



Application of Communicative Teaching Platform in the Model of Flipped Classroom

QIU Yuyi^{[a],*}

^[a] Associate Professor. Zhejiang University of Finance and Economics, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, China.
 *Corresponding author.

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Abstract

In order to arouse the interest of students, improve their capability of practice, and enhance their comprehensive ability, college English teaching has been exploring the effective teaching methods in recent years. The model of Flipped Classroom, which is popular in educational field, breaks the traditional teaching mode by emphasizing the students' subjective initiative as well as autonomous learning, and degrading the effect of "class". In this new teaching pattern, communicative teaching platform is built and applied in college English teaching, which can not only reflect the features and advantages of Flipped Classroom but also exhibit the development of teaching method with the support of new technology.

Key words: Flipped classroom; Communicative teaching platform; College English teaching

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1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, in the increasingly globalized world, the traditional in-class teaching can no longer meet the needs of the times. On the one hand, students must learn how to collect, process and use information actively. On the other hand, the advancement of new technology introduces more teaching methods and diverse teaching models.

In 2006, Salman Khan founded "Khan Academy". Its popularity has attracted wide attention to the novel teaching concept—Flipped Classroom, which has been applied and promoted in teaching to different degrees.

Since 2005, new teaching methods as well as new models have been explored and experimented in college English teaching in numerous universities in order to combine modern technical equipment with teaching activities. Therefore, the traditional in-class teaching can be transformed into a new teaching mode that emphasizes students' autonomous learning, attaches importance to students' individual differences, puts emphasis on the cultivation of students' technical operation skills, and highlights the improvement of students' language ability. The early practice of the online autonomous learning has led to the profound changes of college English teaching with communicative teaching platform based on the new learning mode playing an important role in promoting learning and teaching effects. However, communicative teaching platform has not been fully utilized until now, and its advantages have not been clearly reflected. In fact, the concept of Flipped Classroom, which highly depends on communication and interaction, provides a favourable opportunity to comprehensively demonstrate the key role played by communicative teaching platform in the process of teaching and learning.

2. THE CONCEPT OF FLIPPED CLASSROOM

In the 1990s, Eric Mazur, a professor in Harvard University, put forward the theory of "Peer Instruction", which moved the teaching contents to extracurricular activities, while in-class teaching was dominated by group discussion among students as well as the part of questions and answers between teacher and students. It can be considered as the embryonic form of Flipped Classroom. In 2000, Maureen J. Lage, Glenn J. Platt, and Michael

Treglia explained in detail their application of “flipped” model to teach the course “Elementary Economics” at University of Miami in their paper “Inventing the Classroom: A Gateway to Creating an Inclusive Learning Environment”, which led to a heated discussion on the teaching concept of Flipped Classroom. In 2007, Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams, the teachers of Woodland Park High School in Colorado, USA, pioneered to “flip” the teaching steps in the middle school classroom, and achieved ideal results. At the same time, with the promotion and popularity of Khan Academy, the new teaching mode of Flipped Classroom has been gradually spread widely and almost applied in all subjects and all fields, triggering the worldwide discussion and reflection on the teaching reform.

2.1 The Connotation of Flipped Classroom

Flipped Classroom, based on face-to-face teaching in the classroom, applies a variety of technical equipment to reorganize the teaching structure. By readjusting the teaching organizational structure and redistributing the teaching hours inside and outside the classroom, Flipped Classroom transfers the initiative from teacher to students. The specific operation of the model of Flipped Classroom is mainly divided into two aspects: one the one hand, out of the classroom, teacher can create and provide abundant learning resources while students should study autonomously in advance; on the other hand, the in-class teaching is mainly dominated by group discussion among students as well as discussion between teacher and students. Robert Talbert, a professor in Franklin College, has summarized the implementation model of Flipped Classroom in a diagram (see Figure 1).

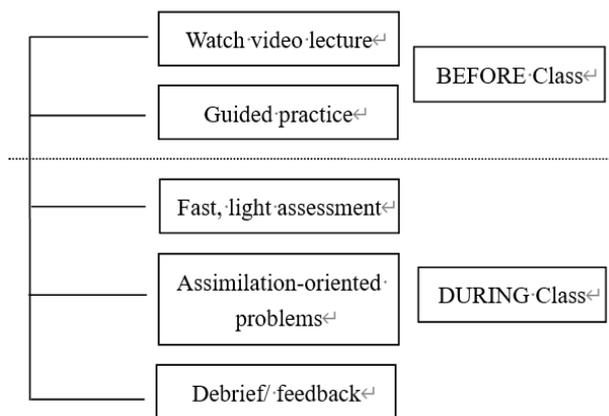


Figure 1
Implementation Model of Flipped Classroom

In other words, with the guidance of constructivism, Flipped Classroom is a complete subversion of the traditional teaching mode in the design of teaching process, the methodology of language teaching, the evaluation of students’ ability, etc., relying on modern educational technology. Its connotation can be mainly reflected as follows:

- Changing knowledge-indoctrination and knowledge-internalization: On the one hand, in traditional class, the main purpose is to input knowledge. As a result, teacher has to complete the corresponding tasks within the limited in-class teaching hours, ignoring the differences of students, which brings negative impact on the teaching effects. On the other hand, in knowledge-internalization model, students have to internalize knowledge by themselves after class. Therefore, it is difficult for students to find problems and solve them in time, which also leads to the unsatisfactory effects. Contrarily, one of the prominent features of Flipped Classroom is that it has revolutionized the whole teaching process. To be exact, students should study autonomously and independently out of class while knowledge-internalization is achieved through purposeful discussions and diverse activities in class.

- Changing roles of teacher and students: With the process of knowledge-indoctrination being realized out of classroom, the role of “feeding knowledge” played by teacher has also been totally changed. Instead, teacher has become the integrator and provider of learning resources, the guide and supervisor of knowledge-internalization, the organizer and observer of teaching activities, and the evaluator and summarizer of learning effects. Meanwhile, being the “center” of learning, students not only need to study and internalize knowledge on their own, but also need to participate in various teaching activities and need to make adjustment as well as improvement in learning strategies according to teacher’s evaluation and feedback.

- Changing teaching methods and implementation of learning resources: Flipped Classroom applies information technology to teaching on the basis of network platform. After class, students obtain and digest knowledge with computer or other mobile electronic devices; in class, teacher organizes various teaching activities with diverse multimedia equipment. Moreover, the changes in teaching methods, which break the limit of textbooks, enrich the teaching resources and expand the scope of knowledge.

2.2 The Advantages of Flipped Classroom

The teaching model of Flipped Classroom has reconstructed the teaching process, changed the teaching concept, updated the teaching methods, and displayed obvious advantages in practice:

- To arouse students’ enthusiasm for study and develop students’ subjective initiative: The core concept of Flipped Classroom is to assist students to master and control the process of learning. Exactly speaking, students can not only make full use of sufficient spare time to study important knowledge in accordance with their different strengths and weaknesses, but also review what has been learned and preview what will be learned with the resources that are stored on the platform. Correspondingly, in-class teaching is dominated by

activities and discussions, which effectively stimulates students' willingness to communicate and put theory into practice.

- To reverse the order of teaching and learning, and improve the efficiency of in-class teaching: In the new teaching model, the concepts of "teaching space" as well as "teaching hour" have been broken by various teaching activities that can be extended out of classroom. To be exact, students can study anytime and anywhere while in-class teaching mainly focuses on checking the learning effects and solving the problems that students have in their self-learning process so as to enhance the efficiency of teaching.

- To form a new teacher-students relationship and improve evaluation system: Flipped Classroom, which is based on constructivism, guides students to construct their own knowledge system gradually according to their real ability with teacher's real-time assistance and instruction. In this way, the in-depth communication between teacher and students can be formed, which finally contributes to the relationship with mutual trust, harmony and equality. At the same time, teacher can observe and record the performance of students in the whole process of learning so that the traditional "summative evaluation" can be revolutionized to formative evaluation, which is fairer and more objective. Therefore, students' motivation for learning can be stimulated, their self-confidence can be enhanced, and their spirit of cooperation can be cultivated.

3. THE APPLICATION OF COMMUNICATIVE TEACHING PLATFORM

The positive impact of Flipped Classroom on teaching has attracted numerous scholars and experts to study the effective way to apply this model. This new teaching concept also enlightens countless teachers on the ongoing reform of college English teaching. However, the current reform of college English teaching is faced with a series of problems, including the limitation of hardware equipment, the heavy teaching tasks, and the disparity of teachers' personal abilities. As a result, in the initial experimental stage when the teaching model of Flipped Classroom is introduced into college English teaching, the prototype model cannot be completely copied but be adjusted according to the actual situation with the guidance of its essence. Under such circumstance, creating and applying communicative teaching platform to change and improve the existing teaching mode step by step is one of the most effective ways to put the concept of Flipped Classroom into practice.

3.1 The Teaching Model of Communicative Teaching Platform

As the extension of CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning), communicative teaching platform, based on the constant development of network system, is established for the purpose of promoting teacher-students as well as students-students communication. On the other hand, it can also be considered as the material basis and preliminary preparation for the gradual introduction of Flipped Classroom.

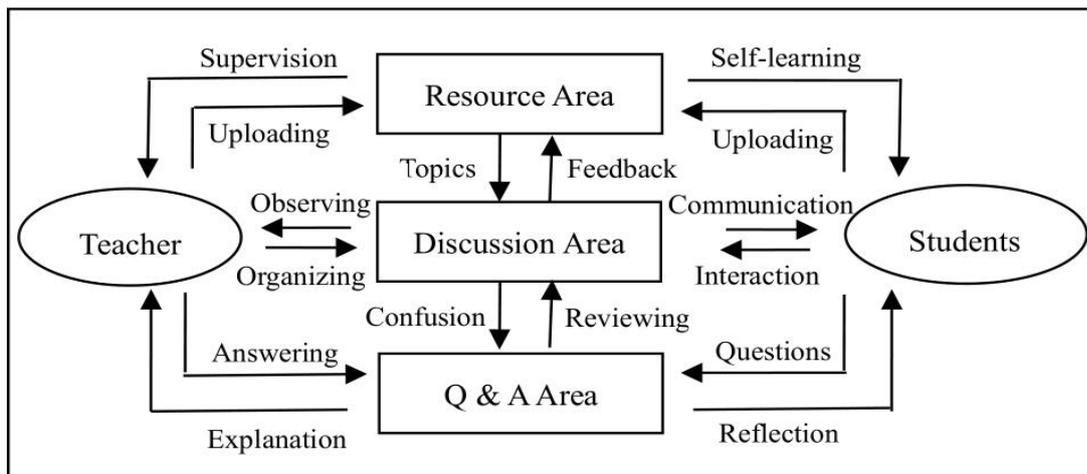


Figure 2
Communicative teaching platform

In terms of the specific operation, communicative teaching platform is divided into four sections: listening and speaking, reading, writing, and current news. And each section includes three parts: resource area, discussion area, and Q & A (questions and answers) area.

On the platform, teacher not only guides students to communicate and discuss in each part but also provides and enriches the contents in each area. The operation model of communicative teaching platform is shown in Figure 2.

It can be seen clearly from the figure that on communicative teaching platform, the teaching activities carried out by teacher and students are mainly as follows:

- In resource area: Teacher uploads resources to each section according to specific teaching objectives before class, and requires students to study autonomously in advance; meanwhile, students also can recommend relevant resources to teacher based on their own interest and upload them to the platform with teacher's permission.

- In discussion area: With the guidance of teacher, students can express their views, explain their ideas, and display their learning results by writing compositions or making short speeches on the knowledge learned during this period; in addition, students can evaluate and analyze the contents submitted by other students or even ask questions, while teacher organizes class discussion regularly.

- In Q & A area: Students can freely put forward the problems that they encounter in certain stage while teacher leads them to discuss the difficult points as well as their doubts and guides them to find the solutions to the problems.

Additionally, the problems solved in the Q & A area can be summarized in the discussion area, and the wonderful comments elaborated by students in the discussion area can be shared in the resource area. In other words, the process of solving problems helps to deepen students' understanding and their different opinions in the discussion also help to expand the scope of resources. Moreover, interacting with students in each area, teacher can fully know students' learning progress, assist them to better their study methods and improve their study efficiency.

In short, the teaching model of communicative teaching platform provides an ideal environment for teacher and students to carry out diversified learning activities, such as browsing online resources, evaluating others' performance, and interacting with each other. The platform organically connects teacher with students, taking advantage of the leading role of teacher, highlighting the concept of "being student-centered", and emphasizing the positive function of information technology.

3.2 The Features of Communicative Teaching Platform

Flipped Classroom has broken the shackles of traditional teaching model and put forward new concepts for the revolutionization of teaching mode, while communicative teaching platform has put the essence of Flipped Classroom into practice with the following characteristics:

- Advanced technology and convenient operation: Communicative teaching platform provides communication media for teacher and students with ubiquitous and comprehensive network systems as well as advanced mobile devices, so that teacher and students

can communicate and interact anytime and anywhere. Moreover, the setting of the platform is clear and easy to operate.

- Abundant materials and diversified perspectives: Teacher and students share the responsibilities of collecting and sorting out learning materials. On the one hand, teacher provides resources according to teaching objectives while students can also add contents in accordance with the teaching theme and their own priorities, so that the platform can present teaching contents from multiple perspectives and on different levels.

- Stable resources and comprehensive evaluation: With integration, various resources can be stored on communicative teaching platform for a long time for students to review what have been learned, laying a solid foundation for their long-term study. At the same time, students' online study is completely recorded so that teacher can evaluate their performance and ability comprehensively and objectively.

- Ubiquitous interaction and personal individuality: On the one hand, students are fully involved in the construction of resources on the platform so that they can share their interest, hobbies and personal tastes; on the other hand, the open and relaxing atmosphere on the platform stimulates students to express their views freely, and fully display their unique personalities. In addition, students can independently set their own learning goals, make plans, design learning steps, and accomplish tasks according to the requirement of teacher, which respects their individuality.

- Supportive function and effective supplement: Communicative teaching platform effectively cooperates with in-class teaching and plays a vital role in promoting the efficiency of teaching and learning. It is because of the extracurricular learning based on the platform, which enables students to focus on and participate in various in-class activities and to understand the teaching contents deeply by asking and answering questions, and by discussing with classmates.

3.3 The Advantages of Communicative Teaching Platform

Through a questionnaire survey involving 340 students who study college English with communicative teaching platform, it can be found that compared with the traditional teaching model, the new model had a greater impact on students by creating relaxing learning atmosphere, improving their ability of studying on the online platform, stimulating their communication and interaction, and deepening their understanding of Chinese culture. As a result, a vast majority of students felt satisfied with the teaching model of communicative teaching platform (see Figure 3). And the survey on the overall satisfaction with communicative teaching platform reflected that most students accepted the new model and

could adapt to the new learning model successfully (see Figure 4).

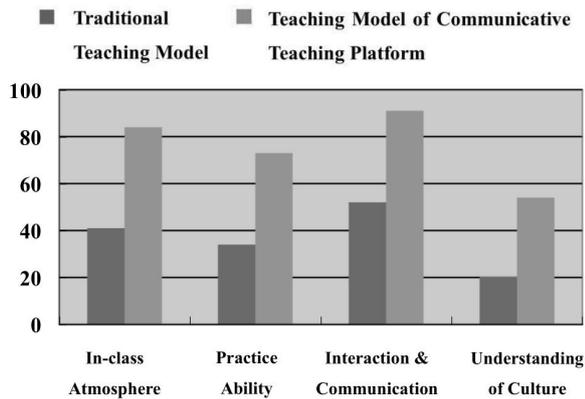


Figure 3
Student Satisfaction with Communicative Teaching Platform

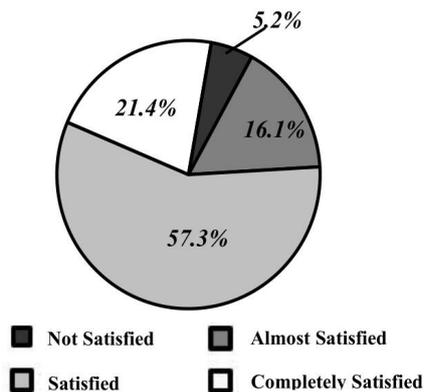


Figure 4
Overall Satisfaction with Communicative Teaching Platform

To be exact, the advantages of communicative teaching platform in improving students' comprehensive quality and English ability can be summarized as follows:

• **Respecting the differences of students**

The traditional teaching model ignores or weakens the differences of students as individuals. In other words, teacher only completes the teaching tasks according to the syllabus, while students' study in the same class regardless of their different ability, interest, as well as hobbies, which often leads to the phenomenon that the students with high receptivity may feel bored with the in-class teaching whereas the students with low receptivity fail to keep up with the progress. By contrast, on communicative teaching platform, attention is paid to the differences of students, which means they can both study in accordance with their own ability and needs and choose learning contents that interest them. In this way, students are more likely to have a stronger sense of fulfillment and achievement since they can study with higher efficiency, and it is easier for them to experience the joy of study.

• **Fitting learning principles**

The research report published by Joan Middendorf and Alan Kalish of Indiana University on *National Teaching and Learning Forum* in 1996 found that college students, on average, could keep concentrated for only 10 to 18 minutes after the class began, so it was natural that the contents taught in a 45-minute class could not be fully understood and digested by students. In traditional class, the cognitive laws of students are ignored, the teacher and students are isolated, the process of teaching is separated, and the opportunities for students to apply the learning strategies such as association, comparison, induction, deduction, and so on, are lost. On the contrary, with communicative teaching platform, the learning materials are uploaded and stored online, which are available for students to study by themselves anytime out of the class. Meanwhile, the in-class teaching mainly applies task-based method, which effectively solves the problem that students cannot keep focused in the classroom. What's more, the platform not only integrates teaching, learning and practicing but also combines the three interacting elements together, that is, individual, behavior and environment, so that an interactive learning environment can be created where students can understand and consolidate knowledge in different activities as well as exercises. In this way, students can build their own knowledge system, which fits the biological principles of learning much better.

• **Getting rid of the time and space constraints of teaching**

The standardized traditional class specifies the key points and difficulties of teaching in content, and fixes the time and place of teaching activities in form. This kind of teaching method helps teacher to keep the class in order and convey information effectively. However, it does not allow students to have enough time to digest and absorb what they have learned, and it also hinders students from actively reflecting on the information and prevents them from communicating with each other. Contrarily, communicative teaching platform provides a channel for students to study autonomously and communicate freely, which means students can study and interact with their classmates at will. In other words, with the platform, students can participate in various learning activities anywhere, and they may find that study is closely related to real life so that their enthusiasm for study can be aroused.

• **Strengthening students' initiative and sense of responsibility**

In traditional teaching, students always play the role of "passive learners", learning what teacher teaches in the way that teacher suggests. Apparently, they neither have the chance to choose what to learn nor have the right to decide how to learn, lacking the sense of responsibility

as “learners”. Nevertheless, in the new teaching model of communicative teaching platform, students must have the initiative to take up the challenge of study, finishing the corresponding tasks before class and participating in the in-class activities. Therefore, students have a more positive attitude towards study and they will be more confident about their study ability.

• **Enhancing communication and interaction**

With less interaction in the traditional teaching model, “teaching” and “learning” are seriously isolated. Exactly speaking, students’ problems about what has been taught in class cannot be solved since teacher fails to give feedback to their confusion in time. Consequently, students may lose their interest in study. In contrast, on communicative teaching platform, students have opportunities to discuss with other students about the difficulties and problems that they encounter in the process of self-study. What’s more, they can also try to find solutions and share experience together. Meanwhile, in class, teacher no longer gives boring and lengthy explanation on the key points but organizes students to carry out face-to-face activities and helps students solve all the problems. It can be said that both in class and out of class, there is sufficient teacher-students and students-students communication so that a positive emotional relationship can be formed, which in turn improves the teaching effects. Additionally, teacher can know the learning progress of students more clearly and accurately with the record on the platform, which makes it easier for teacher to teach them according to their different aptitude and ability, and to introduce the most effective learning strategies to students.

• **Highlighting authenticity and objectivity of evaluation and assessment**

Examinations should be designed to reveal students’ potential, to find the weaknesses in their learning, and to help them find the solutions. The traditional assessment method mainly depends on quizzes or tests, and the scores are the only standard to reflect students’ ability. Obviously, it has numerous disadvantages. For example, in order to get high score in the exam, students have to resort to the poor method of learning by rote without thorough understanding and internalization of knowledge, let alone combine book knowledge with practice; after exam, most students no longer review what has been learned, which weakens the foundation of overall study; teacher focuses on the contents of exam, ignoring the learning process of students. On the contrary, in the new teaching model of communicative teaching platform, the practical ability of students is highly emphasized, with various scenarios being set to evaluate students’ real ability. In the meantime, the learning process and performance of students are faithfully recorded and stored on the platform so that teacher can supervise and assess the progress of students in time, while students can make mutual

evaluation and self-evaluation on the platform. So, it can be said that this diversified, flexible and objective way of assessment can reflect the actual effects of teaching and learning more accurately.

3.4 The Unresolved Problems of Communicative Teaching Platform

• How to change teacher’s concept of teaching and improve their technical literacy: As the embodiment of the essence of Flipped Classroom, communicative teaching platform first requires teacher to leave the central position for students and assign after-class tasks and design teaching activities with an open and equal attitude, which is the premise of strengthening teacher-students interaction. In terms of technology, teacher must keep up with the rapid development, get familiar with the latest trend of teaching, and acquire the skills of applying advanced technology to teaching. Therefore, how to update the concepts and skills of technology of a large number of teachers is the key to promoting the application of communicative teaching platform on a large scale.

• How to improve students’ autonomous study ability and cultivate good learning habits: The habit of relying on teacher that has been developed by countless students for a long time must be changed. The subjective initiative being mobilized, students can study autonomously, make self-control independently, and participate in communication as well as discussion freely on the platform. Consequently, how to guide students to get rid of the past passive learning mode and develop active and positive learning habits so as to improve their real ability is the focus of the study on communicative teaching platform.

• How to produce, select and allocate resources effectively: Due to the lack of equipment as well as teachers’ technical ability, it is temporarily infeasible to make micro-lectures for each unit. Therefore, teacher needs to collect and update teaching materials with moderate difficulty and appropriate topics through different channels. Nevertheless, the online resources are considerably abundant and it is hard to make sure all resources have high quality, so how to provide learning resources with high-quality for students has become the key factor determining whether the new teaching paradigm can bring ideal results.

• How to evaluate students’ learning effects more objectively and systematically: As Zhang Jinlei, Wang Ying, and Zhang Baohui pointed out, Flipped Classroom focuses on quantitative evaluation as well as stereotyped evaluation on students’ learning process, and it also combines summative evaluation with formative evaluation, individual evaluation with group evaluation, self-evaluation with others’ evaluation, so as to truly reflect students’ understanding and internalization of knowledge. Since the main purpose of communicative teaching platform is to stimulate interaction and communication, how to establish an objective and

complete evaluation system to comprehensively reflect students' ability is the key point that must be enhanced.

4. CONCLUSION

In order to meet the requirements of the times, to meet the various needs of students, to make use of teaching resources more effectively, and ultimately to achieve satisfactory teaching results, college English teaching is actively exploring the right way to further reform the teaching model. In the teaching model of Flipped Classroom, the establishment and application of communicative teaching platform has accumulated rich experience for further reform. The teaching practice has proved that the platform provides a free and open environment for students, which effectively helps students improve their abilities in all aspects and is apparently helpful to better the teaching effects.

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