

<https://doi.org/10.22126/tale.2023.2957>

Document Type: Research Paper

Iraqi EFL Learners' Perspectives on Using Flipped Classroom to Enhance Language Learning

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Keywords:

Flipped classroom, EFL, engagement, language learning, CALL

Abstract

The flipped classroom model has not been extensively investigated in English language instruction, specifically in EFL education in Iraq. Despite the growing interest in flipped classrooms as an instructional approach to improve learning outcomes and learner engagement, empirical research on their implementation in these contexts is scarce. This study examined how the flexible classroom model impacted Iraqi EFL university students' language proficiency and learning experiences. By conducting interviews with female Iraqi EFL students, this study investigated the efficacy of the flexible classroom methodology in enhancing language learning achievements and cultivating learner involvement. Over four weeks, a group of female students studying English reading at a university in Iraq participated in a reversed learning approach. After completing this approach, twenty students were interviewed to understand their experiences with flipped learning. The findings showed that flipped learning positively impacted language communication skills and vocabulary development and an independent study of female Iraqi EFL students. The availability of reliable technology, collaborative activities, and teacher support contributed to these positive outcomes. The research study has found that the flipped classroom model can potentially improve language learning outcomes. However, the study also identified certain obstacles and areas that require further investigation. The study also highlights the need for further investigation into the effectiveness of online flexible learning in TEFL contexts and the development of approaches to overcome the obstacles related to its execution.

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Introduction

With the proliferation of technology in education, there has been a significant shift towards learner-centered language learning facilitated by access to digital resources and online platforms. Among the learner-centered instructional approaches gaining prominence is the flipped classroom model, known for its active, collaborative, and peer-assisted learning principles (Akçayır & Akçayır, 2018). Previous research has highlighted the model's potential to enhance learning performance, motivation, autonomy, and engagement (Al-Zahrani, 2015; Aşıksoy & Özdamlı, 2016). The literature on flipped learning in language teaching provides valuable insights into the impact of the flipped classroom model on English language learners. Studies have explored the effectiveness of the flipped classroom in fostering active learning among English language learners Hung (2014).

Additionally, research has indicated that the flipped classroom instructional model positively enhances pupils' academic performance and learning experience in teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) (Ying & Ayub, 2022). Furthermore, the flipped classroom has been associated with promoting learner engagement for the sustainable development of language skills Li & Li (2022) and enhancing learner engagement in the flipped foreign language classroom (Li, 2022).

Moreover, studies have delved into EFL students' perceptions of online flipped classrooms, shedding light on the students' experiences and attitudes toward this mode of learning (Hung, 2022). Additionally, investigations have been conducted on Saudi EFL university students' perceived linguistic gains and learning experiences in flipped classrooms, providing insights into the impact of the flipped classroom model on language performance and learning experiences (Al-Amri, 2022). Furthermore, the flipped classroom's strengths, weaknesses, and effectiveness with Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) in EFL writing classes have been examined, providing valuable implications for language teaching practices (Ghufron & Nurdianingsih, 2021). Moreover, Indonesian EFL teachers' perceptions of the flipped classroom approach in modern classroom contexts have been investigated, highlighting the importance of integrating the flipped classroom approach in language education (Wijaya, 2023). Additionally, the use of flipped classrooms to enhance vocabulary acquisition and EFL learners' performance, perception, and acceptance has been explored, demonstrating positive attitudes of EFL learners toward the practice of flipped learning in English vocabulary classes (Retnaningsih et al., 2022).

However, despite its benefits, implementing the flipped classroom poses both opportunities and challenges (Akçayır & Akçayır, 2018). Therefore, it is imperative to understand the contexts in which the flipped classroom can be most effective, particularly in English language learning environments. This study aims to address this gap by

investigating the impact of the flipped classroom model on Iraqi EFL university students' linguistic gains and learning experiences.

Specifically, the study focuses on implementing the flipped classroom in an EFL university reading course for female students in Iraq. By exploring the integration of the flipped classroom approach in this context, the study seeks to uncover its effects on students' linguistic development and overall language learning experiences. The research aims to address the following question:

- What are Iraqi EFL learners' perspectives on the flipped classroom model?

Literature Review

Flipped learning in the EFL context

The Flipped Classroom approach, also referred to as the 'inverted classroom,' redirects focus from the teacher to the learner (Akçayır & Akçayır, 2018). Common characteristics shared among different flipped classroom approaches include redistributing class and out-of-class time, flipping traditional learning activities, utilizing pre-class and post-class activities, implementing collaborative learning, and leveraging technological resources. Flipped learning definition varies across different contexts. It is sometimes called the blended classroom, which combines traditional teaching with learner-centered discussions and pre-learning materials. Other times, it is associated with just-in-time teaching (Novak, 2011), where instructors prepare pre-class materials to stimulate learners' interest before engaging in classroom tasks. Bergmann and Sams (2012) coined the term "flipped classroom" based on their success in providing students access to short online videos before class.

Bishop and Verleger (2013) define the flipped classroom by emphasizing computer-based pre-class instructions to prepare students for interactive group learning activities during class. They exclude test-based materials and non-video sources.

Studies on flipped classrooms highlight various in-class and out-of-class activities. In-class activities encompass discussions, group work, problem-solving, experiments, quizzes, presentations, and feedback provision. Out-of-class activities include video watching, readings, discussions, reflections, homework, research projects, and presentations (Akçayır & Akçayır, 2018). In the flipped classroom model, teachers create conducive learning environments, guide interactions, encourage participation, facilitate individualized learning, and provide feedback. At the same time, students are expected to take responsibility for their learning, engage in discussions, consume learning materials, and prepare for classes (Ozdamli & Asiksoy, 2016).

Numerous benefits have been associated with the flipped classroom, such as improved learning outcomes, increased engagement, efficient use of class time, and fostering autonomous learning (Akçayır & Akçayır, 2018). However, challenges have also been identified, including time constraints, lack of teacher guidance, difficulty

modifying learning styles, and inadequate technological resources (Wanner & Palmer, 2015; Wilson, 2013).

In the context of EFL learning, the flipped classroom approach offers interactive, enjoyable, and flexible dynamics, promoting collaborative learning and a deeper understanding of learning materials (Unal et al., 2020). Chuang et al. (2018) suggest that EFL learners become responsible scholars in flipped classrooms, exploring information under supportive facilitation. Essential elements for EFL educators implementing the flipped classroom approach include collaborative networking and mutual learning discussions, fostering motivation and interest among learners (Yousufi, 2020). Moreover, enriching learning content design enhances learners' analytical and explorative skills, encouraging critical thinking and insightfulness (Say & Yildirim, 2020).

Previous Studies on the Flipped Classroom in EFL

Numerous investigations have explored implementing the flipped classroom model in language education, with several reviews shedding light on these endeavors. For instance, Filiz and Benzet (2018) analyzed 50 studies employing flipped classrooms in foreign language education, observing a prevalent use of quantitative data sources and research designs. Their focus encompassed assessing students' attitudes, evaluations, academic performance, and writing skills. Similarly, Turan and Akdag-Cimen (2020) highlighted a surge in research on the flipped classroom model in English language education settings since 2015, noting a predominance of mixed or quantitative research methods. Notably, speaking and writing emerged as the most commonly studied language areas. Conversely, Vitta and Al-Hoorie (2020) underscored in their review that their language proficiency rather than age significantly influenced second language students' learning in flipped classrooms.

In the specific context of Saudi Arabia, few studies have explored the use of flipped English language classes. Notable among these is Najmi's (2020) investigation, which employed the flipped classroom to enhance the English language achievement of Saudi primary graders, yielding significant improvements as evidenced by a pre-/post-test design. Ahmed (2016) found a positive impact of the flipped classroom model on Saudi EFL university students' writing skills and language learning attitudes. Similarly, Al-Harbi and Al-Shumaimeri (2016) utilized quantitative and qualitative methods to examine its effect on Saudi female secondary school students' English grammar learning, revealing a notable enhancement in grammar knowledge alongside positive student attitudes.

Several studies have also delved into oral-aural skills. Al-Ghamdi and Al-Bargi (2017) explored the influence of the flipped classroom on Saudi university students' English-speaking skills, albeit not finding a significant impact on skill development. Nevertheless, student responses indicated positive attitudes toward the flipped learning experiences. Alsmari (2020) investigated the impact of flipped learning on Saudi EFL

undergraduates' comprehension of conversational implicatures, noting improvements in comprehension alongside increased motivation for independent learning and self-regulated learning skills development.

While existing studies predominantly adopt quantitative approaches and cover various language areas, a notable dearth of research focuses on reading. Hence, there is a pressing need to explore the application of the flipped classroom in English reading lessons, particularly utilizing qualitative data. Such an approach aligns with Vitta and Al-Hoorie's (2020) call to move beyond mere effectiveness assessments toward understanding when and how flipped learning is optimized.

Numerous studies explored the utilization of the flipped classroom in English language teaching (ELT), revealing four prominent trends: its application on language skills, benefits, implementation challenges, and effectiveness (Turan & Akdag-Cimen, 2019). Studies examining the implementation of the flipped classroom consistently demonstrate favorable outcomes. For instance, Vaezi et al. (2019) observed enhanced listening comprehension in students, while Koroğlu and Çakır (2017) noted improved English-speaking skills among pre-service teachers. Similarly, Zou and Xie (2019) proposed a flipped learning model that surpassed traditional methods in writing performance.

Scholars have investigated the advantages of the flipped classroom in ELT, emphasizing its capacity to foster cooperative and interactive learning experiences (Amiryousefi, 2017) and enhance students' learning motivation through technological integration (Boyras & Ocak, 2017). Other benefits include enhancing learners' preparedness, reducing nervousness, promoting in-depth learning strategies, and enhancing ICT skills (Choe & Seong, 2016; Chen Hsieh et al., 2017).

Challenges encountered in implementing the flipped classroom in ELT encompass technology-related issues (Egbert et al., 2015), heightened workload for both learners and teachers (Yang, 2017), and the necessity for efficient time management to optimize learning outcomes (Zhang, 2017).

Studies evaluating the effectiveness of ELT in flipped classrooms generally support its efficacy (Ahmad, 2016; Meléndez & Iza, 2017). Nonetheless, certain findings indicate mixed results, with specific contexts showing no significant difference compared to traditional instruction (Al-Harbi & Alshumaimeri, 2016; Suranakkharin, 2017).

Methodology

The study used qualitative data collection via semi-structured interviews to address the research inquiries. The qualitative data collected sought to comprehensively examine the perceptions and experiences of female students regarding language learning.

Participants

The study involved EFL students from Babylon University in Iraq. A sample of sixty students was selected from a pool of individuals who had completed at least two years of EFL courses. The sampling technique used was convenience sampling, defined by Mackey and Gass (2005) as a non-probability method that selects individuals who are easily accessible for the study. The research was conducted in adherence to ethical principles. All participants were fully informed about the study's goals and gave their informed consent to take part. They were also informed about the possibility of the research being published. Participants were also informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study if they felt uncomfortable.

Instruments

Interviews

This study used a semi-structured interview to gather data and address the research questions. The aim was to explore the perspectives and attitudes of Iraqi female EFL secondary students towards flipped reading courses. The interview questions were formulated following the study's objectives. The primary objectives of these questions were to explore the students' perspectives regarding the potential linguistic benefits that could have been obtained from participating in the flipped courses, the degree to which the flipped classroom model enhanced their language learning experiences, and their evaluation of the flipped learning opportunities that were presented to them. Before commencing the interviews after the study, these questions were translated into Arabic to aid the students in expressing their thoughts. The students anticipated having difficulties conveying their thoughts precisely in English. Thirty students participated in the interview. The interviews were conducted in Arabic, and the researcher solicited participants voluntarily. The interviews generally lasted 10 to 20 minutes, depending on the depth of the participant's responses. After the interviews, they were transcribed for analysis. Before the interviews, the researcher provided a detailed overview of the objectives, and the confidentiality of all participants was ensured. The identities of all participants were also kept confidential. Here are the guiding questions in the interview:

1. Kindly share your thoughts on your experience with the flipped classroom approach and highlight the key insights gained from it.
2. To what extent has the flipped classroom model contributed to enhancing your proficiency in the English language?
3. Which areas of language learning do you believe have significantly improved through your engagement with flipped learning?
4. How has the flipped classroom methodology influenced your language learning practices outside the traditional classroom? Can you elaborate on any changes

in your learning preferences, such as becoming more visual, auditory, social, or kinesthetic?

5. Have you noticed increased autonomy as an English language learner after your exposure to flipped learning? If yes, which aspects of the flipped approach have facilitated your development as an independent learner?

6. Have you experienced heightened motivation while participating in flipped learning activities? If so, which elements of the flipped method have contributed to your increased motivation as a language learner?

7. What are your thoughts on participating in an English reading course using the flipped classroom methodology? Please elaborate on your reasons for liking or disliking this approach.

Procedures

Flipped Classroom activities

During the research, a three-hour-per-week reading course was chosen as the subject for applying the flexible classroom approach. The study was four academic weeks, including twelve hours devoted to reversed in-class activities. The instructor acquainted herself with the students two weeks before implementing the flexible classroom model. The students were briefed about the model's attributes and how it differed from conventional pedagogical approaches. The students were also introduced to Google Meet. This educational platform was chosen to facilitate the exchange of information, supply course materials, enable discussions regarding allocated assignments, grant access to assignments, and display grades.

Each flipped classroom session was systematically planned and implemented using a ten-step process. At the outset, the class was divided into four-member groups, where each individual was assigned a distinct responsibility (e.g., leader, reader, writer, and editor). The pupils were then provided with audio-recorded reading lessons in advance through the Google Meet platform. Descriptions of designated tasks and primary learning materials were disseminated via the platform. PowerPoint presentations and YouTube videos were among the supplementary materials to enhance the learning experience. The group engaged in various activities, such as responding to reading comprehension questions and completing vocabulary exercises individually. The instructor monitored the students' engagement in these exercises and offered appropriate praise and criticism when necessary. After each session, the instructor would reiterate to the students forthcoming class discussions and homework due dates. The authors collected the semi-structured interviews after four weeks of flipped classroom implementation.

Findings

The researchers meticulously listened to recorded interviews and transcribed them. They reviewed the transcriptions to identify recurring patterns and themes, following the thematic approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The thematic approach involves uncovering, examining, and presenting patterns within the data, aiming to provide detailed descriptions of the dataset. The selection of this method was motivated by its suitability for deeply interpreting data, which is aligned with qualitative research in language education. Ultimately, the researchers presented themes capturing the perceived advantages and disadvantages of using the flipped classroom model, as discussed by Iraqi EFL students. The findings of the thematic analysis are presented in Table.

Table 1. Themes, categories, and examples emerged from the interview data

Theme	Category	Examples
Self-discipline	Motivation	Student 10: “One challenge I faced was maintaining motivation to study independently outside class. It required strong self-discipline.”
	Time management	Student 20: “I found it challenging to manage my time effectively between watching pre-class videos, completing assignments, and attending in-class activities. Balancing these tasks required careful time management.”
Adaptation	Learning format adjustment	Student 16: “A challenge for me was adapting to the new learning format. Shifting from traditional classroom lectures to self-directed study required adjusting my learning approach and habits.”
Technology	Technical issues	Student 7: “One of the challenges I encountered was technical issues accessing online resources and videos. Sometimes, internet connectivity problems or device compatibility issues hindered my learning experience and increased my reliance on technology troubleshooting.”
Peer interaction	Collaboration difficulties	Student 11: “Collaborating with peers outside of class was challenging, especially when coordinating group discussions or completing group assignments. It required effective communication and coordination among group members, which was sometimes difficult to achieve outside the classroom setting.”

Theme	Category	Examples
Content comprehension	Clarification difficulties	Student 5: “Understanding complex concepts or clarifying doubts without immediate teacher guidance was challenging. While the pre-class materials provided valuable information, there were times when I needed additional explanations or examples to fully grasp the content, which was not always readily available outside of class.”
Engagement	Maintaining focus	Student 13: “Staying engaged during pre-class video lectures or self-directed study sessions required a high concentration and focus. Without the immediate interaction or feedback from a teacher, it was sometimes challenging to maintain focus and retain information effectively.”
Assessment	Evaluation uncertainty	Student 9: “One challenge was uncertainty about my progress and performance evaluation. In traditional classrooms, teachers provide immediate feedback on assignments or assessments. Still, with the flipped classroom model, there was often a delay in receiving feedback or clarification on graded assignments, which made it difficult to gauge my learning progress accurately.”

Discussion

The thematic analysis of the challenges reported by students regarding the use of the flipped classroom method reveals several essential insights. These challenges can be broadly categorized into self-discipline, adaptation, technology, peer interaction, content comprehension, engagement, and assessment. One of the prominent challenges highlighted by students is related to self-discipline and motivation. Many students mentioned the difficulty in maintaining motivation to study independently outside of class, indicating the need for solid self-discipline to stay engaged with the pre-class materials and assignments Hung (2014). Adaptation to the new learning format emerged as another significant challenge. Students expressed the need to adjust their learning approach and habits when transitioning from traditional classroom lectures to self-directed study (Samiei & Ebadi, 2021).

Technological issues were also cited as a significant challenge, with students experiencing internet connectivity problems and device compatibility issues (Rukmanta & Yanto, 2022). Peer interaction and collaboration outside the classroom presented additional challenges for students (Zen & Reflianto, 2019). Coordinating group discussions or completing group assignments remotely required effective communication and coordination among group members, which students found challenging to achieve

without the immediate support of a physical classroom environment. Content comprehension emerged as a critical concern, particularly regarding the availability of additional explanations or examples to clarify complex concepts outside of class (Wu, 2023). Maintaining engagement during pre-class study sessions was identified as a significant challenge, with students highlighting the difficulty in staying focused without immediate interaction or feedback from a teacher (Alnahdi et al., 2022). Finally, students mentioned uncertainty about assessment and performance evaluation as a challenge. The delayed feedback on assignments or assessments in the flipped classroom model made it difficult for students to gauge their learning progress accurately and identify areas for improvement (Sya'adah et al., 2022). In conclusion, addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that includes providing adequate support and resources for students to develop self-discipline and motivation, offering guidance and assistance during the adaptation period, ensuring reliable technology infrastructure, facilitating effective peer interaction and collaboration, providing timely feedback and support for content comprehension, designing engaging learning materials, and implementing transparent assessment practices. By addressing these challenges proactively, educators can enhance the effectiveness and success of flipped learning initiatives in language education.

Conclusion

Students have identified several difficulties with implementing the flipped classroom method in language education. These concerns include self-discipline and motivation, adjustment to new learning formats, technological challenges, peer interaction, content comprehension, engagement, and assessment. To overcome these challenges, educators must develop a comprehensive strategy emphasizing transparent communication, technological infrastructure, student support, and pedagogical innovation. Educators should provide guidance and materials to help students develop self-regulation abilities and intrinsic motivation for independent learning. Proactive assistance throughout the adaptation phase can facilitate a smooth transition and minimize opposition to the proposed changes.

Solving technological challenges like internet connectivity and device compatibility issues is crucial to ensure uninterrupted access to educational resources and materials. Effective peer collaboration and interaction are essential for nurturing a sense of community and encouraging collaborative learning. Providing students with quick access to instructor guidance and feedback and developing interactive and captivating learning materials can improve content comprehension. To sustain student interest and participation during pre-class study sessions, educators should implement innovative pedagogical approaches that capitalize on technological advancements and encourage active learning. Transparent assessment practices are also necessary to provide students with prompt feedback and help them advance their education efficiently. By proactively

addressing these challenges, educators can enhance the effectiveness and success of flipped learning initiatives in language education. Ultimately, this will help students achieve their learning objectives and develop the language skills necessary for success in academic and professional settings.

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