


Challenges of Using a Blended Learning Approach: A Flipped Classroom in an English Teacher Education Program in Mexico


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Abstract

Objectives: The objective of the study was to understand the views, experiences, and challenges that preservice English teachers perceived in a flipped classroom, which was implemented in a language teacher education program following our institution's desire to promote blended learning.

Method: Two focus groups were conducted with the students (19). We analyzed the data using thematic analysis.

Results: The results show that the students perceived flipped practices as innovative and beneficial for their learning. However, their responses also reveal that the autonomy required from them and taking more responsibility for their own learning were particularly challenging because of their lack of familiarity with the approach and their past learning experiences rooted in traditional teaching and learning.

Implication for Theory and/or Practice: Our argument is that prior to implementing blended learning approaches, language teacher education and higher education should examine students' readiness for such approaches and provide them with support for carrying out those practices.

Keywords: *blended learning; flipped classroom; higher education; Mexican university; multimodal practices*

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Introduction

In the last few decades, higher education has attempted to shift from traditional to more student-centered learning approaches with a view to encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning (Kim et al., 2014). To this end, universities have started to innovate by incorporating blended learning approaches, following the idea that active student learning is promoted by the flexibility to do activities, different study modes, and a range of learning tools and resources (Uzunboylu & Karagozlu, 2015). One such approach is the “flipped classroom,” which is believed to be an innovative and active learning instructional model that creates a student-centered environment by “reversing the traditional teaching and learning model” (Tomas et al., 2019, p.2). This methodology thus combines face-to-face and online practices alternately in order to maximize class time, benefits of in-class activities, and student participation and achievement. Several disciplines (e.g., economics, natural sciences, technology, languages, and nursing, among others) have explored the use of a flipped classroom approach in which the classroom becomes the center of collaborative activities (Marshall, 2014) and educators go from being a central figure in the classroom to becoming facilitators (Bauer-Ramazani et al., 2016).

Because of the relevance and influence of emerging technologies in modern education, Mexican universities have recently started to incorporate blended and distance teaching practices to promote learning. The university where this case study was conducted has recently required academics, aided by workshops and support from experts, to commence the transition from traditional pedagogy to multimodal teaching and learning practices, that is, face-to-face practices which make use of modern technologies as well as blended and distance learning best practices. The rationale behind this transition is based on the learning benefits that students can obtain from such multimodal practices.

Based upon the above, one of the authors (henceforth, “the teacher”) designed and implemented a technology class following a flipped classroom approach. In this flipped classroom, the students were required to design language activities and lessons using technology as part of their English teacher training. However, as the teacher had both face-to-face and online sessions with the students, she noticed that they were facing several challenges that resulted in low engagement and motivation. Thus, because of the growing interest in implementing blended learning approaches, it is important that research is directed towards examining the challenges that students face. While previous research into the flipped classroom has explored student perceptions in general (Chuang et al., 2018; Elmaadaway, 2018; McNally et al., 2017; Nouri, 2016; Tomas et al., 2019), a search of the literature revealed few studies that have explored the challenges that students face while flipping practices (see for example Lo & Hew, 2017; Zainuddin & Halili, 2016) and no studies that investigate the flipped classroom in language teacher education.

Due to increasing demands for blended learning, research evidence is necessary because preservice language teachers will be required to have the skills to implement these approaches in their future teaching careers and contexts. This, therefore, requires preservice teachers to be familiar with flipped classroom approaches so they are able to implement them in their future classrooms and thus maximize language learning opportunities through combining face-to-face and online practices. Moreover, in order to understand how students in preservice language teacher programs can best implement these approaches in their contexts, it is important that research discourse is directed towards exploring not only their perceptions in general, but also the challenges that they face when they learn in these approaches. This would enable an understanding of the support and orientation English teachers need to fully internalize the principles of blended learning and endorse these approaches for the advancement of language learning.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the views, experiences, and challenges that students faced in a flipped technology class as part of their preservice language teacher training in Mexico. The present study is significant because it provides insight, from the student perspective, on how transitioning from traditional

methodologies to blended learning approaches posed challenges that may result in low involvement, motivation, and performance. Moreover, the present study provides an opportunity to advance knowledge of the support that preservice teachers and students in general need in order to succeed in blended learning approaches. The evidence calls for in situ explorations in higher education to examine students' previous learning experiences, their familiarity with blended learning, and their readiness for such approaches.

Background

The Flipped Classroom in Different Disciplines

In the flipped classroom, activities normally carried out in the classroom take place outside the classroom, and vice versa (Uzunboylu & Karagozlu, 2015). According to Han (2015), in flipped classrooms, "students are provided with out-of-class instructional materials electronically and are expected to read, study, and review them independently. They spend in-class hours practicing and mastering the learning objectives" (p. 98). Thus, lecture material is offloaded for students to learn outside of class at their own pace (Han, 2015; Rotellar & Cain, 2016). In this way, a flipped classroom encourages students to take responsibility for their learning (Roach, 2014; Uzunboylu & Karagozlu, 2015). Learning in a more independent way in flipped classrooms thus fosters student autonomy "by placing the responsibility on them not only inside the classroom but at home in a way that is more scaffolded" (Webb & Doman, 2016, p. 42). Teachers can thus maintain active and self-paced learning and better use their experience, knowledge, and abilities by focusing on key in-class activities. Examples of these activities include group learning, peer-to-peer collaboration, individual student mentoring, problem solving, class discussions, scaffolding, and higher-order thinking (Roach, 2014; Smith et al., 2005; Tomas et al., 2019).

Previous studies in different disciplines have examined the implementation of blended learning and its potential benefits for learning (see Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Brent et al., 2002; Davies et al., 2013; Lage et al., 2000; Sáiz et al., 2020a, 2020b; Sáiz et al., 2019a, 2019b). Stone (2012) flipped two courses, genetic diseases and general biology. Students were given a variety of activities to perform outside the classroom and another set to be carried out as in-class activities. His results showed that those students in these flipped classes obtained better results than those in previous years with no flipped classroom experience. Young et al. (2014) conducted a study in a course of emergency medicine residency. They focused on the instructors' impressions of the benefits of flipped classroom experiences. The results showed that instructors had positive views towards using flipped instruction, as students seemed to obtain better results and showed better retention of learning material. Vaughan's (2014) study in the area of education reported positive results from a group of students who engaged in journals, observations, and discussion board notes as part of their in-class and flipped classroom activities. Their level of reflection seemed to be higher when participating in the flipped classroom group.

However, the benefits of a flipped classroom are not without potential drawbacks. Evidence has recently emerged suggesting that students may not fully endorse flipped classroom practices when transitioning from traditional to blended learning practices (e.g., see Tomas et al., 2019). There are several possible explanations for lack of student endorsement of flipped classrooms or blended learning approaches. For example, students may feel "an underlying fear of added workload and uncertainty of success" (Rotellar & Cain, 2016, p. 3). The idea of having to complete tasks before class to practice them during face-to-face classes can feel overwhelming. Moreover, students may struggle with flipped practices if they feel that they are being made responsible for their own learning. In other words, empowering students to take the initiative of their own learning "may not be the students' expectation of what a typical instructor should be doing. Students might not perceive this facilitation as teaching as they have come to know it through many years of education that they have already experienced" (Baker & Hill, 2017, p. 20). These are legitimate fears motivated by "years of familiarity with learning in traditional classroom environments and, therefore, may take considerable time to overcome" (Rotellar & Cain, 2016, p. 3). Based upon this evidence, it is important that both educators and

institutions assess students' readiness to learn in a flipped classroom and the resources available to conduct and promote such practices. To this end, exploring the familiarity that students have with these practices becomes relevant to determine whether a flipped classroom should be implemented and the support and orientation that they should receive to prepare them to learn in this approach.

Despite the recent attention to the flipped learning approach, there is little empirical evidence of how students experience the approach and the challenges they face and, particularly, how future English teachers learn from and implement a flipped classroom approach. Moreover, reviews on flipped learning in first language classrooms pinpointed methodological limitations (Butt, 2014; McDonald & Smith, 2013), such as the use of surveys that may not be appropriate for exploring the complexities of implementing and learning from flipped classrooms.

In response to this, the present study examines the views, experiences, and challenges of the flipped model approach in a technology course in a bachelor of arts in English language teaching in a Mexican public university. We sought to explore and understand student views of the flipped classroom approach from their own perspective. In order to assess the possible learning benefits of flipped classroom methodology, the teacher implemented it in a technology class with 21 students. As the semester progressed, she observed that students were demotivated and reluctant to participate in the online activities and face-to-face discussions. These perceptions motivated the present study, which is guided by two research questions. The first involved understanding student views and experiences in the flipped technology classroom; the aims of the course were to teach content knowledge and technology skills for English teaching. The second involved understanding challenges students appeared to face in the flipped classroom. Results will place us in a better position to understand how challenges may be best addressed and to suggest possible alternatives for students to embrace blended learning in language teacher education. Moreover, the present study responds to Roach's (2014) call for research that explores students' acceptance of flipped learning and perceptions of learning in this approach at a collegiate level in a language teacher education program.

Methods

Nature of the Study

The purpose of the technology course is to prepare students to plan and design activities and lessons with the aid of technology. The learning objectives encourage students to use different online platforms and apps to design resources they can use to teach English. In this first-semester class, 21 students were enrolled, and the flipped learning approach was introduced by the teacher at the beginning of the semester. The teacher flipped the classroom practices following design principles set forth by Kim et al. (2014). These included providing an opportunity for students to (a) gain first exposure to content related to the topics prior to class; (b) develop clear connections between in-class and out-of-class activities; (c) have clearly defined and well-structured guidance; (d) have enough time to carry out the assignments; (e) receive prompt and adaptive feedback on individual or group works; and (f) use technologies that are familiar and easy to access. In total, the teacher and students had 11 online sessions and six face-to-face sessions.

The pedagogical structure of the flipped classroom was as follows. For the online sessions, the students were supported with reading materials (theory) and were required to explore and use platforms to design their resources and a complete lesson for the final project. The readings covered the theoretical fundamentals of emerging technologies and practical information for the use of online platforms. These materials, instructions for the assignments, and digital supervision were made available to the students throughout the course on a teaching platform called Edmodo (<https://new.edmodo.com/>). If students had questions, they could contact the teacher via this platform. In the face-to-face sessions, the students met with the teacher and peers to put into practice the resources and activities that they designed in the online platforms (sometimes by microteaching, that is, creating teaching situations in which the students could carry out the activities to

practice and develop teaching skills). During these sessions, the students had the opportunity to describe the rationale behind the design of their lessons and materials, making use of information on the readings. Moreover, the teacher scaffolded the lessons and materials the students designed and provided feedback to them. When the teacher identified misunderstandings or needs, she provided elaborated explanations to the whole class to avoid problems in the online sessions.

At the beginning of the semester, the students were highly motivated about learning in flipped classroom practices. However, the teacher perceived that their motivation and engagement diminished as the semester progressed. This study thus set out to understand the students' views and experiences from learning in this flipped classroom, which was new to them, and how to best address the possible challenges they were facing. For this study, we relied on qualitative research. Dornyei (2007) states that qualitative studies are concerned with opinions, which cannot be quantifiable but explored and interpreted. In line with this, our study sought to understand the views of a particular group of students in the class regarding a flipped classroom methodology and the challenges they faced.

Participants

To understand their experiences in the flipped classroom and the possible challenges that they faced, we invited the 21 first-year students to participate in focus groups at the end of the semester. We made sure that the students understood that their participation was under no obligation and would not affect the grades that they had already obtained in this course. However, only 19 students confirmed their interest in participating in the focus groups. The students provided their consent to participate on a confidentiality and consent sheet. They were 17 females and two males. Ages ranged from 19 to 21 years.

Instrumentation

The 19 students participated in two focus groups in the last session of the semester, after all the assignments were evaluated. During the focus groups, a list of ten open-ended questions was used (see Appendix A). One focus group was carried out with ten students, and the second one with nine students, one held after the other. The focus groups were of particular importance to this study because they allowed us not only to understand students' views, attitudes, and experiences, but also to access through these data the challenges that they faced in this course. Even though the teacher of the class was also one of the researchers, we decided to distance any participation in the study. That is, the teacher moderated the focus groups without joining the discussions, serving only as a guide (Krueger, 1998). We are aware of the fact that the teacher moderating the focus groups may raise concerns as to power relations between the teacher and the students during the focus groups and the students' perceived pressure to participate in the study. To address this and ensure that the study was conducted in an ethical way, the students were informed that their participation was under no obligation, and their decision to participate or not in the study would not affect the grades that they had already obtained. Moreover, we acknowledge that the role of the teacher as a moderator might have influenced their responses to some extent. Thus, the teacher played a more detached role, since the aim of the focus group was to explore what was central to the participants regarding the flipped classroom approach. Moreover, the deep analysis of this study suggested that the students were indeed revealing their views, experiences, and challenges.

Data Collection and Analysis

The focus groups lasted from 25 to 30 minutes each, transcribed in their entirety, and translated into English by one native speaker of Spanish and then checked by a native speaker of English. The systematic analysis of data generated by the focus groups is crucial. Therefore, to analyze these data, we carried out a thematic analysis in order to be able to process the data and identify the emerging themes (Alhojailan, 2012; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The thematic analysis first involved identifying and demarcating extracts in which the students appeared to be voicing their views, attitudes, and experiences concerning the flipped classroom and then using a matrix in which these extracts were listed. From these data, we then identified the themes which referred to the link between experiences and challenges in the flipped teaching and learning practices.

According to Lietz and Zayas (2010), rigor in studies requires that the research has been subject to researchers' efforts that increase confidence that findings are representative of the meanings expressed by the participants. However, in the research literature, there is debate about the validity of focus groups and the reliability of their findings. To address this, we followed the recommendations from Chioncel et al. (2003). To increase the validity of the focus groups in our study, the question guide (see Appendix A) was designed and used by the same teacher, who is a researcher with solid knowledge of research and methods in applied linguistics. Moreover, the questions used to encourage the interactions in the focus groups were clear and specific to ensure that the instrument could be replicated in other contexts (Chioncel et al., 2003). Regarding reliability, as previously mentioned, we carried out thematic analysis. To ensure the reliability of this analysis, we analyzed the data independently and then compared our analyses in terms of emerging themes. This intercoder reliability check showed that the percentage agreement between the coders was 92%.

Results

Research Question 1

Several themes emerged in response to Research Question 1. These themes are the students' understanding of the flipped classroom, its learning benefits, and how they compare the approach with a traditional classroom. In the focus groups, the students were able to understand the characteristics of a flipped classroom. Moreover, their responses suggested their awareness of the learning benefits of these approaches. Since this approach was new to them, they compared it with a traditional classroom, suggesting positive attitudes towards the blended learning approach.

Understanding of Flipped Classroom and Its Benefits

It was evident that the students were able to describe the characteristics of a flipped classroom and their role in carrying out online practices. For example, some participants said:

You can take the class from the comfort of your home, it is virtual, with your device. We can enter the platform and start the virtual class and then do your assignments.

Extract 1. Student 09

I understand a flipped classroom as classes that you are taking in different places; you are not in a physical classroom all the time.

Extract 2. Student 02

The classes are online and you can access them the moment that you want, but yes, it is more comfortable for time management and organisation.

Extract 3. Student 11

These extracts describe the students' perceptions of a flipped classroom as "a virtual class" (Student 09), "not being in the classroom" (Student 02) and "online class" (Student 11). In general, their responses reveal positive attitudes towards the online practices. However, when describing the flipped classroom, the students did not mention the face-to-face practices in which they discussed or put into practice what was learned in the online sessions. As we will see, most of the students described the face-to-face practices as traditional, suggesting negative attitudes towards these practices. It is thus possible that the students focused on describing the online sessions because they were the new component of the class and they were getting familiar with their dynamics.

The students also expressed some benefits which they perceived in the flipped classroom. This is suggested in the extracts below.

We have more time to organise our ideas and whatever we want to say because you are not under pressure to submit it in a exact date. It helps us be outside our comfort zone.

Extract 4. Student 03

They are interesting for the students because you are not only using a textbook and taking notes; they are more accessible. Nowadays, everybody has access to an electronic device.

Extract 5. Student 05

It has great flexibility in terms of schedule because you can do the readings whenever you have time. In a flipped classroom, you do not have to be connected at an exact time to be in class.

Extract 6. Student 07

Student 03 claims that in the flipped classroom she is able to manage her time more efficiently for planning and submitting her assignments. In “it helps us be outside our comfort zone,” we can see that Student 03 perceived these practices as challenging. Student 05’s response suggests positive attitudes towards flipped practices and negative views towards face-to-face practices when he says, “they are interesting for the students because you are not only using a textbook and taking notes; they are more accessible.” For Students 05 and 07, a flipped classroom promotes accessibility and flexibility with practices which do not have to be carried out at a specific time. Interestingly, while describing again the online sessions, the students mentioned that their learning autonomy was promoted, as can be seen in the extracts below.

I believe it promotes autonomy, you have to be organised, you have to decide how much time you need to spend on the activity because there is a deadline assigned. You also learn to find your own resources and use them at your convenience.

Extract 7. Student 12

I understand autonomy as being self-sufficient; the teacher gives you the materials and readings for you to work at home and you have to decide your work pace, when to work, how to do the activity or task at hand. It also creates a sense of responsibility when there is no one telling you what to do.

Extract 8. Student 18

It makes us be autonomous because we have to decide when and how to do it, what we are going to do with the materials that were provided to us.

Extract 9. Student 16

For them, autonomy was promoted in the flipped classroom because the online sessions encouraged them to manage their time and activities, look for resources, and decide how and when to do the assignments. What stands out in these data is that their responses again reveal positive attitudes towards the online sessions, which were part of the flipped classroom.

So far, we have seen that when describing the flipped classroom, the students’ responses suggest that they understood its dynamics and their roles as students. The students’ responses also reveal positive attitudes towards the online sessions which were the new component of the class. As we will see in the next section, the students continue to verbalize benefits of the flipped classroom in comparing the approach to the traditional face-to-face classroom, suggesting in turn negative views towards traditional practices.

Comparing the Flipped Classroom With the Traditional Classroom

When describing their experiences in the flipped classroom, the students mentioned some benefits of the

flipped classroom compared to a traditional face-to-face classroom. This comparison is made in the following extracts:

I think that these new activities [flipped practices] allow us to be more independent. The teacher is not there as in the classroom telling you what to do or checking your activities

Extract 10. Student 03

In the platform, you need to be continuously checking the interactions of our classmates and when to submit the assignments. The reading material is provided to you and you decide when to read it. In the classroom, we are more dependent on the teacher's instructions and it is something which has become as a routine in the classroom.

Extract 11. Student 11

The online sessions are dynamic, whereas the face-to-face class is very traditional. The teacher gives you the instructions and you have to follow them and that's it. You are in the classroom receptive and passive. When we have face-to-face classes, I do not pay attention to the class because the teacher is repeating over and over again the same topic. In online practices, it is not the same; if I do not have the teacher here physically to explain the topic and give instructions, I will definitely struggle more to understand the activity.

Extract 12. Student 08

On the one hand, in comparing the flipped classroom with the face-to-face classroom, the students again report some of the benefits they perceived in the flipped classroom. In "I think that these new activities [flipped practices] allow us to be more independent," Student 03 suggests that the flipped classroom promoted her autonomy and decision making regarding the activities they needed to carry out. This idea is also reflected in Student 11's contribution. On the other hand, their responses also suggest negative views towards the traditional face-to-face classroom. As shown in Extracts 11 and 12, we can see that these negative views could be in part motivated by the receptive role they play in traditional face-to-face classrooms. This is supported by Student 08 in Extract 12. In "The online sessions are dynamic, whereas the face-to-face class is very traditional," she again verbalizes her support for online practices and a negative view towards face-to-face classroom practices. What stands out from Student 08's response is that she considers that the online practices can be challenging without the presence of the teacher to provide directions. This idea was also shared by Student 14:

It is not the same pace as in a face-to-face class because in these distance classes it is more autonomous, that is, it all depends on you, if you do not study, you are not going to learn anything. If you do not read, if you don't do the activities and readings, you will not progress.

Extract 13. Student 14

In comparing practices, Student 14 believes that autonomy is promoted more in a flipped classroom than in a face-to-face classroom, suggesting again a positive attitude towards the former approach. However, she then claims that the freedom they have in this blended learning approach can motivate students to procrastinate.

The above data then show the students' positive attitudes towards the flipped classroom in comparison to a traditional face-to-face classroom. However, the learning benefits perceived by the students were nuanced by several challenges that they claim to have faced in the flipped classroom. As we will see in the following sections, it appears that the students' lack of familiarity with this blended learning approach resulted in a number of challenges.

Research Question 2

In response to Research Question 2, several themes emerged. These themes are the students' lack of familiarity with the flipped classroom, their confusion about the approach, and their restated preference for traditional classroom practices. As suggested in their responses, the students appeared to face several challenges which were motivated by their lack of familiarity with the blended learning approach. This lack of familiarity motivated the students' feelings of confusion regarding the requirements of the activities or practices in the flipped classroom. Because of these challenges, the students restated their preference for traditional practices and behavior in the classroom.

Students' Lack of Familiarity With the Flipped Classroom

The students' positive perceptions of the flipped classroom appeared to combine with several challenges that they faced in the flipped classroom. As raised by the students in the focus groups, these challenges were mostly motivated by their lack of familiarity with the flipped classroom approach, as discussed below.

To me, it was stressful because I was not used to this kind of teaching. My classmates were not used to it either.

Extract 14. Student 19

Honestly, I have never worked with this kind of platform, neither as a student nor as a teacher.

Extract 15. Student 02

These practices were new to us. There was none of us with the experience. No one among us was able to guide us.

Extract 16. Student 06

The above responses generally suggest their lack of familiarity with a flipped classroom. The data also shows that this lack of familiarity was a major factor that motivated several challenges that they perceived to face in the flipped classroom. Some examples are shown below.

I was really struggling. It didn't work for us because maybe we needed some previous experience learning with this method.

Extract 17. Student 05

It is not the same being in a face-to-face class, ask questions to the teacher and tell him: "can you please help me with this" to being online, have a question and wait days to get an answer. It was very difficult for me.

Extract 18. Student 12

In these extracts, we can see that the lack of familiarity perceived by the students in turn motivated struggles during the flipped practices ("I was really struggling," Student 05) and perceptions of a flipped classroom as difficult practices ("It was very difficult for me," Student 12). Student 05 believes that the flipped classroom did not work as expected because of their lack of familiarity with the blended learning approach. In the following section, we provide more evidence in support of our suggestion that the students' lack of familiarity motivated several challenges and confusion as to the activities planned for the online sessions, hindering the students from fully maximizing learning in both online and face-to-face practices of the flipped classroom.

Students' Confusion in the Flipped Classroom

As suggested in the students' responses, it seems that their lack of familiarity with the approach, alongside

their previous learning experiences rooted in traditional teaching, resulted in high levels of confusion as to the students' role in this approach and how to carry out the activities in the online sessions, as shown below.

I think that our misunderstanding was not because the teacher did not explain clearly. Simply, we do not understand.... I do not understand.

Extract 19. Student 13

It is a real problem because the teacher did explain everything, but it is still not clear to me. Maybe, someone explains this to me, and another person does it again, but I still do not understand the activity.

Extract 20. Student 02

Sometimes, you don't fully understand what the teacher is requesting. You get confused or do something else. You ask a classmate and she understood differently and then everybody did everything differently.

Extract 21. Student 11

The statements suggest that the students struggled to understand the directions of the activities and dynamics of the flipped classroom. For example, this can be seen in "sometimes, you don't fully understand what the teacher is requesting. You get confused or do something else" (Student 11). The significance of this is that students' understanding of an activity, or lack thereof, will have a direct impact on the way they go about doing it. As suggested in Extract 22, it seems that these challenges were motivated not only by their lack of familiarity with the blended learning approach, but also by their previous learning experiences in traditional classrooms.

We have never been in something like this [flipped classroom] before. We were used to the traditional method. This new approach was new to us and we were so confused.

Extract 22. Student 03

These extracts suggest that the students' previous learning experiences, rooted in traditional teaching and learning, may have motivated their feelings of confusion in the flipped classroom. What this also reveals is that first-year students being trained to be language teachers may not fully maximize learning opportunities in blended learning environments because of their previous learning experiences. This evidence thus calls for language teacher education which supports preservice language teachers with orientation to understand their role in blended learning approaches and guidance for following flipped classroom practices. This support is necessary because, as we will see in the next section, students may reject innovative blended learning approaches as a response to the challenges that they perceive and thus prefer traditional classroom practices which are familiar to them.

Students' Preference for Traditional Classroom Practices

Students stated their preference for traditional face-to-face practices, contradicting somewhat their initial perceptions about the flipped classroom as an innovative methodology in which they can learn actively and autonomously. This is suggested by Student 01.

I really think that it's better that everybody is here taking the class because all our attention is focused on the class and not feeling lost when we are not in the classroom.

Extract 23. Student 01

This student preferred to be in a traditional classroom because that classroom experience would allow her to focus her attention on the activities. Her contribution also shows that she felt lost in the online sessions. As shown below, other students also stated their preference for traditional face-to-face practices over a flipped classroom.

I really like to be in the classroom than at home learning on the computer. The best thing is that teachers explain to you in the moment and that helps you retain and understand whatever you have to do.

Extract 24. Student 14

I believe that it will always be better to be in the classroom and have the teacher in front of you to give you explanations and help you clarify all your doubts.

Extract 25. Student 01

We really need to be here [classroom] because not all things can be clarified online.

Extract 26. Student 09

All describe the presence of the teacher as important to provide them with immediate explanations or clarifications. Despite the fact there was a combination of online and face-to-face sessions, the students felt lost or misunderstood the dynamics of flipping the class. Claiming that they prefer to be in the classroom and have face-to-face communication with the teacher contradicts their initial responses which suggested an endorsement for the online sessions and the flipped classroom in general. Their preference for a traditional classroom, especially, suggests that blended learning may be ineffective for maximizing learning if students are not familiar with the approach and understand their learning role in such approaches. In the area of language teacher education, this evidence is significant because it reveals the need to develop knowledge and skills of future language teachers to teach and learn using blended learning methodologies.

Discussion

This study was conducted to explore student views and experiences in a flipped classroom and to understand the challenges they faced in a blended learning approach. One assumption underlying the flipped classroom is that the approach promotes active learning and maximizes class time, benefits of in-class activities, and student participation and achievement (Tomas et al., 2019). In fact, in addressing Research Question 1, the students perceived the learning benefits of the approach and its practices after the implementation of the flipped classroom in the context of the present study, as reported in previous research (Roach, 2014; Tomas et al., 2019). Moreover, the students' responses suggested an understanding of the dynamics of the flipped classroom as initially planned at the beginning of the semester. This understanding was important for the purpose of the study because it showed the students' awareness of what was expected from them and how the face-to-face and online practices should be carried out in line with the flipped classroom approach that was implemented in the course.

However, in response to Research Question 2, the students' responses during the focus groups suggested that these perceived learning benefits were nuanced by several challenges that they experienced in the flipped classroom. These challenges seemed to be mostly motivated by their lack of familiarity with the approach and their previous learning experiences in traditional classrooms. This lack of familiarity and previous learning experiences had an impact not only on their feelings of confusion in the flipped classroom, but also on their preference for traditional face-to-face classroom practices, as evident in the importance they attached to the role of the teacher and having clearer instructions. These views were opposed to our initial thoughts that this course was to be perceived by the students as beneficial, and they would endorse the transition to the blended learning

approach. It seems possible that learning how to use new online platforms and design materials and activities to teach English and implement them in class were particularly challenging for the students. As suggested by Tomas et al. (2019), the challenges that students perceived themselves to face in the flipped classroom may have been motivated by the high demands of the approach for responsibility, planning, organization, autonomy, and self-direction. Moreover, challenges around blended learning approaches are exacerbated when students have previously learned in traditional classrooms (Tomas et al., 2019). These suggestions were reflected in the students' responses which showed their preference for traditional face-to-face classes, despite the fact they initially claimed to value online practices and the flipped classroom in general. According to O'Flaherty and Phillips (2015), a traditional face-to-face classroom tends to be preferred by students "because it is familiar, comfortable, instructor centered and requires little active participation" (p. 89).

Taken together, the above results suggest that flipped classrooms may be useful for promoting active learning and other benefits in line with current blended learning approaches. However, these benefits may be limited by the students' lack of readiness to respond to the demands of the flipped classroom. As suggested by the elicited data, this lack of readiness may be motivated by the students' lack of familiarity with blended learning approaches and their previous experiences rooted in traditional teaching and learning. To address these limitations, Tomas et al. (2019) propose a flipped learning continuum for supporting students with different levels of teacher instruction, scaffolding, and learner autonomy. In their continuum, they position traditional instruction on the left side. On the right side of the continuum, they place the flipped classroom. In the middle, they locate learning environments that draw upon principles of traditional and flipped classrooms. In this level of their continuum, they suggest that learning in blended learning approaches should be complemented with teacher-led instruction and scaffolding. The continuum implies that students progressively move from one level to the next by receiving teacher instruction and scaffolding. Thus, the flipped learning continuum may be useful for assisting these students in developing skills necessary for eventually teaching and learning in a flipped classroom. Moreover, the evidence highlights the importance of assessing not only the resources to implement blended learning approaches, but also students' readiness for blended or distance learning and their previous learning experiences and provide them with continuous (scaffolding) support to maximize the opportunities they have for learning in those approaches.

Implications

The findings of the study have important implications for language teacher programs in higher education, students and teachers, as follows.

For Language Teacher Education Programs

The findings of this study can inform language teacher education regarding the ways blended learning approaches should be introduced to students who are not familiar with the approaches. In order to effectively implement a flipped classroom which is in line with blended learning benefits, language teacher education should include modules that teach preservice English teachers how to carry out flipped classroom practices and respond to the demands of blended learning. Such modules would help these preservice teachers make connections among flipping classroom practices, their learning roles, autonomy, responsibility, and self-direction in a meaningful way; that is, with opportunities for practical explorations, hands-on experimentation, and reflection through learning in flipped practices in these subjects. These modules are also necessary because these future teachers will be expected not only to teach the language following language communicative approaches, but also innovative approaches such as the flipped classroom.

The benefits of including these modules in language teacher education are that these future teachers will develop knowledge and experience regarding blended learning (Lo & Hew, 2017). Moreover, the modules would provide them with opportunities to better understand teaching and learning roles in both online and face-to-face sessions and thus the transition to blended learning approaches in higher education.

For Students

Students in English teacher programs should develop an awareness of blended learning approaches which help them not only learn the content to become English teachers, but also understand how to teach the language using innovative blended learning approaches. These future English teachers should therefore maintain an active role in learning from and about blended learning approaches and finding and promoting autonomous learning opportunities which are in line with the pedagogical principles of current language teacher education programs and blended learning. Time then becomes relevant in this suggestion because the more time students spend carrying out and learning from and about blended learning, the more familiar and efficient they will become in the process.

For Teachers

In cases in which students are not familiar with blended learning approaches, teachers should gradually introduce students to flipped classrooms. This is consistent with the flipped learning continuum previously described (Tomas et al., 2019). If blended learning approaches are implemented and students do not have experience in learning from them, teachers should provide them with explicit support and scaffolding to progressively develop learning skills necessary to respond to the demands of a flipped classroom. To this end, teachers should support students before and during the implementation of flipped learning approaches with clear expectations and explanations. As students become familiar with these approaches, it will be necessary that teachers conduct classroom-based research or explorations to detect possible challenges that their students are facing and devise possible solutions to reduce the challenges and ensure the efficiency of implementing a flipped classroom or blended learning approaches in general.

Limitations of the study

This qualitative study has several limitations. First, because the data were qualitative and from a small number of participants (19), the findings of this study could not be generalized to other similar language teacher programs and/or contexts. The experiences and perceptions come from one group of students who were not familiar with blended learning approaches. Secondly, the findings were based upon the participants' subjective experiences, and these perceptions could be subject to other interpretations. Thirdly, the data was collected by the teacher who moderated the focus groups, following the institution's suggestions. Her involvement in the data collection may have influenced the students' responses to some extent, although the impact of this was minimized given the results and that final grades were already computed before the focus groups were conducted.

Conclusion

Motivated by our interest in blended learning practices, a flipped classroom approach was adopted to teaching content in a technology class which is part of a BA in ELT at a state-run Mexican university. This interest was partly motivated by our university's decision to start the transition from face-to-face to multimodal teaching and learning practices and also the benefits that combining online and distance practices can have on content learning. We expected to maximize students' learning opportunities and provide them with better chances to develop a sense of autonomy and responsibility for their learning. However, as the semester progressed, the students' motivation diminished, and it was evident that they were facing a number of challenges in the flipped classroom. Students understood the dynamics of the flipped classroom, its learning benefits, and how it differs from traditional classrooms. However, the data also indicated a number of challenges that were mostly motivated by their lack of familiarity with blended learning which in turn motivated feelings of confusion as to the requirements of the practices in the flipped classroom.

The above evidence highlights the importance of having English teacher education programs, prior to implementing blended learning approaches, explore 1) student motivation and attitudes towards blended

learning, 2) their readiness to learn in such approaches, and 3) their previous learning experiences. Moreover, in order to promote the implementation of blended learning and student endorsement of the approach, English teacher programs should include modules that train them to teach the language and learn from those approaches. Moreover, teacher educators should continuously provide preservice teachers with support and scaffolding as they become familiar with the approach and develop a better understanding of their learning roles in blended learning. Otherwise, we will continue to promote language teacher education that trains individuals to teach the language but without the skills to use technology and promote multimodal learning practices as required by higher education worldwide.

Availability of Data and Material

To access the full datasets, please go to the following link:

https://ugtomx-my.sharepoint.com/:f/g/personal/ee_garcia_ugto_mx/Epgq9JFpbNxMpcKWdMW3jxgBA3Ag7qaJvt2OQLXYBuscJQ?e=kRGLvL

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Appendix A

1. How do you understand a flipped classroom? What is a flipped classroom for you?
2. How is the flipped classroom different from a traditional classroom?
3. Have you heard about the concept of “autonomy”? What is it?
4. Do you consider yourselves autonomous learners? Why?
5. What are the kinds of activities that you have carried out in the class which you think can be considered as autonomous practices?
6. What was your experiences in this flipped classroom?
7. What were your positive and negative experiences?
8. What can be some of the advantages of learning in a flipped classroom?
9. What can then be the disadvantages?
10. Which recommendations would you suggest to enhance the practices in a flipped classroom?

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