



## Flipping the Literature Classroom to Foster Active Learning and Vocabulary Acquisition. A Pilot Study

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### Abstract

*Activating innovative educational strategies is the challenge that today's educators are called to face in order to render their teaching relevant to students' learning. In this regard, the emerging "flipped classroom" pedagogy might help instructors effectively capture attention and strengthen motivation offering new opportunities for students to review, discuss and investigate contents.*

*The purpose of this study was to implement an experimental "flipped" classroom for the teaching of Puritan literature and history to a group of thirty Grade XII High School students specializing in Humanities and to evaluate the impact of the "flipped" mode on the students' lexical acquisition and learning outcomes.*

*Short videos and lectures presenting clips from Puritan history, ethics and literature were viewed by students at home before class sessions. Each material came with a brief online quiz offering the teacher immediate feedback on whether any essential points had been missed. Class time was devoted to review materials and to participate in instructor-guided discussions and activities with the teacher functioning as a coach and advisor, encouraging learners in individual inquiry and collaborative effort.*

*Student scores from a written post-test were significantly higher for the flipped topics than for the other curricular subjects receiving traditional lectures. Also vocabulary knowledge proved expanded and appropriate as confirmed by the analysis of the learners' written data collected in a learner corpus purposefully compiled to further investigate the students' vocabulary range and size.*

*This demonstrates that the classroom flip, if properly implemented with cooperative learning, can lead to students' increased language performance and satisfaction. More importantly, the classroom flip focuses on how to teach literature so students feel it really matters in their lives.*

*Keywords: flipped classroom, vocabulary acquisition, active learning, literature teaching.*

### 1. Introduction

The profile of 21st century learners has changed. The signs are all around us. They are the Millennials: saturated in electronic and digital technology by means of the powerful and wireless devices they carry in their pockets. Relentlessly exposed to the world via the media, the Millennials network socially, joining communities and associating with peers around the globe. Being highly relational and collaborative, they share what they learn with others and constantly demand quick access to any new knowledge to build their own identities. With the world literally at their fingertips and with such incredible opportunities on the line, they show persistent disaffection with the traditional instructional paradigms which are poorly engaging [1] and inadequately responsive to the new 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges.

The future of education calls for better learning theories able to reach these students directly. Therefore, it is time for educators to reflect if the current curricular and pedagogical approaches are congruent with the learning styles and needs of this generation who is increasingly demanding for innovative methods involving teamwork, critical thinking, problem-solving and decision-making.

In this regard, the emerging "flipped classroom" pedagogy can help instructors effectively capture attention and strengthen motivation offering new opportunities for students to review, discuss and investigate contents.

This study describes an experimental attempt to integrate flipped teaching into an EFL context to evaluate the effectiveness of this model on students' achievements with literature learning outcomes, language academic performance and participation levels. The current investigation, therefore, aims at addressing the following research questions:

RQ 1: Do students achieve better literature learning outcomes with flipped EFL teaching than with traditional lectures?

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RQ 2: Do students in flipped EFL contexts experience better vocabulary gains?

RQ 3: Over time do students master literature vocabulary and topics more confidently if acquired through flipped techniques than through front-classes?

## 2. What is a flipped classroom and how it differs from the traditional lecture

A flipped or reversed classroom moves away from the traditional teacher-centered lecture as it promotes a student-centered environment where active and collaborative learning are stressed. In the traditional classroom model, teachers first explain topics, and then assign homework. In the flipped classroom educators change the way they teach since topics and contents are re-arranged by means of online learning activities and educational technologies [2]. Thus, students first watch or listen to lessons outside of class and then use class time for inquiry-based learning helped by teachers who can effectively focus on target materials, deliver more one-on-one, customized assistance and offer feedback as needed [3].

Moreover, flipping the classroom helps educators cater for different learning styles since various digitalized inputs and stimuli are more likely to appeal and make sense to learners rather than front-load information at the beginning of each unit [4]. Another added benefit is the fact that students can play, pause, and repeat the lesson until they acquire the prerequisite knowledge they need, something that is obviously not possible in a real class setting. This allows them to cover the materials and review contents at their own pace and maximize intake while also fostering increased learner autonomy [5]. In so doing, in the flipped classroom explicit teaching still has its place -though in smaller amounts- and without sacrificing classroom time which is usually very limited and precious in EFL contexts where it is necessary to expand student talk time in English during classes.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Participants and learning context

This investigation was conducted at a Classical Lyceum, a High School specializing in Humanities in Lodi, Italy. The statutory curriculum is based on five year Latin and Greek core requirement, along with liberal arts and scientific disciplines as mandatory major subjects. All incoming students are also required to follow 5-year English Language and Literature courses up to advanced proficiency (B2+/C1 levels, CEFR) strengthened by C.L.I.L. classes [6] promoting both content and English language mastery in all subjects.

This research is a pilot study that is part of The National Plan for Digital Schools (PNSD) [7], a policy launched by the Ministry of Education for setting up a comprehensive innovation strategy across the Italian educational system. It is a long-term operational plan requiring both schools and administrations to introduce new pedagogical models in the curriculum enabling students to effectively face the new challenges of the digital age.

The participants in this study were thirty Grade XII EFL learners with high-intermediate proficiency in English (B2 level, CEFR) following an English-American Literature course (3 classes, weekly) at their school.

### 3.2 The 'flipped' design

In line with the governmental measures demanding a renewal of the teaching practices and encouraging more personalised instructional paths, a framework of four 'flipped' classes was designed (a fifth more "traditional" class was added for the written test) to present Puritan literature, history and ethics under a new light. By flipping the classes we did not mean to create a technology shock. Rather, we expected to replace a more engaging learner-centred model with the traditional 60 minutes' teacher-centred lecture, with students noting down every word. In so doing, we also tried to narrow the temporal lapses separating learners from the early Pilgrim Fathers' world, which being so distant from theirs, might result in further learning disaffection on the students' side.

The four classes intended for the flipped classroom design represent the four phases of the new approach, respectively: 1) the preparatory phase; 2) the operating phase; 3) the debriefing phase; 4) follow up and introspectional phase [8] as illustrated in the following table:



Phases	Teacher's action	Students' action	Didactic strategy
<b>1-Preparatory phase</b>	<b>In class:</b> -selects teaching and learning activities for prerequisite learning -chooses the right stimuli to launch the target topics and contents -designs and explain the conceptual framework -prepares the preliminary work to be done at home -arranges back-up materials -develops follow-up quizzes and notes to help students' understanding -give assignments	<b>At home:</b> -study -view videos -listen -write -search for information -comprehend at their own pace	Problem solving
<b>2-Operating phase</b>	<b>In class:</b> -organizes individual and group tasks	<b>In class:</b> -produce and share "artifacts"	Learning by doing
<b>3-Debriefing phase</b>	<b>In class:</b> -evaluates the "artifacts" -correct students' mis-conceptions -fixes new concepts -provides appropriate feedback	<b>In class:</b> -critically analyze their artifacts -reflect on the strategies activated in the learning process	Reflective learning
<b>4-Follow-up and introspection phase</b>	<b>In class:</b> -evaluates the processes and class execution -promotes further analysis and introspection	<b>In class and at home:</b> -work out new activities -re-think and recycle the newly learnt contents for fresher activities	Reflective learning Learning by doing

**Table 1 Flipped teaching and learning design grid**

The preparatory phase of the activity initially took place in the classroom where the topic was launched, designed phases were explained and the conceptual framework was provided. A brainstorming followed, trying to get the students closer to the fundamental concepts of predestination, austerity, morality and material success, dear to the Puritan beliefs.

As stimuli, short videos on how and why the Pilgrim Fathers came to America were chosen along with clips from Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter", quizzes and other visual resources used by the students in a problem-solving logic. Given the humanistic approach of their course students were expected to critically analyze, decode and interpret their home assignments.

In the following phases students first returned what they had processed at home. Class time was thus devoted to review materials and to participate in guided discussions and activities with the teacher functioning as a coach and advisor, encouraging learners in both individual inquiry and collaborative effort. Then, in groups or individually, they worked at the realization of a product in the manner they felt most appropriate to their learning styles (a mind map, a poster, a written report, a performance –in this case- seen by classmates) using the web 2.0 tools they preferred (ppt, Prezi, Popplet, Padlet, Kahoot). The final "artifacts" were then posted on private virtual classes (Drive, Dropbox) and larger communities (Youtube, Slideshare, Scribd, Prezi, Anobii) making them accessible to anyone.



## 4. Data collection and analysis

### 4.1 Written test

A 50-item test was administered at the end of the flipped classes. The test questions were designed to match both the contents being taught and specific vocabulary acquisition. Final scores were compared to a previous control test –with the same format- on Elizabethan literature, taken by the students after front lectures, only. Findings suggest that the post flipped teaching scores were statistically higher than post non-flipped teaching scores, thus confirming the beneficial impact of the flipped pedagogy on learning outcomes.

### 4.2 Learner Corpus

To get a more accurate picture of the effects of the flipped mode on the students' lexical performance, a learner corpus (12,800 tokens) including the thirty students' written tests was compiled and data was analysed with reference to the General Service List [9] and the Academic Word List [10]. Preliminary findings pointed to a wide size and range of general and academic English vocabulary which also resulted in appropriate lexical choices, thus proving expanded vocabulary gains favoured by the flipped teaching.

### 4.3 “The Scarlet Letter” performance

The study also found that all the students experienced positive changes in their attitudes towards literature and English language after reversing the traditional teaching approach, since they voluntarily performed scenes from “The Scarlet Letter” before an audience of schoolmates and parents. Both their acting and their script together with their involvement and satisfaction, all confirmed they felt really confident regarding their acquired lexical skills..

## 5. Conclusions

This pilot study may be used as a starting model for future research investigating the benefits of flipped teaching. Results call for more studies to be conducted in the field, yet we recommend the flipped pedagogy as a viable means for language instruction in EFL advanced curriculum. More importantly, by making time for extended creative projects that involve students directly it helps them understand why and how literature continues to be an essential part of any true education.

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