

Research on Procedures and Advantages of Flipped Classroom Based on WeChat: Taking English Teaching in Open University as an Example

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Abstract

Flipped Classroom Teaching model has attracted much attention in China's education system, because it reversed the traditional teaching process and innovated a new teaching structure. This study focused on Flipped Classroom English teaching based on Wechat. First it constructed a flipped classroom teaching model based on WeChat and showed three procedures including before-the-class, during-the-class and after-the-class. It has also revealed three advantages which are focusing English core competences, creating a U-learning environment and sharing digital opportunities. At last suggestions for further study were given.

Key words: Procedures and advantages; Flipped classroom; WeChat; English teaching; Open university

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INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the Ministry of Education in China issued a plan called Education Informatization 2.0 Action Plan which marked the entry of China's education informatization into 2.0 era. In this era, education informatization aimed to promote structural changes in education system while the key lied in the innovation of classroom teaching

structure. Flipped classroom reversed the inherent teaching structure of 'knowledge transmission in class and consolidation after class' and fundamentally changed the relationship between teaching and learning. Therefore, it has been considered as an effective way to promote the informatization process and structural changes of education system in the end.

English teaching in China's Open University system has constantly evolved with the development of information and network technology. It has been a consensus that a new direction of English teaching reform was the deep integration of information technology (especially the network technology) and English teaching practice which has also become an important content of English subject capacity building. Nowadays, almost all adult Chinese people communicated with Wechat installed in the smartphones, including the adult English learners. They used it not only for daily communication, but also for learning and working. So it was necessary and significant to construct a flipped classroom English teaching model and explored how it worked.

1. DEVELOPMENT OF FLIPPED CLASSROOM ABORAD AND IN CHINA

What is the definition of flipped classroom? This brand-new teaching model was done in information environment in which learners got new knowledge by themselves through on-line materials provided by the teachers, while during the face-to-face teaching both learners and the students gathered together to discuss or do experimental and exploratory learning activities (He, 2014). In the first step, learning materials might include course videos, web-articles and so on.

How did flipped classroom start? The most accepted saying by academic circles was the teachers in Woodland Park High School located in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado first used flipped classroom. The two chemistry

teachers named Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams provided online audios, coursewares and other on-line learning materials. And in this way the students taking sick leave could learn by themselves and keep up with others. Gradually those students who did not take sick leave also used this method to review and reinforce what they had learned at school and achieved good results. Therefore, these two teachers proposed the teaching model named flipped classroom, which was exactly the opposite of the traditional 'teachers teaching in class and the students practicing after the class'. At the very beginning, flipped classroom was used in limited areas and countries due to the lack of high-quality online teaching and learning resources. When Salman Khan, a Bangladeshi-American, released a short teaching video on the YouTube without any fee, and gradually established the Khan Academy which focused on making such videos. The development of Khan Academy had provided a powerful support for the wide spread of the flipped classroom around the world.

As the successful practice on flipped classroom increased in other countries, scholars and participants in China's education system started to explore the Chinese version of flipped classroom. In 2011, Jukui Middle School in Chongqing integrated the curriculum and information technology and took the first step in flipped classroom exploration in China. This school thus became the pioneer on the way of constructing 'the Future School'. The next year Nanshan Experimental School in Shenzhen started their own exploration. Teachers prepared teaching videos and uploaded to the 'cloud'. The students could download the videos anywhere and anytime. After that teachers analyzed the learning results and focused on the key problems of the students. Accordingly they could take action to solve these problems. The whole process was summarized as 'Three-Steps-and-Five-Links' model. In 2013, East China Normal University together with administrative departments of education in some provinces and twenty senior middle schools which were national famous to establish C20-Mooc Union. The union aimed to provide high-quality online teaching video resources and furthered the flipped classroom teaching.

Meanwhile college English teachers and researchers began to explore flipped classroom teaching reform from different aspects, such as reading, translation, oral and listening which set a good example for others (Jia, 2016; Jiang, 2018; Zhu, 2015). But such studies mainly focused on college English teaching for the full-time students, studies on adult learners in the open universities were less. On the other side, adult learners in open universities were usually full-time employees and not got enough time on learning. They needed a more convenient and effective learning mode. That was how this study came. It was of importance and significance to explore a flipped classroom teaching model based on Wechat for adult learners in the open universities.

2. EDUCATIONAL FUNCTION OF WECHAT

With the development of smart mobile devices and communication technology, the App of Wechat became more and more popular as an immediate communication tool, because it was easy to use and rich in resources. Statistics had shown that WeChat's popularity had grown dramatically since its launch in 2011, and so far it had a large number of users, including adult English learners of open universities. In fact Wechat had been widely used in many other social sectors. For example, now almost every department and organization would use a WeChat official account as a tool to dynamically release its latest information. Meanwhile, a lot of individuals wrote original articles or posted short videos on Wechat to set up their own business in which Wechat was a good platform. There were many successful cases in social or business parts, and its application and development in education system needed further research.

In this study, Wechat would be applied to provide technical support of flipped classroom teaching. First, Wechat could send multiple forms of interaction like pictures, voices and files. With Wechat group and official account, teachers could share English learning materials such as learning tasks, contents and coursewares with the students. They would understand current learning tasks in a timely, comprehensive and accurate manner, and also clarify objectives in self-directed learning. Secondly, there were a great number of official accounts which contained rich and high quality English learning resources for the students to get more choices. This could make English teaching and learning much more attractive and efficient. Thirdly, Wechat offered instant interaction with which users could do interactive activities among teachers and learners. Learners could ask questions online and be given answers immediately, which enhanced teacher-student relationship, and created a good teaching atmosphere. There had been mini applications that could be accessed without downloading since 2017. Teachers could conduct attendance, online exams to help learners arrange learning progress more effectively. Finally, flipped classroom teaching based on Wechat fully met the personalized development needs of English learners in open universities. For example, teachers made individual learning plans by collecting learners' feedback information. Under the teachers' guidance, learners could carry out learning process in their own pace to increase their interest and improve efficiency in English learning.

3. PRACTICE OF FLIPPED CLASSROOM BASED ON WECHAT

College English was a compulsory course for every single learner who registered in the nation-wide Open University

system. In 2018, the Open University of China decided to launch a new round of college English teaching reform in order to upgrade teaching materials and transfer teaching paradigm. Therefore, a new set of textbooks had been adapted and advanced teaching methods based Internet had been preferred. There were 20 adult learners in this flipped classroom college English teaching based on Wechat who majored in Network Engineering, Civil Engineering and Information Technology. The coursebook English for Technology and Engineering 3 aimed to improve learners' ability and competence to communicate at their workplaces. There were 8 units covering the topics of environment protection, E-commerce, green home design and etc. Each unit had four sections of Learning Objectives, Getting started, Listening & Speaking and Reading & Writing activities.

There were roughly two types of flipped classroom teaching model in practice. They were flipped classroom teaching models with two phases and three phases. The former included in-class and after-class two phases and the latter included before-class, during-class and after-class three phases. Generally speaking, teachers would assign tasks for the learners to consolidate language knowledge and skills, so in this study the three-phase teaching model was constructed.

3.1 Before the Class

The first phase was self-learning under the teacher's guidance. First the teacher uploaded the resources such as didital text, audio and video materials in Wechat group. Next the learners browsed the resources and finished all the tasks on the task sheet. Among all the resources, teaching videos played a very important role. The effectiveness of self-learning was related to the quality of teaching videos to some extent, so the teacher needed to require in-depth understanding of the students' starting point, the key language points and difficult points. Teachers could look for free on-line resources or prepare by themselves. Another point that teachers should pay attention to was the length of teaching videos. Vedios too long were not recommended. In this study teachers generally provided three videos every week and each one was within 15 minutes.

Learners could choose where and when to learn in the Wechat group which gave them more autonomy. But it did not mean that autonomous learning at this stage was aimless or without any guide. Instead teachers had some follow-up steps by scientifically designing the task sheet. Learners might be asked to inquire about job interview, write online job advertisements, or talk about online entertainment after self-learning and then the teachers would know whether they fully achieved teaching objectives.

Then in this phase, how did Wechat function? At the very beginning of the flipped classroom teaching, both of

the teacher and the learners set up the Wechat Group and draw up the rules of speaking to create a good English learning atmosphere. In this study, 20 learners were also divided into 4 teams with a team leader responsible for inner communication. So here Wechat group worked as a platform where the teachers displayed autonomous learning resources and the learners did self-learning.

3.2 During the Class

During face-to-face part, teachers elaborately planned and carried out classroom teaching activities and learners completed knowledge internalization. Teachers first explained the key points quickly and helped learners to solve problems. After that they moved onto deep-learning during which learners would do it with group members or on their own. Teamwork such as group discussion, brainstorm could develop their ability of communication and cooperation while individual exploration such as mind mapping could promote their independent thinking. Finally learners displayed what they had done previously. In the whole process, teachers acted as a facilitator, an organizer and a guider instead of a decision maker or a knowledge transferor.

Teachers should follow two principles in designing face-to-face activities: experiential and communicative. Experimental activities encouraged learners to construct knowledge in real social context and communicative activities supported them to complete communication tasks by using English language. As everyone knows, learning English did not only let learners master language knowledge of English, but also let them master English communication competence. For this reason, teachers needed to create a supportive environment to encourage adult learners to open mouth and practice.

3.3 After the Class

The third phase is evaluation and feedback. Flipped classroom teaching emphasized learners' dominant position in the whole process, so their active participation did benefit the teaching effect. In this study, the teachers would evaluate learners with different forms of tasks. For example, learners were asked to upload a voice audio talking about his or her opinions on online entertainment, or post an online job advertisement or take a quiz on the language points they'd learned. When the learners finished the task, they would upload their works in Wechat group. Each of them could watch or listen to the works and could learn from each other. Finally teachers would access the effect and give a grade according to what learners uploaded in the Wechat. If the learners had any questions, they could ask teachers on line for help. It had been very useful, especially for the learners who had learning difficulties, because they could get feedback immediately. When three phases ended, both the teachers and learners did reflection on what they did to get better preparation for the next turn.

4. ADVANTAGES OF FLIPPED CLASSROOM BASED ON WECHAT

When this study finished after half a year, the researcher carried out a questionnaire and non-formal interviews both on the teacher and the learners. The result showed that the new flipped classroom teaching was welcomed by both sides. Among all 20 adult learners, 90% were willing to continue the course in flipped classroom manner. *"We can talk directly with classmates and the teacher in Wechat and this makes us closer"*, *"If we have questions, we can ask our teacher and get a quick feedback."* Some learners said in the interview. *"Of course I want to go on this way because more learners are willing to speak and do after-class assignments"* the teacher said. Comparing to the traditional teaching model, the new model had the following advantages in general.

4.1 Focusing English Language Competence

For the learners, the ultimate goal of flipped classroom was not only to acquire English language knowledge but also to promote core competence of English. The so-called core competence of English language had four dimensions, including the ability to understand and communicate, skills of international understanding and cross-cultural communication, ability of thinking in English, awareness of lifelong learning and autonomous learning (Cheng, 2016). In the first phase, the teacher guided learners to carry out self-learning to develop their autonomous awareness and ability. The teacher would set and concretize self-learning steps and goals, teach them the tips and grade the results in the end. During the period of face-to-face teaching, the experimental and exploratory activities made learners master English language knowledge and skill, cultivated their collaboration. Both autonomy and collaboration were important for lifelong learning.

4.2 Constructing U-learning Environment

In China, almost every adult got a smart phone installed with Wechat. People could keep touch with others anywhere and anytime. Thus the flipped classroom teaching based Wechat constructed a U-learning environment. U-Learning was an intelligent learning method supported by ubiquitous computing or mobile network system (Xue, 2019). Learners could make full use of time confetti such as the time spent on the way home or waiting in line for coffee. Their learning space broke the limit of classroom and reconstructed the concept of classroom. In other words, any place where learners used Wechat could be defined as a classroom and this would dramatically improve their learning effectiveness.

4.3 Sharing Digital Opportunities

During the process of Education Informatization, different regions and schools tended to cause the trend of

information polarization due to the gap of infrastructure, application and innovation in information and network technology. So in some regions and schools with rich resources, teachers and learners could reach the most advanced devices to carry out flipped classroom teaching while those with poor resources could not. But the situation had changed since Wechat was introduced in flipped classroom teaching. Because smart phones and Wechat were easy to reach and use for ordinary people, anyone who wanted to take part in flipped classroom English teaching could try by themselves. In this way, they could share the digital opportunities and bridge the 'digital divide'.

5. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

The present study had explored the teaching procedures and advantages of flipped classroom teaching based on Wechat. In this section, some suggestions for further study were pointed out.

The new College English teaching model of flipped classroom put forward higher requirements for teachers. They should improve their information and technology skills because they needed to make videos, look for online English resources. They should schedule more free time to tutor learners on line and design attractive activities in face-to-face teaching. This might increase their workload and take up their personal time. In order to deal with the potential obstacles, it was strongly recommended to set up a community of flipped classroom English teaching in which every teacher's strength was added together and made the teaching easier and more effective.

The new teaching model also put forward higher requirements for learners. It was found that learners should work hard on the self-learning before the class. If they could not try their best in self-learning, they tended to be unable to participate in the following activities and gradually lagged behind. That was how learners were divided according to different grades. To avoid this situation, teachers could try these methods. First teachers should pay more attention to design the whole teaching process to make it more interesting and useful. Second, teachers should formulate reasonable assessment system with process evaluation and final evaluation. Last but not least, to those who lagged behind, teachers should push and support them by tutoring on line, so they could catch up with others step by step.

Education informatization promoted continuous innovation of English teaching in open universities. So far, the previous practice and studies had shown that this flipped classroom based on Wechat could stimulate learners' interests and improve English teaching quality. And how to apply this model better still needed further exploration and it was also a potential direction for us to probe.

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