



An Empirical Study on the Role Change of English Majors in the Flipped Classroom

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Flipped Classroom, as an emerging teaching mode, allows students to learn outside the classroom through e-learning and interact with the teacher in the classroom. It is widely used by many educational researchers both at home and abroad. Many studies on the Flipped Classroom are of teaching pattern and teachers' roles, but few are concerned about the changes of students' roles. Based on this situation, by doing questionnaire survey and student interview in Ningbo Dahongying University in Zhejiang Province, the paper discusses the changes of students' roles in Advanced English in terms of three class periods: before-class, in-class, and after-class. Students' roles have changed from passive learners in traditional classroom to be autonomous, confident, cooperative, and self-reflective learners in the Flipped Classroom. Also, existing problems of students' role transition are pointed out and relevant countermeasures are provided.

Keywords: Flipped Classroom, traditional classroom, role transition, autonomous learners, countermeasures

Introduction

College foreign language education is an essential part of higher education in China, which is of great significance to the cultivation of college students' knowledge and profound thoughts. In the traditional classroom, teacher-centered methods make students tend to be a passive learner. However, the Flipped Classroom totally reverses the traditional mode and pushes students to be an active learner.

Since 1990s, Professor Eric Mazur in Harvard University proposed Peer Instruction. After a period of time of reform, Flipped Classroom was put forward and practiced by two teachers of Woodland Park high school. The essence is to make students flip over traditional learning process, let learners, in extra-curricular time, complete the knowledge by autonomous learning. Flipped Classroom has been increasingly popular at home and abroad nowadays. Compared with traditional classroom environment, Flipped Classroom not only is in accordance with "student-centered" teaching concept but also drives innovation of teaching methods and learning approaches. Moreover, Flipped Classroom changes the roles of both teacher and students. Flipped Classroom is a model in which the typical lecture and homework elements of a course are reversed. Generally, short video lectures are viewed by students at home before the class session, while in-class time is devoted to practices and discussions.

So far, there have been many researches about the roles of teachers, but few are concerned about the changes of students' roles. However, the students are the core of the class. Therefore, it is of great importance to

discuss how students change their roles from traditional class to a flipped one. The paper focuses on the role transition of university students through kinds of methods like questionnaire surveys, observation of classes, interview of students and so forth, in order to find out existing problems and offer solutions to improve learning efficiency.

Literature Review

With the introduction of Flipped Classroom, many schools at home and abroad from the education field have done theoretical and application research. Although the Flipped Classroom has fallen into shape, the process of innovation from traditional class to Flipped Class goes through a bitter struggle. The first practice of Flipped Classroom derived from Woodland Park High School of the Colorado Rockies in 2007 by two chemistry teachers Jonathan Berman and Aaron Sams. To begin with, they planned to offer a chance to absent students by autonomous learning online. However, the online materials have become popular among other students who mainly use the materials to review and reinforce lessons. Thus, the two chemistry teachers began to rethink and proposed the concept of the “Flipped Classroom”. In this teaching mode, because of the shift of focus from “teacher dominant” to “student dominant”, the roles of teachers and students have correspondently changed.

In recent years, many foreign schools have warmly welcome this new Flipped Classroom teaching mode. Naafi'ah Nawi (2015) pointed out that “A significant improvement in the students' academic achievement was also observed where through the interactive classroom activities, students developed a deeper understanding of the subject concepts” (p. 133). In addition, Intel global director of education Brian Gonzalez (2011) believed that the Flipped Classroom would refer to educators giving more freedom to students. The process of imparting knowledge is put out of class and learners can select to acquire new knowledge in their favorable ways and the process of internalizing knowledge proceeds in the class in order to facilitate the exchange of ideas among the students and the teachers.

In China, although Flipped Classroom is still a new mode, it has become increasingly popular in recent years. Studies in this area are later and fewer than those in the West and more are on the introduction to the teaching mode and the application of it into classroom. Little focus has been placed on the change of students' roles from traditional classroom to Flipped Classroom.

According to a Chinese scholar ZHANG Jin-lei (2012), the Flipped Classroom, i.e., upside down the classroom, turns upside down the order of imparting knowledge and internalizing knowledge, changes the roles of the students and the teacher in the traditional classroom, and gives a re-planning of the usage of the classroom time. Also, JIN Ling (2013) believed that the Flipped Classroom was a new classroom teaching structure in which the teaching structure is upside down from “teachers teach students in class in daytime, students do their homework after school at home” to “students finish the process of internalization of absorbing and mastering knowledge and students learn new knowledge after school at home” (pp. 8-13). JIN Ling stressed that students should consolidate their knowledge in class and finish learning knowledge after class.

According to above researches, the roles of the teacher and students in Flipped Classroom are different from that in the traditional classroom. During the study of the Flipped Classroom, its teaching modes have been also designed and optimized in China and other countries. Students have more opportunities to open their mouth and practice English, which is the key of learning English. Therefore, it is essential to explore whether students have

realized the change of their roles, what problems still exist in the current situation, and by adopting what countermeasures can students further improve their learning efficiency.

Research Design

An increasing number of teachers are using Flipped Classroom approach in their teaching. In order to answer the questions of whether students have better efficiency and what problems still exist in Flipped Classroom, a questionnaire consisting of 17 questions was distributed to 40 English majors who have taken Flipped Classes in Ningbo Dahongying University in Zhejiang, China. Also, it used other multiple assessment methods, such as observation of classes and interview of students to support the data.

Questions of the questionnaire can be divided into three parts: students' roles before the class (Q1-Q16), students' roles in the class (Q17-Q25), and students' roles after the class (Q26-Q39). Each question is followed by five selections (*A* means strongly agree, *B* means agree, *C* means not sure, *D* means disagree, and *E* means strongly disagree). Forty questionnaires had been sent out while 37 valid questionnaires were returned. All the participants of questionnaire were asked to finish the questionnaires based on their real behavior. Upon the referring of the questionnaire, the data are analyzed by bar charts or tables.

Analysis of Students' Roles in the Flipped Classroom

Compared with being passive learners in traditional classroom, students play different roles in Flipped Classroom. The following Figure 1 illustrates the different emphasis between two teaching modes. Particularly, it highlights the role change of students in pre-class, in-class, and after-class with a clear analysis.

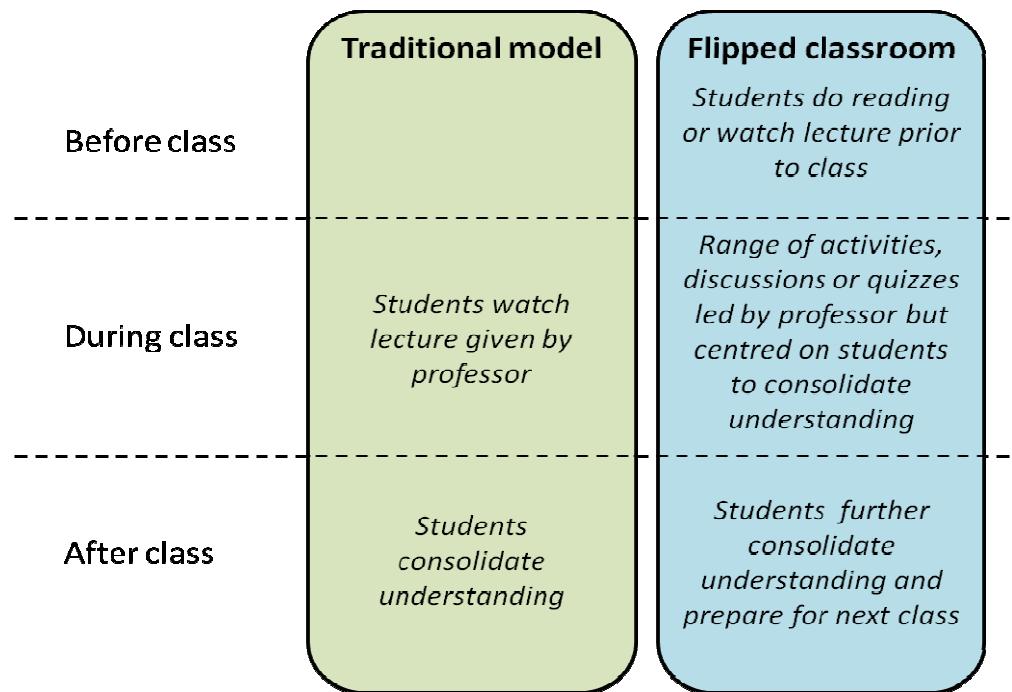


Figure 1. Traditional classroom VS Flipped Classroom.

According to the figure, students have changed from passive viewers and listeners into the Flipped Classroom to active participators, proved by the results of the questionnaire which is also the details are further illustrated from the following three perspectives: student's pre-class, in-class, and after-class roles.

Students' Pre-class Roles in the Flipped Classroom

For students, the preparation before class is one of the biggest differences between traditional classroom and Flipped Classroom. In the traditional classroom, students gather at the class meetings to hear a lecture from the teacher and to take notes and then students work on homework, projects, and other activities outside of class. On the contrary, in the Flipped Classroom, students are asked to watch relevant videos and finish exercises before the class. However, does the flipped classroom actually help students learn more effectively than traditional class model? The following data show what they have done to prepare for the flipped session (see Figure 2 and Table 1).

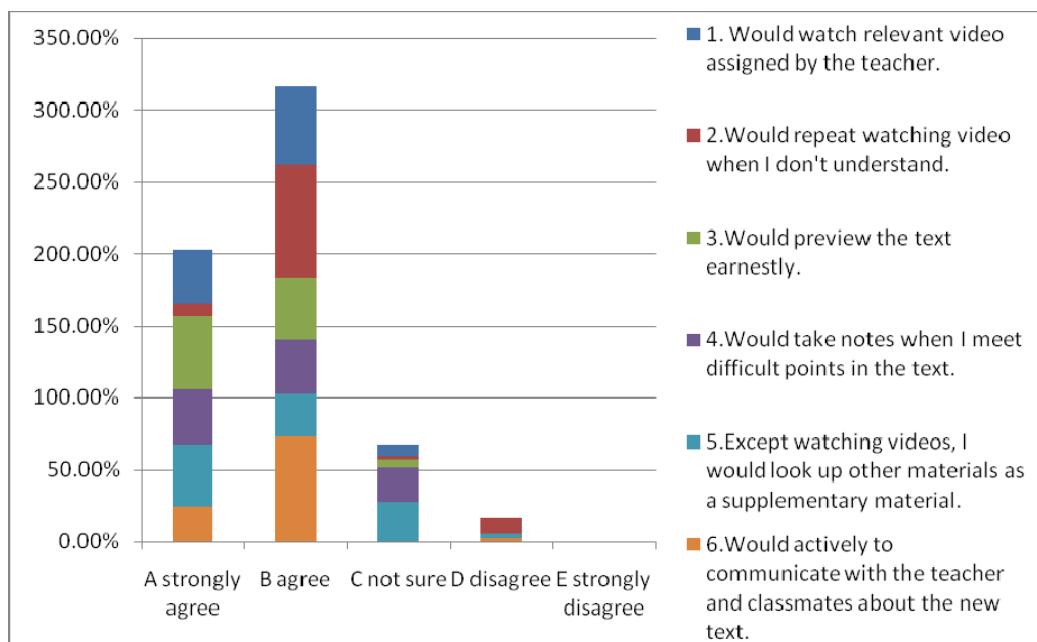


Figure 2. Q1-Q6.

Table 1

Q1-Q6

Questions	Results				
	A. Strongly agree	B. Agree	C. Not sure	D. Disagree	E. Strongly disagree
1	37.84%	54.05%	8.11%	0%	0%
2	8.11%	78.38%	2.73%	10.8%	0%
3	51.35%	43.24%	5.41%	0%	0%
4	37.84%	37.84%	24.32%	0%	0%
5	43.24%	29.73%	27.03%	2.7%	0%
6	24.33%	72.97%	0%	2.7%	0%

Questions 1 to 6 are designed to find out the students' self-learning before the class. It can be found that students would well prepare the pre-class tasks assigned by the teacher, such as watching video, previewing for the text, and preparing for in-class tasks.

Watching video

According to Figure 2 and Table 1, the result of Question 1 presents almost all of the students agree that they would watch relevant videos assigned by the teacher. From Question 2, 8.11% of the students strongly agree that they would repeat watching videos when they do not understand, 78.38% of them agree while 2.73% of them are not sure, and 10.8% of the students disagree. Watching videos can warm up the learning of the new text and students are supposed to be more autonomous and passionate. What is more, pre-task videos can help students understand the topic more flexibly and efficiently. For instance, when the students watch “teaching video” made by teachers and study worksheet of learning out of class, they can decide on how to learn these materials, learning completely or skipping some contents based on their own situation, and they can arrange their own learning paces.

Previewing for the text

Secondly, the students have previewed the target text. From the results of Questions 3 and 4, virtually all of the students agree that they would preview the text more earnestly and take notes when they meet difficult points in the text. In traditional teaching mode, the pre-task for students in most cases is only to preview the text. However, even if it is a small task, most of the students lack motivation and ignore it after all, because they think it is not necessary and the teacher will explain the details about the whole text in class. Thus, students’ role in traditional classroom is a passive learner, while in the flipped teaching mode, students are more autonomous to think deeply about the text.

Preparing for in-class tasks

According to Question 5, 43.24% of the students strongly agree that they would look up other material as a supplementary material, 29.73% of the students agree while 27.03% of the students are not sure, and 2.7% of them disagree. Compared with traditional teaching mode, the burden of students before class in the flipped classroom is much higher. The pre-class tasks for students are previewing text, watching videos and taking notes, and preparing for the group presentation. Based on this situation, it is easy to find that the role of students has been morphed into an autonomous learner. From Question 6, almost all of the students would actively communicate with the teacher and classmates about the new text, which is almost impossible in a traditional class.

Consequently, from traditional classroom to Flipped Classroom, students’ role before the class is changing from a passive learner into an autonomous learner.

Students’ In-class Roles in the Flipped Classroom

The traditional classroom is a closed environment in which teacher asks questions and students answer it; the students just passively answer questions with little language output in the whole process. To some extent, there is rarely real dialogue between teachers and students and the traditional classroom is lack of enough communication, paying little attention to consultation. However, the adverse factors of the traditional class will be perfectly solved in Flipped Classroom.

Questions 7 to 11 are about students’ participation degree in class. Results reflect that students’ roles in the Flipped Class become confident learners and cooperative collaborators. The results are as follows (see Figure 3 and Table 2).

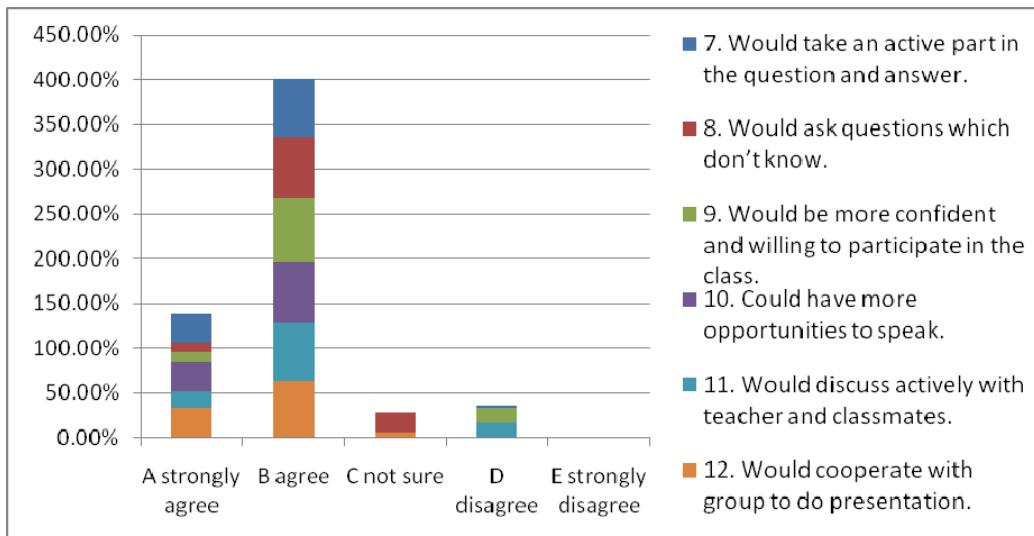


Figure 3. Q7-Q12.

Table 2

Q7-Q12

Questions	Results				
	A. Strongly agree	B. Agree	C. Not sure	D. Disagree	E. Strongly disagree
7	32.42%	64.86%	0%	2.72%	0%
8	10.81%	67.57%	21.62%	0%	0%
9	10.81%	72.97%	0%	16.22%	0%
10	32.43%	67.57%	0%	0%	0%
11	18.92%	64.86%	0%	16.22%	0%
12	32.43%	62.16%	5.41%	0%	0%

Participating in the activities actively

In the Flipped Classroom, students are intended to be active learners and are encouraged to open mouths for discussing and speaking in the class, which is vitally important for learning English. Based on the results of question 7, 32.42% of the students give a strongly positive answer that they would take an active part in the question and answer and 64.86% of them agree with it. Only 2.72% disagree. That learning mode is to show that students have more opportunities to express their ideas in the class. Besides, in Question 8, it can be noticed that 10.81% of the students strongly agree that they would ask questions when they do not understand and 67.57% of the students agree with it, while 21.62% are not sure. In fact, it is difficult for a few students to adapt to the new and open teaching mode, which results in their unwillingness to be involved in the Flipped Classroom. Fortunately, they are likely to be “pushed” to do better and to stretch their knowledge of English. In the process of discussion, the students will experience different ideas actively and be corrected by the teacher timely. Therefore, it could boost students’ development of thinking and increase the chance of language output.

Using the language confidently

From Question 9, 10.81% of the students show their strong agreement on that they would be more confident and willing to participate in the classroom activities. Also, 72.97% of the students show their approval of it, while 16.22% frown at it. According to Question 10, virtually all of the students would have more opportunities to

speak in a Flipped Classroom. Speaking and writing are productive (output) skills in language learning while listening and reading are receptive (input) skills. Swain (1985) put forward the output hypothesis which proposes through producing language, either spoken or written, language acquisition/learning may occur. This is an issue of fluency rather than accuracy. Students in traditional classroom always use ear for passive listening even just follow the teacher's thinking rather than generate their own ideas, which restricts students' thinking. It is worth mentioning that the Flipped Classroom could make up for this shortcoming. In the Flipped Classroom, students are required to use mouth for discussing and speaking in the class, which is the key to improving spoken English and building confidence. Thus, it is one of the reasons for why the students are encouraged to express their ideas as much as possible in the Flipped Classroom. Under this teaching aid, students will use the language more confidently.

Cooperating with partners collaboratively

Furthermore, considering the fact that students will have different levels of understanding and comprehension after having completed the out-of-class work, the discussion could fall in one of the two ways: individual or group-based activities. Through the results of Questions 11, it can be discovered that 18.92% of the students give a strongly positive answer, showing that they would discuss actively with teacher and classmates in the class and 64.86% of them agree with it, while 16.22% disagree. Question 12 helps us to find that almost all of the students would cooperate with group members to do presentation except 5.42% of them are not sure. Besides, 75.68% of the students agree that they would more easily understand the knowledge by group discussions and PPT presentation, 21.62% students are not sure, and only 2.71% (one student) disagree with it. In fact, the ability of collaboration is an essential quality, necessary for students to possess in the current rapidly developing society. As a cooperative team, students can discuss their similarities and differences, becoming co-creators in the learning process. In the during-class activity, every group is ready to put forward their questions or problems and learn to settle them together with other students and the teacher. In this way, students could improve their ability to cooperate and deepen their thinking.

All of these results show that students' roles in class become more autonomous from traditional classroom to Flipped Classroom. Students are no longer the passive listeners in the classroom and no longer passively accept knowledge; in contrast, students would take the initiative to master knowledge and to participate in the process of teaching actively. Therefore, students' roles in class have changed into confident learners and cooperative collaborators.

Students' After-Class Roles in the Flipped Classroom

Students are on the leading position in the task-based language teaching in the teaching model of the Flipped Classroom. After finishing the before-class and during-class activities, the students should reflect and rethink their learning process to check whether they have obtained the autonomy in language learning. Based on the results of Questions 13-17, which is relevant to student's feedback after the class, it can be concluded that students are self-reflective learners. The results are as follows (see Figure 4 and Table 3)

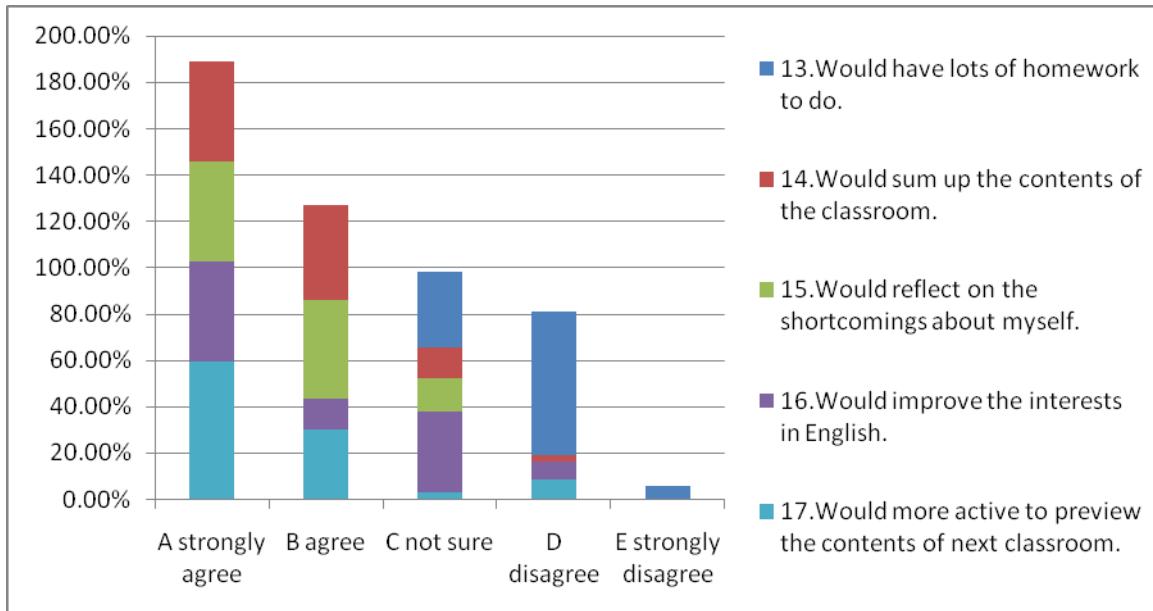


Figure 4. Q13-Q17.

Table 3
Q13-Q17

Questions	Results				
	A. Strongly agree	B. Agree	C. Not sure	D. Disagree	E. Strongly disagree
13	0%	0%	32.43%	62.16%	5.41%
14	43.24%	40.54%	13.51%	2.71%	0
15	42.86%	42.86%	14.28%	0%	0%
16	43.24%	13.51%	35.14%	8.11%	0%
17	59.46%	29.73%	2.7%	8.11%	0%

Consolidating what is learned

According to Question 13, 32.43% of the students are not sure about whether they would have lots of homework to do after class, 62.16% of the students disagree with it while 5.41% of the students strongly disagree. It represents that Flipped Classroom pays more attention to the before-class and in-class sections rather than the after-class part, most of the work will be done before the class and in the class. From Question 14, most of the students would sum up the contents of the classroom. In the traditional classroom, students do lots of homework to consolidate what is learned so that they always have no time to sum up the contents of the classroom.

Doing learning reflection

In addition, from the result of Question 15, it can be found that 42.86% strongly agree that they would reflect on the shortcomings about themselves, 42.86% agree while 14.29% are not sure whether they would reflect on their shortcomings. In the traditional classroom, the process of self-reflection is more likely to be ignored because of enormous homework. However, self-reflection is a key point of autonomous learning mode. In other words, it contributes to finding shortcomings and correcting them, which is the way for students to consolidate and internalize knowledge and get improved.

Previewing for the next flipped task

In Question 16, it can be shown that most of the students improve the interests in English. It reflects that students have more motivations on learning English. Furthermore, according to the results of Question 17, 59.46% of the students strongly agree that they would more actively to preview the contents of next class and about 29.73% of them agree with it, while 8.11% disagree with it. The result presents that students have much stronger motivation to preview for the next flipped task, thus to become self-reflective learners.

Problems and Countermeasures for Students' Role Transition in the Flipped Classroom

Despite all the many benefits of learning in a Flipped Classroom, there are still some challenges that students will face when beginning to integrate this practice. Therefore, we had some interviews with students after finishing a round of flipped classroom teaching. The problems revealed are listed as follows, meanwhile countermeasures are provided.

Lacking the Ability of Sorting Out the Most Valuable Learning Materials

One question that usually arises in most discussions about flipped teaching is “How could students ensure that they have taken full use of materials assigned by teachers in pre-class tasks”.

According to the questionnaire, four fifths of the students think they could know the basic contents of the lesson before class, one tenth hold an opposite attitude, and one twentieth are uncertain. Besides, two thirds of the students could completely finish pre-class tasks, three tenths students could finish a half of it, and one thirty-seventh could finish a small part of it. Furthermore, the questionnaire focuses on the students who could not master the basic contents of lesson before class. The collected data show that about three fourths of the students could not grasp the key points and difficult points, almost a half of them lack self-discipline, two fifths claimed videos were unable to work for knowledge, and one third believed they could not get help timely. In order to solve the above mentioned problems, here are a few ideas worth trying.

Firstly, students should carefully analyze the teaching goals and focus on difficult and important points. After that, the students should set their own goals, study on the learning worksheet at their pace, and record the problems that confused them. Then students can discuss the problems within the groups or among groups through their QQs or e-mails. At last, they report their common problems to their teacher and then the teacher could guide students to solve problems.

Lacking the Ability of Evaluating the Other Groups' Performance Appropriately

Another challenge is that students lack the ability to evaluate other groups' performance appropriately. In the flipped classroom, the student evaluation can be divided into two parts: self-evaluation and peer evaluation. It is necessary for students to give an objective comment on other groups' presentations. However, students are likely to be shy and do not want to criticize their classmates. In fact, with objective comments from other groups, students could not only find their mistakes, but broaden their horizon and diversify their ideas. When students are aware of this main point, they are willing to evaluate others' performance. Moreover, open questions should be asked by the teacher, such as questions based on the problems of the emotional experience and the problem of imagination. Teachers are suggested to prevent students from being bounded by the standard answer to help them open and develop their own thinking and to provide more guidance in how to be effective evaluators.

Lacking the Ability of Enhancing Input Quality

In addition, the low output quality of students is another hot potato. Before the Flipped Classroom, the teacher would send students some high quality mini-video. However, students are not able to expand reading and extensive study after class because of their poor search ability. In order to enhance output quality, students need read lots of relevant materials to develop their import. From the results of the interview, students seldom surf internet on foreign website to support the in-class learning. It is true that foreign website is an extremely useful and effective access to obtain authentic English language. Students could use some foreign excellent websites, such as YouTube, Ted, Google, and BBC News, to search valuable data in the Big Data Era.

Conclusion

The study of students' roles in Flipped Classroom is based on the questionnaire and interview participants of which are the students who take Advanced English course in Ningbo Dahongying University. The Flipped Classroom mode is a new teaching mode which reflects the "students-centered" principle, reversing the order in which learning content is spread and internalized. From the above results, traditional classroom pays more attention to in-class and after-class parts, but Flipped Classroom pays more attention to before-class and in-class sections. Although domestic researches on the Flipped Classroom mode still stay at an initial stage, the modern society tends to choose Flipped Classroom, in which the students take on the roles of autonomous learners, confident learners, cooperative collaborators, and self-reflective learners. Also, existing problems of students' role transition are pointed out and relevant countermeasures are provided. There is no denying that Flipped Classroom is worth trying to place students as the center of class, offering them more opportunities to output, evaluate, and cooperate, which is in accordance with the ultimate target of language learning.

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