# Lessons learnt: Flipping a Business English Course with Moodle's "Learning Paths"

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#### Abstract

Inverted/flipped learning<sup>1</sup> has been taking the field of education by storm but the concept seems to be still under-researched in EFL / ESP contexts, especially in relation to its exact impact on promoting students' English learning (e.g., Lee & Wallace, 2018; Kirk & Casenove, 2016). The approach involves students engaging in online self-directed learning phases in which they gain factual knowledge prior to the classroom learning phases during which they can apply the acquired knowledge to develop higher-order thinking skills, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Tolks, Schäfer, Raupach, Kruse, Sarikas, Gerhardt-Szép, Klauer, Lemos, Fischer, Eichner, Sostmann, & Hege, 2016, p. 3). This paper reports on the outcomes of an action research project whose aim was to improve the learning experience of a cohort of undergraduate students taking a business English course by inverting the classroom. The self-directed phases involved creating learning paths u sing Moodle's activity completion and restrict access settings as well as various features (e.g., quizzes) that relied on both the course book material and authentic online sources. During face-to-face sessions the focus was on extending the task-based approach used with previous cohorts by using open case studies to develop students' productive skills. The lessons learnt – via student feedback and the lecturer's own reflection – will be examined in detail and suggestions for refining the concept further will be offered.

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<sup>1</sup> The term *flipped learning* is used in the context of primary and secondary education whereas *inverted learning* is used to refer to third-level education (see e.g., Tolks et al. 2016). In this paper both terms will be used interchangeably.

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# 1. Introduction

With the rise in popularity of flipped learning, aided by the advent of screencasts and instructional videos, *open educational resources* and *massive open online courses* (MOOCs) (Tolks et al., 2016, p. 4), technology and foreign language teaching and learning have become even more closely intertwined. In a flipped learning classroom, "students gain first exposure to new material outside of class... and then use class time to do the harder work of assimilating that knowledge, perhaps through problem-solving, discussion, or debates" (Brame, 2013). The approach thus tries to solve the common problem where the delivery of content consumes so much class time that little is left for practice and application of new knowledge, which necessitates learners engaging in these activities as homework (Buckingham, 2018). Contrary to popular belief, flipped learning is not only about learners watching videos at home (Adams, 2017) as the pre-class materials can include a variety of learning resources such as texts, self-made or already existing lecture videos, podcasts, and screencasts (Brame, 2013).

The literature mentions numerous advantages of flipped learning such as the fact that it "put[s] ... [students] at the helm of their own learning" since they are able to do pre-class tasks at their own pace and repeat them if necessary (Spino & Trego, 2015, p. 1). The role of the teacher, who is no longer a "sage on the stage" but rather a "guide on the side" (Buckingham, 2018), is to help learners to focus on higher-order thinking skills in the classroom and engage with more challenging aspects of the learning process, such as application of new knowledge (Spino & Trega, 2015, p. 1), "tailor[ing] class activities to focus on the elements with which students are struggling" (Brame, 2013). In addition, peer interaction and collaboration are fostered in the classroom (Buckingham, 2018).

Inverted learning, which used to be applied predominantly in STEM<sup>2</sup> subjects and blended courses, has been making inroads into the field of foreign language education (Lyddon, 2015, p. 381). From the point-of-view of communicative language teaching with its emphasis on "real or realistic communication, where the accuracy of the language... is less important than successful achievement of the communicative task" (Harmer, 2001, p. 85), the flipped approach is particularly appealing. This is because it can provide rich input (through pre-class activities) and output/interaction opportunities (through in-class acti-

<sup>2</sup> STEM stands for Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths

vities) for learners, while also encouraging them to assume more responsibility for their own learning, engage in individualised learning outside the classroom, and construct their own knowledge inside the classroom (Spino & Trego, 2015, p. 3). However, in spite of these perceived advantages, it appears that, as far as the field of foreign language education is concerned, and especially English for specific purposes (ESP), flipped learning is still relatively under-researched (see e.g., Kirk & Casenove, 2016; Lee & Wallace, 2018; Mehring, 2016).

#### 2. The Study

The purpose of this study was to convert a "traditional" ESP (business English) classroom into a flipped one. The study was conducted within an action research framework. Action research is "a process in which teachers investigate teaching and learning so as to improve their own and their students' learning" (Verster, 2015). Davidoff and van den Berg (1990; as discussed in Verster, 2015) identify the following stages of an action research project: 1) planning (identifying a problem, coming up with a solution and considering the evidence to evaluate its success); 2) teaching/acting (solution implementation); 3) observation (evidence collection) and reflection (analysing the evidence to see whether the problem has been solved). The question guiding this particular project, which arose out of the author's growing dissatisfaction with the traditional classroom-homework model and her wish to provide students with richer authentic input as well as more collaborative and output-focused activities, was "How can I further improve my students' learning experience?."

Two groups of first-year students (38 students in total) from a variety of BA programmes took part in a business English course at level B2. The focus of the course was on writing business reports, developing presentation skills and the language of graphs and charts. Specific business English topics covered included marketing, retail, and accounting and finance. 20% of the grade was participation- and assignment-based.

The *virtual learning environment* (VLE) Moodle was used to both facilitate the flip and serve as a vehicle to implement technology-mediated tasks (e.g., writing texts in wikis). In particular, in the self-directed phase the author used so-called *learning paths* which allow the teacher to guide students through the Moodle course and activities in a specific order (Elearning Service HWR Berlin, 2016). These "paths" were created through Moodle's *activity completion* and *restrict access* settings to not only make material (websites, videos, articles) and activities (e.g., multiple-choice questions, matching, short answer questions) available to the students prior to each session to prepare them for the classroom tasks, but also to sequence these appropriately. In practice, this meant that the students had to complete the activities in a certain order (e.g., doing a vocabulary revision and extension exercise before a listening comprehension task) and were only able to progress to the next activity once the previous one had been completed (see Figure 1), which was signalled by the appearance of a "tick" next to it.

The classroom learning focused on the knowledge the students had acquired during the "home" phase by asking them to engage in various tasks as understood in task-based teaching and learning. In this approach:

> the learners are given meaningful text material to work on and after a series of preparatory tasks they are asked to solve a problem or to develop a text (e.g., a report, a newspaper article or a business plan) using their own knowledge, competences and skills. Their oral and written production is meaningful and useful. There is no right or wrong answer to the task, but each learner, or each group of learners will have developed their own valid solution or product. The learners are taken seriously and become autonomous users of the language. The content of their oral and written input has become relevant and has a purpose. (Fischer, Musacchio, & Standring, 2006, p.9)

Some of the tasks were adapted/based on the course book (Maier-Fairclough & Butzphal, 2010), which was compulsory course material. For example, a course book case study which required the students to create a marketing campaign for a German organic soft drink producer planning to introduce a product to the US consumer (Maier-Fairclough & Butzphal, 2010, p. 71) was expanded to include, in the pre-class phase, a number of authentic materials and activities based on them to prepare the students for the collaborative and product-oriented in-class activities. The former included: reading a BBC text about the marketing mix to acquaint students with key vocabulary relating to marketing and designing a marketing campaign followed by a comprehension check activity (automatically graded and corrected); watching a video from the Wall

Street Journal about the consumption of sugary drinks in the US followed by a listening comprehension activity; reading a website from the US Department of Agriculture on the state of the organic market in the US (followed by reading comprehension questions). In addition, the students had to complete two listening comprehension activities based on the course book to become familiar with the language of presentations.

In the classroom phase in turn the students were asked to: 1) in groups/ pairs write an email inviting the marketing team members to attend a meeting to discuss ideas for the new strategy (a wiki activity), which allowed for revision of useful email phrases practiced in the first semester; 2) role-play the meeting of the marketing team to discuss and agree on the marketing strategy (revision of meeting language covered in the first semester); and 3) prepare a presentation to be given to the company's management (which gave the students an opportunity to practise "new" language of presentations).

The students were introduced to the principles of flipped learning in the first session of the semester and half of the 11 weekly face-to-face sessions (each one comprising four 45-minute teaching units) were conducted using the flipped approach.<sup>3</sup> In the second half of the term an anonymous questionnaire was conducted with the students whose aim was to examine their attitudes towards the flip as well as perceived benefits and problems. More precisely, the students were asked to respond to the following two open-ended prompts (either in English or German): 1) What I like about flipped learning; and 2) Suggestions for improvement. 31 students in total submitted their answers. These were subsequently analysed by the author to identify key themes and categories, which are presented below.

<sup>3</sup> Approximately half of each session was flipped each time.



Figure 1 – A sample Moodle learning path

# 3. Student Feedback

The student responses revealed four main perceived benefits of the new approach. These concerned: its positive impact on the language learning process; better preparation for in-class activities and the end-of-term exam; benefits of integrating technology into the course; and, lastly, the range of activities on offer. These are discussed in turn.

With regard to the positive impact of the flipped learning approach on the students' learning, the key issue, as mentioned by eight students, concerned the independent/deeper/individualised learning afforded by the approach. This is exemplified by the following quotes: "You can listen to a video more then [sic] onetime for yourself so you understand it<sup>44</sup> and "Man befasst sich mehr mit verschiedenen Themen, da man die Aufgaben alleine machen muss" ("You engage more with different topics because you have to do the tasks on your own").<sup>5</sup> Another salient point made by five of the students concerned the fact that the new approach helped them to address both their strengths and weaknesses: "When you do the flipped learning, I think it makes a lot of sense, you learn a lot and deal with your own problems – you also practice in [sic] time pressure." Four students also mentioned the positive impact on the class time: "You can do work more during the lessons and have more time to explain things which are unclear," while a

<sup>4</sup> All quotes are students' original words and have not been corrected by the author.

<sup>5</sup> All translations are author's own.

few more mentioned the positive impact overall, the workload involved, and the impact on motivation (three, three, and two students respectively).

The second advantage of the flipped model concerned the fact that the students felt better prepared for classroom activities and the exam. The following comment is representative of those of the nine students who mentioned the former point: "You are always prepared for the next lesson (the vocabulary and the new theme)." Two students also pointed out the benefit of being able to catch up if they missed a session: "When you miss a lesson you can do the important things at home."

Finally, as far as the advantages of the new approach are concerned, the students also mentioned the benefits of integrating technology (in the form of online material and the VLE) into the pre-class activities as well as the range of learning activities included. In relation to the former, five students appreciated the immediate feedback/correction of online activities (e.g. "Bekommt die Lösung meistens sofort" / "You get the answers usually immediately") and five students also liked the clear structure afforded by the use of the VLE ("gut fände ich, dass wir die Aufgaben direkt auf Moodle machen können. Man kann parallel dazu auch im Internet suchen was ebenfalls einen positiven Lerneffekt hat" / "I found it good that we can do the tasks directly on Moodle. You can search on the Internet at the same time, which also has a positive learning effect"). Thirteen students in total mentioned liking the various pre-class activities and tasks, for example, "Die Kombination von Lesen, Schreiben und Hören ermöglicht ein Verbessern in allen Bereichen" ("The combination of reading, writing and listening makes it possible to get better in all areas"). The other issues raised included the incorporation of authentic/modern learning materials and liking online assessment (three students in each group).

The student feedback revealed however that while having an overall positive impact, the workload associated with the new approach was perceived as too high. This issue was mentioned by 20 out of the 31 students who submitted their answers and is exemplified by this comment:

> Allerdings finde ich, dass die Arbeit die zu Hause zu erledigen ist, nach wie vor zu viel Zeit in Anspruch nimmt. Ich würde mir wünschen, dass wir in Zukunft weniger zu Hause machen müssen dafür mehr während des Unterrichts. So haben wir mehr zu Hause zu tun als in der Vorlesung und das ist

nicht gerechtfertigt. However, I find that the work to be completed at home still takes too much time. I wish that in the future we would have to do less at home and instead do more during class. Otherwise we have more work to do at home than in class and that is not justified.

However, as can be seen from this comment, it was not always clear whether the comments concerning the workload applied to the new approach or to the workload of the course in general.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, 15 students experienced some difficulty with the pre-class materials and activities, mainly the listening comprehension tasks (an issue mentioned by 11 out of the 15 students). This quote is representative of the comments made: "I find that the Vidios schould [sic] be a little bit shorter and with out any dialect or regional speech (if possible)". In addition, the deadlines that had to be met by the students to complete the pre-class activities was also a cause of some dissatisfaction (as mentioned by nine students) and the students generally wished they had had more flexibility with their deadlines, as demonstrated by the following quote:

I would appreciate to have [sic] the freedom to do the exercises whenever I want to. In some weeks there is just to [sic] much else to do. I also think that it is part of the study to decide yourself [sic] if and when you practise!

Also the learning paths and the answers/feedback provided on online activities caused some frustration. These points are exemplified by the following two quotes respectively: "Freischalten der Aufgaben nacheinander unpraktisch, da man z.b. nicht immer zuhause ist und man deshalb die Listenings von der CD nicht manch kann, sind andere Aufgaben nicht verfügbar" ("Making tasks available one after the other is not practical because e.g. you are not always home and therefore cannot do the listening tasks from the [course book] CD [so] the other tasks are not available") and "make more automatic correction so you can see what you have done wrong." Only one student mentioned (a lack of) motivation as a problem with the new approach.

<sup>6</sup> The course ECTS workload was 100 hours.

#### 4. Discussion

Based on the student feedback presented above as well as the author's own reflection on the project, the following "lessons" have been learnt:

#### 4.1 Lesson 1: "Hop" Before You Flip

A number of authors have pointed out that switching to a flipped learning model involves significant workload on the part of the teacher, especially in relation to the preparation of pre-class activities (e.g., Tolks et al., 2016; Kirk & Casenove, 2016), which was also the case in this project. As pointed out by Lyddon (2015, p. 384), "the burden of creating an optimal flipped classroom may prove too great for any single instructor." Solutions offered in the literature include, among others, collaboration with other teachers, also across languages and inverting the classroom gradually (Spino & Trega, 2015, pp. 4–5) as well as using open-access external resources (Tolks et al., 2016, p. 5). With regard to the first recommendation, a gradual change is also to be recommended in order to take into account possible resistance from the learners or the perceived increase in workload (the latter point having been mentioned by the majority of the students in this project). This is in line with Muldrow's (2013) observation, according to which preparing students for the new flipped learning approach is essential.

# 4.2 Lesson 2: Expect the Unexpected

As is evident from the student feedback, whereas the inclusion of technology in the self-directed phase certainly offered a number of benefits, in a few cases, especially at the beginning of the project, it led to some confusion and frustration on the part of the students when the learning paths did not work according to plan (e.g., because restrictions were inadvertently put in place by the author that prevented the students from completing a path). That is why testing activities and making them "fail-proof" is paramount (Spino & Trega, 2015, pp. 4–5). In addition, teachers should not assume that learners are technology-savvy and include too many different tools may be ultimately counterproductive (Spino & Trega, 2015, p. 4). Lastly, it has to be borne in mind that technology is not a "magic bullet" that can "convert bad classes into good ones or ineffective teaching practices into effective ones" (Spino & Trega, 2015, p. 3): As with classroom-based activities, all pre-class tasks have to have a clear pedagogical rationale.

# 4.3 Lesson 3: Provide Incentives

More often than not homework and assignments that are not graded are simply not completed by students. Therefore, especially in flipped learning whose success depends on the completion of pre-class tasks, it seems particularly important to provide students with incentives to complete those. In the case of the course described above, this involved completion of online tasks that were taken into account in the assessment process. Indeed, the literature recommends including various incentives to make sure that students engage with pre-class material (e.g., Tolks et al., 2016, p. 9; Adams, 2017). In addition, it is also important to check comprehension, for example, by means of online quizzes or quizzes carried out at the beginning of a class session (Adams, 2017, Kirk & Casenove, 2016, p. 122). Concerning this point, Spino and Trega (2016, pp. 4–5) recommend using multiple-choice and true/false activities instead of writing activities as the focus of pre-class activities should be on input, not output, and on providing students with immediate feedback. As can be seen from the student comments, the possibility of receiving immediate feedback on their work was appreciated. According to Adams (2017), it is also the products that students create during the collaborative classroom activities that should "hold students accountable."

# 4.4 Lesson 4: Maximise the Class Time Available

As discussed at the beginning of the paper, one of the key advantages of flipped learning is the fact that it frees up class time for more collaborative tasks. This, however, is connected with another challenge of the approach, namely careful planning to maximise the potential of class time made available in this way and using it to foster production and student interaction (Spino & Trega, 2015, p. 3). Kirk and Casenove (2016, pp. 124–125) point out that "although flipped learning is generally associated with the use of videos, it is what is done with class time, rather than the videos themselves, that is the most important aspect of the approach," while Tolks et al. (2016, p.9) point out that there must be a "thematic connection" between the self-directed and learning phases. Global simulations, project work, case studies, and webquests are examples of the various task-based approaches that can be adopted and embedded into VLEs (Fischer, Musacchio, & Standring, 2006) and used in the classroom phase of flipped learning. An alternative is, as was done in this study, to integrate course book material. As the example above shows, it is possible to design pre-class activities around carefully selected course book sections. Lastly, during the faceto-face sessions the teacher should focus on continuous, formative, in-class assessment involving observation, diagnosis and feedback (Bauer-Ramazani, Graney, Marshall, & Sabieh, 2016).

#### 4.5 Lesson 5: Use common sense

Whereas creating learning paths to guide students through the sequence of pre-class has many advantages (e.g., as far as scaffolding is concerned), it is important to use manageable chunks in order to prevent learners from becoming demotivated and "dropping out." Based on the student feedback, the author recommends limiting the number of pre-class activities to four or five (depending, for example, on the course workload and objectives) and using a combination of skills in each set.

#### 5. Conclusion

Integrating technology into classroom learning has become a must, largely in response to the changes to the learning attitudes and styles of the new generation of learners. According to Mancall-Bitel (2019), *Generation Z* students "were born into a world where algorithms keep them clicking, scrolling and swiping at a frenetic pace," which has significant implications for how teachers plan and conduct their classes and keep the learners engaged. Flipped learning seems to fit well into this new teaching and learning paradigm as "[i]n pursuit of autonomous and active students, … [it] gets the traditional classes all upside down with the help of technology" (Demirel, 2016, p. 109). Although there is no denying that the workload involved in the switch is significant for both teachers and learners and various first- or second-hand lessons have to be learnt first, the experience can be very satisfying to both groups. As Jon Bergmann, one of the pioneers of the flipped learning approach, stated (as quoted in Sherman, 2019): "Flipping your class will not make teaching easier, but it will make it better."

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