Flipping academic English language learning: Experiences from an American university

Erik Voss & Ilka Kostka

2019
€ 49.99
81 pp.
Springer Nature
Singapore

Flipped learning has become a fashionable instructional model in education, with its transitional role of converting traditional in-class activities into out-of-class activities and taking learning beyond the confines of the classroom (Bergmann & Sams, 2012). Use of the model has grown exponentially in various educational disciplines following its first appearance in the literature (O'Flaherty & Phillips, 2015). However, the model has only become widespread in the foreign and second language-learning domain over recent years, due to the promised gains for language development (Wang & Qi, 2018). With their timely book, *Flipping Academic English Language Learning: Experiences from an American University*, the authors, Erik Voss and Ilka Kostka, have made an important contribution to this new area of interest in the language-learning domain. The book is part of the SpringerBriefs in Education project, which aims to present innovative research topics and practical applications in education to the readers through compact volumes between 50 to 125 pages. Combining elements of both journals and books, the book differs from other recent resource books (i.e., Mehring & Leis, 2018). The authors have presented a concise yet comprehensive book within the scarce literature on flipped learning in language teaching.

The book has six chapters balancing theory and practice for implementing flipped learning in academic English-language classrooms at universities. While the first three chapters are more theory-based, concentrating on tenets of flipped learning and language learning, the remaining three chapters focus on the practical implementation of flipped classrooms in skill-based academic English-language courses. By way of sample topics for lessons and the provision of technological tools, the authors call readers to take the benefits of flipped learning in language classroom.

In the first chapter, “Defining Flipped Learning and Academic English at the University,” the authors, Voss and Kostka bridge academic English-language learners and flipped learning methodology to provide a foundation for the succeeding chapters. In this opening chapter, they briefly explain the unique characteristics of language learners and factors that might influence their language development, and outline how flipped learning might offer advantages for both language instructors and students at the tertiary level in the United States. Using an illustrative approach, the authors compare instruction and application procedures in the traditional classroom with flipped learning. They add that flipped learning is not only shifting the delivery of instruction to different times and locations, but is related to the use of higher
cognitive skills in learning on Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy. The authors define academic language based on various literature sources and add that academic language is not only the language explicitly used in the classroom, but also for social life on campus.

In the second chapter, “Linking English Language Learning and Flipped Learning,” the authors underpin the use of flipped learning in language classrooms and acknowledge instructors who are unsure where to start. They present how flipped learning fits into the current student-centered approaches of language teaching and from what perspectives the method resembles communicative language teaching (CLT). Later, the authors discuss the tenets to debunk myths about flipped learning. They focus on the role of technology in flipped learning and question whether advanced technology is a necessity for the implementation of the method in the language classroom. Providing hints for implementing flipped learning using technology, they also present alternative approaches, namely non-technical options of content delivery, for both inside and outside the classroom for those who have no or limited access to the Internet. Moving from theory to practice, the authors conclude the chapter with a recommendation to instructors who are not comfortable with technology or are new to flipped learning to adapt only small portions of their course until they are familiar with the method.

In the third chapter, “Rethinking Accountability, Feedback, and Formative Assessment,” the authors focus on student accountability—a shared concern among instructors regarding what to do if students do not study the content before instruction. Drawing a connection between motivation and the four pillars of flipped learning, Voss and Kostka discuss the different aspects of student accountability and emphasize the significant role of the instructor in designing engaging assignments and materials to intrinsically motivate students to study language, both in and outside of the class. In this manner, the authors suggest instructors attempt to understand their students’ perspective and provide unambiguous instructions, set clear expectations, offer choices, give interactive assignments, and present timely feedback on students’ progress. The authors conclude the chapter by highlighting that increases in the use of technology might be a chance to monitor students’ learning and enhance accountability for engagement both in and out of the classroom.

In the fourth chapter, “Experiences Flipping Academic Reading and Writing,” Ilka Kostka shares her own experiences in implementing a flipped classroom in an academic language course: Reading and Writing. She outlines how she flipped three topics in the course by developing both in- and out-of-class assignments, with detailed explanations on the implementation and pictures related to sample activities and screenshots of the technological tools. Last, she reflects on her experience and accepts that flipped learning provided a chance for careful planning of class time, activities in class, use of higher-level skills on Blooms’ Taxonomy and experience with various technological tools to support students’ learning.

In the fifth chapter, “Experiences Flipping Academic Listening Speaking,” Erik Voss describes his experience implementing a flipped classroom in an academic listening and speaking class, following a similar pattern to that of the previous chapter. He presents three topics, designed for both in- and out-of-class assignments, to enhance students’ listening and speaking skills with and without technology. He concludes that flipped learning made it easier for him to focus on higher-order thinking skills in the classroom, as students already practice less cognitively demanding skills at home. Last, he reflects that he spent less time preparing course content and saved significant time for practice and feedback in the classroom due to flipped learning.

In the sixth and final chapter, “Resources for Further Exploration,” Voss and Kostka first present technological tools and resources they use to support learning both in and out of their own classrooms. The authors provide additional tools and software, including video creation, lesson delivery and language development, for out-of-class practices. In addition, they present knowledge creation software, quizzes, testing, and feedback methods, and provide a list of digital tools complete with descriptions and links. Last, for the sake of teachers, the authors ask five questions concerning how to track the latest pedagogical ideas and create a network of flipped learning in language teaching. They list the names of top-tier journals, popular communities focused on flipped learning, conferences, listservs and university websites to guide instructors on how to flip language courses. The authors end the chapter with their final remarks, restating
their gains as language instructors due to flipped learning experience, as well as their eagerness to continue flipping and integrating new technologies into their lessons.

In line with the goal of SpringerBriefs in Education, the authors address the core topic and present their experiences in flipping their own language classrooms using recent advancements in technology. They succeed in engaging potential readers, language instructors and practitioners aiming to implement flipped learning in classrooms with a reader-friendly strategy. Comparing the flipped learning approach with more traditional classrooms, the authors acknowledge the superiority of flipped classrooms in creating time for more in-class activities and implementing higher-order thinking skills in language learning. Additionally, they briefly outline extra activities for instructors who have limited or no access to the Internet. Furthermore, through the book, the authors pose reflective questions to readers after presenting ideas and practical applications. These reflective questions allow readers to pause and compare and contrast their own classroom setting with the newly learned content. They also outline highlights at the end of each chapter to summarize the key ideas for the readers.

Despite its strength in keeping readers’ attention while reading, the book has some drawbacks that lower its understandability. For instance, I noted that some of the tables and screenshots of the technological tools were not properly referenced where they are mentioned in the text, which was difficult to follow; they were listed on another page or even a few pages later (i.e., Table 2 on page 76). In addition, there is an incorrect sub-title in the fifth chapter, about listening and speaking (i.e., three example reading and writing topics on page 52). These problems might be rectified in the next edition of the book. For improvements to the practical aspects, the authors might present a brief summary of the sample lessons in tables, based on their conceptualization of the three phases of flipped language learning: before class (pre-instruction), in-class (instruction), and after class (extended application).

Although language instructors at universities are the target reader group, anyone interested in flipped learning who feels insecure regarding implementation in a language classroom or with less flipping experience might significantly benefit from the book. Overall, this modest book is a helpful addition to the literature on flipped language learning, due largely to its concise summary on how to implement flipped learning in language classrooms. As a language instructor and teacher trainer, I find this book useful and encourage potential readers by restating the authors’ invitation to “Take the plunge and give flipped learning a try” (p.80).

References


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