THE ABACUS AND THE WEB BEHIND THE GREAT WALL: “FLIPPING” FOREIGN LANGUAGE COURSES IN MAINLAND CHINA, THAT IS THE QUESTION

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Abstract

The term “flipped or inverted classroom” has become an important focus in the Education arena, a shift that reflects a wider pedagogical trend in the use of emerging Technologies in Educational Institutions worldwide.

This paper will provide you with a description of our experiences flipping foreign language courses in an English medium university in Modern mainland China. It will also discuss strategies, and present resources working from within the confines of the Great Firewall. We will illustrate some uses and applications of the different resources that boost students' active participation in the class by making the audience experience those resources first-hand.

To do so, we will "gamify" their experience using a free game-based learning platform called Kahoot and Mentimeter.

The final aim of this article is to share the lessons learned in an ongoing research where students transition from a traditional class in mainland China, to a more engaging, effective and stimulating one which facilitates a collaborative learning environment that integrates technology to foster the growth of 21st century lifelong learners.

Keywords: Flipped classroom, emerging technologies, Higher Education, innovation, pedagogy, foreign languages, gamification, motivation.

“I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” Maya Angelou

1 INTRODUCTION

In this paper we intend to present our experience “flipping” Spanish language courses at United International College1 (UIC), an English medium College in Zhuhai, mainland China. These Spanish language courses are addressed mainly to Chinese students (including students from Hong Kong, and Macau) and sometimes foreigners, aged 18 to 24, as "General Education Distribution Course"2, from now on GED. The value of each GED is 3 Units, which is the equivalent of a 3 hour face-to-face class a week for 14 weeks - which is the duration of the semester at UIC - with a total of 42 hours per course. How can we improve the learning experience of our students? Which resources will work from within the confines of the Great Firewall? Is the speed of Internet fast enough to take advantage of all the resources? How can we boost students' active participation in class and make them 21st century lifelong learners? Can we “flip” our students? Are they ready for a "flipped" teaching/learning approach?

2 FLIPPING THE SPANISH LANGUAGE COURSE AT UIC

The course that we have used to illustrate our ongoing research is Spanish I (SPI). This course covers the A1.1 level of the European Common Framework of Reference for Language Teaching from the Council of Europe (2011) using a "flipped" approach for the past two academic years.

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1 http://uic.edu.hk/en
2 The aim of the GED requirements is to broaden the scope of students’ learning by having them pursue areas of knowledge outside of their major discipline. The GED courses to be offered are grouped under different categories. Foreign Languages are under the category: Foundation Courses in Foreign Languages.
2.1 Context

As we mentioned above, our students have 42 contact hours per semester with their language instructor, but these contact hours are never sufficient to master the foreign language. So we decided to provide the students with more resources on our Learning Management System platform based on Moodle, called ISpace. Although we continue re-designing our courses and adding resources regularly following students suggestions, SPI follows a simple structure, as shown in Fig. 1.1 and Fig. 1.2.

Fig. 1.1: Structure of our main SPI.  
Fig. 1.2: Detail of the "Content" of SPI on ISpace.

2.2 "Flipping" activities

2.2.1 Video

First, students can watch a video at home about the content that will be used in the classroom in the next session. As shown in Fig. 2, the content is a video about the house.

Fig. 2: Video content.

2.2.2 Website

Then, as shown in Fig. 3, students can access some resources online. On this website, the students find different resources to practice different language skills. They can read, write, watch, listen, and do different tasks related to the specific topic that they need to prepare for. They can choose what they do, when they do it, and where.

Fig. 3: Website with different resources.

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2.2.3 Quiz: ISpace
After watching the video, they can do a quiz individually on the ISpace as shown in Fig. 4.

Fig. 4: Quiz on ISpace.

2.2.4 Quiz: Kahoot
Moreover, we can gamify the assessment part by using Kahoot\(^4\) as a more fun formative assessment tool for the whole class. All text and images (if any) are on the front screen as shown in Fig. 5.1. Students' devices only displays colours and shapes as answer choices as in Fig. 5.2.

Fig. 5.1: Kahoot Quiz screen. Fig. 5.2: Student device screen.

2.3 "Flipping" the students: Panopto
Apart from "flipping" the classroom, we have decided to help students to take ownership not only of what they learn and when they learn it but also how they do it. By doing so, we are offering them the chance to explore some of the 21st century skills that Trilling and Fadel described: collaboration, problem solving, leadership, etc. [5] In our experience, we asked our students to use the video platform Panopto to record their presentations. In this way, not only can the instructor comment directly about presentation skills, content and design but students can also see themselves and see their own performance as is shown in Fig. 6.1 and 6.2.

Fig. 6.1: Students giving a presentation in class. Fig. 6.2: Students pre-recording their presentation.

2.4 Giving students a voice: Mentimeter
Mentimeter is a resource that allows you to engage and interact with your target audience in real-time as is shown in Fig. 7. In mainland China, very often, the students do not like to ask questions in front

\(^4\) https://getkahoot.com/ (for teachers to create Kahoots); https://kahoot.it/ (for students to play)
of others. So, they will either not ask questions at all, or they will wait until the professors end their classes to address their concern.

![Image: Fig. 7: Student questions.]

3 CONCLUSIONS

Our teaching experience with the "flipped classroom" approach is far from being exhaustive or complete. Further results will emerge as we carry out our ongoing research. However, it is already possible to analyse some results from online surveys.

Overall, the students have made very positive comments about the content, the activities and the experience of playing (Kahoot) while learning. Some of them mentioned some technical difficulties due mainly to a slow connection. Most of the resources online are audiovisual, so bandwidth may have been a problem. A few students commented negatively about the "flipped" classroom because sometimes, the structure of the course could be confusing.

To our surprise, after reading the online surveys, we found that some of the students did not like Mentimeter very much, others did not find Mentimeter as useful as we thought. We believe it is due to the fact that the instructor had lost her voice when this resource was introduced and maybe they did not understand exactly what it was about. We discovered this resource too late in the semester. But the positive comments are about how this tool can, in some students, help overcome the fear of making mistakes or talking in public.

In conclusion, we believe that by "flipping" the classroom, as Trilling and Fadel expressed, "learning becomes more in tune with the demands of our times and the needs of today's students". [5]

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all the staff from UIC that helped with this research, the students who recorded their presentation during their free time, as well as the students who despite having final exams, answered the online survey.

REFERENCES


5 https://www.mentimeter.com/ (for teachers to create surveys, presentations...); https://www.menti.com (for students to participate)


