An Investigation into Using Flipped Classroom Model in an Academic Writing Class in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Taking cognizance of challenges of 21st century learning and the ubiquitous technologies available, a course applying flipped classroom model with a detailed combination of in-class and out-of-class activities was utilized to teach an academic writing module. The study aimed to (1) find out the effects of flipped classroom model towards improving learners’ writing achievements and (2) investigate learners’ attitudes towards this approach. 40 English-major freshmen at the Banking University of Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam participated in the study during the second semester of the 2016-2017 academic year. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected to ensure the reliability as well as the validity of the results. Analysis of this data revealed that this model was beneficial as it not only improved learners’ performance in the final exam but also brought about positive attitudes towards the learning process. Finally, suggestions on how the model could be improved and better utilized are also discussed so that positive learning outcomes in academic essay writing could be obtained.

KEYWORDS
Academic Essay Writing, Attitudes, Banking University of Ho Chi Minh City, Case Study, Discourse Approach, Flipped Learning, Flipped Model, Mixed Method, Performance

1. INTRODUCTION

Although the EFL training in Vietnam has experienced a shift from the traditional Grammar-Translation Method to Blended-Language Learning in recent years, activities in which students take a proactive role are scarce and the traditional writing classes are still dominant. For example, many Vietnamese writing instructors still stick closely to conventional methods (i.e. in-class silent practice) which not only hinder students’ performance but also de-motivate them (Dang, 2010; Nguyen Thi Mai & Hall, 2016). Moreover, the role students are supposed to take during the learning process is minimal compared to the authoritative position of the lecturers (Pham & Tran, 2013). Therefore, with a view to changing the current situation, this study drew on a suggested flipped classroom model combining a technology-enhanced environment for out-of-class activities and a discourse approach for collaborative in-class sessions in an academic writing class to evaluate its effectiveness on learners’ performance and to shed light on how Vietnamese students perceived each element of this innovative model.

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Three main reasons underpin the motivation for this study. First, a review of recent literature shows that flipped classrooms are not always effective in improving students’ learning outcomes as well as attitudes compared to non-flipped classrooms if both methods utilized an active learning, constructivist approach (Betihavas et al., 2016; Pienta, 2016; Whillier & Lystad, 2015). Therefore, additional research should be conducted to explicitly define the values connected to flipped models. Second, certain studies claim that social-sciences subjects may be less suited to flipping than science and engineering disciplines (Johnson, Bender, & Oldham, 2015). Hence, the desire to investigate the feasibility of this method in an academic writing classroom has inspired researchers to bridge the literature gap. Finally, most designs of flipped classrooms have been limited to a mere replacement of in-class lectures with home-based video-recorded lessons and use of class time for exercises, discussions and practice (Kim et al., 2014). However, the questions of what framework should be used to integrate critical-thinking activities into the teaching process and what techniques can facilitate collaborative environment inside the classroom are still left unanswered. Hence, there are numerous calls for further research into how this approach should be implemented in terms of in-class instructional designs to maximize its positive impacts (Abeysekera & Dawson, 2015; O’Flaherty & Phillips, 2015). Consequently, a detail model of in-class activities using discourse approach was adopted in this study to reveal how classtime was used for creating meaningful activities, brainstorming logical ideas, and writing practice. Meanwhile, digital tools were exploited to show how out-of-class tasks were allocated to enhance learners’ academic performance.

2. FRAMEWORK AND PROCEDURE

The framework of this study is built upon 2 main cores: Technology as a mediational tool for out-of-class activities and Learning theory applying discourse approach for in-class instructions. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between these parts as follows.

An online writing platform was created so that students could log in with their accounts, download lessons and assignments. It consisted of three main functions: Announcements, Writing Samples, and Group Forum. The “Announcements” was comprised of latest updates, task specifications, pre-recorded videos and presentations so that learners could download them for preparations and revision. The “Writing Samples” included essays of former students and professional experts for reflection and self-study. Finally, the “Group Forum” allowed students to exchange ideas and disseminate information for their writing tasks. In short, technology in this study was a mediational tool for the teaching process, and interactions between students, teachers, and the online environment were of great significance.

As regards out-of-class activities, students were required to watch pre-recorded lectures and do basic tasks such as taking notes, tracking down unknown words, and exploring new concepts. The videos were taken from both online resources and teacher-made materials based on the course objectives and curriculum. Afterwards, learners did some preparatory exercises related to the video contents, such as multiple choice, gap filling, mistake correction, brainstorming, or re-ordering. Portfolios including the notes and preparatory tasks were marked as part of the formative assessment which accounted for 20% of the total grades to ensure learners’ preparations. As these skills did not require teacher’s assistance, students could understand the theories before coming to class and class time was dedicated to teacher’s clarification of unclear contents, collaborative activities and writing practice.

The in-class procedure adapted from the discourse framework of Wennerstrom (2003) consisted of five elements: Revision of prior knowledge, Text deconstruction, Joint negotiation, Individual construction, and Peer review. First, previous lessons and video-related contents were revised through games, quizzes, mini-tests, or homework correction to check learners’ understanding as well as to identify their difficult problems. Second, Exploratory activities allowed learners to get involved in a critical analysis of the way in which authentic texts were organized, and how the organization was
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