Flipped English as a Second Language (ESL) Classroom Approach to Scaffold the Slow Learners

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Abstract

Teaching and learning process of English as a Second Language (ESL) for the Tamil medium learners, particularly in classrooms is one of the toughest tasks for the ESL teachers. Especially in Sri Lankan context, ESL learners play passive role at school level. Due to this long experience, they are unable to become active role players during ESL learning in universities; most of these adult learners are slow learners; transforming an adult slow learner into the active role player is important in ESL classrooms to master all the four skills and it is really a great challenge to the teachers. On the other hand, since ESL teaching hours are inadequate at the university level, learners' exposure level frequently does not support them to enhance and accelerate their learning process. In order to overcome the above classroom learning issues, it is proposed that if an effective flipped ESL classroom approach is implemented as scaffolding, most of the adult slow learners will be benefitted within a short period to enhance their language proficiency. In order to accomplish this objective, 27 Tamil medium ESL first year learners were randomly selected as sample population in the Faculty of Arts, University of Jaffna and a classroom investigation employing an intervention programme for one complete semester was conducted; the intervention programme incorporated with flipped classroom approach, participant observation and verbal report.

Having employed qualitative methodology with the questionnaire, participant observation and retrospective report, this study, at the end, found out that the ESL learners' proficiency level progressed dramatically.

Keywords: Flipped classroom approach, Scaffolding, Passive role, Adult slow learner, Transforming

1. Introduction and Definition

Flipped classroom teaching is an instructional tactic and a type of learning opposite process of traditional classroom learning. In the traditional classroom setting, learning content

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and activities are presented in the classroom to complete the task. In a flipped classroom teaching situation, learning content and activities are uploaded well in advance via smart mobiles or online; learners are supposed to go through the content and activities before attend the actual classroom. At home or working place during their leisure, learners are expected to familiarize the learning content and activities. This situation is entirely new unlike traditional homework. Learners are supposed to form groups (viber/whatsApp) and discuss the content with activities. This type of collaborative interaction and discussion mode is expected to provide with sufficient scaffolding in the learning process particularly for the slow learners. When they attend the real class, they will be able to participate in the learning process and gain the proficiency level fast; they are believed to transform highly motivated and actively participating learners in the real classroom due to this flipped classroom tactic.

2. The Objective of the Research

In order to examine the effect of flipped classroom tactic, it is planned to conduct a classroom investigation by employing the same before the real classroom activities. The advocates of Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) suggest that a pre-task session is an essential step to support learning process particularly for the slow learners; this familiarization step is implemented before introducing the main task; generally, they categorize the classroom in to three sessions: (1) pre-task, (2) while-task and (3) post-task. However, flipped classroom tactic support learners further because it allows learners to independently interact among themselves via online chat or viber or WhatsApp and so on. In order to confirm the effectiveness of this tactic, the present study attempts to implement the above tactic for a group of learners and check the effectiveness by employing qualitative research methodology.

3. Learner Factors

Generally, in the University of Jaffna ESL classrooms, teachers face great challenges to teach all the four basic language skills since the classroom teaching and learning issues are many and diverse. Identifying these issues and finding appropriate solutions are not an easy task; however, language researchers suggest ample solutions based on their findings.

Among these issues, there is no second opinion that learner factors considerably influence teaching and learning. In ESL classrooms, learner factors are generally categorized into two: (1) internal factors and (2) external factors; while internal factors are strongly associated with learners, external factors influence teaching and learning process from outside. Some major internal and external learner factors are presented in the table (3.1) below:

Internal and external leaner factors Table – 3.1

	Internal factors	External factors
01.	Age & anxiety	Curriculum/syllabus
02.	Aptitude	Style of instruction
03.	Personality	Learning strategies
03.	Affective (Attitude & motivation)	Culture and background knowledge

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04.	Hemisphere dominance	Motivating strategy
05.	Learning style & cognitive style	Native speakers contact situation
06.	Experiences	Environmental support/contextual support
07.	Mother tongue influence	Administrative system

In order to shape and transform these learner factors to influence the learning process positively in the ESL classrooms, there are a large number of studies conducted and based on these studies many pedagogical suggestions have already been introduced. To add with these, the present investigation attempts to check the effectiveness of flipped classroom approach in the learning process.

4. Some major principles associated with flipped classroom approach
4.1 Scaffolding and Language Acquisition Supporting System (LASS)

The collaborative interactional situation in the flipped classroom approach offers a form of scaffolding to the learners particularly for the slow learners. To explain this situation Bruner (1973) introduces a word called "scaffolding"; Bruner (1973) claims that scaffolding is "a process of setting up the situation to make the child's entry easy and successful and then gradually pulling back and handing the role over to the child as he becomes skilful enough to manage it" (p. 60). Bruner (1982) further demonstrates that there is a Language Acquisition Support System (LASS) along with Chomsky's (1965) Language Acquisition Device (LAD). According to Bruner's view, LASS is a manner of network of social interaction which permits and promotes cognitive maturity of the human brain. Bruner (1982) defines,

LASS frames the interaction of human beings in such a way as to aid the aspirant speaker in mastering the uses of language. It is that system that provides the functional priming that makes language acquisition not only possible but makes it proceed in the order and pace in which it ordinarily occurs (Bruner, 1982, p.120).

Certainly, the flipped classroom approach, not only regular learners but also the slow learners get support from peers during leisure time interaction.

Ovando, Collier, and Combs (2003) also define scaffolding recently and they claim, scaffolding refers to providing contextual supports for meaning through the use of simplified language, teacher modeling, visuals and graphics, cooperative learning and hands-on learning (Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003, p. 345).

The definition of Ovando, Collier, and Combs (2003) provides adequate information about scaffolding types during the flipped classroom approach. This definition presents the following operations in the classroom:

- Contextual support (adequate and appropriate)

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- Simplified language in the form of casual discussion (modified language)
- Cooperative or collaborative learning

4.2 Vygotskyan Perspective

At this juncture one can recall Vygotskyan perspective, which views when L2 learners obtain opportunities to interact with others, i.e. fellow learner from the peer group, they are able to perform functions in the language which they cannot produce by themselves previously. During the course of time they will be able to internalise these functions and they discover to produce those functions independently and thereafter they will be able to self-regulate the language (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky claims this concept as Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and defines as,

the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaborative with more capable peers (p.86).

Thus, during flipped classroom approach, learners get ample opportunities to obtain support from the others.

4.3 Community Language Learning

The flipped classroom approach assists a learner to recognize his own potential and encourages his own labour; the learner ultimately is able to help himself. The concept of Community Language Learning also supports this view. In this approach, learners are given support at the initial stage and then gradually those learners commence to operate the language on their own (Curran, 1972).

Apart from these major principles, there are other perspectives also somewhat support flipped classroom approach; for example, self-access learning, learner centeredness, autonomous and discovery learning are some to mention.

The above theoretical views unambiguously confirm that how flipped classroom approach is effective and significant in the progress of learning process.

5. Research Methodology

The framework of this investigation was based on entirely qualitative method. The target group of this investigation were 27 first year first semester Tamil medium undergraduates in the Faculty of the Arts, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka. They studied English language at the school with their formal education from grade I, but never possess equal proficiency level among them. A researcher-made questionnaire was administered among teachers. The questionnaire had a Likert Scale response format ranging from "very much" and "not at all". With this questionnaire, to triangulate the data, informal interview was conducted.

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During informal interview, the responses of the target group were audio-recorded for analysis and recognize new insights about the advantages of flipped classroom approach. In addition, participatory observation applied by the researcher to systematically observe the changes in the classroom; classroom observational element is very crucial in order to obtain clear picture regarding to the effectiveness of flipped classroom approach. To complement the data which were obtained from participatory observation with teachers' suggestions, the researcher administered questionnaires to the target group.

The informal interview with the target group was conducted to enrich the result of the discussion, sharing experience, cooperation and collaborative venture outside the classrooms employing social media. The informal interviews revealed rich and more in-depth data relevant to the benefits of the flipped classroom approach in ESL classrooms.

6. Findings
6.1 Informal Group Interviews
Expressions of target group, who are involved in this investigation is vital. This target group interview discloses important information relevant to overall programme. From their verbal data it is found that flipped classroom approach greatly helped them enhance each individual language skill in the actual classroom.

6.2 Questionnaire Responses
As it can be observed from the target group's responses, 50% positive expression (strongly agree) have been identified regarding the flipped classroom approach; 30% of the target group revealed "agree" responses and others disclose (10%) neutral and 10% reveal disagree responses.

As I mentioned earlier, before beginning the investigation I conducted pre-LC test and after completing the intervention programme a LC post-test was administered. When I compare these two tests it is recognised that the post-test scores indicate vast improvement among target group members relevant to comprehension ability.

6.3 Observation Report
Target group learners repeatedly and very openly declared that their English language proficiency was low. But the researcher observed that they were all very good in their respective majors. They, on several occasions, during casual discussions, appealed to the researcher to help them improve their proficiency level in English on par with their academic achievement.

7. Suggestion
At the beginning, it is very important that teachers have to plan their day-to-day curriculum appropriately based on flipped classroom approach; this plan should be plainly articulated the ultimate goals/outcome and other relevant factors which include needs of the institutions, learners, employers, society and evaluation scheme; thereafter, teachers have to

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upload the day to day programme based on the prescribed curriculum. Teachers may discuss with the students before the actual class and they have to give adequate time to prepare the activities and learning contents. In the actual classroom teachers have to ensure whether learners had interaction am ng themselves.

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