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# Rethinking the Design of English Language Teaching Online Using the Flipped Classroom Approach

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## Abstract

Online teaching has been in use for a while, but not many people cared to embrace it as a method of teaching until the COVID-19 pandemic literally forced them into giving it a consideration. The sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led to the shutting down of schools across the country and several parts of the world. Consequently, many state governments and educational institutions turned to media broadcasts as well as online teaching to keep learners engaged. For the first time in decades, teleconferencing applications and Internet services such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Skype witnessed a surge in their use for teaching and learning as well as for conducting meetings in different spheres of life such as governance and business. Thus, many English language instructors began to teach online without any appreciable time to understand the specialized techniques for the design of online teaching for maximum benefit to learners. Many English language instructors arranged for synchronous online classes that lasted between one to three hours. From personal experiences, the researchers observed that many learners in such classes experienced boredom and disengaged from the live online classes. This prompted the researchers to rethink how online English language teaching can be designed for maximum engagement of learners. This paper proposes the incorporation of the flipped classroom approach into the design of online English language teaching and presents steps that English language instructors need to take to be able to incorporate the flipped classroom approach into online English Language teaching for maximum benefits and learners' engagement.

**Keywords:** Design, Online Teaching, Flipped Classroom Approach, English Language

## Introduction

The innovation of online teaching has been around for a while, even though not many people cared to embrace it as a method of teaching, especially in Nigeria, until the COVID-19 pandemic literally forced them into giving it a trial. The outbreak of the corona virus pandemic led to schools being shut down across the country and in many parts of the world. Consequently, many state governments and educational institutions turned to radio and television broadcasts as well as online teaching to keep learners engaged. For the first time in decades,

teleconferencing and Internet services such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Skype applications witnessed a surge for teaching and for conducting meetings in different spheres of life such as governance and business.

English language instructors also joined the bandwagon and took to online teaching. Many English language instructors delved into online teaching without any previous experience in the design of online teaching for maximum benefit to learners. Many English language instructors arranged for synchronous online classes that lasted between one and three hours. From personal experiences, we observed that many learners in such classes experienced boredom and withdrew from the live online classes. This prompted us to rethink how online English language teaching can be properly designed for maximum engagement of learners. In this paper, we propose the incorporation of the flipped classroom approach into the design of online English language teaching and present steps that English language instructors need to take to be able to incorporate the flipped classroom approach into online English Language teaching for maximum benefits and learners' engagement.

### **What is Online Teaching?**

Manoj (2019) defines online learning as “education that takes place over the Internet. It is often referred to as [online learning or] e-learning among other terms” (para. 18). Online learning and online teaching are used interchangeably in this paper to refer to teaching and learning activities conducted over the Internet using computers, mobile phones and other Internet-enabled devices. Online teaching refers to the processes of presenting ideas and knowledge content to students through the Internet medium. Zhu, Payette and DeZure (2003) described online teaching as the delivery of instruction using different Web-based technologies, from the Internet or an Intranet and other communication technologies that enable students to participate in learning activities beyond the campus, from students' homes to workplaces and other locations. Online teaching involves delivering instruction using a computer or other devices via the Internet without the need for face-to-face meetings of students and their instructors. Online teaching is a form of distance education conducted over the Internet. Distance education is any form of teaching and learning that takes place over a distance without the necessity of the instructor and learner being in the same place. Mobile learning and Online teaching, also known as online learning or e-learning are the most popular forms of distance learning today (<https://www.igi-global.com>).

Online teaching can be conducted both asynchronously as well as synchronously. Asynchronous online teaching involves placing content in a learning management system for learners to interact with at their convenience. In this form of online teaching, there is little or no live, real-time interaction between the instructor and the students. However, that does not mean that there is no communication between the teacher, student, and classmates (Zucker & Kozma, 2003).

Synchronous online teaching on the other hand, is a form of online teaching in which the instructor and learners arrange to meet at regularly pre-agreed times to transact teaching and learning interactions in real-time over the Internet without having to meet face-to-face. In synchronous online teaching, “students interact with the [instructor] and other students in real time; they are separated by distance but come together during regularly scheduled periods” (Barbour, Siko, Gross, & Waddell, 2013, p. 62). Synchronous online teaching is considered the most similar to the traditional face-to-face teaching because of the possibility of real-time interactions.

### **Why Teach English Language Online?**

Learning English language, especially as a second language has been challenging especially for non – native speakers. This is especially so for low proficiency learners, who are less motivated to learn the language. Teaching online, especially asynchronously, enables English language instructors to make content available for learners to access at any time, and from anywhere. This flexibility afforded by online teaching means that learners can access content and work at their own pace and time. Teaching English language over the Internet gives learners the opportunity to broaden their knowledge because they can learn on their own and this increases their level of confidence and independence. Compared to the traditional face-to-face classroom teaching where

lessons are paced to accommodate the slowest learner in the class, online teaching and learning, especially those that incorporate asynchronous modules, allow learners to move at their own pace without having to wait for the slow learners or having to hurry to catch up with the fast learners.

According to Appana (2008), “studies (Hill, 1997; Webster & Hackey, 1997) have shown that online instruction offers a major breakthrough in teaching and learning [English language because] it facilitates the exchange of information and expertise [among learners] while [also] providing opportunities for [all types of] learners in distant or disadvantaged locations (p. 6). This can result to greater participation of all learners, including shy ones if instructors deliberately incorporate elements of anonymity through the use of pseudonyms. Research shows that given the same conditions, learners in online settings outperform their counterparts in face-to-face classes (Bourelle, Bourelle, Knutson, & Spong, 2016; Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, Jones, SRI International, U. S. Department of Education, 2004). Other research reports have however demonstrated contrary outcomes. For instance, Ni (2013) and Al-Maqtri (2014) reported no significant differences between face-to-face and online learners, while Heppen, Sorensen, Allensworth, Walters, Rickles, Taylor and Michelman (2017) reported that learners in face-to-face classes outperformed their online counterparts. Despite these mixed outcomes, the innovation of online teaching and learning continues to gain traction around the world, especially in this era of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Several factors have driven and continue to drive the transition to online teaching among educational institutions across subject disciplines. Tschida, Hodge and Schmidt (2016) citing Wise and Rothman (2010), stated that “online [teaching] is cost effective in a variety of ways [; for instance, there is no need for] physical classroom space and accompanying tools [, and ] courses can be developed, copied, and reused by other instructors” (p. 665).

### **Challenges of Teaching English Language Online**

As promising as online teaching is, it is not a safe sail for all instructors and learners. Online teaching and learning are fraught with different challenges ranging from learners’ dissatisfaction to non-completion of online courses. According to Tschida, Hodge and Schmidt (2016), “the move to online teaching can be quite unsettling for some faculty who are successful in the classroom but then struggle to interact with students in cyberspace or design online courses” (p. 665). Tschida, Hodge and Schmidt (ibid) further stated that instructors who are “used to teaching in the traditional face-to-face classrooms now find themselves transitioning to teaching online. In the process, they are learning that teaching online is not as simple as transferring face-to-face courses to the Internet. [And] that many instructors teach as they were taught” (p. 666); and because many of them have not even taken online courses as students, they struggle to find a model to imitate.

Not having a model to imitate has led many online instructors to delve into online teaching by simply moving their boring traditional lectures to the online environment via teleconferencing services such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Presenting lengthy lectures over the internet without offering opportunities for active participation of learners and facilitating interactivity could lead to learners being disinterested and disengaging from the learning experience being offered. Cole, Shelly and Swartz (2014) in a three-year study of student satisfaction with online courses reported the absence of interaction as the most often cited reason for course dissatisfaction. Hence, English language instructors need to provide opportunities for active participation in their online course design to ensure greater satisfaction, increase progression and completion rates.

### **Mitigating the Challenges of Teaching English Language Online Using the Flipped Classroom Approach**

Tschida, Hodge and Schmidt (2016) assert that “for online [teaching and] learning to be effective, institutions must recognize the importance [of] providing [instructors] with support in designing online courses and transitioning the content of specific areas of study to the online platform” (p. 676). This is because the instructor’s role is different in an online setting. Rather than acting as a traditional ‘lecturer’, the instructor assumes the role of a learning facilitator. Most ‘traditional’ instructors thus struggle to shift roles, and as noted

by Fish and Wickersham (2009), many of them often simply put their poorly designed face-to-face course materials into the online delivery system.

However, simply transferring face-to-face course materials into an online teaching and learning situation is not considered best practice because the factors that influence student success in a traditional face-to-face classroom differ significantly from those in an online classroom. To ensure that students succeed in an online teaching and learning situation, instructors “must be able to provide opportunities for interaction when convenient for the student, provide authentic feedback without ever coming in direct contact with the students, and be able to monitor students who are becoming isolated from the rest of the class” (Barbour, Siko, Gross, & Waddell, 2013, p. 62).

Bormann (2014) stated that: “the lower activity levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy- Remembering, Understanding and sometimes, Applying- are addressed within the classroom [while] the top levels of Blooms Taxonomy- Analyzing, Evaluating and Creating- are then left for the student to do on his or her own with no assistance than parents and the occasional classmate(s)” (p. 7). The problem with this approach to teaching is that it assumes that all learners come to class prepared to learn, which often, is not the case. Leaving the more complex tasks of: analyzing, evaluating and creating to the learner to tackle alone at home leaves many struggling and in a state of disequilibrium.

The flipped classroom is presently one instructional practice growing in popularity in education because it supports the active participation and success of learners. The flipped classroom is an instructional strategy in which learners are pre-exposed to content before coming to live face-to-face class. It involves the “organization of the educational process in [such a way that] when students attend face-to-face classes, they already have some theoretical knowledge and understanding of the matter that will be discussed in the classroom. [This] makes the interaction more effective and fruitful [because] students feel more comfortable and confident asking questions and discussing the issues with the teacher and peers” (Evseeva & Solozhenko, 2015, p. 207). The instruction is organized in such a way that the lower levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy are catered for through the pre-class activities, usually in video format. Learners watch the videos that are sent to them via the Internet or uploaded to an online platform for them to access at any time and place that is convenient for them. By the time they converge in a face-to-face class, they already have the basic knowledge about the topic and this aids active participation in the discussions and hands - on - activities that take place in the classroom.

Research shows that the flipped classroom approach has been effective in science, technology and mathematics (Strayer, 2007; Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Marcey & Brint, 2012; Gehringer & Peddycord, 2013), but not much research is available about the effectiveness of this approach in English language classrooms. Despite this, the flipped classroom has continued to attract the attention of language instructors.

The face-to-face component of the flipped classroom is not feasible in many schools today due to COVID-19 restrictions and social distancing rules. However, teleconferencing applications such as Zoom can be used to implement the face-to-face component of the flipped classroom in an online teaching environment while applications such as Edpuzzle can be used as a medium to share pre-live class videos. Rather than trying to engage learners in two to three hours live video calls via Zoom to present boring lectures, English language instructors can create engaging videos as pre-class content and upload them to Edpuzzle.

Engaging videos are videos that have elements of interactivity. Interactive videos contain quizzes or questions strategically placed at intervals within. When learners watch the videos to the points where quizzes or questions are embedded, they are prompted to enter their responses before they are allowed to continue watching. According to Li (2016), when students have the chance to interact with multimedia module, it increases their interest in learning, makes learning more fun as well as fosters better understanding of the content. Various online quiz programmes can be utilized to add interactivity to videos or text-based materials. Edpuzzle for instance, enables the instructor to add interactivity to videos by offering the capability of adding comments, voice-over, and quizzes. As learners watch the videos before class, Edpuzzle gives the instructor the ability to

check to see those who are fully engaged with the video and those who are not. The instructor can do a follow-up on such learners by sending them direct messages via their e-mails or placing personalized messages on Google Classroom for such learners. Such learners can in turn, be helped individually by instructors to overcome whatever challenges they might be experiencing.

There is an emerging model of the flipped learning approach that holds much promise for designing online courses. It is called Synchronous Online Flipped Learning Approach (SOFLA). According to Marshall and Kostka (2020), “the model was developed by Marshall (2017) and Marshall and Rodriguez Buitrago (2017) in order to align flipped learning principles with online instruction. SOFLA mirrors flipped learning in that work that is completed outside of class now moves to the asynchronous space, and in-class work is completed in synchronous class sessions when the teacher and students’ peers are present” (p.4).



Figure 1: The SOFLA cycle of Learning

Source: Marshall & Kostka (2020)

The first step of SOFLA, *Pre-work*, involves placing video, textual material or other types of multimedia online for learners to access asynchronously. The video is usually interactive and may be uploaded onto Edpuzzle or PlayPosit. These two platforms enable the instructor to add interactive elements to the video such as quizzes or questions, which learners must respond to as they watch the video. This ensures that learners are not just passive watchers of the video. Responding to the embedded quizzes helps to check the level of understanding and ensures that learners are grasping the concept(s) being presented through the video. The instructor might also place textual content such as book chapters or articles on Perusall. Perusall helps to make the textual material an interactive textbook. Every participant in the class gets to read the same copy asynchronously. The instructor can highlight some portions of the text, and add questions for all learners to discuss. Learners on their parts can highlight portions that they find interesting or confusing and ask for clarifications within the same copy of the text.

The instructor might decide to use video or textual material as pre-work. What matters in this step of SOFLA is that the out - of - class work now being placed in the asynchronous space should contain interactive elements that can help learners engage fully with the content and foster learning.

Step two, *Sign-in Activity*, begins the live or synchronous component of the SOFLA framework. At this stage, all learners must have watched the video or read the textual material. So, the instructor and the learners converge online in a live session. This can take place in Zoom, Microsoft Teams or any other teleconferencing application. It involves learners answering some questions that may or may not be related to the pre-work. The instructor can have all learners who are connected to the live class write one or two sentences in response to the question posed. Responses can be posted to Jamboard, an interactive whiteboard or on the chat box within the Zoom application.

Step three of the SOFLA framework is whole group application. This step is instructor led. It is not a time to lecture. Rather, it is a time for the instructor to guide the whole class in applying the principles of what they learned in the pre-work. The instructor might also use this time to clarify misconceptions that might have arisen from the pre-work as revealed in the data downloaded by the instructor prior to the synchronous session.

Learners may utilize audio, whiteboard, or the chat box within the Zoom application for the whole group application step.

Step four of the SOFLA framework is breakouts. At this stage of the live session, learners are divided into several small groups. The breakout groups allow the instructor to implement peer instruction. The instructor might give the same or different tasks to each of the groups. Within each breakout group, learners are encouraged to collaborate by teaching or explaining certain concepts to their peers within the groups. At the end of explaining, the peer tutor within the group then asks the group members some questions to check for understanding. The Zoom application is an excellent tool in helping to divide learners into breakout groups as well as for polling.

Step five of the SOFLA framework is share out. At this stage, all learners rejoin the main class within the Zoom platform. Each group is encouraged to share what they learned with the general class at this stage. Fethi (2015) developed an instrument known as SHAC (Share, Help, Ask, Comment). Learners are encouraged to share what they worked on or learned in their individual groups. Using SHAC, learners are also encouraged to ask questions, make comments and help their peers in areas where they still have misconceptions or difficulties.

Step six of the SOFLA framework is *Preview and Discovery*. At this stage, students are primed for their upcoming assigned work. Marshall and Kostka (2020) stated that “to accomplish this goal, the [instructor] can pre-teach terms and concepts, activate [learners’] prior knowledge, and build new schemata. Importantly, the [instructor’s] task [at this stage] is to introduce but not teach the material because direct instruction occurs in the pre-work for the next [live session]” (p. 8). Previewing the material for the next session enables learners to see the gap in their knowledge and are thus motivated to want to fill the knowledge gap through the out - of - class work that the instructor will place in their synchronous space against the next live session.

Step seven, assignment instructions, involves the instructor assigning new work and explaining what learners “are expected to do for the next out - of - class work, [while also reminding] them where the [materials] they will need to access are located [online]” (Marshall & Kostka, 2020, p.9). To make it easy for learners to locate these materials, instructors should try to place the materials in multiple locations because learners often navigate online courses in different ways.

Step eight, *Reflection*, brings the synchronous class session to a close. At this stage, the instructor typically asks learners to reflect on what they found most interesting or important in the lesson by writing one or two sentences on the whiteboard where they can all see one another’s responses. However, voiceThread or Flipgrid could be used in addition to the white board to get students’ reflections on the lesson. This step is very important because students’ reflections give the instructor some insight into what each learner found meaningful and this could inform modifications in future lesson design.

## Conclusion

Effective online teaching and learning depends on many factors. Simply digitizing traditional face-to-face lectures and uploading them online does not bring about effective learning and learner engagement and satisfaction. Many English language instructors lack the training and skills needed for effective transition to online teaching. This perhaps accounts for why many of them have moved their traditional teaching strategies online by lecturing for hours without incorporating elements of interactivity to keep learners engaged and motivated. They need to be deliberately trained professionally in the design and implementation of online teaching and how to use Internet services and applications such as Zoom, Edpuzzle, Perusall, etc. This will make them better equipped to offer opportunities for learners’ active participation and engagement, and ultimately, greater learning and satisfaction with online teaching and learning. The flipped classroom is a promising instructional approach and if well incorporated into the design of online English language teaching, it is capable of fostering higher learner engagement and deeper learning.

## Recommendations

To successfully incorporate the flipped classroom approach into the design and implementation of online English language teaching, the following steps are recommended:

1. Online English language classes should be a mix of synchronous and asynchronous delivery of content. Teleconferencing applications such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams should be used to hold live classes over the Internet while Edpuzzle and Google Classroom should be used to deliver pre-class videos and other forms of content to learners.
2. Live class sessions in online English language teaching should not exceed 45 minutes. A majority of contemporary learners have low attention span; hence, any class that lasts for too long is almost likely going to cause them boredom without appreciable learning experience.
3. Pre-class video or content should focus on the lower cognitive levels of Bloom's taxonomy while the live class sessions should focus on guiding learners through application, analysis, evaluation and creation using the background knowledge already gained from watching pre-class videos or interacting with pre-class content.
4. The government and managers of educational institutions should make it a point of duty to train prospective and in-service English language instructors in the use of different Internet applications and on how to design and implement online learning.

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