Flipping English Teaching in Open University Based on WeChat: Model and Reflection

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Abstract

The flipped classroom teaching has now attracted much attention and been widely applied in China's education system in order to promote teaching modernization and innovation. This study tries to construct the flipped classroom teaching model based on WeChat and carry out it in College English learning of Open University. This teaching model consists of three procedures including before-the-class, during-the-class and after-the-class, which reverses the traditional teaching process and innovates a new teaching structure. After practice, it has been found that flipped classroom teaching can focus English language competence, construct U-learning environment and share digital opportunities.

Key words: Flipped classroom; WeChat; English teaching; Open university

INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning within higher education continues to evolve with the innovation of information and communication technology (especially the network technology), and English teaching in China's Open University makes no exceptions. Nowadays, almost all adult English learners in Open University are willing and able to utilize modern learning equipment to make their English learning more efficient and effective. And thus blended teaching such as flipped classroom teaching has been increasingly accepted and used in daily teaching practice. So, it is necessary and significant to construct a flipped classroom English teaching model and explore how it works.

As we know, teachers of Woodland Park High School in Rocky Mountains of Colorado first used flipped classroom teaching in 2007. At the very beginning, this brand-new instructional model was only 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 short teaching videos 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.

The flipped classroom teaching model switches the activities traditionally done in class with those completed after class. Learners first need to finish direct instruction by themselves such as viewing a lecture online, and in face-to-face teaching section both learners and the teachers gather together to discuss or do experimental and exploratory activities (He, 2014). By doing so, flipped classroom style is able to help learners engage in active learning and become much more involved during the lesson sessions by accomplishing small group discussions, or in-depth investigations.

1. DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY IN OPEN UNIVERSITY

In 1979, China Central Radio and Television University and 28 other provincial and municipal ones were established, symbolizing the starting point of distance open education in China. Since the very beginning, its

teaching and learning has always developed with the integration of information technology and curriculum. Generally speaking, it is said that the development of integration of information technology and curriculum go through three periods, which include Computer-assisted instruction, Computer-assisted learning and Information technology and curriculum integration (He, 2012).

1.1 Computer-assisted Instruction (CAI)

Since the invention of the computer, Computer-Assisted Instruction (CAI) was gradually applied to English teaching. In Open University system, computers help teachers of English to vividly display the teaching contents, activate students' motivations and enhance the interactions between students and teachers in classroom so as to create a good learning atmosphere. In early period, teachers simply used computers to make PPT, CAI courseware, documents to replace the traditional blackboard. Computer-Assisted Instruction (CAI) did make English teaching and learning more attractive, but the traditional teacher-centered teaching model still played a very important role.

1.2 Computer-Assisted Learning (CAL)

With the development of information technology, especially the network technology, auxiliary teaching tools such as multimedia courseware, videos can no longer meet the requirements of English teaching reform in Open University and since 1980s Computer-Assisted Learning (CAL) comes. Different from CAI, the focus of CAL begins to transfer from teaching to learning. That is to say, computer has been a useful tool both for students' autonomous learning and teachers' teaching. For example, teachers and learners can collect materials, ask or answer questions on line, do self-tests and schedule plans, etc. with the help of CAL. However，because of the influence of traditional teaching understanding, CAL teaching model still highlights teachers' teaching instead of learners' learning.

1.3 Information Technology and Curriculum Integration (ITCI)

Since the mid-1990s, a new direction of the application of information technology in education is Information Technology and Curriculum Integration (ITCI) and instantly becomes the focus of education research and practice both abroad and in China. In this period, network technology has been so widely used in people's daily activities, such as shopping, communication, learning and so on. Therefore researchers in education area pay more and more attention on how to integrate information, especially network technology with learning and teaching. In digital era, the widespread of mobile devices such as tablet PC, smart phones in teaching area make that anyone learns at any time anywhere possible. And thus various new teaching models appear, including flipped classroom teaching, in which the traditional teacher-centered

framework has been broken and the teaching structure has also undergone major changes. The teacher is no longer the only owner of knowledge, and the classroom is no longer the only place where teaching and learning takes place.

2. PRACTICE OF FLIPPED CLASSROOM TEACHING MODEL BASED ON WECHAT

2.1 WeChat in Education

With the development of smart mobile devices and communication technology, the App WeChat becomes more and more popular as an immediate communication tool. Statistics has shown that WeChat's popularity had grown dramatically since its launch in 2011, and so far it has attracted 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. At the same time a lot of individuals write original articles or post short videos on WeChat to set up their own business in which WeChat functions as a good platform. There are many successful cases in social area or business, and its application and development in education system needs further research.

In this study, WeChat would be applied to provide technical support of flipped classroom teaching. First, WeChat can 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 courseware with the learners. They could understand current learning tasks in a timely, comprehensive and accurate manner, and also clarify objectives in self-directed learning. Secondly, there are a great number of official accounts which contain rich English learning resources of high quality for the students to get more choices. This could make English teaching and learning much more attractive and efficient. Thirdly, WeChat can offer 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 create a good teaching atmosphere. There also have 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 meets the personalized development needs of English learners in open universities. For example, teachers make 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.

2.2 Background Information of College English Teaching in Open University

College English is a compulsory course for every single learner who registered in the 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 were adapted and advanced teaching methods based Internet had been preferred. In this study, 20 adult learners participate in the flipped classroom college English teaching based on WeChat who majored in Network Engineering, Civil engineering and Information Technology. The course book English for Technology and Engineering 3 aims to improve learners' ability and competence to communicate at their workplaces. There are 8 units covering the topics of environment protection, E-commerce, green home design and etc. Each unit has four sections of Learning Objectives, Getting started, Listening & Speaking and Reading & Writing activities.

2.3 Model of Flipped Classroom Teaching Based on WeChat

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

2.3.1 Before Class

The first phase is self-learning under the teacher's guidance. First the teacher uploads the resources such as digital texts, audio and video materials in WeChat group. Next, the learners browse the resources and finish all the tasks according to the task sheet. Among all the resources, teaching videos play a very important role. The effectiveness of self-learning is closely related to the quality of teaching videos to some extent, so the teacher needs to require in-depth understanding of the learners' starting point, the key language points and difficult points. Teachers also could find out on-line resources or prepare by themselves. Another point that teachers should pay special attention is the length of teaching videos. Videos too long are not recommended. In this study teachers generally provide three videos every week and each one is within 15 minutes.

The learners could choose where and when to watch the videos in WeChat group which gives them more autonomy. But it does not mean that autonomous learning at this stage is aimless or without any guide.

Instead, teachers have 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 achieve teaching objectives.

Then, in this phase how does 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 are divided into 4 teams with a team leader responsible for inner communication. So here WeChat group works as a platform where the teachers display autonomous learning resources and the learners do self-learning.

2.3.2 During Class

During face-to-face part, teachers elaborately plan and carry out classroom teaching activities and learners complete knowledge internalization. Teachers first explain the key points quickly and help learners to solve problems. After that they move on to deep-learning during which learners will do it with group members or on their own. Teamwork such as group discussion, brainstorm could develop learners' ability of communication and cooperation while individual exploration such as mind mapping could promote their independent thinking. Finally learners display what they have done previously. In the whole process, teachers act 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 encourage learners to construct knowledge in real social context and communicative activities support them to complete communication tasks by using English language. As everyone knows, learning English does not only let learners master language knowledge of English, but also let them master English communication competence. For this reason, teachers need to create a supportive environment to encourage adult learners to open mouth and practice.

2.3.3 After Class

The third phase is evaluation and feedback. Flipped classroom teaching emphasizes learners' dominant position in the whole process, so their active participation does benefit the teaching effect. In this study, the teachers would evaluate learners with different forms of tasks. For example, learners are 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've learned. When the learners finish the task, they would upload their works in WeChat group. Each of them could watch or listen to the video or audio and could learn from each other. Finally, teachers would access the effect and grade learners' performance

immediately online. If the learners have any questions, they can ask teachers on line for help. It is very useful, especially for the learners who have learning difficulties, because they could get answers immediately. When three phases end, both the teachers and learners do reflection on what they did to get better preparation for the next teaching and learning turn.

3. REFLECTION ON FLIPPED CLASSROOM TEACHING BASED ON WECHAT

3.1 Advantages of Flipped Classroom Teaching Based on WeChat

When this study lasted for 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. "O*f 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.

3.1.1 Focusing English Language Competence

For the learners, the ultimate goal of flipped classroom teaching is not only to acquire English language knowledge but also to promote core competence of English. The so-called core competence of English language has 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). Because the flipped classroom teaching transfers the teacher-centered into the learner-centered, learners have more time to practice English in different tasks. In the first phase, teachers guide learners to carry out self-learning to develop their autonomous awareness and ability. Teachers 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 make learners master English language knowledge and skill, cultivated their collaboration. Both autonomy and collaboration are important for lifelong learning.

3.1.2 Constructing U-learning Environment

In China, almost every adult gets a smart phone installed with WeChat. People could keep touch with others anywhere and anytime. With the help of smart phones,

this teaching model based on WeChat can construct a U-learning environment. U-Learning is an intelligent learning method supported by ubiquitous computing or mobile network system (Xue, 2019). Learners are able to make full use of time confetti such as on the way home or waiting in line for coffee. Their learning space breaks the limit of classroom and reconstructs the concept of classroom. In other words, any place where learners can use WeChat could be defined as a classroom and this would dramatically improve their learning effectiveness.

3.1.3 Sharing Digital Opportunities

During the process of education informatization, different regions and schools tend 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 use the most advanced devices and make their teaching more interesting and efficient while those with poor resources could not. But the situation can be improved since WeChat is introduced in flipped classroom teaching. Because smart phones and WeChat are easy to get and use for ordinary people, anyone who wants 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'.

3.2 Prerequisites for Deepening Flipped Classroom Teaching

The present study has explored the teaching procedures and advantages of flipped classroom teaching based on WeChat. In this section, some suggestions for further study will be pointed out.

3.2.1 For the Teachers

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 need to make videos and find out 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 is strongly recommended to set up a team of flipped classroom English teaching in which every teacher's strength will be added together and made the teaching easier and more effective.

3.2.2 For the Learners

The new teaching model also put forward higher requirements for learners. It has been found that learners should work hard on the self-learning before the class. If they could not try their best in self-learning, they tend 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 lagged behind, teachers should push and support them by tutoring on line, so they could catch up with others step by step.

CONCLUSIONS

The study constructs the flipped classroom teaching model of College English in an open university. In practice of this model, teachers lay special emphasis on the learners and integrate knowledge, skills and emotions to cultivate learners' ability of inquiry and high-level thinking skills. So far, the previous practice and studies has 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 needs further exploration and it is also a potential direction for us to probe.

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