The Use of SPOC-based Flipped Classroom in Facilitating Chinese EFL Learners' Engagement in Language Learning

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Abstract: Neither teachers' teaching nor students' learning will be confined to the classroom as the Internet becomes pervasive. SPOC-based blended learning, as a new product of the Internet era, is the use of a SPOC platform to combine face-to-face classroom learning with online learning. This study focuses on examining if the use of SPOC-based flipped classroom could help EFL learners become more engaged in their classroom learning so as to meet student-centered learning and active learning requirements.

1. Introduction

The Internet has changed not only our lives but our education. Researchers and educators who have been restlessly exploring original and effective teaching modes quickly find that conventional teaching can be improved with the application of new technology brought by the Internet. Blended learning as a new model of learning comes into being in higher education institutions. Blended learning is generally explained as the phenomenon in which face-to-face classroom learning and teaching are combined with online learning and teaching [1]. The essence of blended learning is to flip the classroom. The term "flipped classroom" was first used by American educators Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams in 2000 [2]. This teaching model basically involves inverting the activities that usually take place in or out of the classroom with the support of new technology. In general, the use of the flipped classroom method includes two parts: online learning such as watching recorded lectures prepared by teachers or completing online tasks assigned by teachers together with classroom activities devoted to solving more important and practical tasks with teachers. This process of learning enables students to have more time to interact with their teacher and makes face-to-face learning more effective [3], thus can optimize in-class time.

To successfully flip the classroom, SPOC (small private online course) is playing an increasingly important role. A Small Private Online Course (SPOC) is understood as a development of a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) used in a smaller sphere. Armando Fox, professor of University of California Berkeley, coined the word SPOC in 2013 to refer to a localized instance of a MOOC course. In this sense, SPOCs are designed to facilitate students who are qualified to take the course and ready to interact with others based on this learning model. The features of SPOCs decide that they can be used to support blended learning and flipped classroom learning, which require the combination of online resources and technology with personal engagement between teachers and students. Some research results have already revealed that such approaches can improve students' performance and learning.

SPOC-based flipped classroom can meet the growing focus on shifting the teacher-dominated learning to student-centered learning [4] inspired by the notion of active learning [5]. Students actively engaging themselves in learning is an important and desirable goal for both foreign language learners and teachers. The present research aims to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the SPOC-based flipped classroom in facilitating Chinese EFL learners' engagement in language learning.

2. Literature Review

This literature review aims to attentively examine studies related to the concept of SPOC-based flipped classroom, student engagement and EFL teaching and learning in China especially in Chinese universities.

2.1 Booming of SPOC-based Flipped Classroom

SPOC is regarded as a new generation of MOOC. Unlike MOOC that thousands of students can have the access to a class, SPOC is limited to a much smaller scale. Presently, SPOC is more widely used in colleges and universities because the attendance can be limited to a smaller number, and teachers can more easily manage SPOC-based flipped classroom.

Instead of replacing MOOC or the traditional classroom teaching, SPOC can be understood as part of a limited accessibility: by attending SPOC-based flipped classroom, students can not only get more specialized information but also receive more direct attention and information from their teacher.

When a SPOC is practiced at a university, teachers determine what resources and contents to use. This may include recorded lectures, discussion forums, interactive groups, online tests and evaluations. The use of SPOC technology makes it possible for the teachers to arrange their time with students in effective ways, such as allocating more time in class for project-based work instead of basic knowledge lecturing. SPOCs have been analogized to "next generation textbooks," by allowing teachers to determine when and how to use the SPOC. In a SPOC as in a MOOC, students enjoy the flexibility of fulfilling their tasks at their own pace.

As the advantages of SPOCs are obvious, college and university teachers are actively experimenting this new teaching model. A SPOC enables teachers to deliver the material directly to students and devote much more time to practical activities such as discussions and problem solving. SPOC as an "almost inevitable evolution" of the learning experience is in a booming trend in China. Many Chinese universities are encouraging teachers to explore new teaching models with the use of SPOC technology to improve their teaching.

2.2 Role of Student Engagement in EFL Learning

"Silence is gold" is a short form for the English proverb "Speech is silver, silence is gold". Quite incidentally, this proverb has an equivalent Chinese version, "Chen Mo Shi Jin". In both western and Chinese cultures, silence has long been valued as an effective way of communication, and sometimes even more effective than speaking. However, when it comes to a class, especially a foreign language class, silence is by no means gold; instead, silence is quite destructive in an EFL class: killing active class atmosphere; decreasing passions of both teachers' teaching and students' learning; and even giving rise to mute English. In an EFL class, silence is nightmare rather than gold. Therefore, students' active participation and engagement in classroom activities are the desirable outcomes for EFL teaching and its role cannot be overestimated.

According to Wikipedia, student engagement occurs when "students make a psychological investment in learning. They try hard to learn what school offers. They take pride not simply in earning the formal indicators of success, but in understanding the material and incorporating or internalizing it in their lives [6]." Students are engaged when they are actively involved in their tasks, persist in what they are doing despite difficulties and challenges, and enjoy accomplishing their work. Student engagement also refers to a "student's willingness, need, desire and compulsion to participate in, and be successful in the learning process promoting higher level thinking for enduring understanding." When talking about student engagement in learning activities, we are likely to understand engagement with an activity as being represented by good behavior (i.e. behavioral engagement), positive feelings (i.e. emotional engagement), and, above all, student thinking (i.e. cognitive engagement) [7]. This is because students may be behaviorally or emotionally involved in each activity without making the necessary mental effort to understand and master the knowledge, craft, or skill that the activity promotes.

Under the context of student-centered learning, student engagement is accordingly attached more importance and value. Generally, student engagement study sets high demands on teachers, requiring teachers to seek the best way to interact with students. However, very limited class hours can hardly meet these demands in a university. SPOC technology brought by the digital era will serve as an effective supplement to classroom teaching.

2.3 EFL Teaching in Chinese Universities

The National College Entrance Examination marks an important milestone for most Chinese students. It is the most competitive, stressful and important test. University means so much and so differently to each individual student. After stepping into the university, students fall into three main types: interest-driven learners, exam-driven learners, and pleasure-driven learners who indulge themselves in playing rather than studying. It can be easily noted that interest-driven EFL learners are most intensely engaged in learning: showing great passion in class activities, interacting actively with teachers and classmates, completing homework and enjoying class. Exam-driven learners, however, engage only in exam-oriented lecture, work and activity. They are motivated by high test scores in Band-4 and Band-6 tests, two tests that are popular in China to evaluate university students' English proficiency. Most pleasure-driven learners attend class and complete homework to meet the basic requirements of university who are the least motivated and engaged.

In most universities, College English is still a required course. The first difficulty faced by most EFL learners at university is reduced class hours. English was one of the key courses in high school and the average time spent on English amounted to 20 to 40 hours according to an impromptu class survey, which explained that students were exposed to the language for at least 3 hours a day with the supervision of teachers. How about College English? Teacher and students meet twice or once a week. There is an obvious fault line between high school English and College English in regards to the time spent on this course. Students are at a loss as what to learn, how to learn and when to learn.

EFL teachers find that they have to arrange and rearrange their teaching in order to make class hours most effective ; while students, in the meantime, also struggle a lot to follow and digest the teaching materials. As time goes on, some students are getting more and more disengaged because they don't see much progress in their learning especially those who lack self-discipline. A familiar picture is some students have no idea as what has been discussed in the previous lecture after a whole week with only 2 to 4 hours spent on the language. And the fault line between high school English and College English also explains why some students don't and can't interact with teachers quite well, which decrease the effectiveness of EFL teaching and learning.

Another reason that students' engagement in the classroom should be valued is to meet the reform in EFL teaching. Rather than adhering to a teacher-dominated class model in high school, classroom interaction is strongly emphasized; likewise, rather than being passive knowledge receivers, students are encouraged to be active participants in classroom interaction. The new expectations for university-level EFL education emphasize development of students' English skills in international communicative settings and academic exchanges. The ideal role of a teacher now is to create a student-centered classroom where students can present the best in their linguistic knowledge and communicative techniques [8].

The change of requirements for the role of university-level EFL learners and teachers makes it urgent to explore a more effective teaching model in this digital era.

3. Methodology

The evaluation methodology has been designed to investigate students' engagement, satisfaction, difficulties and suggestions for the SPOC-based flipped classroom which they have attended for at least one semester.

3.1 Participants

All participants were sophomores and juniors from a 211 university in central China. In total, 257 students completed an online questionnaire survey, and after elimination of incomplete and

invalid returns, the final sample size was 239. The distribution of participants can be seen in Table 1. From the table we can see the majority of the participants are sophomores, and more than seventy percent of the students have been involved in the SPOC-based flipped classroom for more than a year; therefore, the investigation results will objectively reveal the effectiveness of blended teaching and learning model.

Table 1 Questionnaire sample

Gender	Major	Grade	Time Involved
Male 60.7%	Arts 42%	Sophomore 86.8%	Less than 1 year 28.3%
			1-2 years 60.4%
Female 39.3%	Science 58%	Junior 13.2%	2-3 years 9.4%
			More than 3 years 1.9%

3.2 Instruments

The questionnaire was distributed to students online through a questionnaire *app named Wen Juan Xing*. Most students completed the questionnaire on their smart phone. The full questionnaire was composed of three parts: personal data; blended learning-related questions, engagement-related questions and improvement suggestions as demonstrated in the following tables.

3.3 Results and Discussion

Data presented in the following tables were calculated automatically by the questionnaire *app Wen Juan Xing.* Some of the questions adopted Likert scale, and some of the results were demonstrated in a straightforward way.

Table 2 SPOC Learning Survey

Questions	Results
1. How often do you log onto the SPOC platform?	everyday 13.2% ; 2-3 times/week 62.3%; 1/week 11.3%; 1/2weeks 13.2%
2.Time you will spend on the SPOC platform during each log.	15min. 22.6%; 15-30min. 45.3%; 30-60min. 26.4%; over 60min. 5.7%
3.You will spend much less time on the SPOC platform without a clickstream data requirement or online tests from your teacher.	Likert Scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree: 15.1%; 39.6%; 33.4%; 11.3%; 0%
4. You need teacher or classmates to remind you of your SPOC tasks.	Likert Scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree: 32.08 %; 20.75%; 33.96%;5.66%; 7.55%
5. You can't resist the temptation of other websites during SPOC learning.	Likert Scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree: 15.09%; 33.96 %; 30.19 %;11.32% ; 9.43%

In table 2 we can see most students log onto the SPOC platform 2 to 3 times a week and the time spent on SPOC learning ranges from 45 minutes to 3 hours. Questions 3 to 5 suggest that the majority of students lack self-discipline and are somewhat pushed to do SPOC learning passively. Without clickstream data requirement or online tests from their teacher, most students agree that they will spend much less time on SPOC learning.

Table 3 Engagement Survey

Questions	Results
1. With the help of SPOC, you have a better understanding of classroom teaching.	Likert Scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree: 7.55%; 33.96%; 54.72%; 3.77%; 0%
2. With the help of SPOC, you have more opportunities to get involved in classroom discussion and question-answering.	Likert Scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree: 3.77%; 32.08%;54.72%; 9.43%; 0%
3. With the help of SPOC, you have more and effective access to useful resources.	Likert Scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree: 18.87%; 56.6%; 22.64%; 1.89%; 0%
4. With the help of SPOC, you can digest classroom teaching better.	Likert Scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree: 7.55%; 37.74%; 50.94%; 3.77%; 0%
5. SPOC learning can make up for limited class hours.	Likert Scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree: 22.64%; 43.4%; 30.19%; 3.77%; 0%

Table 3 provides positive results as regards to the effectiveness of SPOC-based blended learning. We can see about 40% of the students agree that SPOC learning is a good supplement to classroom learning as well as after-class revising, and about 35% of the students believe SPOC learning does help them to have more opportunities to get involved in classroom discussion and question-answering. Over 60% of the students admit they have easier access to useful resources and SPOC-based learning model can effectively make up for limited class hours. As has been discussed before, the main problem of EFL learning at university is the limited class hours which leads to a fault line between high school English learning and College English learning. In order to teach basic knowledge, teacher and students do not have time to carry out meaningful and useful class activities. The survey on student engagement provides positive results that SPOC-based blended learning can help to bridge the time gap and supplement classroom teaching.

Table 4 Problems and Improvement Suggestions Survey

Questions	Results
1. Major problems of SPOC learning.	Students can choose more than one answer: Take too much time 62.26% Lack self-discipline 60.38% It takes a long time to adapt to the learning model 41.51% Lack interaction with the teacher 33.96% Not familiar with the operation 16.98%
2. Improvement Suggestions (a written question)	Improve the operation of the platform. Allocate the time between classroom learning and online learning more reasonable. Lower the assessment value of online learning. Designate the tasks with a clear deadline.

Table 4 reveals a majority of respondents consider the problems they are faced with now are the struggling of time and their own lack of self-discipline. Time flows more quickly on the Internet. Downloading materials, watching online courses and so on will consume much of students' free time which is a fact. Also, about 40% of them think it takes a long time to adapt themselves to this new type of learning model. The other problem students complain is that they cannot get timely help from teachers in opposed to classroom face-to-face teaching. Finally, 16.98% of the students think they have problems getting used to the SPOC platform.

In the survey, a written question was designed to learn about students' suggestions in improving SPOC-based learning model. Students' improvement suggestions are centered around the operation of the platform, the scientific allocation of time between online learning and classroom learning, the supervision of online learning and the assessment of online learning.

4. Conclusion

This study has provided some important research findings. Firstly, Chinese EFL learners have been used to conventional teaching model, and it takes some time for them to adapt to a new model. Secondly, some students lack self-discipline and are easily distracted, so online learning is a big challenge. Thirdly, with the support of SPOC, students are more engaged in effective classroom activities; besides, they have a better understanding of the class arrangement and can go back to what they have learned more easily. Fourthly, students have easy access to useful resources and can expose themselves to the language more often which is a good supplement to limited class hours at university. Finally, problems of SPOC-based blended learning raised by participants can help educators and teachers to improve the new teaching model.

Flipping the classroom with high quality online learning resources improves students' performance to a large extent, such as increased opportunity for teacher-student and student-to-student interactions, greater flexibility and abundant learning resources. These improvements can meet today's student-centered teaching requirements and bridge the fault line between high school English learning and College English. Nevertheless, it is necessary to evaluate the substantial effort, the real effectiveness, students' satisfaction degree and suggestions.

Problems and difficulties arise in new things; SPOC-based blended learning as a new model is to be gradually perfected. It takes time for students to shift their learning habit from passive learning to active learning and it takes time for them to get used to a new platform. By examining students' responses to this new teaching model, educators and teachers can make improvements accordingly. Based on this research, we can do more empirical studies related to SPOC-based blended learning, and it is also worth researching if SPOC-based flipped classroom can improve students' learning in the long run.

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