

A STUDY ON THE EFFECTS OF FLIPPED CLASSROOM APPROACH ON CHINESE EFL COLLEGE STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILLS

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Abstract: This mixed-methods study investigated the effects of the flipped classroom approach on Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills and their perceptions of this instructional model. Using an explanatory sequential design, quantitative data from the CET-SET and a questionnaire, and qualitative data from interviews and reflective notes were collected from 128 students. The study found that the experimental group outperformed the control group, with advanced level participants showing the greatest improvement. Students held positive perceptions of the flipped classroom approach, emphasizing its effectiveness in enhancing speaking skills, engagement, collaboration, and learner-centeredness. The qualitative findings provided further insights into the key elements of an effective flipped classroom approach, including structured learning phases, blended learning dynamics, flexibility and customization, diverse speaking practice opportunities, and systematic assessment and feedback. The study contributes to the growing body of research on flipped learning in EFL contexts and offers valuable recommendations for educators and researchers seeking to implement this approach to enhance students' speaking proficiency.

Keywords: Chinese EFL college students, flipped classroom approach, mixed-methods study, speaking skills

INTRODUCTION

English language education plays a crucial role in China's educational system, particularly in the context of globalization and the country's rapid economic development. As China continues to strengthen its international ties and participate in global markets, the demand for English language proficiency among its citizens has grown significantly (Li & Hao, 2021). Consequently, the Chinese government has implemented various educational policies and

initiatives to promote and improve EFL education at all levels. However, despite the government's efforts to promote communicative language teaching and the development of practical language skills, the dominant teaching practices in Chinese EFL classrooms remain largely focused on grammar-translation, reading, and writing skills (Chen & Liu, 2021). Speaking and listening skills often receive less attention in the classroom, limiting students' opportunities for authentic language practice and interaction. Moreover, EFL education in China faces several challenges and limitations, such as large class sizes, limited teaching resources, and the exam-oriented nature of the education system (Xu & Li, 2021). These factors can hinder the implementation of communicative and student-centered teaching approaches, which are essential for fostering students' speaking skills and overall language proficiency. To address these challenges and gaps in the teaching of speaking skills in the Chinese EFL context, it is crucial to explore innovative instructional approaches that can create a more engaging, interactive, and communicative learning environment. The flipped classroom approach, which has been successfully applied in various educational contexts to promote active learning and student-centered instruction (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Bishop & Verleger, 2013), offers a promising solution to address the speaking skill challenges in Chinese EFL classrooms.

The study aims to address the following research questions:

1. Are there any significant differences in the post-test speaking skills test scores between the control and experimental groups?
2. What are the effects of the flipped classroom approach on Chinese EFL students' speaking skills?
3. What are the students' perceptions of the flipped classroom approach in enhancing their speaking skills?
4. What are the elements of an effective flipped classroom approach for the teaching of speaking skills?

This research contributes to the growing body of literature on blended learning and its potential to transform education. The findings support the Chinese State Council's "13th Five-Year Plan for the Development of National Education Industry" (2017), which emphasizes the need to improve the adoption of information technology in teaching. By providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of the flipped classroom approach, a form of blended learning, in the context of EFL speaking skill development, this study informs educational policies and practices aimed at leveraging technology to enhance language learning outcomes. Furthermore, the research generates valuable insights into Chinese EFL college students' perceptions and experiences of the flipped classroom approach compared to traditional classroom teaching. These insights offer crucial feedback on current teaching methods and learning strategies employed in the universities included in the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Speaking skills are essential for effective communication and are considered the most effective approach to exchanging ideas among speakers (Wu, Hsieh, & Yang, 2017). The ability to systematically put words together to exchange ideas easily while exhibiting proficiency in the various linguistic subskills is advantageous for Chinese EFL learners both professionally and personally, enabling them to inform, persuade, and stand out from others (Gao & Li, 2016).

However, developing speaking skills requires more than just a comprehensive knowledge of grammar rules and vocabulary; it involves aligning these elements with real-life scenarios, practicing them in daily speech, and coordinating the key components of speaking skills simultaneously for successful oral interaction (Lin & Hwang, 2018). In the context of this thesis, which focuses on the effects of the FCA on Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills, the operational definition of speaking skills serves as a foundation for understanding the specific challenges faced by these learners and the potential benefits of the FCA in enhancing their oral proficiency.

The flipped classroom approach (FCA) is a pedagogical model that reverses the traditional instructional approach by delivering instructional content outside of the classroom, typically through video lectures or readings, and utilizing class time for active learning activities facilitated by the instructor (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Bishop & Verleger, 2013). The key components of the FCA include pre-class activities, in-class engagement, and post-class reinforcement (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Kaur, Singh, & Sonika, 2021). Pre-class activities involve students accessing and engaging with instructional content before attending class, typically through video lectures, podcasts, readings, or other multimedia resources (Bishop & Verleger, 2013). In-class engagement focuses on active learning and the application of knowledge acquired during pre-class activities through discussions, problem-solving tasks, collaborative projects, and other interactive exercises (Bergmann & Sams, 2012). Post-class reinforcement involves students extending their learning beyond the classroom through additional practice, reflection, and assessment activities (Kaur et al., 2021).

The theoretical framework guiding this study integrates social constructivism, mastery learning, and activity theory. Social constructivism, as proposed by Vygotsky (1978), emphasizes the role of social interactions and collaborative learning in the construction of knowledge. This theory is particularly relevant to the current study, as the FCA promotes active learning and peer collaboration. Mastery learning, as developed by Bloom (1968), posits that given sufficient time and appropriate instruction, most students can achieve a high level of understanding and skill in a given subject. This theory is particularly relevant to the current study, as the FCA allows for more individualized pacing and targeted support. Activity theory, as developed by Engeström (1987), provides a framework for understanding human activities as goal-oriented and socially mediated processes. By examining the flipped classroom as an activity system, with its various components such as tools (online platform), rules (classroom norms), and division of labor (student and teacher roles), the current study aims to provide a holistic understanding of how these elements interact to support or hinder the development of speaking skills. These theories provide a robust foundation for understanding the potential of the FCA in enhancing speaking skills and inform the design and implementation of the intervention in this study.

Existing research on the effectiveness of the FCA in language learning has yielded promising results, particularly in the context of speaking skill development (Chen Hsieh et al., 2017; Lee & Wallace, 2018; Zarrinabadi & Ebrahimi, 2019). Chen Hsieh et al. (2017) investigated the impact of a FCA on EFL learners' idiomatic knowledge and oral proficiency. The study found that the flipped approach significantly improved learners' idiomatic knowledge and speaking skills compared to a traditional teaching method. Lee and Wallace (2018) examined the effects of a FCA on EFL learners' speaking skills and student perceptions. The study revealed that the flipped approach enhanced learners' speaking performance, particularly in terms of fluency and accuracy. Additionally, students reported positive perceptions of the FCA, citing increased engagement, motivation, and opportunities for practice as key benefits. Zarrinabadi and Ebrahimi (2019) explored the impact of a FCA on

EFL learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) and speaking skills. The study found that the flipped approach significantly increased learners' WTC and improved their speaking performance compared to a traditional teaching method. While these studies provide evidence for the effectiveness of the FCA in language learning and speaking skill development, some limitations and challenges have also been identified. Hung (2015) noted that the success of the flipped approach depends on learners' self-regulation and motivation to engage with pre-class materials. Additionally, implementing a FCA may require significant time and resources from instructors to develop and curate appropriate learning materials (Lo & Hew, 2017). Despite these challenges, the existing research suggests that the FCA has the potential to enhance language learning and speaking skill development by providing learners with more opportunities for active engagement, practice, and individualized support.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, specifically an explanatory sequential design, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effects of the flipped classroom approach on the speaking skills of Chinese EFL college students and their perceptions of this approach. The explanatory sequential design was chosen because it allows for the collection and analysis of quantitative data first, followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data to explain and complement the quantitative findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This design is particularly suitable for addressing the research questions of this study, as it enables the researcher to examine the impact of the flipped classroom approach on students' speaking skills through quantitative measures and then explore students' perceptions and experiences through qualitative methods to provide a more in-depth understanding of the factors influencing the effectiveness of the approach.

Sampling

The target population for this study encompasses college students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at Heze University, a comprehensive public university located in Shandong Province, China. Heze University was selected as the research site due to its representative nature as a Chinese higher education institution offering EFL courses to a diverse student population from various regions of China. The sampling frame for this study includes all Chinese EFL college students enrolled at Heze University who meet the following inclusion criteria: (1) first-year students, (2) non-English majors, and (3) enrolled in the College English course during the fall 2020 semester. The total population of freshmen at Heze University is 4,300, divided into 64 classes based on their selected specializations. In the quantitative phase of the study, a convenience sampling method is employed to select participants for the questionnaire and teaching experiment. This non-random sampling method is chosen due to the accessibility of the target population and the constraints of conducting research within a specific educational setting (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Two intact classes with similar specializations (Business and Accounting) are selected based on their availability and the willingness of the students and instructors to participate in the study.

Research Instruments

The study employs a comprehensive array of instruments to assess the effects of the flipped classroom approach on Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills:

The College English Test-Spoken English Test (CET-SET), a nationally recognized standardized assessment, serves as the primary instrument for evaluating participants' oral English proficiency. Administered as both a pre-test and post-test, the CET-SET measures various aspects of speaking skills, including pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse management (Wang & Sun, 2021).

A questionnaire, comprising 34 items across four sections, is utilized to examine students' perceptions of the flipped classroom approach. The instrument, developed based on previous research (Chen Hsieh, Wu & Marek, 2017; Al-Zahrani, 2015; Alghasab, 2020), employs a 5-point Likert scale to assess learners' experiences, perceived effectiveness, and challenges encountered in the flipped learning environment.

Semi-structured individual interviews are conducted with 15 participants to gain deeper insights into students' perceptions, experiences, and views on the key elements of an effective flipped classroom approach for teaching speaking skills. This qualitative method allows for a balance between structure and flexibility in data collection (Alshenqeeti, 2014; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Reflective notes are employed as an additional qualitative instrument to capture students' ongoing experiences and perceptions throughout the intervention. This method enables participants to record their thoughts, feelings, and observations about the flipped classroom approach and its impact on their speaking skills development (Ortlipp, 2008; Jasper, 2005).

This multi-method approach facilitates triangulation of data sources, enhancing the validity and reliability of the study's findings on the effectiveness of the flipped classroom approach in improving Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills.

Reliability and Validity

In this mixed-methods study investigating the effects of the Flipped Classroom Approach (FCA) on Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills, several measures were taken to ensure the reliability and validity of the data collection instruments and the overall research design. To assess reliability, internal consistency of the questionnaire was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, while equivalence and stability reliability were examined through parallel forms of the CET-SET and test-retest analyses of interview responses, respectively. The questionnaire, interviews, and reflective notes were also pilot tested and reviewed by experts to improve their reliability. The CET-SET, a standardized exam developed by the Ministry of Education in China, served as the primary measure of students' speaking skills, with its high reliability and validity established through extensive statistical data and experimental materials.

To ensure validity, a rigorous validation process was undertaken for the questionnaire, with items adapted from established sources and reviewed by experts to confirm content validity. Construct validity was assessed by examining the relationships between questionnaire items and underlying constructs. The validity of the interviews and reflective notes was ensured through careful design, judgmental sampling, and validation by an experienced English teacher. Data triangulation and peer debriefing were used to corroborate findings and enhance credibility. By implementing these comprehensive reliability and validity measures across the quantitative and qualitative instruments and employing a multi-method approach, this study aimed to ensure the trustworthiness, accuracy, and generalizability of the findings, thereby strengthening its contribution to understanding the effectiveness of the FCA in enhancing Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study involves both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effects of the flipped classroom approach on Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills and their perceptions of this instructional model. For the quantitative data from the CET-SET, descriptive statistics are generated to comprehend the dependent and independent variables, summarizing frequencies in tables. To conduct inferential analysis, various statistical tests are employed, including independent samples t-test, paired samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA, and their non-parametric equivalents of Mann-Whitney U test, Wilcoxon signed-rank test and Kruskal-Wallis test, depending on the fulfillment of assumptions (Field, 2018). The quantitative data from the questionnaire are analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, to provide an overview of the distribution of responses and to identify key patterns and trends in the data. The qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews and reflective notes are analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis process involves familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data in this study follows the explanatory sequential design, where the qualitative results are used to explain and contextualize the quantitative findings. This triangulation of data sources and methods enhances the validity and reliability of the study's conclusions.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study are presented in two main sections: quantitative findings and qualitative findings. The quantitative findings, based on the analysis of the College English Test-Spoken English Test (CET-SET) scores, provide compelling evidence for the effectiveness of the flipped classroom approach in enhancing Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills. The qualitative findings, derived from the thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews and reflective notes, offer valuable insights into students' perceptions of the flipped classroom approach and identify the key elements that contribute to its success.

Quantitative Findings

a. Significant differences between the control and experimental groups in post-test speaking skills test scores

The Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to compare the post-test speaking skills test scores between the control and experimental groups, as the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variances were not met. The results revealed a highly significant difference ($U = 0.000$, $p < .001$), with the experimental group (mean rank = 96.50) outperforming the control group (mean rank = 32.50). Further analyses of specific speaking skill components showed that the experimental group demonstrated superior performance in fluency ($U = .000$, $p < .001$), pronunciation ($U = 0.000$, $p < .001$), grammar ($t(126) = 14.909$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.32$), vocabulary ($U = 685.500$, $p < .001$), and content ($t(126) = 49.058$, $p < .001$) compared to the control group. These findings provide strong evidence to reject the null hypothesis (H_0) and support the alternative hypothesis (H_1a), indicating that the FCA had a positive impact on students' speaking skills.

b. Significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills of the experimental group between pre-test and post-test

Due to the violation of normality assumptions, the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was employed to compare the pretest and post-test speaking skills scores of the experimental group. The results showed a statistically significant improvement from pretest ($M = 65.61$, $SD = 4.588$) to post-test ($M = 90.40$, $SD = 0.847$), with $Z = -6.955$ and $p < .001$. All 64 participants in the experimental group had higher post-test scores than pretest scores. These findings support the rejection of the null hypothesis (H_{30}) and the acceptance of the alternative hypothesis (H_{3a}), highlighting the effectiveness of the FCA in enhancing students' speaking skills.

c. Significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills of the experimental group in post-tests among beginner, intermediate, and advanced level participants

The independent-samples Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to determine if there were significant differences in the improvement of speaking skills scores among beginner, intermediate, and advanced level participants in the experimental group. The results indicated significant differences in the distribution of improvement scores across proficiency levels ($p < .001$). Pairwise comparisons using the Dunn-Bonferroni test revealed significant differences between all pairs of proficiency levels, with advanced level participants showing the greatest improvement, followed by intermediate and beginner level participants. These findings support the rejection of the null hypothesis (H_{30}) and the non-support of the alternative hypothesis (H_{3a}).

d. Significant differences in the scores of the speaking skills of the control group in pre-test and post-tests

The Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to compare the pretest and post-test speaking skills scores of the control group, as the assumption of normality was not fully met. The results indicated a statistically significant improvement from pretest ($M = 64.05$, $SD = 2.094$) to post-test ($M = 90.40$, $SD = 0.847$), with $Z = -6.959$ and $p < .001$. All 64 participants in the control group had higher post-test scores than pretest scores. These findings lead to the rejection of the null hypothesis (H_{20}) and support the alternative hypothesis (H_{2a}), suggesting that even without the experimental intervention, the control group showed significant improvement in their speaking skills, possibly due to factors such as natural progression of learning or regular classroom instruction.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data, gathered through semi-structured interviews and reflective notes, yielded two main categories of findings: students' perceptions of the flipped classroom approach and the key elements of an effective flipped classroom approach.

Students' perceptions of the flipped classroom approach were overwhelmingly positive. Participants reported increased engagement, motivation, and confidence in speaking English as a result of their participation in the flipped classroom intervention. They attributed these positive outcomes to the active learning opportunities provided by the flipped classroom model, which encouraged them to take ownership of their learning and participate more actively in class discussions and activities. Participants also appreciated the opportunities for peer interaction and collaborative learning, which allowed them to practice their speaking skills in a supportive and low-stress environment. The self-paced nature of the pre-class activities was

another aspect of the flipped classroom approach that students found beneficial, as it allowed them to learn at their own pace and review the materials as needed.

The thematic analysis identified several key elements that contribute to the effectiveness of the flipped classroom approach in enhancing Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills:

1. Well-structured pre-class, in-class, and post-class activities that align with learning objectives and promote active learning.
2. Balance between independent and collaborative learning, catering to different learning preferences and fostering a supportive learning environment.
3. Integration of technology and face-to-face instruction, creating a blended learning environment that maximizes the benefits of both modes of delivery.
4. Creation of a learner-centered classroom environment that encourages student participation, autonomy, and ownership of learning.
5. Provision of flexibility and customization based on individual learning needs and proficiency levels.
6. Inclusion of diverse, authentic, and relevant speaking practice opportunities that simulate real-life communication scenarios and promote communicative competence.
7. Implementation of systematic assessment and provision of constructive feedback to monitor students' progress, identify areas for improvement, and support their continuous learning.

These key elements provide a framework for designing and implementing successful flipped classroom interventions in the context of EFL speaking skill development. By incorporating these elements, educators can create an engaging, supportive, and effective learning environment that promotes active learning, caters to individual needs, and enhances students' communicative competence.

DISCUSSION

The discussion chapter integrates the quantitative and qualitative findings of the study, comparing them with previous research and discussing their implications for EFL teaching practice. The convergence of the quantitative and qualitative results provides strong support for the effectiveness of the flipped classroom approach in enhancing Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills. The significant improvements in CET-SET scores and sub-scores for the experimental group, coupled with the students' positive perceptions and experiences of the flipped classroom model, demonstrate the potential of this instructional approach to address the challenges faced by Chinese EFL learners in developing their speaking skills.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research on the application of flipped classroom approaches in EFL contexts. The positive impact of flipped learning on students' speaking skills, engagement, and motivation has been reported in studies conducted in various EFL settings (Chen Hsieh et al., 2017; Dong, 2018; Zheng & Liu, 2020). These studies have highlighted the benefits of flipped learning for promoting active learning, increasing student participation, and providing opportunities for authentic language practice. The current study extends this body of research by providing empirical evidence for the effectiveness of the flipped classroom approach in the specific context of Chinese EFL college students' speaking skill development.

The key elements of an effective flipped classroom approach identified in this study also align with the principles and best practices of flipped classroom implementation discussed in the literature (Lee & Wallace, 2018; Mehring, 2018; Turan & Akdag-Cimen, 2020). These

elements, such as well-structured activities, balance between independent and collaborative learning, integration of technology and face-to-face instruction, learner-centered environment, flexibility and customization, diverse speaking practice opportunities, and systematic assessment and feedback, have been recognized as essential components of successful flipped classroom interventions. The current study contributes to the literature by providing a comprehensive framework that integrates these elements and demonstrates their applicability in the context of EFL speaking skill development.

The findings of this study have significant implications for EFL teaching practice, particularly in the context of developing Chinese college students' speaking skills. The study provides empirical evidence supporting the adoption of the flipped classroom approach as an effective instructional model for enhancing speaking skills. EFL educators can use the identified key elements as a framework for designing and implementing flipped classroom interventions in their own teaching contexts. By incorporating these elements into their teaching practice, educators can create a more engaging, interactive, and communicative learning environment that promotes active learning, collaboration, and learner autonomy.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effects of the flipped classroom approach on Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills using a mixed-methods research design. The quantitative findings, based on the analysis of CET-SET scores and sub-scores, revealed significant improvements in the experimental group's speaking skills compared to the control group. The experimental group demonstrated substantial gains in overall speaking proficiency, as well as in specific linguistic and communicative competencies, such as fluency, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and content. These findings provide strong empirical evidence for the effectiveness of the flipped classroom approach in enhancing Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills.

The qualitative findings, derived from the thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews and reflective notes, provided valuable insights into students' perceptions of the flipped classroom approach and identified key elements that contribute to its effectiveness in enhancing speaking skills. Students reported increased engagement, motivation, and confidence in speaking English as a result of their participation in the flipped classroom intervention. They appreciated the opportunities for active learning, peer interaction, collaborative learning, and self-paced study provided by the flipped classroom model. The study also identified seven key elements of an effective flipped classroom approach, including well-structured activities, balance between independent and collaborative learning, integration of technology and face-to-face instruction, learner-centered environment, flexibility and customization, diverse speaking practice opportunities, and systematic assessment and feedback.

The convergence of the quantitative and qualitative findings provides strong support for the effectiveness of the flipped classroom approach in enhancing Chinese EFL college students' speaking skills. The study makes significant contributions to the existing body of knowledge on flipped learning in EFL contexts by providing empirical evidence for the effectiveness of this instructional model in promoting speaking skill development and offering a comprehensive framework of key elements that can guide the design and implementation of effective flipped classroom interventions. The findings have important implications for EFL teaching practice, highlighting the potential of the flipped classroom approach to create a more engaging, learner-centered, and communicative learning environment that fosters active learning, collaboration, and learner autonomy.

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