

A Case Study on Vocabulary Acquisition for ESL Students

by

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Instructional Context

Course name and description

Level One Vocabulary and Literacy is a course for students with low English proficiency. Students at this level only know past and present tenses in English and can write simple, often grammatically incorrect sentences. There are 484 words on the required vocabulary list. The learning outcomes require students to know the meaning, grammatical form(s), how to spell, pronounce, and use all the words on that list. In addition, students have to learn to hear and produce all 15 vowel sounds in American English and all 24 different consonant sounds. To do this, the curriculum requires the use of the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).

Place of course in larger program of study

The intensive English institute (IEI) at Ball State University is an academic English training ground for international students. There are seven levels in the program from fundamental (zero), to being ready to study at the university, level 6. The curriculum is designed so that students have 6 different skill courses in each level, and the cohort of teachers working with each group of student collaborates to reinforce skills across the curriculum. The Level One Vocabulary and Literacy course is placed early in the program as it aims to increase students' vocabulary and teach them to understand nuances in meaning for different words. It is also important to note that each session is only seven weeks long. The curriculum is designed to move very quickly.

Learning goals of the course

The academic cultures in the home countries of the students vary greatly from American academic standards and expectations. Many international students are not familiar with some of the concepts Americans believe are normal expectations in higher education such as doing homework, coming to class on time, being independently resourceful, taking responsibility for learning, and group work. Therefore, in addition to the learning outcomes for each course in our program, teachers also have the additional goal to help acculturate the students to become successful in an American classroom. Teachers in the program are free to address these goals in individual ways. I chose to flip the course because I believed the flipped model would become the impetus to get students to actively participate in some of these expected behaviors. In particular, I wanted them to embrace their role as learners and begin to use their time outside of class more effectively.

Description of the learners

The population of the IEI program at BSU is primarily from China and Saudi Arabia. When I taught the course and flipped it, 90% were Arabic speakers and the other students were Chinese speakers.

Rationale for flipping

I taught this course seven times using traditional methods. I read about flipped models in science and math courses, but never in an ESL course. What attracted me to the flipped model was the idea that students could do what was normally considered to be “homework” in the classroom where I could observe the process of application and be on hand to answer questions as they arose. I was frustrated by the amount of time it took to teach the IPA and the meanings of the vocabulary words. Despite the time dedicated, students still weren’t able to apply what they learned to anything other than the examples used in class. I decided to flip the *Level One Vocabulary and Literacy* course because I felt students were not sufficiently mastering the course outcomes and seven weeks was not enough time to accomplish all that I wanted to do. Based on what I knew about flipping, I believed it would allow me to use class time more efficiently. My vision for flipping was that students would learn the meaning of new vocabulary and the IPA outside of class so we could use class time applying that knowledge to new situations.

Model (s) and theory (ies) used to guide the flipping

In preparing to flip the course, I read many articles and case studies about flipping courses at the university level. Those that served as my model were Math and Physics courses. I chose to follow these models by making the bulk of learning new material take place outside of the classroom via videos of me teaching as I had previously done in the classroom. Then I designed in-class activities so that students could solve problems with that new knowledge with me there for assistance. These in-class activities were based on homework assignments I had used when I taught the course before flipping, but re-designed to incorporate group work with an emphasis on solving problems.

Structure and Implementation

Structure of the flipped course

Keeping to the most basic definition of the flipped classroom model, I set about creating videos of myself teaching what I had normally taught in the classroom. I used two formats: 1) PowerPoint presentations with voice, and 2) videos using only my iPad and iMovie on my Mac computer. I then made a YouTube channel and put the videos there for my students to access. Each video was less than 10 minutes long. Students were required to watch the videos before attending class. I made this clear by having all students keep a “Task Record” where each day they wrote their learning goals for the next class meeting.

Preparation of learners for participating in flipped instruction

My next challenge was to get students to actually watch the videos before class. On the first day, I told the students that their experience in my classroom would be different from anything they had experienced before. This created a sense of curiosity. Then I asked them to trust me, further pushing the curiosity. On the first day, I conducted a scavenger hunt in the classroom with students finding hidden words that, when put together, created the main points of the syllabus. These components demonstrated to the students that active participation would be required of them. They enjoyed the activity so it was easy to stress that if they didn’t watch the

assigned videos before class, moving forward, they would not be able to participate in future activities.

Thereafter, at the beginning of class, I gave a short quiz on the materials students should have viewed at home. The first one was based on homework assigned on the first day of class. It was somewhat of a disaster because many students hadn't done the homework, as I expected. However, I was strict in not giving them a chance to make up the quiz another time. I was also committed to forging ahead with the few students who were prepared. Those who hadn't done the homework were affected not only by losing points, but also because they couldn't effectively participate in the class activity. I designed the activity to be fun and to be completely dependent on the information in the previous homework. Those who were not prepared felt the effects of not doing their homework without any reprimand or punishment from me. This was the first "lesson" in becoming responsible for one's learning. Students got the flipped idea almost immediately after that because they wanted to be able to do the class activities and they wanted those points on the quizzes. This set the stage for the flipped model over the course of the seven-week session.

Description of in-class and out-of-class activities

Traditionally, I spent class time explaining new vocabulary words and giving them examples of the words in different contexts. Or, with the IPA, I explained each sound and symbol in class. When I flipped the course, all this information was provided for students via videos and assigned as work to be done prior to class meeting times. A quick quiz at the beginning of class might be to transcribe a few words written in the IPA and spell them correctly and then choose the best one for a given definition. Then, during the class sessions, we categorized the vocabulary into groups with similar meanings, similar word forms, same vowel sounds, etc. Another type of class activity was for students to work in groups to identify the best word for given situations. Afterwards, they created their own contexts and produced their own sentences, sharing these with their classmates. Structuring the course in this way allowed me to address several learning outcomes, overlap the outcomes and reinforce these many times throughout the course.

Tools used to support the flipped process and learners

The tools I used to prepare my videos were my Mac computer, the iMovie program, and YouTube for video hosting. In class, we used small, portable white boards so that students could visually brainstorm, draw ideas and images, create their categories, and sentences. With these boards, students could work in a group at one board, then move to other boards to contribute to the work of other groups. We could also easily see the work in process and this led to meaningful discussions.

Differentiation of instruction

By flipping the course, I was able to double the amount of exposure the students had to the course material, as well as provide many reinforcement activities to help them better learn the material. My role changed as I became more of a facilitator in their learning. Throughout the duration of the course, students first learned new information at home via videos. Class time was spent solving problems through team activities. For example, after learning the IPA, an in-class activity would be to categorize words by their vowel sounds. Or, after learning spelling rules,

students would classify words under each rule and identify exceptions. An exam could then be to apply what they learned about sounds and spelling rules to new words.

Before flipping this course, nearly all my in-class time was spent teaching and explaining concepts, and tests were focused on students' ability to memorize examples presented in class. After flipping, there was much more emphasis on application during class meetings.

Assessment of student learning

Assessments measured students' ability to connect what they learned in order to explain or solve new problems. After flipping this course, my initial assessment was based on the level of student engagement in the learning process and hence, their acceptance of responsibility for their own learning. In future sessions, I would like to compare exam grades between a class taught traditionally with one taught following the flipped model.

Lessons Learned

The instructional experience

I think the key to the success of this flip was the transfer of responsibility for learning from me as the teacher, to the students. When students became responsible, not through lecture, but through their involvement with the lessons, then true learning took place. Students moved beyond rote memorization to being able to figure things out for themselves. This ability should help them in future classes and situations where they will have more reasoning skills to approach problems.

The student experience

I believe that students enjoyed being able to do more challenging activities in class. This is evidenced by the fact that I saw them fully engaged. I also received considerably fewer complaints about the curriculum. Students asked more meaningful questions both inside and outside of the classroom. In particular, for the first time in my ESL career, more students came to class with specific questions about the material. This low level vocabulary and literacy course is very difficult for students, and historically, one that they have disliked and resisted. After flipping, student comments on course evaluations indicated that 1) they learned faster; and 2) they enjoyed the class. I found that although it was more work for me initially to create the videos and structure new lessons that were based on collaboration and solving problems, the subsequent class work was significantly more meaningful, both for me and for the students.

Flipping an ESL course offers an opportunity for students to implicitly learn to be independent, resourceful, and cooperative and to take responsibility for their own learning. It offers teachers opportunities to do more follow-through activities and be more involved in guiding students through the process of applying and practicing new skills. I will definitely flip more classes in the future.