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Switching to online learning: Using the flipped learning approach to deliver pre-sessional EAP remotely

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Abstract

This small-scale study investigates how the flipped approach to learning helped a UK university teaching team deliver the Pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course remotely during the pandemic. The study draws on the theoretical framework of the flipped approach to learning to explore the use of the approach in the Higher Education (HE) context. The study suggests that the flipped approach to learning may be helpful in the delivery of pre-sessional EAP courses remotely as it offers students opportunities to engage in communicative activities and encourages independent learning and autonomy, both of which are key practices in EAP. However, teachers may find the approach challenging if they cannot monitor students' work or connect with them while completing the flipped activities. Only a few studies have focused on this issue to date. Further research involving more teachers and students is recommended to provide additional insights on this aspect of teaching remotely.

Keywords: English for Academic Purposes (EAP), flipped learning, remote teaching, Higher Education (HE).

1. Introduction

Universities in the UK closed their classrooms to students and staff following guidelines issued by World Health Organisation in March 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic (UNESCO, 2020). Many Higher Education (HE) institutions in the UK offer pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses to prospective international students. The closure of the universities meant that EAP professionals faced the difficult task of developing and delivering a summer pre-sessional programme to approximately 1000 international students online. The programme required three separate five-week courses to be delivered across the summer. The pre-sessional programme aims to raise international students' language skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening to the level required for entry to their target programme of study and train them to learn effectively in a UK university context. Progression to their academic

programme depends on the outcome of their assessment of the four skills at the end of the final course.

The members of the EAP team at the focus of this study did not have online teaching experience. The team was faced with the challenge of redesigning the existing pre-sessional EAP courses for online delivery within a short time. The teachers had to convert learning materials into online resources using popular technologies such as Moodle, videos, and online quizzes (BALEAP, 2021). The EAP team, whose primary role is to support and train international students to enable them to use English effectively for their studies and research, decided to use the flipped learning approach. The (Flipped Learning Network, 2014, p. 1) define flipped learning as:

> *a pedagogical approach in which direct instruction moves from the group learning space to the individual learning space, and the resulting group space is transformed into a dynamic, interactive learning environment where the educator guides students as they apply concepts and engage creatively in the subject matter.*

The flipped approach was introduced and explained to students during induction sessions. This approach allowed the students to complete some of the classroom tasks asynchronously so they could watch pre-recorded lectures and discuss and review the tasks during live sessions in pairs or groups. The synchronous sessions were delivered in 90-minute Zoom sessions from Monday to Friday; the students then had the opportunity to engage in asynchronous guided independent study using Moodle as the primary communication and learning platform. They could engage in classroom exchanges, ask questions and communicate with their tutors and peers via discussion forums. In this way, the teachers could combine asynchronous and synchronous learning using the available technologies to offer the course remotely. Activities were built into all materials to stimulate learner autonomy and independent reflection on learning.

Among the many challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic presented to universities was the inability to offer face-to-face interaction to their students, forcing lecturers to rely solely on technologies that provide opportunities for online teaching. There is no doubt that the teachers' experiences during the pandemic are varied. Their reflections may bring new and interesting insights on the use of flipped learning in a remote EAP classroom. By analysing the different experiences of the teachers in this context and the current literature on the topic, this study aims to understand how using the flipped learning approach helped an academic team deliver a Pre-sessional English course remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This study investigates how the flipped approach to learning helped the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) team at the UK University deliver the pre-sessional EAP course remotely during the pandemic. This inquiry was guided by the following Research Questions (RQs):

RQ1: How did the flipped approach to learning help a teaching team at a UK University deliver the Pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic?

RQ2: What factors influenced their decision to use the approach in their online classrooms?

RQ3: How useful was the flipped method in terms of the course delivery?

2. Literature review

Many research studies within my area of scholarship and professional practice have focused on the problem of online learning and on the very recent issue of moving to online learning during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. A few researchers have considered the usefulness of the flipped approach in delivering online sessions during the pandemic. Below are the key themes that emerged from the literature, which also correspond with themes identified during the data analysis of the interviews carried out for this study.

2.1. Switching to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic

In 2020, higher institutions worldwide had to switch to online learning quickly (Bruce & Stakounis, 2021; Rapanta et al., 2020) to enable their students to continue their academic journey (Golden, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020). According to recent studies (Bakogiannis, 2021; Campillo-Ferrer & Miralles-Martínez, 2021), this shift from classroom-based to predominantly online learning required HE institutions to take new measures to adapt to the unique situation, including downsizing classes and limiting face-to-face sessions.

Unsurprisingly, these sudden changes created new challenges for course leaders and teachers who had to coordinate and teach their courses from home, find new resources and develop new online teaching skills (Bruce & Staukonis, 2021). On the other hand, the switch to online teaching created collaboration and professional development opportunities for teachers as they experimented with new methods and approaches to online instruction (Hendrie & Tibbetts, 2021).

2.2 Delivering pre-sessional English online

BALEAP (The Global Forum for EAP Professionals), a professional organisation which supports the professional development of EAP teachers, scholars and researchers, issued a report on the impact of Covid-19 on the UK EAP sector (Bruce & Stakounis, 2021). This examined how organisations delivering EAP were affected by the pandemic and how they responded to the course delivery and operational procedures. According to the report, several institutions in the UK and worldwide were forced to stop all face-to-face EAP courses and switch to fully online courses almost instantaneously (Bruce & Stakounis, 2021). Many EAP practitioners used the opportunity to share their own experiences with this sudden switch. Antoniou (2021) and Bakogiannis (2021) provide their readers with a real sense of their online home-based classrooms by sharing their views on how their institutions responded to the situation. Antoniou (2021) and Golden (2020) identify some of the challenges that teachers and institutions faced: lack of resources, insufficient online teaching experience, and lack of experience using some of the required technologies.

As the majority of pre-sessional courses start before the summer, usually in late May or early June, the providers of pre-sessional classes were not required to switch to online learning overnight, a process known as Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) (Golden, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020). Unlike other UK HE institutions that had to switch to online teaching immediately in the Spring of 2020, they had time to redesign their courses to adapt them to online delivery (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Golden, 2020).

2.3 The Flipped approach to learning

In recent years, the flipped approach contributed to a significant shift in learning and teaching in HE. This approach creates the opportunity for students to manage their learning in a more 'proactive way' (HEA, 2017), giving them increased input and control over their learning as opposed to the more traditional teacher-centred approach (HEA, 2017; Iskhova et al., 2021; Nottingham Trent University, 2013). In a flipped classroom, students are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Reidsema, Kavanagh et al., 2017; Strayer, 2012) which indicates that the approach may help students to develop essential skills needed for university studies such as independent learning, managing their study time, and problem-solving. As Kerr (2020) suggests, the flipped approach may also appeal to teachers because students are required to complete tasks at home, thus, leaving more space for communication between teachers and students, providing a platform for discussion, problem-solving and increased interaction.

According to Hockly (2017, p. 144), flipped learning may comprise a form of blended learning as students are asked to do a specific task before their face-to-face sessions, typically by watching videos (e.g., pre-recorded lectures). However, Kerr (2020) and Bergmann et al. (2013) argue that this explanation of flipped learning assumes that listening activities take up most of a lesson is not very informative. Bergmann et al. (2013) feel that this description of flipped learning is limited as it implies that online videos are an inherent part of the lesson when, in fact, the use of technology is not always required in a flipped lesson. I tend to agree with Roehl et al.'s (2013) definition of flipped teaching when they state, as cited in Pechenkina (2017, p. 1), that in the flipped classroom:

> "*all or some of direct instruction is moved outside of the face-to-face environment to dedicate more in-class time to more hands-on, experimental ... activities*".

2.4 Flipping EAP lessons during the Covid-19 pandemic

Although the flipped approach to learning seemed to be a popular choice across the EAP sector, only a few studies have discussed the problem of using the approach to deliver the pre-sessional EAP courses during the pandemic. For example, MacDiarmid and Rolinska (2021) describe how drawing on principles of effective online learning; they flipped EAP lessons by giving the students pre-recorded lectures and asynchronous activities. In another study by Iskhova et al. (2021), a team of university teachers take a 'lighter' approach and instead of pre-recording the lectures, they introduce topics weekly by sharing slides of upcoming classes and other resources, which allows them to update and adapt the material and develop effective methods tools for communication and learning. In both cases, the institutions used the flipped approach that helped the teachers to provide the students with synchronous content to maintain communication and social interaction. They introduced an asynchronous element that gave the students flexibility and autonomy (Nordman et al., 2020).

3. Methods

3.1 Research approach

To generate qualitative data for this small-scale empirical study that enabled me to look at the problem through the eyes of the teachers, I conducted semi-structured interviews to investigate how using the flipped approach to learning helped the academic team deliver the pre-sessional

EAP course remotely as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This study also sought to understand why the teachers chose this approach and whether they saw it as a practical and helpful approach to teaching EAP remotely.

One of the reasons for choosing interviews as the research method for this study was to examine participant responses, investigate their feelings and motives, and follow up on their ideas (Bell, 2010), which is not possible when using questionnaires. I decided to use semi-structured interviews so that the participants could set the pace (Silverman, 2010) and allow myself, the researcher, and the interviewees to depart from the prepared core questions and expand on their responses.

3.2 Data collection

The data were collected from six EAP practitioners involved in developing and delivering online Pre-Sessional EAP summer courses in 2020 who volunteered to participate in the semi-structured interviews. I selected and approached this particular group of professionals for this study because I believed I could get valuable insights into their experience designing and delivering the online EAP using the flipped pedagogy, including how they felt about using this method and the challenges they faced. The insights I obtained from the participants helped to address my research objectives. The interviews took place between 26 July 2021 and 19 August 2021. The sessions took place on Zoom and were recorded and transcribed in Zoom.

During the semi-structured interviews, I focused on the course development experience, the usefulness of the flipped learning approach when it came to delivering the courses remotely, and the teachers' reflections on the experience. The semi-structured interviews allowed me to collect data by asking interview questions. The questions were developed based on existing literature. For example, questions about the teachers' familiarity with the approach and rationale for selecting the approach. This helped me compare their experiences with some general claims on aspects of flipped learning found in the literature.

3.3 Data analysis

Qualitative data were analysed via thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006), which involved searching the data set to identify themes, assign codes and record repeated patterns. First, I read through the transcripts to identify recurring themes and establish which themes were relevant to my study (Bell, 2005). I also watched the recordings to interpret the participants' responses and their behaviour to validate the data to ensure that the extracted information from the interview contained sufficient detail (Silverman, 2010). The interview data were automatically generated from the recording and stored in my Zoom account.

3.4 Ethical considerations

Before the study, all participants were given a copy of the Participant Information Sheet containing detailed information about the study. All the participants had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss the details of the study with me. Throughout the study, I made sure that the identity of the colleagues I referred to in the study was not revealed, and no sensitive data was shared. In this paper, I refer to the participants as Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, Participant 4, Participant 5, and Participant 6 or P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, respectively.

All transcripts were anonymised and stored in compliance with the Data Protection Act. No personal data was shared with anyone beyond the researcher.

4. Findings

This section presents the findings obtained through the interview data.

4.1 RQ1: How did the flipped approach to learning help the teaching team at a UK University deliver the Pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic?

4.1.1 Planning the flipped lessons

All the participants who took part in the interviews had prior experience teaching pre-sessional EAP and were familiar with the course material, each having taught the course before. However, as Participant 2 explained

> *Not all the participants were familiar with the flipped approach or had only heard of it but never used it in their classrooms.*

Some of the teachers had used the approach in their face-to-face classrooms or were familiar with the flipped pedagogy to some degree.

> *I wasn't massively familiar with the theory in any depth…I had used flipped classrooms for other courses that are taught* (P3).

The team aimed to design a course that would allow to reduce synchronous learning and offer more opportunities for asynchronous tasks. This enabled the teachers to give the students more opportunities for meaningful interaction:

> *…so that students would do the bulk of the reading and the processing of information and then that would allow the face-to-face time online to be much more interactive… From asking to problem-solving that kind of thing* (P5).

4.1.2 Dealing with challenges

However, three teachers found converting the materials challenging in terms of making the decision on which classroom materials to deliver synchronously and which asynchronously and estimating how much time the students may need to do the tasks:

> *One of the issues was that what was originally live class material for a presumably 2-hour class suddenly a large chunk of that became self-study we had one-and-a-half-hour live class. But, in fact, what would have been done in the live class had been transferred into self-study and one of the issues I think was, what can I do with them [the students]?* (P1).

> *That took into account how much time do these students have to actually be together as a team and as a class and what can we do with them in that time* (P5).

> *…so we went through, basically, we had the course books, we went through the lesson by lesson, what would have been delivered in class what clearly would not be appropriate* (P3).

Although the study participants had different roles, such as course convenors and teachers or both, they seemed to have equal input in the decision making, as pointed out by Participant 1: "*everybody had their input*". Furthermore:

> *it's probably one of those decisions that are made as a team where it's kind of collaboratively [done]* (P3).

> *The necessity of it actually created some really good experiences and a huge learning curve for both teachers and students, I think, even just practical things like using new platforms and using technology and taking small risks* (P4).

4.2 RQ2: What factors influenced their decision to use the approach in their online classrooms?

Choosing the flipped approach seemed to be born naturally during the planning stage. Designing a pre-sessional course using the flipped approach seemed to have been an obvious choice to satisfy some of the course objectives, such as encouraging autonomy and independent learning and supporting the students' academic studies:

> *In the pre-sessional, it's more about… giving homework that then also prepares them for the next class* (P5).

> *…knowing what's required [from students] and in many respects this course is very much structured to help people with the studying rather than their English* (P5).

Five teachers also pointed out the importance of maximising opportunities for interaction and using the communicative approach that they usually use in their EAP classroom:

> *I think the flipped approach kind of lends itself to organizing the courses so that students would do the bulk of the reading and the processing of information and then that would allow the face to face time online to be much more interactive and yeah maybe have opportunities, then to process what they've learned* (P5).

> *It aimed to maximise interaction by giving communicative activities where students can practice language, especially speaking and listening; therefore, a very strong communicative approach was taken to ensure that* (P6).

4.3 RQ3: How useful was the flipped method in the course delivery?

4.3.1 Benefits

Four participants pointed out specific academic skills that the students seemed to develop during their online courses, such as autonomy and resilience. Some teachers also observed that, in the process, their students became more organised, prepared and responsible for their learning:

> *In terms of the benefits, I do think for some students, maybe a lot of students, are thrown into independent learning in a way that forces them to become resilient, become organised in the process* (P5).

> *… the [flipped approach] really advanced students. I think … it's good for them to develop their time management autonomy. They can work on the order they want, they can work with me if they want. It's up to them* (P6).

All the participants considered the approach useful and believed that adopting this approach to deliver the pre-sessional classes was the right decision.

> *I think that the approach that was taken was the right approach* (P5).

> *Without being able to flip stuff ... we wouldn't be able to deliver [the course]* (P6).

4.3.2 Disadvantages

Despite several benefits of flipping the lessons, some teachers noticed several disadvantages of using the approach in their online classrooms. One of the drawbacks was the lack of "*face-to-face bonding*" (P5), the physical aspects of teaching that both teachers and students experience when they are in a physical space and can better "*understand their feelings*" (P5).

Three teachers also shared some scepticism about the effectiveness of the flipped approach. For example, they were not always sure if the students "*had done the work*" (P5) or "*how prepared they were*" (P5), which may suggest that the lack of face-to-face teaching sessions and physical contact with the teacher and peers was disadvantageous for the students.

5. Discussion

The results of this study suggest that the flipped approach to learning that was used by the team of pre-sessional teachers to help with the delivery of online EAP was a practical and valuable approach that enabled them not only to deliver the course remotely by allowing the teachers to balance synchronous and asynchronous activities but also provided opportunities for communication and social interaction which seemed to appeal to EAP teachers. As Kerr (2000) points out:

> "*one of the key objectives of the flipped approach is to "provide opportunities for communication between students during class time as they work together to solve a problem*" (p. 4).

This aligns with the principles of communicative language classrooms, where students work together and actively engage in tasks and problem solving.

The flipped approach gave the students flexibility and encouraged independent learning and autonomy (Bergmann & Sams, 2012; Nordman et al., 2020; Reidsema, Kavanagh et al., 2017; Strayer, 2012). These opportunities seem to be the main factors that influenced the teachers' decision to use the approach to deliver pre-sessional EAP remotely as they satisfied the pre-sessional EAP key objectives, such as encouraging autonomy and independent learning, also allowing the students to engage in communicative activities and develop a set of academic skills that would be required for their studies (MacDiarmid & Rolinska, 2021).

Although the flipped approach helped the teachers to deliver the course and seemed to satisfy the students' academic and learning needs, there were specific challenges that teachers had to face during the design stage and when teaching online. For example, a lack of physical contact with the students preventing teachers from getting a sense of the students' feelings and needs. Furthermore, the inability to monitor the students' work and their engagement in pre-session tasks may be a limitation of the approach that could impact the delivery of the online sessions and their effectiveness in online classrooms.

The switch to online learning by the EAP team was not a typical emergency response to the situation as, unlike other UK institutions that had to adapt their face-to-face classes to online learning within a short time (Golden, 2020; Hodges et al., 2020), the EAP team had a few more weeks to complete the project. However, converting a course that had not been delivered in a blended or distance mode before was a challenging task as the teachers had to start from scratch without prior experience, and many were unfamiliar with online teaching methods and the use of certain technologies (Antoniou, 2021; Golden, 2020).

Although the flipped approach to learning seemed to be a popular choice across the EAP sector, few studies have discussed the problem of using the approach to deliver the pre-sessional EAP courses during the pandemic. Therefore, more research involving larger groups of teachers and students is needed to provide more information on this aspect.

6. Conclusion

This research aimed to investigate how the flipped approach to learning helped a team of EAP teachers deliver pre-sessional EAP remotely. In this study, I tried to view the experience of using this approach through the eyes of the teachers and gauge their feelings about using the approach in their classrooms.

As identified earlier, the study results suggest that the flipped approach to learning may help deliver Pre-sessional EAP online as it creates opportunities for active engagement in communicative activities and encourages autonomy and independent learning, which satisfies the pre-sessional EAP key objectives. However, the identified limitations, such as the lack of physical contact with the students and the inability to monitor their work and engagement outside their live sessions, may be challenging for the teachers and may impact the effectiveness of the approach. For a holistic consideration, the perspectives of a larger group of teachers and students could provide more insights into this aspect of teaching online EAP. They could also offer solutions to overcome these challenges and minimise the approach's limitations.

My EAP background and interest in using technology in the EAP classroom inspired me to look at the experiences of other EAP practitioners who, like many other teachers around the world, had to move their EAP lessons to an online environment. This, in turn, enabled me to reflect on my own practice and development.

I believe that this study has contributed to a gap in the literature on the effectiveness of using flipped learning to deliver pre-sessional EAP online.

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