Chapter 9

Academic Writing in the Flipped EFL Classroom: A Case Study on Student Engagement in Oman

Afef Ahmed Gasmi
Middle East College, Oman

Michael Thomas
University of Central Lancashire, UK

ABSTRACT

During the last few years flipped classrooms have aimed to provide more authentic forms of student engagement in which learners have greater opportunity to utilise classroom time more effectively. This chapter reports on a preliminary study conducted in a private higher education institution in Oman involving 16 students enrolled in Level 3 of the English GFP (General Foundation program). It investigated the effect of the flipped model on the engagement of EFL (English as Foreign Language) learners in writing skills, focusing specifically on their cognitive, behavioural, emotional, and agentic levels of engagement. Students’ self-report questionnaires and focus group interviews were used in a mixed methods approach. The results revealed that students’ overall level of behavioural and emotional engagement was closely related to their cognitive engagement and agency. The chapter calls for more research on the flipped classroom in relation to writing skills as well as the need to identify strategies to help with the extra non-classroom activities required of them.

INTRODUCTION

‘Flipping the classroom’, an instructional model in which homework and input material are completed by students before the class rather than after it, has been widely implemented for several years in the STEM field (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) both at secondary and tertiary level (Yarboo, Arfstrom, McKnight, & McKnight, 2014). According to this reversal of the traditional order,
more in-class time as a result can be devoted to discussions, projects and other forms of meaningful interaction. Researchers including Baepler, Walker and Driessen (2014), Davies, Dean and Ball (2013), Mason, Shuman and Cook (2013), Moravec, Williams, Aguitar-Roca and O’Dowd (2010), and Schlingensiepen (2014), to name but a few, have reported a range of positive results arising from studies in which a flipped instructional approach has been developed in this disciplinary context. Among many other benefits, it is believed that flipped instruction enhances students’ academic engagement and motivation (Moravec et al., 2010), both important factors that play a significant role in students’ general academic progress (Baron & Corbin, 2012).

On the other hand, research into flipped EFL instruction is still in its infancy. The research studies that have been conducted in this field to date have been limited both in scope and methodological rigor. For this reason, the EFL literature base, for instance, lacks research that outlines the classroom design principles underpinning this approach and how this instructional model could be implemented, particularly in terms of teaching various language skills. Moreover, although few studies have explored the perceptions of EFL students of this instructional model, the existing studies often lack empirical rigor, transparency and depth and this may reduce the value their findings and recommendations. Furthermore, research studies which have examined the way flipped instruction influences students’ engagement in various English language skills such as academic writing are extremely limited, if they exist at all. In addressing these concerns and elisions, this chapter reports on the results of a preliminary study conducted at a higher education institution in Oman, which aimed to investigate the effects of flipped instruction on the various dimensions of foundation students’ engagement in an EFL academic writing course.

BACKGROUND

Lack of student engagement in the EFL classroom has been a concern of a number of academic studies (Kuh, Hu, & Vesper, 1997; Sheard, Carbone, & Hurst, 2010). Several authors including Al Mahrooqi (2012) and Al Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014) have argued that academic writing constitutes a major challenge to many EFL students in Oman, and it is often perceived as a source of disengagement. Engagement is conceptualized here as a multidimensional construct which involves four primary areas, namely, emotional, behavioural, cognitive, and agentic aspects (Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). According to Skinner and Belmont (1993) engaged students are both behaviourally involved and emotionally positive. Consequently, they invest ‘intense’ and ‘concentrated effort’ while completing learning tasks and are ‘enthusiastic,’ ‘optimistic,’ ‘curious,’ and ‘interested’ in the learning process. In addition, these students utilize ‘deep thinking skills’ which reflects a high level of cognitive engagement. Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon and Barch (2004) used agentic engagement theory to describe the degree to which students with this profile deliberately and constructively contribute to their own learning over time.

The four engagement dimensions are highly significant indicators of student success. According to Krause (2005) engagement guarantees learning since engaged students ‘persevere,’ ‘persist,’ and ‘show interest’ — all of which are crucial for ‘deep learning’ to take place. Tross, Harper, Osherr, and Kneidinger (2000) pointed out that students’ grades are also affected by their engagement levels, which ultimately impacts on their academic progress. Furthermore, Finn and Zimmer (2012) claimed that students who are academically engaged are more satisfied with their educational experience and succeed in transferring the abilities they develop in-class to the workplace, unlike their disengaged counterparts. This