

Flipped Classroom for English Conversation: a Case Study

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Abstract

At first glance, language learning does not appear to be ideally suited to the sort of self-paced, and ultimately unaided, learning environment that online programmes offer. After all, language is a uniquely social activity, making human interaction not only desirable but indispensable. However, researchers point to the fact that, if a decent level of proficiency in a foreign language is to be achieved, a solid grounding of both vocabulary and grammar is needed as a pre-condition. A tall order, particularly in the early stages of acquisition, involving long hours of repetitive and often boring practice. But imagine – say eLearning enthusiasts – a handy multi-media device such as tablet or smart phone, equipped with infinitely patient and compelling software, and your problem is solved!

Key words : Flipped classroom, English conversation, annotated turns

1.0 Introduction

The term “flipped classrooms” is the more recent version of “inverted classrooms”, which made its debut in a paper by Miami University academics in the year 2000 (Lage, Platt, & Treglia, 2000). As a way of learning and teaching, it has been popularised in the phrase: “putting the traditional model on its head”. Over the past decade, flipped classrooms have been applied to a large variety of teaching and learning practices whose underlying principle is the transfer of content presentation – hitherto a par excellence classroom feature – to the internet, while at the same time ushering self-study activities such as practice and consolidation back into the classroom. Put more simply, in flipped teaching students acquire syllabus content by themselves using a form of IT rather than having it presented during class time, which can then be devoted to practice, assessment and a deepening of understanding. It follows that reliance on information technology is crucial to the flipped classroom model, and that it is only possible in places where students have ready access to computers and internet connections.

Even on its own, the computer offers freedom of use with regard to timing and pace; it also allows the provision of audio and video material, both highly attractive and engaging. And yet, as such, the computer would be a mere permutation of the earlier cassette and video player as well as, arguably, the good old book itself. However, when linked to the internet, not only does it become

aware of its user’s actions, but also capable of responding to them in the here and now. It was therefore only going to be a question of time before educators started to take advantage of the tutorial potential of IT, which under the name of eLearning and in the guise of flipped classrooms, blended learning, Khan Academy, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS) and the like, is transforming the world of education.

Also at Seirei Christopher University e-Learning and teaching are viewed as a perfect opportunity to bring its policy of active learning closer to reality. We offer numerous classes which combine online with classroom work, the so called blended learning. This paper reports a pilot project to introduce the flipped classroom model to a course of English conversation in the autumn semester of 2014. It sets out the context, *raison d’être*, procedure and future goals for the model in question as well as offering a passing comment, rather than a scientifically based assessment, on what is still a work in progress.

2.0 Two birds with one stone? Why not!

“English 2A”, as officially designated in the curriculum, is a course of English conversation open to all students at the university, whose level of proficiency usually ranges from false beginner to lower intermediate. In the autumn semester of 2014, it attracted slightly over a hundred first-year students, nearly a quarter of that year’s intake. Our usual practice is

to create groups of varying size (but not exceeding forty) on the basis of a placement test to be taught by one full-time teacher aided by one or two part-time colleagues. All students follow the same basic syllabus, obtaining a single credit, and the main difference between the lower- and higher-level groups is one of pacing. Inevitably, perhaps, this arrangement has the potential for causing problems of collaboration among teachers, reflected in students' class assessments in the form of complaints of inequality in requirements. Thus unifying the standards of instruction and assessment was the immediate reason why the idea of e-learning had seemed attractive. However, the decision to move considerably further – such as offloading a lion's share of the syllabus content to the internet and re-shaping classroom work – stemmed from our ambition to raise the profile of our teaching by providing more sophisticated content, promoting learner independence and critical thinking skills.

For our online platform, we had chosen Moodle, a popular learning management system (LMS). Apart from lending itself to content presentation in multiple languages and in a variety of ways, both audio and visual, Moodle can be used to closely monitor the progress of a large body of students as well as being fully interactive. Readily accessible on both stationary and mobile devices, it is familiar from other university courses and offers more privacy than some other platforms we had experimented with, such as Facebook and Edmodo.

3.0 Conversation as content

We have built our English Conversation syllabus around a well-known publication appropriate to our students' proficiency level. It focuses on everyday situations associated with foreign travel, from 'airport check-in counter' and 'bureau de change' to 'sandwich bar' and 'getting lost'. As a form of introduction, students are presented with a recording of brief, semi-authentic conversations which illustrate the particular context and associated vocabulary. This is followed by a scripted conversation to be drilled by substituting parts of lexical information, rounded off by an information gap pairwork activity on the same theme.

The approach has clear advantages for a low-level conversational course, such as the persuasive link between listening and speaking, transparent agendas for conversations, the paramount emphasis on vocabulary work, or the fair mix of transactional and interactive language. However, a great opportunity is wasted when an impression is given that parties to a conversation have equal roles assigned to them, which would, in turn, imply that the speaker – listener alternation is merely routine; or that conversations lack any consistent patterning, leading one to suspect that each new one is an arbitrary arrangement of contributions motivated by context alone; and, last not least, that words and grammar always carry the same meaning, irrespective of their function within a conversation.

All of this reinforces a common view

among students that conversation classes are little more than easy credit earners: you keep recycling already acquired knowledge, preferably in a relaxed atmosphere, until applying it without thinking becomes a habit. No rules involved, no new skills to be acquired. You may need perhaps to pay some attention to pronunciation, or a sprinkling of “Oh”, “Erm” and “Great!” here and there – that’s all. Even some EFL teachers would agree, adding that

conversation, besides being open-ended, is an intuitive and shared human trait – an art, as it is often called, rather than skill.

In reality, conversations fall into a range of recognizable patterns, styles, nuances and strategies. Fig. 1 is an example of three speaker turns which, from the transactional point of view, constitute a single category [*Advise*].

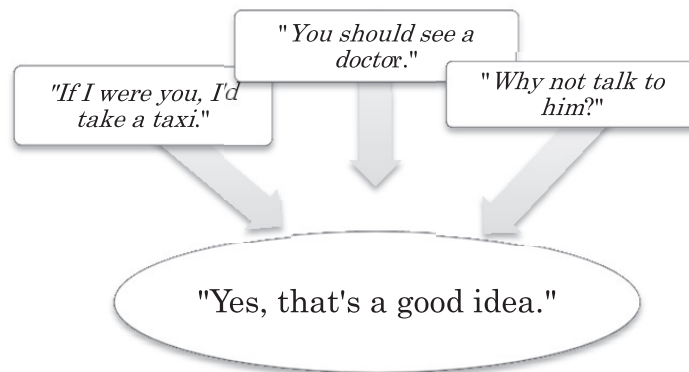


Fig. 1

Conversely, Fig. 2 shows one turn capable of realizing two categories: [*Inform*] and [*Complain*].

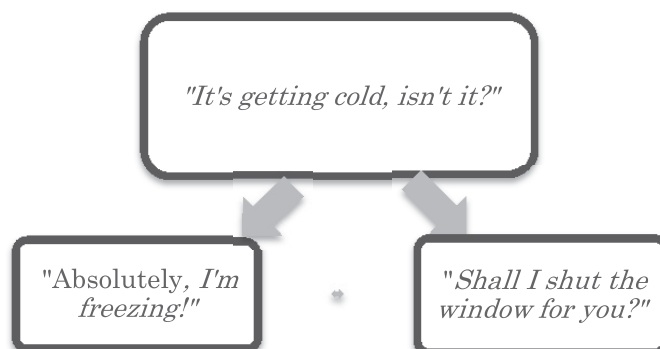


Fig. 2

Both Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 prove the point that conversations are capable of segmentation into highly coherent exchanges categorised on the basis of their transactional and interactive function. They are also an illustration of the linguistic strategies deployed by speakers to achieve transactional goals – witness the indirect [*Complain*] turn of Fig. 2.

Such strategies are remarkably universal, but they do vary across languages and cultures. In an increasingly globalized world, we realize this to our cost only when things start getting “lost in translation”. English, for example, avoids direct commands or requests, preferring indirect turns of the kind: “*Do you have a room for tonight?*” And, while it would be hard to imagine even a non-native speaker responding with: “*Yes, but why do you ask?*” , the [*Request*]’s masquerading as [*Enquiry*] may strike some as exotic. In Japanese it is possible to use “*Yes*” (“*Hai*”) in the sense of a non-committal [*Acknowledge*], similarly to the English: “*I see*”, which, from the English point of view, may well be mistaken for a committal [*Confirm*]. Differences in conversational strategies lead to a great deal of frustration and cultural stereotyping, and need to be included in a conversational syllabus.

The labels [*Request*], [*Enquire*], [*Confirm*], [*Acknowledge*] etc., are all examples of simple coding, which bears witness to a consistent structural patterning across all conversation and to the differential roles played by parties to it. We had decided to share that insight with our students, and bring to light the implicit structure of the conversations in

our students’ handbook. Besides adding to the content of the course and making it more sophisticated, it offered the prospect of fulfilling the rest of our promise, i.e. the promotion of learner independence and critical thinking.

4.1 eLearning: number-tagged slots

Each new Topic in the eLearning component of our flipped classroom was designed as a preview of next week’s class, and consisted of three parts: 1) Listening, 2) Assignment and 3) Progress Report. Assignments instructed students to “write down each and every word they hear” in the numbered slots provided on the Moodle webpage. The system would reject as incorrect any mistake, whether of lexis, grammar or spelling. Students were allowed repeated attempts, but only after completing the whole Assignment once.

Progress Reports, on the other hand, involved students in recording their rate of success in deciphering the audio material, both in statistical terms for each slot category as well as in terms of deeper understanding implicit in a free comment, usually offered in Japanese. There were five days (and four nights) to complete and submit the answers. After the deadline had passed, the system was open again to allow the viewing of correct answers. The policy of “zero tolerance” for mistakes of any kind was only partly to do with listening comprehension, its main purpose being to engage weaker students in remedial

work on English grammar and spelling.

Aural comprehension is notoriously hard for non-native listeners, yet the problem is hardly one of symmetry: English is arguably more troublesome than either Japanese or Spanish despite the latter two being spoken faster. The reason is that English is characterised by fluctuations in both the speed and articulation of functional as opposed to content words, where Japanese and Spanish remain highly regular. Hence the idea of tagged empty slots, (1) through (7) in Assignments. Once the number puzzle is solved, the system emerges

as a set of cues to aid both in the segmentation of the stream of speech – e.g. (1+2) is a combination of pronoun and auxiliary: [That'll] – as well as in attending to the interactive signals of conversation such as (6)[Oh]. The number system is a heuristic one, and to some extent provisional, but students had proved extremely adapt at decoding and using it to their own advantage. For a peek into one student's answers – warts and all – here is a sample from the Assignment in Week 2 of the course:

2 [Do] ✓ 1 [you] ✓ 7 [want] ✓ 5 [to] ✗ 7 [single] ✓
 4 [all] ✗ 5 [over] ✗ 7 [t] ✗ ?

Fig. 3

6 [Oh] ✓ 1 [I] ✓ 7 [see] ✓ .1+2 [I'd] ✓ 7 [like] ✓
 5 [a] ✓ 7 [return] ✓ , 7 [please] ✓ .

Fig. 4

It will be seen from the above that, even so early on in the course, the student is having little problem working out what linguistic categories most of the tagged slots refer to. Categories (4) and (5), in Fig 3, which hint at a conjunction and article respectively, are still somewhat vague, and the student is struggling with segmenting the part of the stream of speech represented here as “a/single/or/a/return”. The misheard “to”, following “want”, is a common fossilised error among lower-level students, which cannot yet be rectified at this

stage; the linking /r/, of the “or/a” cluster, compounds the problem by assimilation to /l/, leading to its retrieval from the lexicon as “all”; this in turn associates with its common collocate, “over” – further proof that category (5) is still very much an arbitrary entity.

In order to assess students' progress from one Topic to the next, we resorted to the analytics provided by Moodle as soon as each student had completed their Progress Reports. Most comments were encouraging, suggesting that students were taking responsibility for

their learning and willing to improve. Above all, they proved to be aware of number tagging system, and had shown themselves capable of using critical thinking skills by arriving, unaided, at the concepts behind it. Here are a few samples from Progress Reports, Topics 1 through 3.

Topic 1:

/It was very difficult for me/ It took me a long time/ I was difficult listening test/I want to listen to English always. For example, English radio, a English TV program/I think listening is difficult. If I listened many time, I couldn't it. I'm not good at listening. But I would like to can it/This problem is very difficult/This is a burden/I am interested in your class/this assignment is a little difficult/

Topic 2:

/ I am not yet used. But I want to do my best/A grade rose than the last time and was glad/This assignment is bery difficult!/ I thought that it re-heard many times that's important/I'm gradually improving on my English listening comprehension skills/It was difficult/I could listening. I was glad to listen perfect/I don't no how to answer, "OK" OK,

Okay, Ok, ok? I can't correct answer/I did my best/A correct answer rate rose from the last time and was glad/

Topic 3:

/ I thought I should see more advice. And I want to hear many times/It's difficult. I need to listen to English/It was hard for me to listen to "a" or "to"/I think difficult more than the one of last/This assignment use ear/It was difficult/A lot was able to be heard from the last listening. I think that the accuracy rate also increased/I want to make a review already once!/I came to understand it little by little/Mistakes decrease little by little and glad/

4.2 eLearning: annotated turns

Apart from the number allocated slots intended to aid aural decoding, Assignments featured annotations at the head of each contribution within the exchange which introduced students to elements of Conversational Analysis (CA). Thus a typical interactional exchange, when correctly deciphered, looked on the Moodle page as follows:

Q.3 Koji: [Request clarification]

1+2 I'm ✓ 7 sorry ✓?

Q.4 Clerk: [Clarify by rewording previous offer]

2 Do ✓ 1 you ✓ 7 want ✓ 5 a ✓ 7 single ✓

4 or ✓ 5 a ✓ 7 return ✓?

Fig. 5

As the course develops, students acquaint themselves with a limited number of transactional turns used to move the business of conversation forward as well as interactive ones used to maintain relationships. [Request], [Offer], [Enquire], [Suggest] or [Complain] are examples of the former; [Call someone's attention], [Reassure], [Echo], [Clarify], [Signal reply] are examples of the latter. Crucially, each turn sets up the expectation of a relevant response. Thus [Request] is followed by [Comply] or [Refuse], [Offer] by [Accept] or [Decline], [Suggest] by [Welcome] or [Reject] etc. [Comply] can be performed using either "Certainly" or "Here you are", among others, while "No, thank you" can be both a [Decline] and [Reject]. The labels for specific turns, despite being self-explanatory, often carry unfamiliar meanings at this level of proficiency, and less hard-working students struggle to absorb them. Annotated turns are introduced solely in the eLearning component of the course in order to boost listening comprehension even further. We expect students to study the labels during or before listening to the audio, become aware of

the context, and conclude that parties to the conversation behave in predictable ways by invoking the same repertoire of turns again and again in order to achieve specific goals.

In contrast to the tagged slots, the annotated turns do not attract comment by students in Progress Reports. The reason could be way the Progress Report template is set up on Moodle, first showing a list of all the tagged categories with the associated number of word samples for a given Listening Task. At the bottom of the page, students are invited to contribute a free comment. Our main sources of feedback remain the paper tests to be discussed in more detail in 5.0. Most students perform reasonably, and seem to have little trouble understanding the system, but many remain unconvinced of the purposefulness of mixing online and paper testing. On the other hand, the passivity of the test – students merely reproduce the listening content – gives reason to believe the reality looks less rosy, i.e. students have failed to master the system. This certainly is one area in need of improvement.

5.0 Of bricks and mortar

The physical classroom component of the conversation course continues to rely on a popular published handbook, but is taught by two or three teachers, each with an individual teaching philosophy and technique. In most flipped classroom models, it is designed to complement the eLearning component in variety of practical ways. In our case, students are expected to come to the classroom only after previewing most of the necessary lexical, grammatical and phraseological material while working with Moodle. Thus the first business of the day is to test students' level of preparedness using the annotated conversational scenarios from Moodle. In general, students are offered freedom to simulate the conversations to the best of their capacity, yet many give up after realizing they cannot reproduce, word by word, the original conversations from the Moodle Listening Task.

Having given the test, teachers move on to work on the handbook content, thus losing the formal connection between the eLearning and physical classroom components. Their activities usually involve pairwork, focusing on new vocabulary and grammar. At two-Topic intervals, a review test is given in which students are expected to reproduce selected exchanges from the Listening Tasks, prompted by turn annotations and on a tagged slot by slot basis.

The final examination promises to be something of a contest between the eLearning

and handbook content, with 60% of the mark including the former.

6.0 Conclusions

Now more than half-way down the flipped classroom course, we realize that the greatest threat it faces comes from a lack of proper connection between the eLearning content and classroom activities. In particular, the concepts of Conversational Analysis (CA) have little bearing on our work in the classroom, which will affect both the effectiveness and wider reputation of the course. Both practice and testing ought to make greater use of creativity and simulation as opposed to mere reproduction. All the teachers on the course must have equal access to CA knowhow in order to avoid giving the impression of being only partly competent in the subject or not fully involved in the teaching process.

The idea of introducing Conversational Analysis (CA) concepts to students at a low level of proficiency may seem a risky and unnecessary enterprise, yet – at the cost of repeating ourselves – we are going to argue that it serves a number of practical purposes.

- The first of these is to avail ourselves – as teachers and students – of a meta-language, a framework within which to teach, compare cross-culturally and assess conversations.
- The second, related one is to equip students with a set of learnable tools allowing the creation and simulation of conversational scenarios, both for practice and testing.
- Our final purpose is to imbue students with a

sense of satisfaction at acquiring knowledge that expects higher level thinking such as analysis, simulation and creativity.

Let us put each under a magnifying glass. If a student responds using “OK” to the question: “Do you need an immigration card, Ma’am?”, our reaction, as teachers, can be: “No, that’s wrong, you don’t answer a question using OK”. “Then what about: ‘would you like \$100?’ or ‘can I take a picture of you?’”, your student asks. If you have a meta-language in common, you can explain that “OK” can be an answer to a [*Suggest*] or [*Request*] turn in English, but not [*Enquire*]. You could then both look at your student’s L1, and compare the use of “OK” there. Practising conversations at a low level of proficiency can be a repetitive and uninspiring task. But an element of problem solving, where students create role scenarios to be acted out by classmates, and the other way round, introduces variety and challenge. The same, of course, is true of testing. How does one test the conversational skills of a large group of students, and how do students prepare for a test? A “gap fill” or “one-sided dialogue” type of test are often used, but these are limited in scope and somewhat routine. However, setting students an imagined

conversational scenario, to be played out either in writing or audio-recorded, has the advantage not only of maintaining the whole activity in English, but forces students to rely on more sophisticated cognitive processes than mere memorisation. With regard to the last rationale, it bears repeating that a course of English Conversation suffers from an image problem: it is not considered to be demanding, nor do students expect to profit much. Poor motivation and a feeling of being underestimated, particularly in weaker students, lead to a vicious circle. Dumbing down only aggravates that feeling, so a more prudent alternative is to offer the kind of course content which raises students’ expectations and allows them to excel in spite of their low proficiency and self-esteem.

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