

FLIPPED MODEL OF INSTRUCTION IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: A KAZAKHSTANI PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The purpose of this pilot study is to explore Kazakhstani students' attitudes towards the ESL instructional videos to identify the features that are the most and least helpful for grammar, vocabulary, and listening skills acquisition. The analysis of students' open-ended questionnaire and statistics from the Analytics section of the Office Mix platform has revealed that ESL students find instructional videos and exercises helpful for grammar, listening comprehension, vocabulary, and pronunciation enhancement. The videos also motivate them to learn English. Additionally, the amount of time spent for the flipped classroom preparation was less than the traditional classroom approach. In respect of technological features, the videos should support subtitles and fonts should be big enough to enable watching them on mobile phones. The instructional videos should offer different types of exercises, instant feedback, and more real-life examples. The background music should be removed from the instructional videos because it can disturb some of the students.

Keywords: Flipped learning, second language acquisition, TESOL.

1 INTRODUCTION

The English language is considered to be the “dominant international language of the 21st century” as it represents a global language of technology, science, diplomacy, and business [1]. The recent British Council [1] report revealed that a quarter of the world's population speaks English. In fact, the non-native speakers of English outnumbered the native English speakers at a ratio of 4 to 1, which is approximately 625,000,000 native speakers compared to 1,125,000,000 non-native speakers worldwide. The British Council predicts that this tendency will increase and two billion people will be using or learning English by 2020. The importance of English as a language of global communication is discussed on the world and national scales. In 2007, the President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, [2] addressed the need of staged implementation of the Language Tri-Unity program where he defined Kazakh as an official language, Russian as a language of intercultural communication, and English as a language of successful integration into the global economy. Since that time, these three languages have taught from a very early age.

In Kazakhstan, the foreign language policy requires students to start learning English as a second language (ESL) in elementary school and keep learning it at the undergraduate and graduate levels. However, regardless of time spent for learning English, Kazakhstani students have low or very low second language proficiency [3]. One of the reasons for students' poor knowledge may be their teachers' use of traditional drill-and-practice methodology and lack of time during the lesson for active forms of learning. Over the past few years, the flipped learning approach attracted a lot of attention from educational scholars around the world. A number of studies in the domain of ESL revealed that the flipped instructions increase students' emotional engagement [4], promote active learning [5], and offers more opportunities for in-class interactions with teachers and peers [5, 6].

Practitioners highlight that the flipped learning model is more effective if students watch the instructional video before the class so that more opportunities arise for collaborative activities and problem-based learning during the class [7-10]. Chu [11] also reported that watching an instructional video before the class enhances ESL students' understanding of the lecture content and working on the interactive exercises during the video lecture enhances their language learning. In fact, learners who watch a video in a target language develop a deeper understanding of words and notions due to the exposure to more contextual information and authentic materials [12]. Moreover, Lindstorm [13] found that students who are taught visually, audibly, and actively work with the materials during instructions understand the subject matter better in comparison to students who are presented information in either a visual or audio form. Thus, the combination of these factors may be a key reason of positive ESL academic performance [6], listening, speaking [11], and writing [14].

Recent research has revealed that ESL students in the flipped classroom spend more time and put more effort outside the class to complete their assignments than students who participate in the traditional classroom [5, 6, 15]. This outcome may be caused by the flipped learning option, which allows students to review the instructional videos as many times as they need for better in-class participation [6]. Furthermore, in spite of the positive attitudes toward the flipped learning pedagogy and increased ESL performance, students may still prefer teacher's explanations in class and favour the traditional instructions over the flipped instructions [5, 14]. This attitude may be linked with the previous students' experience in a traditional teacher-centred classroom; hence, ESL students may be initially hesitant about a new model.

In such a way, emotional engagement in the flipped learning classroom may positively affect students' second language speaking, writing, and listening skills, increase interest in learning, participation, and interactions with other students in class. Although ESL students have positive attitudes towards the flipped learning model, some students may prefer traditional teachers' instructions. Nevertheless, there has been relatively little exploration of the flipped learning model in the ESL context. The purpose of the present pilot study is to discuss the flipped learning model in the domain of ESL and to explore Kazakhstani students' attitudes towards the instructional videos to identify the features of the video that are the most and least helpful for grammar, vocabulary, and listening skills acquisition.

2 METHOD

2.1 Participants

This study consisted of 14 intermediate ESL undergraduates enrolled in the Technical University in Kazakhstan. They came from different majors such as Transport Engineering (22%), Mining Engineering (7%), Computer Science (7%), Economics (7%), Metallurgy (14%), and Civil Engineering (43%). Among the participants, 64% were female and 36% were male. The average age was 19 and the first language backgrounds included Kazakh (57%) and Russian (43%). The participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and no rewards would be provided. The researcher did not have any power-over relationship to the participants. All participants were required to watch two instructional videos outside the classroom using any available technology as well as to complete exercises while watching. Afterwards, they were asked to fill out an online open-ended questionnaire to share their experiences.

2.2 Materials

2.2.1 Instructional Videos

According to the Kazakhstan State English Language curriculum, by the end of a one-year core course undergraduate students should know how to tell about the culture of the target language population as well as their own culture. Another important aspect is English grammar. Students should recognize the grammar patterns and correctly use them in writing and oral speech. Lack of time during the class requires students to spend a significant number of hours outside the classroom for self-acquiring of grammar skills and cultural knowledge. The main issues ESL students face are the pronunciation of the words, listening comprehension, and usage of grammar structures.

Two instructional videos were created to make the process of the self-study more appealing and useful for the students. Both videos were voiced by the native speakers of English and were edited using Office Mix, Sound Forge, and MovieMaker. The six-minute Present Perfect video was aimed to explain the rules and master the grammar skills. All rules were supported with the real-life examples after which students had to do a set of short fill-in the gap exercises. The four-minute cultural video on Nauryz-Meiramy was focused on students' practice of related vocabulary and listening comprehension skills enhancement.

2.2.2 Office Mix

Office Mix is a free Microsoft software program that allows instructors embedding video and audio narrations, simulations, videos, web pages, real-time digital handwriting, as well as interactive quizzes and polls, into the PowerPoint presentations, which can be published online. The Office Mix online platform offers students the opportunity to watch presentations on any device that supports a web browser. They can also download the instructional video and watch it off-line; the interactive quiz option, however, would be blocked. Instructors, in turn, can track the students' progress online, see

how much time they spent watching each slide or the whole presentation, and check their quizzes or polls' answers [15]. Another distinguished feature of the platform is a discussion section under each video where both instructors and students can ask questions, comment on the video, and "like" the best comments.

2.3 Instrument(s)

A pre-study survey retrieved information about the participants' gender, age, first language, second language proficiency, and major at the University. An online open-ended questionnaire was developed to evaluate the students' perceptions towards the instructional videos and to identify the most and least helpful video features and exercises and learn how these features and exercises can be improved. Additionally, the last two questions were aimed to find out if students spent more time preparing for the flipped class in comparison to the traditional class. The open-ended survey consisted of the following questions:

- What do you like most about the instructional videos?
- What features of the instructional videos were the most helpful?
- What do you not like about the instructional videos?
- What features of the instructional videos were the least helpful?
- How can we improve the instructional videos?
- Were the exercises helpful?
- How can we improve the exercises?
- How much time do you usually spend to prepare for an English class?

2.4 Data Analysis Procedure

The data collected from the pilot study included an open-ended questionnaire and statistics from the Analytics section of the Office Mix platform. Participants' answers were grouped by the question to which they refer and then coded by the themes: instructional video features, exercises, and timing. Participants' recommendations for instructional video improvement were added to each theme. The mean amount of time needed for the traditional classroom preparation specified by the participants were compared to the mean amount of time participants spent for working with the instructional videos on the Office Mix platform.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Instructional Video Features

The analysis of the questionnaire established that the students found the instructional videos easy to understand and remember because the instructors' speech was slow and the most important things were stressed out. The language of the video itself was also simple and clear for 93% of the students. One student mentioned that the instructor in a video "explains not worse than our teachers in school". One of the most helpful features for the instructional videos was the option of pausing and re-watching the videos as many times as needed. At the same time, 14% of the students reported that the subtitles would be more beneficial for listening comprehension. Generally, the design of instructional videos was attractive for 38% of students. The 43% of learners who watched the videos on their mobile phones reported that the pictures and font were too small for successful work; therefore, they suggested making the pictures and fonts bigger. The Mendelssohn's Spring Song and Mozart's Piano Concerto no. 1 in F Major II Andante as a background music was destructing for 29% of students and they recommended to change it into a more dynamic or national Kazakh music. Nevertheless, 86% of students reported that the instructional videos motivated them to learn English and were useful for grammar, listening, vocabulary, and pronunciation practice. In addition, students enjoyed working with the Office Mix online platform because it provided a user-friendly interface.

3.2 Exercises

This study revealed that 79% of the students found the exercises helpful; however, 87% would have preferred to do different types of exercises such as matching, guessing, and crosswords. Students also suggested offering a built-in dictionary, instant feedback or discussion of common mistakes in the beginning of the next video, as well as to add more grammar examples. After watching the instructional video, some of the students showed a greater interest in getting understanding of the grammatical peculiarities they faced with the video and asked questions for clarification on the Office Mix webpage.

3.3 Timing

Students reported that they needed approximately 1-2 hours to prepare for a traditional class. By contrast, the Analytics section revealed that students spent approximately 16-40 minutes watching each instructional video and making exercises. In such a way, the results of the current study indicate that ESL learners spend less time for flipped class preparation. At the same time, 7% of students were concerned about time they spent for doing interactive exercises; they pointed out that 40-minute work with a six-minute instructional video is too long.

4 LIMITATIONS

The study has a number of limitations. Biases associate with the convenience sampling technique such as limited generalizability of the results should be taken into consideration [16]. A bigger sample size could provide results that are more accurate and applicable to the students of different backgrounds. Finally, the data used in this study is mostly based on students' self-reported questionnaires. The follow up interviews with the participants and the Likert scale could shed more light on the findings.

5 CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the limitations, the findings from the present pilot study may have some important implications. This research has established that ESL students find instructional videos and exercises helpful for grammar, listening comprehension, vocabulary, and pronunciation enhancement. The videos also motivate them to learn English. Moreover, the amount of time spent for the flipped classroom preparation is less than for the traditional classroom preparation, which makes it more attractive for students. In respect of technological features, the videos should support subtitles and fonts should be big enough to enable watching them on the mobile phones. The instructional videos should offer different types of exercises, instant feedback, and more real-life examples. Since musical tastes may vary and music can disturb some of the students, the background music should be removed from the instructional videos. In terms of educational value, further research should explore what aspects of the flipped learning model are more beneficial for ESL learners: the ability to access to the lecture material at any time, the opportunity to re-watch the video, or more time for teacher-students in-class interactions. The subsequent research should also focus on the ESL teachers' perceptions of the flipped learning model and challenges they face while implementing it.

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