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A WAY TO COMPENSATE PHD STUDENTS' INSUFFICIENT EFL PROFICIENCY: FLIPPED CLASSROOM APPROACH

I.A. Martynova

Background. *The shift in standards in Russian education has led to certain changes on the tertiary level of higher education. Most notably the consequences have concerned the aspect of teaching a foreign language to postgraduate students. In particular Samara State University of Economics now does not have language entrance exams anymore and foreign language class time has been rather limited. Nonetheless the level of final exam requirements is yet quite high. The article is relevant due to the need to find a possible remedy to overcome a problem of a fairly low level of previous language training among a certain category of postgraduate students.*

Purpose. *The research purpose was to determine the effectiveness of a flipped classroom strategy as a way to compensate insufficient level of English mastering among the students of postgraduate courses.*

Materials and methods. *Flipped classroom acts as a well-proven approach that could solve the problem. The results of summative assessment are presented in this paper. The methodology adopted in this study is based on the needs analysis, mathematical statistics and content inspection of students' interviews. The range of students, whose needs to improve their language level were determined at the first stage of the experiment then took part in a flipped classroom project. At the final stage of the experiment the students were examined for their language performance.*

Results. *The results of the experiment prove the effectiveness of the proposed format for teaching a foreign language for postgraduate students*

in a non-linguistic university as it increases the efficiency of mastering the skills for the successful exam pass. This study suggests that flipped classroom approach could be an effective remedy to overcome the challenges that teachers and students at postgraduate level are facing today.

Keywords: *flipped classroom; higher education; blended learning; academic foreign language; foreign language for specific purposes*

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Научная статья | Методология и технология профессионального образования

ПЕРЕВЕРНУТЫЙ КЛАСС КАК СПОСОБ КОМПЕНСАЦИИ НЕДОСТАТОЧНОГО УРОВНЯ ВЛАДЕНИЯ ИНОСТРАННЫМ ЯЗЫКОМ У АСПИРАНТОВ

Мартынова И.А.

Обоснование. *Переход на новые стандарты в российском образовании привел к определенным изменениям на постдипломном уровне высшего образования. Особенно остро эта проблема коснулась аспекта преподавания иностранного языка в аспирантуре. В частности, в Самарском государственном экономическом университете были отменены вступительные экзамены по иностранному языку, а объем занятий максимально ограничен. Тем не менее, уровень требований к выпускным экзаменам остается достаточно высоким. Актуальность статьи обусловлена необходимостью поисков возможного решения проблемы, связанной с низким уровнем предшествующей языковой подготовки определенной категории аспирантов.*

Цель – *оценка эффективности стратегии «перевернутый класс» как способа компенсации недостаточного уровня владения английским языком у аспирантов неязыкового вуза.*

Материалы и методы. «Перевернутый класс» представляет собой подход, хорошо зарекомендовавший себя на других уровнях образования. В данной статье представлены результаты констатирующего эксперимента. Методология исследования основана на анализе потребностей, статистических расчетах и контент-анализе интервью студентов. Аспиранты, чьи потребности в повышении уровня владения языком были определены на первом этапе эксперимента, затем приняли участие в эксперименте «перевернутый класс».

Результаты. Результаты эксперимента доказывают эффективность предложенного формата обучения аспирантов в неязыковом вузе, поскольку он позволяет достичь уровня знаний, достаточного для успешной сдачи экзамена. Сделаны выводы о том, что данный подход может стать эффективным средством преодоления проблем, с которыми сталкиваются сегодня преподаватели и студенты постдипломного образования.

Ключевые слова: перевернутый класс; высшее образование; смешанное обучение; иностранный язык для академических целей; иностранный язык для специальных целей

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Introduction

In recent decades, the importance and opportunities of higher education have increased significantly. It is widely acknowledged that one of the most important performance factors influencing a nation's capacity to successfully build an economy based on scientific knowledge and innovation and compete on the world stage is postsecondary education. The development of international academic and research linkages as well as corporate relationships is necessary for the higher education system to bolster its position and increase its contribution to the nation's competitiveness. As a result, modern students should receive instruction at

a level that is unmatched by that of earlier decades. Foreign language (FL) proficiency enables students to take use of the opportunities provided by the global information database, even in the face of political challenges. A strong command of English (EFL, the target language) at the postgraduate (PhD) level of study enables students to interact and share the findings of their practical and scientific research with academics worldwide in their field. Furthermore, in order for a postgraduate student to become recognized as an expert in a certain professional community, they must currently be proficient in English.

However, the general level of English proficiency among secondary school students and even university graduates is often capable of improvement. Inter alia it is apparently worth taking into account that, having not mastered a foreign language to a proper extent during school years, in the foreseeable future it is unlikely that a person will return to its study. Russian universities were allowed to apply their own standards and requirements to certain aspects in their curricula. It became possible due to the transition from the Federal State Educational Standards (*ФГОС*) to The Federal State Requirements (*ФГТ*) in Russian education. Thus, in SSEU (Samara State University of Economics) language exams to enter postgraduate courses were abolished and class time for foreign language has been notably limited. Nonetheless the level of final exam requirements has yet remained quite high. Thus, a lot of applicants enter PhD courses without an appropriate FL proficiency that could be enough to master academic English (AE) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and to pass their final exams at the level eligible for further academic studies. Simultaneously there is a certain number of applicants with sufficient and even advanced FL proficiency for whom the present syllabus time is quite enough to successfully pass the assessment procedures. That resulted in unprecedented difference of language proficiency among PhD students and became a great challenge both for the teachers of FL and the students.

All of the above-mentioned assumptions allow us to come to an obvious pedagogical conclusion. Finding a compromise between the ultimate objectives of postgraduate education and certain applicants'

inadequate language training is necessary. In an effort to find a middle ground and adapt to the harsh realities of the contemporary world, which has high expectations for PhD grads, EFL academics are striving to seek the opportunities for PhD students to compensate their insufficient level of EFL proficiency. The central idea of this paper is that flipped classroom (FC) approach to EFL teaching and learning could to some degree smooth out tensions which follow from the contradictions in educational standards. There are two primary tasks of this research: 1. To determine the EFL educational needs of PhD students. 2. To ascertain the effectiveness of FC approach. This paper therefore was set out to assess the effect of flipped classroom approach as a way to compensate low EFL proficiency in postgraduate academic setting. Quantitative and qualitative methods were adopted to provide the insights into the mechanisms and effects of flipped classroom approach to EFL teaching and learning.

This study uses data from PhD students' needs analysis, their on-the-course interviews and statistical results of their final exams. Bergmann [5], the creator of the 'flipped classroom' system, highlights its significance for foreign language instruction. He contends that while time in the classroom can be used productively, students can complete more menial and mechanical work outside of it. It is utilized for gamification, conversations, problem-solving, and other tasks involving actual communication in a foreign language. The sample of this study consists of 32 first-year PhD students taught in the flipped classroom format. It should be born in mind that the analysis presented here is based solely on of the data taken from highly motivated students. That could be a practical constraint due to which this study cannot provide comprehensive results that can be generalized for other situations. Taking into account the main issues, which are addressed in this paper, it has been organized in the following way. First the theoretical background of the research is provided. Then it gives a brief overview of methodology applied in the study. The next part presents the results of the research, and it focuses on the experimental group. The final part deals with the findings that follow from the research results.

General observations

Although the “flipped classroom” approach has been applied by teachers for more than 20 years, it is still referred to as an inventive teaching strategy in the literature. One way it differs from the standard method is that students study part of the materials on their own before class. ICT (interactive materials, slideshows, and video lectures) can be employed for that, increasing the amount of time available for offline learning. Practical work, collaboration, and engagement might occupy the free time. It also enables the application of information and abilities in novel contexts. As a result, the emphasis now is on the collaborative study and investigation of a new topic rather than an overview of it. Student queries during instructor-prepared video lessons serve as a useful motivator for the development of cognitive skills. In addition to this, class time is dedicated to practice, deeper comprehension, and analysis rather than memorization of the material. The teacher can spend more time and energy on individual students and small groups because there is no need to explain material in minute details to the full class.

Up to now there has been no single pattern for the flipped classroom model. The term is used to generally describe the structure of any class that is designed based on the lectures or any other educational material provided to students in advance and accompanied with the afterwards class discussion or practice.

Flipped classroom teaching approach emerged as a result of pedagogical research in the late 90s and early 2000s and recommended itself as a methodology about ten years later. In 2000, a seminal work in the philosophy of the flipped classroom by Baker was published entitled “The ‘Classroom Flip’”: Using web course management tools to become the guide by the side” [4]. Although the comprehensive study by Agirman & Ercoskun [1] revealed the historical development of the flipped classroom model, proved that the ideas and practices that paved the way for the emergence of this approach are older. It is stated that the flipped classroom approach was first applied in the USA almost two decades ago. Under this approach students learn the basic concepts at home freeing up time for interactive and practical work in class. The

schoolteachers Sam and Bergmann from the USA are thought to be the first educators who conducted flipped classes in 2007. At a high school they designed tests and assignments. But the lack of interest to the subject among students they came up with an idea to record their lectures on video. They then posted the information online, and sent the links to their students. When their students were assessed a year later, it resulted in the increase of student's academic performance. Then other teachers adopted the new methodology. As it turned out, this format was much more convenient than traditional classes, not only for students, but also for teachers. Teachers no longer had to constantly present the same material, it was enough just to answer questions, give examples, and then they could immediately turn to the practice. Another pioneer who started teaching classes in the flipped classroom format was Khan [1]. He worked as an investment analyst and helped his cousin with math on the phone. When Khan was asked to take two more people as students, he recorded several videos explaining the subject in detail and posted them on YouTube. Other children were able to watch these lectures. After some time, video recordings became so popular that Khan was able to open his academy, an electronic database of video tutorials, and received a grant from Google to develop the project. Khan justified the need to switch to a flipped classroom learning format by improving the school curriculum. In higher education setting the similar technique was utilized by Mazur [16]. He was a professor of physics at one of the American universities. He gave students his lecture materials in advance. The students came to class prepared, with the knowledge of new concepts and terminology. When the class started, the professor surveyed which questions should be paid special attention to. At the next stage in-depth study of the material and problem solving took place in mini-groups. The professor encouraged his students to think about and apply general principles and theories in various situations. The results of mid-course and final tests conducted by the professor demonstrated a higher level of mastering the material in comparison with the traditional method of teaching.

Gerstein divides effective use of the FC technology into four stages [11]. At the first level which is called “student involvement”, the instruc-

tor conveys to the class the new idea. After getting acquainted with the subject matter, they are given a trial assignment that fits the parameters of the discipline they are studying. During the second phase, known as research, students continue to study the subject on their own by watching and listening to lectures, clicking on links to extra resources that the teacher has posted, finishing the suggested interactive assignments, and participating in online forums, blogs, and chats.

At the next stage of comprehension, students are given a number of tasks with increased complexity. Then the stage of “demonstration and application” comes. At this stage, students demonstrate the skills. This is the stage of mastering the material through projects, presentations, and conceptual maps.

Thus, it is since the work of Baker [4] that the study of the flipped classroom approach has gained momentum. Over the past decade, the studies on this approach by both the Russian and the foreign researchers have emphasized various aspects of its application. The most recent comprehensive literature reviews on the topic have been reported in the works by Vitta & Al-Hoorie [23] and by Kotova [13].

Critique of flipped classroom approach

Almost every research that has been taken on the flipped classroom approach mentions its pros and cons. To better understand the specifics of the model research data were analysed in more details. The approach under study has been questioned by the researchers. It is stated by a French scholar Lebrun that FC learning cannot be called a new method, but rather it represents a new way of thinking. He adds that this way of thinking is aimed at optimizing classroom work with students through extracurricular activities [9]. Russian scholars argue that the FC strategy is not more than a method of advanced independent work of students. They name it reverse learning and refer to it as to one of the forms of blended learning [3]. For example, some researchers note that such classes can be ineffective if the new format is used irregularly. Moreover, this is not a practice that can be safely given under the supervision of artificial intelligence, but a joint work that requires quick feedback from a teacher or a peer student. The clear boundary between synchro-

nous and asynchronous learning sets a new dynamic in the classroom when everything that is alive becomes very active and has a high level of involvement. Critics of FC model claim that the traditional aspect of education is only worsened by this approach. Among the reasons for this they mention the inability of students to promptly ask questions to the teacher. But there are also the defenders of the approach who argue that the problem could be easily solved. The remedies can be found in the new features of the flipped classroom format that appear thanks to the distance learning systems.

The critics also point out that there are some important concerns related to students that are needed to be considered when discussing the flipped classroom approach. Based on the study by Voronina [24] the following list was compiled:

- 1) Stress and anxiety of students when they have to use e-courses;
- 2) A student pays attention to the teacher only in case of being addressed;
- 3) Extra diligence of students who are dependent from teachers' instructions;
- 4) Students' lack of experience and navigation in an electronic course;
- 5) Fear to communicate on educational platforms;
- 6) The detailed outline of the course can make students feel confused;
- 7) A lack of students' interest to the elements of the course that are not assessed;
- 8) Theory is addressed only after unsuccessful efforts to complete the task that could cause anxiety.

Flipped classroom approach prospects

Despite the existing concerns in her case study Paveleva [19] draws our attention to the advantages this approach has, namely:

- 1) students can view materials outside the classroom at any time convenient for them, anywhere and from any device (smartphones, tablets, laptops);
- 2) wide accessibility and convenient format of the training content make it possible to keep up with the educational process, to repeat the missed material;

- 3) classroom time can be spent on those tasks that involve a deeper understanding and interpretation of the studied material;
- 4) individualization of learning. The teacher has more opportunities to devote time to each student;
- 5) the use of technology allows students with abilities of different levels to succeed. For example, some students may study the material several times before acquiring a solid knowledge;
- 6) the cooperation of students and the teacher increases. Since part of the task is performed during extracurricular time and is the basis for working offline, teachers can devote classroom time to closer interaction with students, organize different types of work: in groups, in pairs, role-playing games and project activities.

According to K. Muldrow [17], a teacher cannot fully adopt a differentiated approach to learning, take into account each student's unique traits, and guarantee that each student is mastering the content at the proper speed in a regular classroom. That is why she explains the popularity of the flipped classroom approach by the inability of the traditional education to cover the huge amount of information that is needed.

The role of an academic (university teacher) in a flipped classroom environment formed the central focus of a study by Borzova [6] in which the researcher discovered that the flipped classroom requires teachers to have completely different teaching skills than non-traditional teaching. A teacher who previously was a knowledge carrier becomes a facilitator. That means they change their roles from '*sage on the stage*' (lecturer) to '*guide on the side*' (tutor, instructor). That, in turn, leads to the expansion of the functional tasks of an academic. The experience of organizing training using the flipped classroom technology shows the important role of a university teacher, who simultaneously acts as a representative of science (scientist), designer and developer of online training courses (methodologist), manager of an electronic educational space.

To ensure the conscious work of students and effectively rebuild the educational process the following requirements should be met:

- 1) to explain the goals of the flipped classroom format clearly to students;
- 2) to place special emphasis on the importance of lectures and training presentations (students should be clearly aware that watching and studying a video lecture is mandatory, as well as completing assignments developed by the teacher);
- 3) the teacher should monitor the watching of lectures and the completion of assignments by students, without exceptions that is why they need to develop a number of tasks for formative controls that are performed online;
- 4) to effectively implement this technology and management of the process, the teacher should use a centralized platform;
- 5) since the new material study and a number of tasks are performed online, the teacher should clearly plan the classroom time. The tasks that are aimed at critical understanding of the material and critical thinking;
- 6) a discussion of the studied material should start each class and involve as many students as possible. Short tests with instant answers could be conducted. These platforms allow conducting tests online in the classroom, using students' own gadgets;
- 7) for effective management of the learning process and for the teacher's confidence the students study the material during extracurricular time, they can be invited to view and comment on each other's posts on the forum or in a chat. If a group is organized, the assessment will be given to a group. This will undoubtedly contribute to increasing the level of responsibility of every student.

Fig. 1. Requirements for effective FC. Based on Paveleva [19]

Tikhonova's thorough investigation [20] concluded that the flipped classroom approach allows an instructor to hold on the level of students and to increase the bulk and complexity of tasks gradually. It is emphasised that via the information technology there is control that could be organized at each stage of extracurricular work. Taken together, the studies, that have been analysed, support the notion that the techniques of the flipped classroom approach advance the intensity of educational process and demonstrate its application prospects.

Overall, there seems to be definite evidence to indicate that the FC approach needs to be considered as a method that even though it appears that demands extra effort in teaching still could bring fruitful results. This view is strongly supported by Sointu et al. who write that this method greatly assists students in acquiring and mastering “*twenty first century*

skills, such as self-directed learning in collaboration with peers using technology as key elements of these skills [22, p. 503].

A search of the literature has revealed that while flipped classroom research has grown exponentially and has been the focus of several meta-analyses and systematic reviews [10; 14; 8], the effectiveness of the flipped classroom for EFL teaching and learning at postgraduate level has admittedly been under-researched.

ICT for flipped classroom

The cooperation of teachers and students benefit from the accessibility of technology. Utilising distance technologies promotes the solution of various pedagogical problems, which traditional methods could not challenge. For example, applying flipped classroom tools via the blended learning format can considerably expand the constraints of academic hours limitations for the discipline in the basic curriculum. When e-technologies arrived, old pedagogical practices of didactic teaching, e.g. content delivery for student ingestion and testing, almost immediately were delegated to them. The terms “blended learning,” “mobile learning,” and “electronic learning” refer to instructional strategies that integrate the best in-person and virtual interactive teaching methods to create a system that is always correlated and functions as a single unit. The terms are used interchangeably here.

Based on the information in Martynova [15], the benefits of the assignments incorporated into an electronic environment are outlined below (Fig. 1).

The emergence of online services gave a strong impetus to the progress of the methodology under study. There are a number of platforms that are used to organize distance learning, as well as platforms for the application of the flipped classroom technology. It is necessary to give a brief overview of Moodle features since the e-course for the flipped classroom was designed on this platform that is provided by SSEU. Moodle is undoubtedly one of the most well-known and demanded online platforms. The system allows creating courses adapted to mobile phones. The platform is friendly to third-party developers. Moodle features various toolbars, multimedia support, enabling the teacher to track students' progress.

tasks integrated into an electronic environment	are flexible and interactive;
	stimulate the development of higher-order creative thinking;
	stimulate students' internal motivation and responsibility for learning outcomes;
	attract students' attention; promote the exchange of ideas, experiences and skills;
	contribute to the development of autonomous learning abilities;
	allow the integration of guided autonomous learning into classroom activities;
	are evaluated in an electronic environment.

Fig. 2. Advantages of blended learning

In addition, the service allows its users not design a course from scratch but offers them a number of ready-made templates to save time and effort. Community of users is another important advantage of Moodle. Horizontal and vertical feedback is available on this platform. But there a limitation because the teacher cannot create their course as a private person, because this platform is linked to some specific educational institution.

Materials and methods

The methodological approach taken in this paper is a mixed methodology based on the findings from ascertaining experiment, the content analysis of students' interviews, and mathematical statistics. The participants, who formed the sample for this research, are the first-year students of postgraduate courses in SSEU. This cohort consisted of PhD students aged from 24 to 49 (n=97), who preliminarily were tested for EFL proficiency level on the initial stage of the study, which took place in the beginning of 2023 academic year. Of 240 students, who entered PhD course and passed the

preliminary test, 97 students, who agreed to participate in the experiment, were selected. Among those students who showed A1-B1 language proficiency, which was not at all sufficient for mastering AE and ESP at the required level, 32 participants were selected to form an experimental group based on their needs analysis results and voluntary consent to take part. 15 students who were randomly selected entered the control group. The voluntary consent to analyse their academic performance was also taken but they did not demonstrate motivation to take part in flipped classroom training. A respectable degree of linguistic competency was exhibited by the students in the second control group ($n = 50$). While the experimental group studied in a mixed course format, the control groups received training using the conventional methods inside the confines of traditional classrooms.

At the final stage the academic results of students with high EFL proficiency were also analysed to provide more objective results of the experiment. During the study, special attention was paid to the analysis of the on-the-course interviews. The methodology of qualitative research of data collection methods through interviews is the most common in studies involving a limited sample. It allowed the experiment to be timely adapted to the needs of the participants. It seems necessary to provide brief explanations on the motivational aspect of the students participating in the experiment because it is of particular interest for this study. The research design employs a methodological framework derived from Oxford [18], which proposed that multiple attitude levels can influence EFL students' behaviors. This framework is based on the taxonomy of individual differences among language learners. For this reason, the first questions in the requirements analysis looked at PhD students' overall motivations for studying foreign languages.

The students with low or now motivation had to be excluded from the sample, because according to the scholar, motivation “*technically means the condition of being moved to action*” [18, p. 37], and in case of motivation paucity the experiment would automatically become irrelevant. Interestingly, that although the majority of respondents, that had been asked, reported the presence of instrumental motivation, which is less preferable than having integrative motivation in the situation of lan-

guage mastering, students that demonstrated the desire to participate in the experiment literally were the initiators of the process. Moreover, despite all stress and anxiety which they faced during the experiment and which by themselves is able to “*cause motivation to plummet and attitudes to turn negative*” [18, p. 37], they demonstrated the highest level of self-discipline. Self-discipline is thought to be a non-cognitive skill. It is known that this skill is typically acquired at the initial stages of education. Furthermore, it was argued in Gorbunovs et al., self-discipline is “*a more complicated and difficult way to achieve success than in a case of motivational approach, but this is the most reliable way*” [12, p. 257].

The present study utilises the following assumptions to provide the tools for designing flipped classroom in postgraduate academic setting. The claim that extracurricular activities, including ICT-related ones, are required in higher education raised the possibility that a mixed learning environment could assist instructors in striking a balance and implementing a flipped classroom as an addition to the current core course, based on the needs analysis, to increase the efficacy of the formation, development, and consolidation of EFL proficiency skills [21]. The study by Aikina et al. [12] demonstrated convincing evidence that the use of e-learning can significantly expand the limited number of academic hours for “Foreign language” subject in the basic curriculum of non-linguistic universities.

Thus, when academic activities are combined with extracurricular, highly focused tasks that are carefully incorporated into an electronic environment, a dynamic learning environment can be created. The combination of the flipped classroom methodology and blended learning’s advantages on the SSEU-provided learning management system allowed for the creation of an experimental electronic course intended for first-year postgraduate students. The goal of the course is to increase the efficacy of language instruction for learners who are not as proficient in FL.

Results and discussion

This section reports the results of the pedagogical experiment that had been conducted from October to July, 2023. The total number of PhD students that had been tested for their language proficiency and study mo-

tivation was 240 people. From that number the cohort of students, who proclaimed themselves ready to attend classes, was selected. Based on the findings from the entry tests they were divided into groups for conducting the experiment. This division is shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

Data on experiment participants	
Types of groups	Number of people in groups (n=)
Experimental group participants (entry level of English proficiency A1-B1)	32
Control group 1 participants (entry level of English proficiency A1-B1)	15
Control group 2 participants (entry level of English proficiency B2-C1)	50

As it is evident from the table the total number of participants differs from the total number of assigned PhD students. The rest of the students either attended very rarely or attended only on the assessment events.

Based on the findings from entrance tests and on needs analysis results the e-course on LMS platform Moodle was designed. The course had both theoretical chapters and practical exercises. Before every class the students from the experimental group were given the content list for it and the instructions for the work with the course. So they knew what topics they have to understand in advance to be able to practice in class at the level that could allow them to follow the students from the control group 2.

The most required topics are demonstrated in Fig. 1. Not surprisingly they are directly connected with the final educational purpose (passing tests and exam) and allow practicing the skills needed for successful pass. The details of final requirements are given in the syllabus which is placed on the official site of the University. It became evident from the needs analysis that the experiment participants put a great importance on grammar skills formation. It is because of the unavailability to form the skills of FL oral and written speech without knowledge of grammar. Consequently, in the process of course design special attention was paid to the development of grammar skills. Therefore, the author made ev-

ery effort to ensure that students learn and freely use the grammatical structures of the foreign language. When an instructor teaches in-person, they typically use the classroom setting to introduce new grammatical principles to their students. In this instance, they are able to ascertain with clarity whether the pupils comprehend the new information and, if required, can immediately adjust to the needs of students. The application of a flipped classroom method allowed the author to save 20-30 % of classroom time.

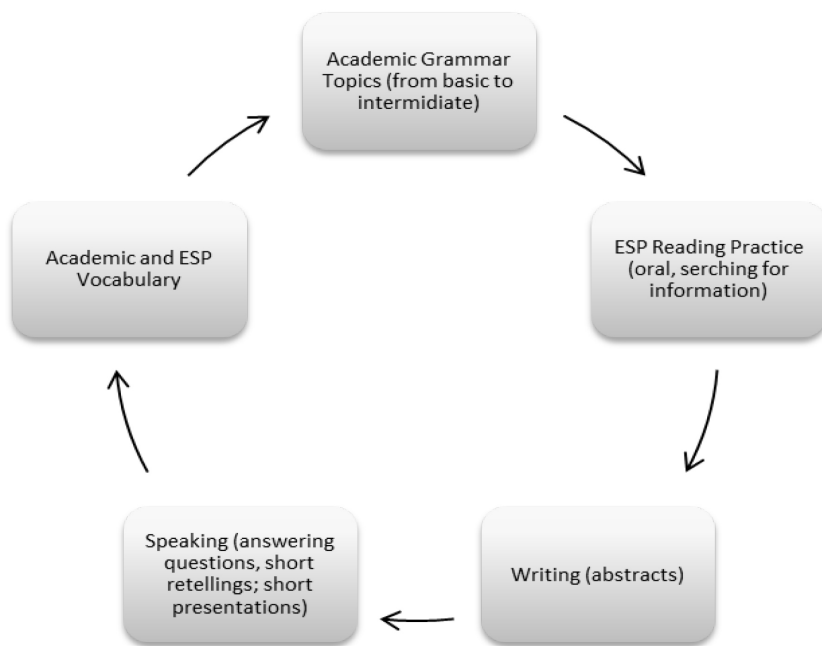


Fig. 3. Topics mostly required by the experiment participants

In the following part of this section the results of the last stage of the experiment are presented. Statistical analysis was used during this stage of ascertaining experiment to examine how effective was the technology of flipped classroom approach. For that the final assessment grades were analysed. The table below illustrates the average numbers according to the breakdown the participants into groups.

Table 2.

Final assessment scores	
Types of groups	Average assessment scores (n=100%)
Experimental group participants (entry level of English proficiency A1-B1)	75–87%
Control group 1 participants (entry level of English proficiency A1-B1)	0–51%
Control group 2 participants (entry level of English proficiency B2-C1)	89–100%

It is apparent from the data in Table 2, that the PhD students with low level of EFL entrance proficiency demonstrated quite different results at the final assessment procedures and the difference between the experimental and control group 1 participants was significant. When comparing their results strong evidence of the flipped classroom effectiveness was detected. This is rather a remarkable outcome.

Undoubtedly the level of the experimental group was incomparable with the level of the PhD students from the second control group who were initially tested as having B2–C1 level of English. Nonetheless, the findings revealed significant progress among the PhD students of experimental group and their overall prevalence over the students from the first control group. Moreover, several students from the latter group could not at all pass the assessment. And although there were no special measurements on the point but it is worth mentioning that the students from the first control group who relied only on offline classes were losing their motivation. That gives the ground to once again emphasize the importance of self-discipline in the process of learning and voice a doubt that the flipped classroom approach could be feasible being initiated for the students with low level metacognitive skills. And these results were not very encouraging. Far and away this could be an important issue for future research.

Conclusion

The goal of the current investigation was to ascertain the effectiveness of flipped classroom approach application to the situation when the entry level of foreign language proficiency differs significantly among

the students who are meant to study together and demonstrate the results sufficient to meet the requirements of postgraduate level in a university. The results of the experiment seem to be unambiguous and consistent.

1. Regarding the first study query, it was discovered that the PhD students with insufficient level of EFL proficiency demonstrated the urgent need to compensate the existing discrepancy and initiated the search for possible ways to cope with the challenge they had faced. It is worth noting that they were highly motivated and although struggling in the process showed exceptional level of self-discipline and hard work that supported them in the moments of stress and frustration. These results, however, cast doubt on the study's approach's capacity to show the same degree of effectiveness when used with PhD candidates who lack the same drive and self-control.

2. Another concern of utilising this approach is about the university support for the academics who try to apply this methodology. As it was mentioned above the workload of the teacher grows exponentially and without any incentives from the employer this work loses its appeal.

3. As for the second research question the results are quite revealing in several ways. Firstly, it could be suggested that the entrance language exam should be returned to the postgraduate setting. Prior studies that have noted the extreme importance of language proficiency for this level of education, otherwise researchers will have to lose time and effort not being able to know about the results of their peers in the international science. Second, the study's findings show that there is a solution to the problem, despite the task's seeming complexity in trying to make up for the low level of language ability within the given time frame.

Taken together, the findings suggest that the flipped classroom approach could be successfully utilised to balance the discrepancy in EFL proficiency among PhD students and could allow them to pass assessment procedures. This study advances the scientific search of the best strategies for raising EFL proficiency levels. Blended learning combined with the flipped classroom approach is a system that has promising futures. Nonetheless, given the constraints of the research sample, it is imperative to enlist additional participants in the experiment going forward. Investigating the idea of providing this kind of instruction outside of an

experimental context, inside the confines of a standard curriculum, may also be interesting.

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DATA ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Irina A. Martynova, PhD in Philology, Associate Professor, Associate Professor of Linguistics and Business Communication Department
Samara State University of Economics
141, Soviet Army Str., Samara, 443090, Russian Federation
miasseu9@gmail.com
SPIN-code: 7911-9573
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0701-4224>
ResearcherID: M-1495-2018
Academia.edu: <https://independent.academia.edu/IMartynova>
ResearchGate: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Irina_Martynova

ДААННЫЕ ОБ АВТОРЕ

Мартынова Ирина Анатольевна, кандидат филологических наук, доцент, доцент кафедры лингвистики и иноязычной деловой коммуникации
Самарский государственный экономический университет
ул. Советской Армии, 141 г. Самара, 443090, Российская Федерация
miasseu9@gmail.com

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