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PERCEPTIONS OF ENGLISH METHOD STUDENTS TOWARDS THE FLIPPED CLASSROOM APPROACH AT A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on findings from a research study that sought to establish the perceptions of pre-service teachers towards the flipped classroom approach. The flipped classroom approach, also known as the inverted classroom, has gained prominence in recent years. However, little has been written about its benefits in language teaching, particularly in the South African context. In contrast to the traditional classroom, where the teacher takes centre stage, imparting new information to students who passively absorb it, the flipped classroom approach focuses on providing students with learning materials in the form of pre-recorded lectures, videos, presentations, tutorials, and other web-based resources before the actual class. The approach requires students to familiarise themselves with new information and prepare for in-class activities with the teacher and peers, ahead of time. Class time in the flipped classroom approach is reserved for revisiting the topic while the teacher actively engages with the students via group discussions, collaborative coursework, and assessments. This paper discusses how the researcher applied the flipped classroom approach in teaching English method modules and conducted the study on which this paper is based. It emphasises why language teachers should consider flipping their classrooms. This study employed a qualitative research design because the researcher intended to collect descriptive data in the form of student teachers' spoken and written words. Purposeful sampling was used, as it allowed the researcher to select the students to be included in the study intentionally. The researcher selected 20 students out of a class of 52 students. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Before commencing the study, the researcher obtained an ethical clearance certificate from the University Research Ethics Committee, which enabled the study to proceed. The findings indicate that students had a positive attitude toward the flipped classroom approach. Most students appreciated the use of videos and the flexibility provided by the flipped classroom approach.

Keywords: the flipped classroom, English method students, perceptions

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The flipped classroom approach, also known as the inverted classroom, is a relatively new teaching method that has gained prominence in recent years. Demiralay (2014) argued that the flipped classroom, a new educational trend, is expected to be widely implemented in tertiary education over the next few years as an alternative to the traditional face-to-face approach. While there have been several studies on the use of the flipped classroom in South Africa (Tanner & Scott, 2015; Mulder & van Oord, 2015; Cilliers & Plyman, 2020; Winfield & Whitelaw, 2024), not much has been written about the use of the flipped classroom in South Africa. The flipped classroom concept was first introduced by Jonathan Bergman and Aaron Sams (2012), both of whom were high school chemistry teachers, in their book *Flip Your Classroom: Reach Every Student in Every Class Every Day*. They explored why teachers should adopt the flipped classroom model in contrast to the traditional classroom, where the teacher takes centre stage, imparting new information to students who passively absorb it. The flipped classroom technique focuses

on providing students with learning materials in the form of pre-recorded lectures, videos, presentations, tutorials, and other web-based materials before the actual class. The method requires students to familiarise themselves with the new information and prepare for in-class activities with the teacher and peers ahead of time. In class, teachers mainly help students with their difficulties or assist those who are struggling with experiments. With the development of the internet, the flipped classroom has become popular in North America. The flipped classroom approach is a pedagogical method in which students acquire new knowledge by means of short videos, podcasts, e-books, and the internet outside of the classroom, and then consolidate what they have acquired through classroom activities with the help of classmates and teachers. The flipped classroom differs from the traditional face-to-face learning method in that students learn their lessons at their convenience, either before or outside of class. Teachers usually prepare their lesson content digitally and enable their students to access these materials before lessons. Issues that are ambiguous, problematic, and cannot be sufficiently internalised are noted and then presented to their teachers and peers electronically. In this way, class time is reserved for revisiting the topic while the teacher actively engages with the students by means of group discussions, collaborative coursework, and assessments.

The researcher describes how to apply the flipped classroom approach in teaching English method modules and summarises the methodology used in the study, on which this paper is based. Bishop and Verleger (2013) stated that the flipped classroom approach was grounded in constructivist learning theory. According to this theory, learners construct their own meaning while still depending on existing knowledge. Students are actively involved in the learning process. Instead of giving direct information to learners, teachers prepare an appropriate environment in which they build their own knowledge electronically (Kauchak & Eggen, 2003) in the flipped classroom.

Classroom learning activities are high-level cognitive tasks that utilise active learning technologies, allowing students to interact with them. The out-of-class learning process is based entirely on self-regulated learning. Classroom learning comprises high-level cognitive activities that utilise active learning techniques, thereby allowing students to interact with one another and with the teacher (Roehl, Reddy, & Shannon, 2013).

Lage, Platt and Treglia (2000:32) posited that “inverting the classroom means that events that traditionally took place inside the classroom now take place outside the classroom and vice versa.” Invert means ‘turn inside out’ or ‘upside down’, which has a similar meaning to the word ‘flip’. Goodwin and Miller (2013) posited that the flipped classroom enabled students to learn tasks before class, then allowed them to identify any difficulties they had encountered in the classroom. The tasks follow a similar procedure: Firstly, before class, all students watch a teaching video designed by the teacher. Secondly, the students attempt to complete all the tasks assigned by the teacher. Thirdly, all the students discuss the content with the teacher or classmates through QQ platforms to share answers and write down any unsolved or difficult questions. Thus, students can work out unsolved and difficult questions with classmates or teachers rather than merely passively receiving basic information in class.

Flipping the classroom is the practice of providing online lectures that students can watch from home, thereby replacing traditional classroom lecturing. Ideally, this practice allows more class time to be dedicated to active learning rather than instruction (Bergmann & Sams, 2014). Proponents of the flipped classroom method believe that it offers numerous benefits, including enhanced classroom efficiency and increased student engagement. Conversely, some students thought it was difficult to implement and that unequal access to technological resources disadvantages certain populations (Smith, 2016; Tomlinson, 2015).

Bergman and Sams (2013), the real proponents of the flipped classroom, consider it a teaching method that primarily reverses the traditional classroom approach, where, after classes, students complete homework or engage in classroom activities on their own. Bergman, Overmyer and Willie (2015) posited that the traditional definition of a flipped classroom is replacing direct instruction with videos and, thereafter, encouraging students to focus on essential learning activities with their teachers inside the classroom.

The following table provides a comparison between traditional and flipped classrooms.

Table 1.1: A comparison between the traditional and the flipped classroom approach

	Traditional Classroom	Flipped Classroom
Role of teachers	Master of knowledge and class	Instructor and stimulator
Role of learners	Passive learner	Active learner and researcher
Teaching methods in class	Teaching in class and doing homework after class	Pre-learning before class and discussing problems in class
Time distribution in class	Spending most of the time teaching	Spending most of the time discussing among learners
Teaching content in class	Teaching and imparting knowledge	Question and answer study
Application of teaching methods	Presenting learning contents	Autonomous learning and cooperative learning
Teaching evaluation	Paper test	Evaluation from multiple aspects

As can be seen from the table above, the flipped classroom approach has many advantages for both educators and learners. Researchers Bergman and Sams (2012), Bishop and Verleger (2013), and Smith (2020) agreed that using the flipped method has the following benefits:

- Facilitating reviewing the video lectures more than once
- Proactive learner attitude through self-learning
- Thinking outside the box
- Online collaboration with peers opens new doors for students
- Learners explore the length and breadth of the subject in time and space, without the confines of the classroom

This study aimed to share the perceptions held by the English method learners towards the use of the flipped classroom approach. The research questions that the study sought to answer were:

1. What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of using the flipped classroom approach in your English methodology module?
2. Will you use the flipped classroom approach when you start teaching?

1.2 BACKGROUND

At the University of Zululand, where the study was conducted, there is considerable discussion about the use of blended learning, and a draft policy on blended learning is in place. Still, there is no mention of using ‘flipping’ as a way of using blended learning. One way to implement blended learning is by utilising the flipped classroom approach. We need to see flipped classrooms as a method of instruction and a form of blended learning. Baepler, Walker and Driessen (2014) argued that the flipped classroom is a learning design that sometimes plays a vital role in blended learning.

1.2 THE LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Bergmann and Sams (2014) stated that flipping the classroom entails an educator replacing information that would traditionally be covered by means of an oral, in-class lecture with a video or digitally based media that learners can access at home and revisit if needed. This frees up time that can instead be dedicated to hands-on learning or direct engagement and interaction with learners in classrooms (Bull, Ferster & Kjellstrom, 2012).

Hall and DuFrene (2016) argued that the flipped classroom has advantages. One benefit is an increase in efficiency of time usage. A flipped classroom typically requires watching video versions of course material online as homework. The next day, learners can come to class ready to actively engage in the material (Martin, 2015).

It also allows teachers to spend more time individually interacting with students, which creates more opportunities to check for understanding and clear up misconceptions (Bergmann & Sams, 2014). An additional benefit regarding time efficiency is that once teachers have recorded and chronicled course materials online, they can then easily refer to them in the future, thus saving time by avoiding repetition and allowing them to focus their productivity on addressing other student needs. Improvements in student engagement are also frequently supported by existing research. This could be because the flipped classroom approach presents material through digital media, which students tend to relate to more easily (Greenfield, 2009).

Considering that most of today’s youth have grown up with a reliance on web-based forms of consumption and communication, perhaps computer-based modes of learning will resonate with them more naturally (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Goodwin & Miller, 2013). Another explanation for the more engaging nature of video lectures compared to traditional lectures is rooted in research into human nature and physiology, which has found that learners typically lose interest in an activity after approximately ten minutes (Medina, 2008; Goodwin & Miller, 2013). This approach works perfectly with the structure of a flipped classroom, as the video lectures are kept short to keep them engaging (Engin & Domanci, 2015). Another advantage of the flipped classroom is that it allows students to revisit material at their own pace by replaying video lectures or reviewing content in their own time. In other words, flipping will enable students to enjoy the benefits of self-paced learning or differentiation (Bergmann & Sams, 2013). The advantages of the flipped classroom include increased interactivity with students, fostering of personal accountability and responsibility, and improved student learning (Rotellar & Cain, 2016:2).

McNally et al. (2017:283) stated that most students prefer the flipped classroom to the traditional classroom. Furthermore, Bergmann and Sams (2013) pointed out that flipping also allowed students to retake tests or quizzes. Since students consider self-paced learning to be an essential benefit of flipping, this policy provides students with an opportunity to demonstrate that they have mastered the course content, even if they required additional time to do so. They shun the idea that assessment scores must remain static or punitive and encourage the use of flexibility in assessment as a component of flipping (Bergmann & Sams, 2013).

1.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Constructivist theory was used in this study. Social constructivism was employed in this study because it incorporates aspects of cooperative learning, such as group work and sharing information during discussions.

The constructivist theory was used in this study. The constructivist perspective is a theory of human learning and development. The most distinctive feature of the constructivist approach may be the way in which learners play an active role in constructing their knowledge and meaning gained from personal encounters (Doolittle, 1999). The constructivist theory aligns with the flipped classroom approach, as students are actively involved in constructing their own knowledge, rather than relying only on educators' one-directional impartation of knowledge.

Social constructivist theories centre on the interdependence of social and individual practices in the production of knowledge. Vygotsky's research aimed to demonstrate that social interaction among individuals with varying levels of experience or knowledge enhances the knowledge level of less experienced individuals within a community (Vygotsky, 1978:80).

By incorporating social interaction, learners can benefit from the shared understanding of the group. Social constructivism is a highly efficient means of schooling. Vygotsky believed that social interaction plays a fundamental part in learning. Social constructivism is grounded in communal interactions alongside an individual's critical thinking process.

All of Vygotsky's theories, such as cognitive dialogue, the zone of proximal development, social interaction, culture and inner speech, are cooperatively concerned with the development of social constructivism. By understanding these theories, a classroom that employs communal interaction will result in a highly effective environment (Powell & Kalina, 2009:243). Vygotsky also posited that students would learn more if other peers established a support structure. For example, it often becomes difficult for a student to perform a complex task alone. Still, with the added support structure given by the teacher and peers, it becomes easier for a student to complete complex tasks.

Cooperative learning is thus essential in creating a social constructivist classroom; therefore, students should be allowed to interact not only with the teacher but also with their peers. When tasks or assignments are completed in a group, the knowledge is internalised for all group members, but at a different rate, according to their individual experiences (Vanderburg, 2006:377). Vygotsky understood that internalisation occurs more efficiently when social interaction is made part of the educational setting (Powell & Kalina, 2009:244). Social constructivism was employed in this study because it incorporates aspects of cooperative learning, such as group work and sharing information during discussions. Students

can discuss the concept of a flipped classroom and explain that it is a way of utilising social constructivism.

1.5 RESEARCH METHODS

Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018) (2003:56) described research methodology as the research process, tools, and procedures to be applied, as well as the data collection methods to be used by a researcher. Considering the nature of the research questions being addressed, a qualitative research methodology was deemed the most appropriate for this study, as it is best suited for understanding how English Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) students perceive the flipped classroom approach. The research was conducted as a qualitative case study, seeking the opinions of an English teacher who could share their experiences with flipped classroom teaching methods.

A qualitative approach was employed, drawing on the constructivist and interpretivist views of knowledge (Bryman, 2012:380). The constructivist strategy can also be described as an ontological position which implies that via the interaction between individuals, a feeling of belonging to a social group is produced (Bryman, 2012:381).

The interpretivist strategy describes how to understand the social world through the eyes of its participants (Bryman, 2012:383). A case study design was employed, utilising two classes. Questionnaires and unstructured interviews were used to collect the data.

The data was analysed using content analysis to arrive at findings. Qualitative research employs interpretive techniques that describe, decode, translate, and assign meaning to the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell & Poth, 2018). What is essential is understanding the phenomenon from the participants' perspective, rather than from the researcher's viewpoint. The qualitative method was chosen for this study as the most suitable methodology for the researcher to examine how English PGCE student teachers perceived the use of the flipped classroom approach.

1.6 DESIGN OF THE STUDY

A case study can be defined as an intensive analysis of a single case (Bryman, 2012:66). The most common use of the word 'case' connects this word with a location, group, community or organisation. A case study design favours qualitative research methods such as participant observation and unstructured interviewing. Still, it cannot be exclusively classified as such (Bryman, 2012:67). A case study is often a rigorous investigation of a single case (Bryman, 2012:70).

1.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The University of Zululand approved the study. The researcher designed a consent form. The former PGCE students signed the consent forms. Anonymity and options to withdraw were explained to the participants.

1.8 POPULATION

Population is a term that sets boundaries on study units. Creswell and Poth (2018) defined population as the totality of all subjects that conform to a set of specifications comprising the entire group of persons that is of interest to the researcher and to whom the research results can be generalised.

1.9 SAMPLE AND SAMPLING

According to Cohen et al. (2018), a sample is a segment of the population on which a study is conducted. Hsien and Shannon (2005) defined sampling as “the process of selecting a subset of items from a defined population for inclusion into a study.”

Purposeful sampling is based on the judgement of the researcher in that a sample comprises elements that contain the most characteristics representative of typical attributes of the population. Purposeful sampling allows a researcher to handpick the cases to be included, based on their judgement of their typicality. The researcher selected student teachers who had completed the methodology module that was being investigated.

Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasised that a purposive sample is based on the researcher's judgement. They cautioned that the researcher should be specific about the knowledge and skills of the informant when doing purposive sampling, as inappropriate informants may render the data meaningless and invalid. The sample was thus based on the researcher's judgement and the purpose of the research, looking for those who had completed the PGCE module being investigated.

Twenty student teachers participated in this study, comprising 12 female and eight male individuals. Participation was voluntary. The participants were in the researcher's office, where they received information about the project and were asked to provide written consent for their participation. The researcher explained to the participants that they would need to reflect on the Method of English for the Further Education and Training (FET) module and express their views on the use of the flipped classroom approach in delivering the module.

Coded pseudonyms were allocated. To protect the identity of the participants, T was used for a student teacher, F was used for a female student teacher, and M was used for a male student teacher. Each participant was given a number from one to 20.

1.10 THE INTERVIEWS

According to Mason (2007), qualitative interviewing refers to in-depth, semi-structured or loosely structured forms of interviewing. According to Johnson and Christensen (2014), an interview is a data collection method in which an interviewer asks questions of an interviewee. The participants were asked to respond to the following questions after the interview:

1. What were your thoughts and feelings about today's classes, where the flipped classroom approach was used?
2. What stood out for you as something new you had learnt?
3. Do you think you will be able to use this approach in your classroom?

1.11 DATA ANALYSIS

A qualitative analysis was performed on the data collected from students (Steen-Utheim & Foldnes, 2017). This was done to establish the students' perceptions regarding the use of the flipped classroom approach.

1.12 CONTENT ANALYSIS

Content analysis is a procedure for concluding by objectively and methodically identifying specific characteristics of the collected data after systematically analysing the data (Bryman, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

1.13 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study investigated the advantages and disadvantages perceived by English teachers who have used the flipped classroom method. Rule and John (2011:75) stated that data analysis was a critical stage of the research process, in which the researcher needs to construct comprehensive descriptions, identify themes and generate explanations of relevant thoughts and actions.

Analysis means organising and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to “see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories.” Cohen et al. (2011:537) posited that data analysis means organising, accounting for and explaining the data; in short, making sense of data in terms of the participants' definitions of the situation, noting patterns, themes, categories and regularities.

Once the data had been collected, the next step was to “bring order, structure, and meaning to the mass of collected data” (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). The recordings from the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the data were coded and categorised into emerging themes and patterns of responses. The researcher analysed, compared and identified patterns and relationships of themes. Cohen et al. (2018) posited that qualitative data analysis is often expressed in written language. The researcher identified sentences and paragraphs from the transcribed interviews and categorised them accordingly.

The following themes emerged from the analysis of the data:

1. Students had positive attitudes towards the flipped classroom

One of the primary findings was that students had favourable attitudes towards the flipped classroom approach. Out of the 20 students who participated in the study, 17 expressed a positive attitude toward the topic.

FST1 said, “I liked everything about the flipped classroom. It made me interested in the module.”

MST8 said, “The flipped classroom is a wonderful method to get students involved in class and to understand the material better.”

FST15 said, “I liked the use of the flipped classroom. It was different from what I've been used to in lectures.”

Similarly, FST4 said, “What a way to get the students to participate in discussions.”

MST11 had this to say, “I liked the use of the flipped classroom approach because it made us as students in control of the discussions and to share.”

Additionally, FST7 said, “The flipped classroom has many advantages, such as saving time which could have been used for the lecturer to deliver his lecture. In the flipped classroom approach, we have enough time to engage with the lecturer and our fellow students. This deepens our understanding of the topic.”

The above assertions by the students align with the existing literature on the flipped classroom (Barrett, 2012; Bergmann & Sams, 2014; Cilliers & Plyman, 2020). However, three students expressed negative attitudes towards the flipped classroom approach.

One of them, MST6, said, “The flipped classroom approach has disadvantages in that the videos and the lecture notes were sent in the afternoon by the lecturer. I do not stay on campus, and I have problems with connectivity once I am off campus.”

In a similar vein, FST13 said, “The approach has disadvantages for people who do not have access to a computer, especially in the afternoon once we leave campus.”

The last student, MST9, said, “While I can see the benefits of this approach in terms of getting students to engage with the topic, I did not have data to view the videos and the lecture notes to prepare for the discussion in class.”

The views of these students indicate that, although they recognised the advantages of the flipped classroom approach, they felt that it disadvantaged them because they lacked access to an internet connection or data to view the videos and notes sent by their lecturer, which prevented them from participating in the discussion in the classroom the next day.

2. Students said they would use the flipped classroom in their classes

When asked whether they would use the flipped classroom approach in their classrooms, 15 out of 20 students indicated that they would.

MST10 said, “Yes, I would definitely use the flipped classroom approach because it is a great way to save class time and get the learners to understand the topic better.”

MST18 also said, “I will try the approach in my classroom. I will use the flipped classroom. It will get my students interested in the topics I will teach them.”

FST2 said, “The approach makes classes interesting. I will use it in my classes.”

Five students stated that they would not use the approach. However, FST3 said, “I intend to work in one of the rural areas where there are always network problems. I do not think the approach would work well where there are network problems.”

FST17 said, “While I think that the approach is beneficial to the students, I think the learners I will teach will have issues with access to data, as most learners come from poor communities.”

Similarly, FST20 said, “I do not think it would work for me as learners will complain about not having access to the internet. I think I can try to use a partial flipped classroom where I would have to give the learners some notes so they can prepare for the next class.”

The views expressed by students who initially thought they would not use the flipped classroom indicated that they did not have a negative attitude towards the flipped classroom per se; the major problem was access to internet connectivity.

1.14 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we need to employ pedagogies that engage students in the learning process. The approach has completely transformed the way the researcher teaches, and the researcher wishes that all language teachers, especially those learning African languages, could try the approach. The researchers' classes have been more interactive and interesting since adopting the flipped classroom approach.

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