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A Study on the Introduction of Flipped Classroom to Chinese EFL Students

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Abstract: This study delves into the effects of implementing a FC model in teaching L2 grammar to Chinese students at the university level, in which the traditional learning procedure was reversed by replacing in-class grammar instruction with input presented in the form of pre-class online materials like PPT and online video. The idea of inquiring into the attitudinal change of Chinese EFL learners towards FC is central to this study with an attempt to explain it. The participants were 30 EFL students who have completed their education from primary school to university in China, with the expectation that they can further their studies in Australian schools. Three instruments were used to collect data: three questionnaires were distributed at different stages of curriculum development to collect quantitative data for revealing the changing trajectory of students' attitudes towards FC, along with the qualitative data acquired from interviews to dig into the root of students' perspective toward FC classroom. The results indicated a promising trend regarding the students' perspectives on FC, that is, students' attitude towards FC was becoming increasingly positive in despite of a rather low starting point.

1. Introduction

Flipped class (FC), as a type of pedagogy that integrates active learning and social engagement into class, provides students with spaces in which they can consolidate the acquired knowledge through various activities [1]. It is a pedagogy that is mainly embraced by teachers and educators across various traditionally lecture - based disciplines, such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) [2][3], for the purpose of replacing long-lectured lesson with more interactive and student-oriented activities. While in the second language (L2) classrooms' context, it is the meaningful practice that is primarily valued by the educators.

This study sets sight on the Chinese context, where the FC classroom is a novel not only to students but also to teaching staff and educators. The authors focused on the Chinese students' experience in an L2 Flipped class, in which the conventional learning process is inverted by removing explicit grammar instruction and traditional lectures outside the classroom, and equipping students with all the needed input through pre-class self-learning materials in the forms of PPT and video recordings. The 30 participants were intermediate English learners which can be attested by their nearest IELTS score of 6.5. None of them had FC learning experience before this class. The core idea is to explore

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the attitudes of Chinese L2 learns towards FC language class on their first try and what exactly give them the feeling about the disadvantages or advantages of FC teaching models.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Flipped classroom

Gone are the old days when traditional teacher-fronted instruction held sway in classrooms and to the exclusion of the creativity as well as the autonomy of learners, many novel teaching models are on the rise and here to stay. For example, the flipped classroom, a form of student-oriented model that is increasingly gaining in popularity and prominence, was initially introduced by Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams [4]. They set the precedent for the adoption of this instructional approach, and form which many instructors and educators started to follow suit. The flipped classroom approach effectively equips learners with access to necessary instruction-related resources before class and prepares them for better engagement and involvement in class [5].

Though neither a fixed pattern nor a hard and fast rule for FC exists, the overall idea is to realize the reversal of the traditional F2F instructional order and creates a combination of pre-class instructional materials with in-class activities [6]. A flipped class can be divided into a pre-class part that featuring a computer-based online self-learning, and an in-class part that focusing on group-oriented active learning [7]. These two parts are inextricably inseparable in which students' pre-class preparations are required to be designed and organized according to in-class learning activities, on which the quality and efficiency of in-class learning primarily hinges [8][9]. By moving the time-consuming and preliminary foundation-building work out of F2F classroom, this approach holds learner's independent learning ability to higher standards by asking them to search background information and acquire necessary knowledge independently. The face-to-face in-class time can be saved for more meaningful activities that add to students' problem-solving as well as collaborative learning ability [4], thus providing more personalized and customized instructions tailoring to every student's needs [10].

The in-class activities can be presented in a variety of forms, such as collaborative learning, peer-tutoring/peer-editing, problem-solving, case-based studies. According to Rogers [11], if students were to be allowed to apply what they learned into practice, the learning process will be rendered more active and flexible. Active learning primarily places emphasis on students' active role in the knowledge-internalizing process, stressing the ability to connect new knowledge and prior knowledge other than passive information-receiving [12]. This is highly aligned with the pedagogical design for flipped classrooms which attempts to alter the center of instruction from teacher to student, positioning the teacher from *a sage on the stage to a guide on the side* [13].

2.2. Central debate related to FC

Though an increasing number of studies concerned with the efficacy of the novel instruction have come to the fore, as claimed by Ekmekci [14], only limited research paid attention to the flipped classroom, and studies with emphasis on flipped language learning classrooms were even more so. The majority of the literature body gave great prominence to the effectiveness of the flipped approach by far, for example, Hung [15] conducted a study aiming at examining the effects of flipped instruction on EFL Taiwanese students' language learning at the university level. As the results showed, full-flipped and semi-flipped classes all enjoyed a certain level of superiority in comparison with the traditional ones, receiving an overall positive feedback from the participants. Parallel to that, Lee and Wallace's [16] study revealed similar results under South Korean English learning background regarding the effectiveness of flipped approach.

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The results of some research, on the other hand, lend support to opposite opinions that the flipped approach enjoys no obvious advantages over the traditional approach in adding to students' knowledge in mathematics [17][18][19]. These called into question the applicability of flipped classroom into all subjects [7]. DeLozier and Rhodes [20] assumed that the instruction which takes the form of video and functions as pre-class homework, does not seem to have an impact on learning performance, but probably offers more time for in-class active learning activity which greatly contributes to improving students' learning performance. According to O'Flaherty and Phillips [7], who conducted an exhaustive review on flipped learning which led them to the conclusion that existing studies fail to utilize conceptual frameworks and pedagogical designs fully, there were varying degrees of deficiency in integrating pre-class activities into F2F classes. They also pinpointed the problem on the need for stronger evidence to evaluate the effects of FCs.

2.3. L2 Grammar teaching in FCs

As for the literature on the L2 grammar teaching in FC, some of them indicated promising results. Moranski and Kim [21], who investigated the efficacy of the flipped pedagogy on students' Spanish grammar learning, provided participants with instruction related to the Spanish impersonal pronoun se in conjunction with corresponding assignments. Half of the participants were assigned with in-class instruction and the rest of them received PowerPoint videos prior to F2F classes. As shown in a test demonstrating students' grammatical learning consequences, the group learned through the instructional videos prior to the F2F class outperformed the other one significantly. Building upon Van Lier's [22] research relating to learner agency and Leow and Mercer's [23] study concerning processing depth in L2 learning, Moranski and Kim [21] put forward an argument that the determinative contributor in escalating learners' existing L2 systems to higher levels should be the greater learner agency that promoted by self‐manipulated processing of grammar content and intensive interactive activity. Given that deeper processing contributes to better retention [24], and the L2 contexts are conducive to L2 knowledge development, Moranski and Kim [23] posited that the flipped grammar instruction promoted student involvement and deepened knowledge processing, thus exerting a positive effect on students' grammar learning.

On the other hand, Mori, Omori, and Sato [25]'s research revealed mixed results. By comparing two controlled groups under flipped and traditional models respectively, they delved into beginner-level and intermediate-level L2 learners' Japanese vocabulary learning. They found that students' utilization of online supplementary resources hinges on the availability of online resources not so much as it is on course requirements, which means that whether the FC can be successfully implemented or not mainly depends on the students themselves. Muldwin [26] pointed out that the implementation of flipped teaching varies in different cultural backgrounds, and the success of which cannot be guaranteed on account contextual differences. In addition, Solanpour and Valizadeh [27] believed that the level of second language learners also serve as a factor which may affect the results of flipped instruction. Therefore, it can be said that notwithstanding the large amount of research revealing positive results, more investigation is in need if a valid conclusion concerning the effectiveness of flipped teaching method to be reached.

2.4. The introduction of FC within China context

Scrutiny on research focused on L2 teaching in the Chinese educational context reveals a rather concerning prospect that the teacher-fronted approach tends to dominate most of the classrooms. The role of teachers as the crucial information provider as well as the pace-controller has been entrenched in students' mind with their learning autonomy crippled by the overreliance of the teachers' guidance. Consequently, there were hardly any spaces for new teaching model to exist or grow. China's

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relatively backward technological development has also hampered the survive of new teaching models, which further compounds the ossified educational system.

Although a review of the research on the introduction of the FC model within academic backgrounds reveals an abundance of works dealing with different contexts. The same cannot be said of China yet where FC is still viewed as a novelty by many teachers and students. Computers appeared in the classrooms in America around the 1990s in conjunction with many Internet-based techniques as multimedia, while at the same time in China, the spread of the Internet has not even started.

All the above factors combined account for the reason why many Chinese students lack in the experiences of learning under FC pedagogies. Thus, with the employment of the combination of questionnaires, interviews, and class observations, this study aims to inquire into Chinese learners' perceptions of the FC teaching model with the further purpose of shedding light on the participants' transformation of ideas through the course. Moreover, by conducting this study we also hoped to address the gap in FC's preliminary foray into China context.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research methods

In order to contribute and expand our current knowledge of the effect of FC models on L2 grammar learning, in this study, we employed both qualitative and quantitative analysis to explore the actual processes involved in the L2 grammar learning. In addition to collecting data from surveys administered to students, we also conducted interviews to delve into the authentic details.

3.2. Research Questions and Overview

In view of the discussed issues related to FC pedagogies, the current study aims at offering L2 students who had no FC-related experiences with grammar instruction via a flipped approach. The primary purpose is to address the following research questions (RQ):

1. RQ1. Is FC or traditional in-class instructions more favored by students in teaching English grammar?
2. RQ2. Is there any trouble that students had upon the first time they experienced FC language instruction?
3. RQ3. What are on the attitudinal inventory of students from the first class to the last one? Is there any change of mind during this process?

3.3. Participants

This study was conducted at an English institute in Australia, in which students endeavour to reach an IELTS score of 7 as a warrant to prove that they are linguistically qualified to apply for universities in Australia. A total of 30 students were selected for this study. Given that all of them received their compulsory education in China where FC instructions rarely been introduced in language classrooms, none of them had any prior experience of FC. Due to the fact that the majority of students shared a common weakness—the lack of skills for academic writing, the institute contrived a language program composed of three parts: one grammar lesson, one vocabulary lesson, and one writing lesson. The grammar class takes place twice in week, and the duration of each class is 60 minutes. All sections in the course were flipped.

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3.4. Instructional design

Students who participate in flipped classes downloaded pre-recorded videos and PPT via a link provided by the teacher assistant. Before class, the teacher gave students a small quiz to examine the students' online self-study work. Teachers and students were required to download the We-chat as a platform where doubts and opinions can be posted in the group. The observer was also invited to join the group chat and recorded the students' situation in detail. If students have any questions or discomfort about flipped classroom, they can report to our observers at any time.

3.5. Data collection

Interviews and focus group discussions: This study has designed two groups of interviews, which are set at the beginning and the end of the course. The content design and questioning mode of the two interviews are similar, but the difference lies in the influence of different time. The content of the interview mainly involves two aspects: one is whether the students' attitude towards the course is positive or negative, and the other is the students' corresponding perception and experience in the process of accepting flipped learning. A total of 87 comments were provided by 28 respondents, which can be classified as positive or negative in nature.

Surveys: A total of three electronic questionnaires were designed and administrated to participants at the very beginning, the middle, and the end of the whole sessions. The Likert - scale questions were employed in questionnaires to explore students' attitudes on this teaching model and find out the extent to which they agree or disagree that FC classes have advantageous over the traditional ones.

Curriculum observation: Curriculum observation is carried out by the researcher as an outsider. The researcher does not participate in the course physically and achieved an understanding of the class through the form of a classroom video.

4. Results

4.1. Curriculum observation

In this semester, the most significant aspect of the feedback from observers is the improvement of students' enthusiasm and confidence in interactive activities. As the observer reported, "at the beginning, when the teacher ordered the students to use the learned grammar knowledge for communication, many students showed a look of bewilderment, and few of them volunteered in the demonstration. But at the end of the course, more and more people are willing to demonstrate themselves and are very active in group activities.

Another point worth noting is the richness and diversity of classroom activities. The teacher prepared a variety of activities, and according to the teacher's feedback, students' self-confidence in using English with their accuracy and fluency of grammar use have been greatly improved.

Table1. Type of observation

Type of observation	Positive	Negative
Classroom order and discipline	3	1
Diversity and enrichment of classroom activities	3	1
The frequency of using English and the accuracy of grammar	2	2

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The frequency and quality of teacher feedback to students	2	5
Impressions of student preparedness	3	5
How is the pre class video content integrated into the classroom	3	2

4.2. Surveys

28 of the 30 students responded to the three surveys. The descriptive statistics were presented in table3-5 which collected from three surveys. The Likert - scale questions in the surveys were geared to answer the research questions in the current study. With most of students agreed or strongly agreed that this learning was “a good educational experience”, we can infer an overall positiveness of FC as an experience. However, the predominant opinion on whether they had difficulties in learning is that the majority of them, accounting for 76%, 77%, 62.4% respectively, agreed or strongly agreed that they had various troubles in learning under FC model. In terms of the question that whether students prefer FC teaching or traditional teaching, the data shown a mild transition which started from an overwhelming support for traditional teaching, while the support for FC rose dramatically from 22.3% in the survey 1 to 70.7% in the last survey.

Table 2. Questions

Question:	Mark
A: I think the flipped learning mode is more conducive to learning English grammar than the traditional learning mode	A
B: I think the offline activities in flipped classroom can improve my English grammar competency	B
C: I completed the self-study of online videos and handouts as required	C
D: The mix of online instruction and face-to-face grammar practice activities are very suitable for me	D
E: I feel uncomfortable in the process of changing from traditional teacher centered teaching mode to flipped classroom	E
F: I have enough hardware and technology to support the online learning part	F
G: The flipped language class is well-organized	
H: I have a very clear understanding of what I need to do in the whole process	
I: I have encountered difficulties in my study?	
J: This is a good educational experience for me.	

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Table 3. Likert-scale results for survey after the first week

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agreed
A	34.5	43.2	18.3	4
B		24.9	50	25.1
C		54.6	23.3	22.1
D	12.7	18.9	60.3	8.1
E	10.3	64.5	12.5	12.7
F			65.8	34.2
G	8.5	19.8	35	36.7
H	23	29	36	12
I	20	4	35	41
J	5	10	66	19

All responses are tabulated in percentages.

Table 4. Mid - semester survey Likert - scale results

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
A	31.5	29	33	6.5
B	35.8	10	25	29.2
C		46	32	22
D	13.5	23.6	31	31.9
E	9.8	54	29	7.2
F			10.3	89.7
G	12.9	21	43	23.1
H	16	20	49.5	14.5
I	15	8	37	40
J	4	11	69	16

All responses are tabulated in percentages.

Table 5. End-of - semester survey Likert - scale results

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
A	9.8	19.5	43.6	27.1
B		8.5	56	35.5
C		14.3	50.2	35.5
D	11.3	13.6	46.9	28.2
E		16.5	64.3	19.2
H			49.6	50.4
G	3.5	11.6	69	15.9
H	6.8	13.2	34	46
I	20	17.6	45.5	16.9
J	3	7	67.8	22.2

All responses are tabulated in percentages.

4.3. Interviews

The open-ended comments on FC

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Excerpts from students' comments
Opinions on flipping in the beginning:

- *I think this learning mode has put forward very high requirements for my own self-learning ability. However, I have been immersed in an environment in which teachers serve as the main knowledge imparters for a long time.*

Opinions on flipping in the middle:

- *In the process of learning, I stumbled across a lot of problems. For example, I often forget that I need to listen to the video before class and watch the handout before class. However, I seem to be getting used to this pattern gradually. The group discussion and activities like role-play were also quite interesting.*
- *The existence of online video allows me to go back and watch it again anytime,, and I can learn grammar in a more personalized way and spend more time on my weak points.*

Opinions on flipping in the end:

- *I think the flipped classroom teaching mode has greatly weakened my dependence on teachers. I began to form a unique learning mode of my own. And I summed up some learning methods suitable for me.*

5. Discussion

In response to the first research question, the survey data show that Chinese students who were first exposed to flipped classroom show more tendency to traditional English Grammar (i.e. teacher led) teaching. In the questionnaire, 77.7% of the students chose the teacher's guidance in the classroom over the online videos and PPT provided by the teachers. This tendency is in accordance with previous studies inquiring into students' attitudes as to whether teacher-fronted or student-oriented teaching is more preferable [33] and problems impose by communicative methods in foreign language teaching environments [34][35][36]. The underlying reason for students' preference for teacher-oriented teaching is that they have more contact with classroom teaching in the past [37].

The results of questionnaires and interviews have shown that students have difficulties in adjusting to the flipped classroom. 76% of the students agree or strongly agree that they have encountered obstacles in the learning process. In the procedure of grammar teaching, Chinese teachers usually take on the heavy task of explaining and summarizing rules and meta-linguistic knowledge. Therefore, it is justifiable that students responded negatively to this method at the initial stage, which cannot fully reflect the effect of the flipped classroom.

One of the critical problems frequently reflected in students' interviews is that they had trouble in accepting the absence of teachers as the knowledge imparter. In other words, neither the umbilical cord to the teachers was cut nor their ability of autonomous learning has been developed. A comparative study by Song [38] concludes that Chinese students' learning autonomy is relatively low compared with Western students. Although 68.15% of the interviewed Chinese students gave priority to planning learning activities, only 25% fulfilled their plans and only 38.47% of them volunteered in performing the preview part. Wang et al. [39] revealed in his study conducted at a university in Henan Province, that the over-reliance of students on classroom teaching and teachers is deep-rooted which impinges on their autonomy in making independent learning plans. Song [38] considered the entrenched authority of teachers as the culprit which greatly contributes to students' passive learning and strong dependency. It is often disheartening for educators that some students are hard-wired to

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self-regulate in their own study and those lacks this kind of ability can hardly excel in any instructional design [40].

Another difficulty is their discomfort with the computer itself. The alienation of Technology [41] also comes into play in students' resistance to the incorporation of technology in education. For example, in the interview, there were some common refrains such as "I am looking forward to more humanized curriculum design, more in-depth communication and flexible explanation, rather than facing the cold machine". Technology alienation refers to the phenomenon that technology puts human beings in a disadvantageous situation in which people are prone to depression, constraint, a sense of void, and emptiness [35]. Although the emergence of smart phones has facilitated communicative convenience with people, it is also the perfect source of distraction that easily diverts students' attention from serious learning to frivolous entertainment, form which academic laziness and plagiarism may ensue [42].

The data of this study show that despite a small minority of students reflected problems involving the practice of technology, it is indeed one of the potential targets for the blame of the flipped model. In the wake of the classroom "technologization", new teaching approaches and novel curriculum design are coming to the fore. However, the incorporation of technology in learning can trigger a sense of alienation despite students' passion for technology and its entertaining bonus. Whether students are well-equipped to innovate around all the problems e-learning imposes remains to be seen [43]. Apart from this study, a great number of relevant studies also indicate that students are not born fully prepared for online learning. According to Piskurich [44], among all the underlying factors with the potential power of militating against e-learning, the ill preparation of students should always be on the list. In a survey conducted by Mar [45], 40% of the students expressed difficulties in adapting to web-related self-study.

At the initial stage, the students' feedbacks toward the flipping model presented a negative state. But the attitude of the students moved gradually away from dislike to support with new insight arising throughout. In questionnaire 1 conducted on the first week of curriculum, 77.7% of the students commented negatively on the flipped classroom with the disapproval of its advantages over the teacher-fronted approaches. However, in the middle of the course, only 60.5% of the students insisted on their point of view, while the rest of them grew to favour the flipped classroom. In addition, until the end of the curriculum, 70.7% of the students chose out-of-class online teaching over in-class instruction with 50% of them agreed or strongly agreed that they would like to move the learning out of class and conduct it online. This result is in line with the finding of Lage, Platt, and Treglia's [46] research in which a shift in learners' attitudes towards flipping overtime was unveiled. The students interviewed in this study obviously need a transitional period to fit in the new model, which is consistent with the "internalization process" described by Inoue [47].

According to the excerpt from the third interview, we can see that students had a general reflection that they feel more in control of their own learning, and they realized that they should be held accountable for their learning. A potential trait of flipped instruction, which has the potential of affecting the effectiveness of flipped instruction, is learners' active role in taking responsibility for their own learning [48][49]]. Students in flipped classroom are often able to construct their own knowledge actively rather than become "passive recipients of external stimuli" [50].

6. Conclusion

The main idea of this study is to introduce second language grammar teaching into a place in which students can control the speed and depth of their participation in learning, so as to enhance their sense of competence in a new language. There was a shift in students' attitudes from opposing and rejecting flipped classrooms to gradually accepting and realizing the benefit from it. In the interview, it was reported that many of them believe flipping therapy was beneficial for learning because it gave them

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time to understand and "digest" the new structure. Before they were required to practice with their peers in class, they have learned some basic knowledge through self-study. Thus, classroom learning can be more meaningful and more effective with their learning autonomy improved at the same time.

Although the data obtained from class observations and open-ended interviews show that students' attitude towards the flipped English classroom was, broadly speaking, positive. However, there were still many dissenting opinions that worthy of note. Quite a number of students reported in questionnaires that they were still adjusting to this new learning model which requires great learning autonomy, complaining that they were not used to it yet, or they had the impulse of calling a return to the traditional teacher-fronted classroom.

The results of this study have many implications for the introduction of FC in China. In this study, three questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data on students' orientation towards the two teaching modes, with the qualitative data generated by conducting interviews composing of 12 open-ended questions. Therefore, this study offered elaborate explanations and arguments, putting forward useful suggestions for implementing FC in China context.

The pool of our participant sample (n = 30) was rather limited to draw meaningful conclusions on the experience of students in a flipped EFL context. A comprehensive understanding of students' experiences in flipped EFL classroom calls for a more in-depth qualitative analysis combined with the semi-structured interview of students, which hopefully can be achieved in future studies. In view of the fact that this study is a case study on the experience of students in the second language intermediate class, it is more indicative than decisive; more research is in need in the future with different language levels and L2 backgrounds in better measuring the influence of FC on students. Moreover, we should attach more importance to designing and testing the survey instruments for ensuring their validity. It is also of great value to conduct a longitudinal study on the continuous effect of FC model. The last but not least, researchers call on College English educators to carry out more flipped experiments to enrich the existing research with regard to flipped classrooms.

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