Taxonomy in Flipped Classroom (Zainuddin & Halili, 2016).

Although flipped learning approach shifts the learning responsibility from teacher to students ([Bergman et al., 2011](#)), it has some different requirements regarding teachers and students' roles. [Bergmann and Sams \(2012\)](#) declare the teacher's role as the most important element in flipped classroom approach which constitutes: designing intentional learning experiences to involve students outside of the classroom ([Brewer & Movahedazarhouli, 2018](#)); creating a learning environment based on questioning ([Bergmann & Sams, 2012](#)) and interactive discussions ([Millard, 2012](#)); and having one to one communication with students ([Cohen & Brugar, 2013](#)).

Research in educational psychology and second language learning has established the importance of self-efficacy and collaboration in the learning process. [Milman \(2012\)](#) contends that the flipped classroom approach encourages and supports team working, investing students with confidence and self-efficacy ([Enfield, 2013](#); [Namaziandost & Çakmak, 2020](#)). Moreover, students can have access to lecture videos at the time and place that suits them and it offers students the chance to learn at their own pace ([Fulton, 2012](#)). [Alsowat \(2016\)](#) found that flipped classrooms in teaching language increased students' academic performance, motivation, and involvement in the foreign language learning process. It was also found that English language learners in the flipped classes have more positive attitudes towards the experience of learning language than learners in the non-flipped classes ([Chen Hsieh, Wu, & Marek, 2017](#); [Doman & Webb, 2017](#)).

[Basal \(2015\)](#) strongly recommends integrating Learning Management Systems and flipping classes in English language teaching as it can offer great advantages to both the students and the teacher. He found four major advantages of flipping English classes viz., overcoming the limitations of class time; student preparation in advance; learning at one's own pace; and increasing the participation in the classroom. In a quasi-experimental study to explore the impact of flipping classes on writing skills in EFL, [Ahmed \(2016\)](#) found that the experimental group performed better than the control group in the post-test of EFL writing and the experimental group's perceptions were significantly in favor of flipping.

In a systematic review of empirical research in effectiveness of flipped classroom at college level, [Shi, Ma, MacLeod, and Yang \(2020\)](#) found that this instructional model improves learners' cognitive learning and can prove more effective when instructors assimilate individualised, collaborative and active pedagogical approaches. Its implementation in the language classroom enhances students' performance and motivation ([Du, 2020](#); [Evseeva & Solozhenko, 2015](#); Hung, 2015; [Lee & Wallace, 2018](#); [Thai, De Wever, & Valcke, 2017](#)).

### **3.1. Methodology**

In a digitised world where education and businesses are going virtual rapidly and consistently, flipped classroom method is a promising approach to teaching. Moreover, in higher education, the time constraint resulting from a limited semester duration available to cover a lot of syllabus makes it a viable choice for teachers to switch to flipped teaching. The need for increased input in English language teaching makes it a valuable asset for teachers.

Keeping this in mind, this study set out to survey the readiness of ESL teachers in Pakistan for this promising pedagogy. The study was carried out in two universities of Pakistan viz., COMSATS University Islamabad, Lahore Campus and Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi. A total of 18 (n=18) English Language instructors (9 from each of the universities) were interviewed for the purpose. Interviews were

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carried out till saturation was reached. It is a point where no new themes emerge in the data. Data were then analysed qualitatively on the basis of the themes that emerged during interviews.

### **Main research questions**

The main research question formulated is as follows:

1. Are Pakistani ESL teachers and learners ready for flipped classroom approach?

The subsidiary questions are:

- What challenges do the teachers face in employing the flipped classroom approach?
- What challenges do the teachers think their students face while learning language through this approach?
- What are the potential prospects of the employment of this approach in teachers' perspectives?

### **4.1. Analysis of semi-structured interviews:**

For elicitation of information, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the English language instructors. The responses were analysed qualitatively after coding the themes that emerged in the data.

#### **Methods and materials used by ESL Instructors**

As for the frequency of flipping classes, instructors had different responses. Some use it only once a semester; a few respondents employ flipping from 4 to 6 times during the semester; and one utilises the approach in alternate classes i.e., 50% of all the classes. However, one instructor teaching at both undergraduate and graduate levels said she uses it 3 to 4 times a semester for undergraduate classes, but for graduate classes, she uses it 'almost always.'

Different instructors were found to be employing different tools and materials and technologies for flipping classes. Table 1.1 shows the teaching materials which are popular among the instructors:

<b>Materials/Tools</b>	<b>Instructors' response</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Notes & Articles	11	61%
Videos	8	44%
Books	6	33%

Table 1.1: Teaching materials popular among the instructors

The most popular among the materials were notes and articles that appeared in 11 instructors' responses (61%). Videos were the second most popular material with 8 (44%) instructors using them.

The following ICT tools presented in the Table 1.2 were popular among the respondents:

<b>ICT Tools</b>	<b>Percentage of instructors</b>
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PowerPoint	90
PowToon	20
WhatsApp	50
Online Tutorials	60
Language related software	66
Audio	40
Screen Casting	12
Social Media Links	56

Table 1.2: ICT tools used by the instructors in their ESL classes

The above results show that though the instructors are familiar with a variety of materials and tools, they are not comfortable with relying on flipping all the time with all levels of students. This raises concerns about feasibility of the approach in the context of the study and the readiness of the instructors and learners which warrants investigating the problems and challenges involved.

***Challenges faced by instructors***

Connectivity issues, students' lack of responsibility and unpreparedness were the main challenges faced by instructors especially with undergraduate classes. Graduate classes, however, showed greater level of responsibility for preparing the material for class in advance. One of the challenges mentioned by the instructors from both the institutions was the *"non-seriousness of students"*. According to three (17%) respondents, students hardly do home tasks. Weak students do not take responsibility and need help from instructors. One respondent said:

*"Students are least willing to take the responsibility for this kind of semi-autonomous learning."*

This means students should be motivated and encouraged regarding self-efficacy by the involvement of both parents and teachers.

Less involvement in discussion by the students was mentioned as a challenge by respondents from CUI. According to one instructor, *"most of them avoid speaking in class during interactive activities."* Lack of IT sources and internet connectivity issues were mentioned by instructors from both the institutions. One of the instructors from FJWU mentioned: *"There is sometimes no internet facility inside classrooms"*. It is

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a fact that in some classrooms, internet facilities have not been provided and sometimes, due to load shedding, the connectivity is interrupted. This is in keeping with findings of [Kordyban & Kinash \(2013\)](#). One respondent from FJWU however, said, "*I rather enjoy flipping classes and don't consider it a challenge.*" One respondent from CUI said:

*"At postgraduate level, challenges are less because the student responsibility level is higher. For the undergraduate level, I rarely rely on flipping techniques."*

### **Challenges faced by learners**

Two respondents from CUI think that "*lack of time*" and sometimes lack of motivation owing to English being an allied course, and not the students' major, is a problem with students. Some respondents from both the universities think that lack of confidence, especially in public speaking, hampers some learners from participating in class discussions. For some instructors, students lack seriousness because all of them do not have equal access to technological resources.

Lack of self-efficacy beliefs among students seems to be a big challenge for the participating population which, otherwise, help in achieving academic goals independently ([Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996](#)). An instructor from CUI remarked:

*"It is emotionally, mentally, and physically exhausting for the students."*

According to two (11%) respondents from CUI, the students have "*problem with the idea of self-learning and independence.*" The biggest challenge for students according to respondents from both institutions is that some weak learners find it difficult to understand the concepts on their own. This points out to the need for designing carefully planned home tasks and materials according to the level and needs of learners.

An instructor from FJWU thinks there are not many challenges faced by the learners in learning language through a flipped pedagogical approach. Almost all of them have gadgets and Wi-Fi at home, "*They just need to learn how to use technology for education.*" According to a respondent from FJWU, "*carelessness*" was the main issue on the part of the learners. They need to have a prior knowledge of the topic which asks for some personal effort on their part and most are unwilling or unable to make those efforts. These challenges are similar to what Bristol (2014) pointed out that students coming to class without preparation can be a big challenge for a flipped classroom.

### **Suggestions in Pakistani context**

Though most respondents realise the importance of the approach, their limited use in their respective classes is owing to either their lack of readiness, lack of training, and mostly students' lack of readiness to take the responsibility of their own learning as they have been accustomed to traditional, instructional methods for the first 12 years of their academic lives. One respondent from CUI said: "*ELT practitioners must have the knowledge of IT tools.*" Another instructor from CUI suggested that the resources should be shared amongst teachers, thus empowering them and making their teaching more effective.

One respondent from CUI pointed out: "*Attention should be paid to ELT at the very basic levels in schools for the gap is very difficult to fill at the undergraduate level.*" Another respondent from FJWU considers it a vital tool for equipping learners with critical thinking skills necessary for independent learning. She remarked:

*"The approach should be employed at least in one of the lessons at undergraduate level, so as to develop critical thinking patterns amongst students and should be made a regular teaching method at graduate and postgraduate level."*

### ***Prospects in Pakistani context***

The responses revealed that the flipped classroom in its present form with the existing level of preparedness on the part of instructors as well as students is not very effective. One of the respondents said: *"I don't see much potential for it in my context because the majority of the instructors are unaware of this technique."* According to some respondents, its potential is doubtful in Pakistani context because many students at public sector colleges and universities do not have internet access and they recommended that this issue should be focused on first.

On the other hand, some respondents, however, believe in the potential popularity and usefulness of flipping classes in Pakistani context e.g., one said; *"If applied effectively, it might inculcate learning independence amongst language learners."* and another remarked: *"With awareness, teachers are modifying their practices."* This points to the fact that teachers also need to be trained in the special competencies required to plan and implement the methodology effectively. One respondent remarked:

*"We have to wait a long time for that. At the moment, I do not see any prospects, because: our academia is not streamlined; there is a huge discrepancy between private and public sector education; and HEC (Higher Education Commission) is not concerned with the quality of education."*

Some respondents linked its utility with interest and confidence level of the students of a second language e.g., one said: *"By applying flipped approach in language learning, students can become confident and apply linguistic and critical thinking skills in other courses as well."* Still another respondent remarked:

*"Yes, it can help a lot in making a dull subject come to life by arousing students' interest in practical aspects of the language which the stereotypical reading approach fails to do, at times."*

Some respondents were of the view that flipping classes might be very useful for particular students, and it might not be very useful for students who refuse to cooperate; or if the majority of class comes without having gone through the topic given to them, this approach might not be that useful. This means the students' individual needs and learning styles should be studied by the instructors before implementing the technique; planning the lessons and designing the activities.

### **5.1 Discussion and Recommendations**

The study concludes that teachers in Pakistan have a long way to go in this regard as they are not trained enough to be able to implement flipped classroom teaching effectively in classrooms. Their preparedness is very important in bringing the students up to accepting this pedagogical practice for a language classroom, especially at undergraduate level since a majority of teachers have been found to be feeling comfortable with the use of technology themselves but found their students to be careless and disinterested.

One of the reasons for the method not being very successful yet is that students are not responsible enough especially at undergraduate level. A flipped approach requires a special kind of lesson planning and preparation on the part of teachers in order for the process to be most effective and students to be motivated for self-learning.

To improve the situation and increase the effectiveness of flipped approach, this study recommends that training for teachers need to be arranged and materials need to be developed. Teachers should be trained



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technically as well as academically so that they can handle both technology and material design and lesson planning for their flipped classrooms. This will increase their confidence level and motivation for initiating the approach more effectively. To motivate learners for an approach, teachers have to feel motivated for and interested in it first.

Universities can collaborate with universities providing online education in Pakistan viz., Allama Iqbal Open University and Virtual University for training their faculty for effective lesson planning and classroom activities in a flipped classroom situation. With better training, teachers will be able to revamp their lesson plans and hence, make teaching more effective and aligned with flipped learning/teaching.

Equally important is the requirement to revise curriculum and policy decisions in order to align them with virtual academic environments and this involves curriculum designers to be innovative and familiar with the flipped approach, too. Even after implementing the flipped classroom approach, constant and rigorous research needs to be conducted to find out whether the pedagogy of flipping proves to be useful for language teaching in Pakistani context and which aspects of the practice need further attention and improvement.

Students' individual learning styles should be kept in mind to enlighten instructors, course designers and policy makers about how its effectiveness can be increased; what forms homework can take; and what should be the focus of the classroom activities for optimal achievement of the course objectives.

To sum up, flipped model is a very promising approach to language teaching but Pakistani teachers, students and curricula have to go a long way in order to implement it systematically and this requires alignment of practice, policy and research.

Further research can be conducted on students' perceptions regarding their readiness for using the tools necessary for flipped learning. Institutes and decision makers can work on arranging training for teachers as well as students.

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