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# FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING WITH FLIPPED CLASSROOM METHOD IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN FINLAND

A. Kirkkomäki<sup>1</sup>, P. Kavander<sup>2</sup>, M. Tuunanen<sup>3</sup>, S. Kettunen<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Laurea University of Applied Sciences (FINLAND)*

<sup>2</sup>*Turku University of Applied Sciences (FINLAND)*

<sup>3</sup>*Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences (FINLAND)*

<sup>4</sup>*University of Eastern Finland (FINLAND)*

## Abstract

This paper discusses flipped classroom method in teaching and learning professional Swedish in higher education in Finland. A team of language teachers in higher educational institutes has been developing the method in a national development project for second language learning in higher education. The project is financed by the Finnish Ministry of education as a strategic priority project. The team consists of members from four institutions: Laurea University of Applied Sciences, Turku University of Applied Sciences, Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences and University of Eastern Finland.

The objective of this paper is to present flipped classroom method in language teaching and studies and to introduce the possibilities of the method as an alternative to traditional language teaching. The aim of the flipped classroom project was to find out if learning would be more efficient using flipped classroom method and if the method could be used effectively in heterogenic student groups.

During the project the teachers created a model course in Google Sites environment containing flipped classroom study modules which they have tested and used in their own pilot student groups. The main focus in the modules is on the oral and written work life related, professional language skills. The created Google Sites material, Common European Frame of Reference level B1, is intended for the use of Swedish language teachers in higher educational institutes and the method can easily be used in any language studies.

The collected student feedback from the flipped classroom courses shows that the students found it useful to in advance study the material by themselves and then in flipped classroom use the theory in practice in various work life related oral and written communication situations. As an alternative to the tradition of studying the theory in the class, the students were now able to concentrate on practicing and deepening their skills in central course contents in classroom communication and at the same time get teacher guidance and stimulating feedback.

The created Google Sites environment benefits digitalization and technology. All the study material is available for the students in advance including a study plan for the next contact lesson. This way the students know what material to study prior the lesson and what kind of situations will be practiced in the flipped classroom peer communication.

Keywords: flipped learning, Swedish as a second language, learning, foreign languages, digitalization, student-centred approach.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This article presents Flipped Classroom method that our project team of four language teachers has developed in a national 3-year project (2017-2019) DIGIJOUJOU for second language learning in higher education. The project is financed by the Finnish Ministry of Education as a strategic priority project and it has collected 52 teachers from 12 universities in Finland to work for the targets of new digital pedagogy, blended learning/e-learning curriculum and flexible study paths for the benefits of national collaboration and higher education crossovers. [1]

In DIGIJOUJOU our project team has concentrated on developing the use of Flipped Classroom (FC) in foreign language learning in higher education, more specifically in Swedish language learning. However, the method can easily be applied also to the learning of other foreign languages. Swedish language is the second official language in Finland and compulsory to all the students in higher education with the starting level of B1.2 (Common European Frame of Reference). Flipped Classroom is a pedagogical approach challenging more traditional methods. In FC method the teacher is not lecturing in the traditional manner but provides the lecture material for the students beforehand to be

independently studied prior to the contact lesson. Then in the contact teaching the material contents are elaborated in interactive student-centered assignments. The teacher's role is changed from the role of a lecturer to the role of a pedagogical coach and facilitator. [2]

We have created an open access Google Sites environment <https://sites.google.com/view/flipattu/etusivu>, [3] ) for the use of the teacher. The platform is free from charge and non-commercial (CC by NC). In this environment we introduce with examples how Flipped Classroom method can be utilized in language teaching. Professional field-specific language and communication skills are in the center of higher education language studies in Finland. This means that the students study the vocabulary and expressions of their own professional field alongside with general work life language and communication. The Google Sites FC platform, modules and learning materials are planned for teacher's use who then can compile a suitable package for her or his own course. The material on the sites is divided into modules with contents suitable for compacting or widening according to course needs. The sites comprise material for both the students' advance assignments and contact lessons as well as assignments for course works to be returned. The course work assignments the students need to return always include the purpose and aim of the individual assignment, as well as the time schedule and the way of returning the assignment in question. Also, the criteria and way of assessment are included (oral or written assessment, peer assessment, etc.). The teacher can differentiate and tailor the course contents by letting the student choose learning assignments and materials according to the student's language level according to separate instructions. Additionally, the FC sites offer examples of language course plans utilizing Flipped Classroom method, also student experiences and tips for problematic questions included in the sites. [4]

## 2 METHODOLOGY

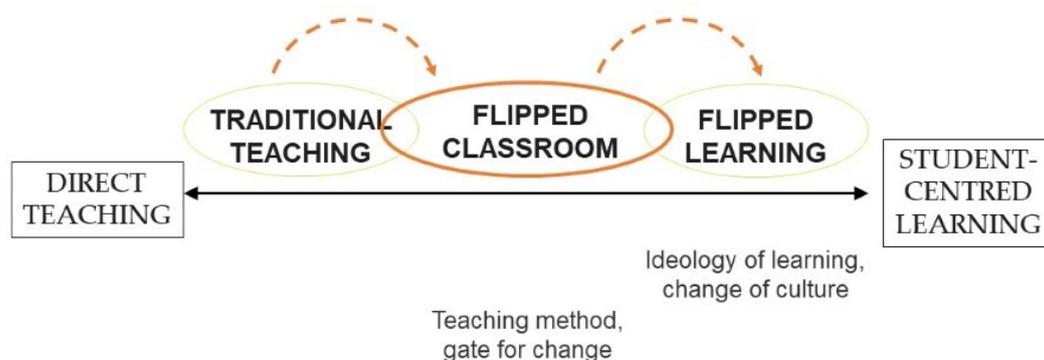
### 2.1 Flipped Classroom and Flipped Learning

In Finland, as well as in the world, there are two prevailing approaches to flipped course method, Flipped Classroom and Flipped Learning. In both of these, collaborative learning and its benefits for individual students are in the center. Supporting collective way of studying for example contributes positively to the student's internal relationships, self-confidence and attitudes and motivation to studies.

However, Flipped Learning and Flipped Classroom mean different things and the basic principles of collective learning differ from each other. To put it simply, Flipped Classroom is about co-operative learning initiated by the teacher and advancing under teacher's control. The teacher's role changes from the deliverer of information to the supporter of individual learning and self-guiding studying.

Flipped Learning, for its part, is about individual learning where the student utilizes student group co-operation and the teacher to serve her or his own learning motivation.

### Traditional teaching, FC, FL

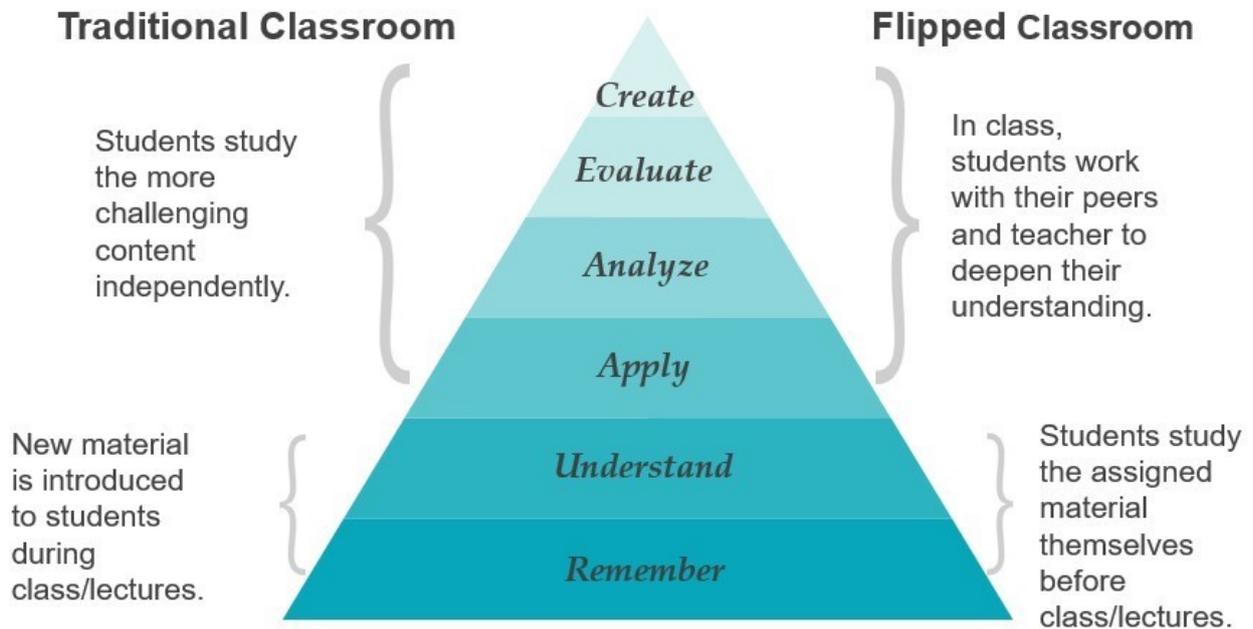


(Adapted from: Toivola & Silfverberg 2015; see also Toivola, Peura & Humaloja 2017)

Figure 1. Traditional teaching, FC, FL.

## 2.2 What Is Flipped Classroom?

Flipped Classroom is a pedagogical teaching method which challenges traditional teaching, i.e. lecturing in a classroom and transferring information. Compared with the old, traditional method, flipped teaching approaches the question from exactly the opposite direction.



### Blooms Taxonomy

Adapted from [Krathwohl \(2002\)](#); [Williams \(2013\)](#)

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Figure 2. Blooms taxonomy

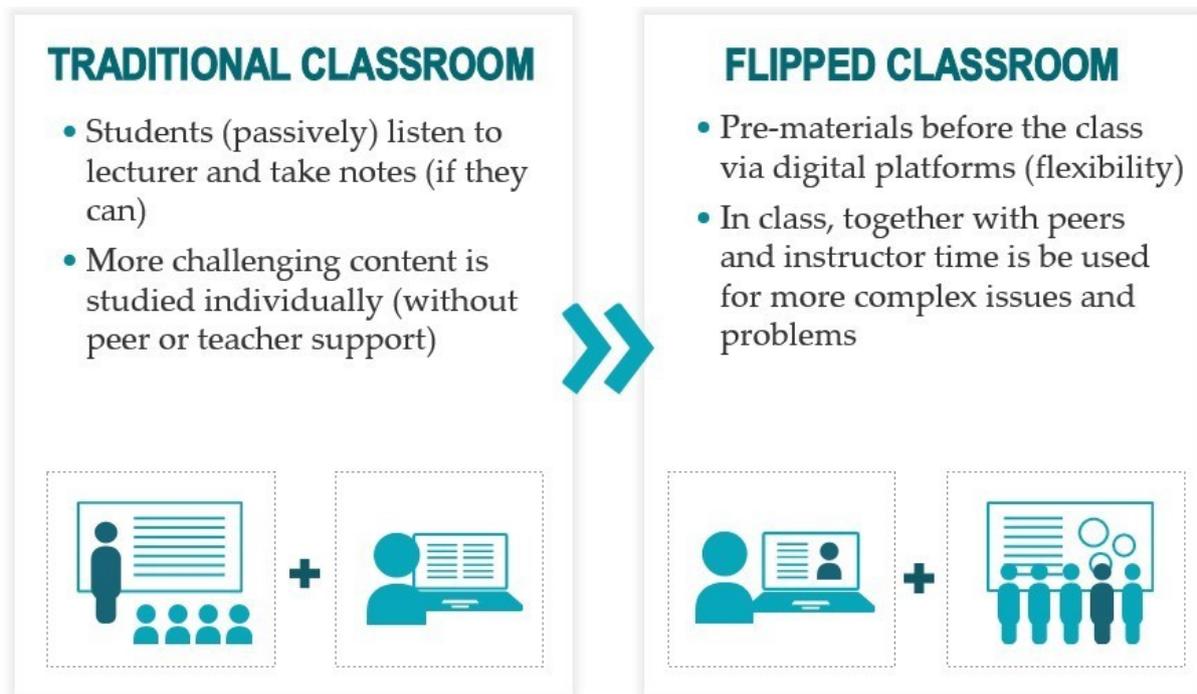
In the traditional method the teacher uses time to teach new course contents during the classroom lesson and the students continue studying the topic at home doing their homework assignments individually by themselves before the class. The method suits well to part of the students and they can easily follow the course and teaching. In more heterogeneous student groups this method, however, creates problems because all the students can't follow teaching and thus doing the home assignments becomes more difficult after not properly understanding the previous lesson contents. Then again there are the students who already are familiar with the lesson contents and they find it frustrating following the self-evident contents of the lesson.

Flipped Classroom method aims to change this setting. The students prepare themselves for the contact lesson beforehand by studying the learning material the teacher has provided them in the course platform, for example a video material suitable for the purpose. In this way the students are given similar chances to study the needed material. If the need be, a student can watch the video several times to understand the learning contents better than studying it in traditional lessons. Watching the video beforehand also serves the students mastering the learning contents better, instead of them getting frustrated when listening to a classroom lecture. Instead, they can use more time to get deeper in the topic by studying some extra materials. The students can also in advance think about related questions that need answers and in net environment it is possible to arrange collective learning sessions where the students can turn to each other with their questions or solve individual assignment challenges together. [2][5][6]

Teacher's role in the classroom changes from the role of a lecturer and deliverer of knowledge to the role of a counsellor of learning. When meeting face-to-face in the class there will be more time to interaction between the teacher and the students. Learning the theory has already taken place prior the classroom lesson, so the teacher now concentrates on counselling and supporting the student work in the class, giving them more challenges or if need be teaching and explaining the theory depending on individual student's needs at that moment. The classroom time can now be used to discussions and creating deeper understanding of the course contents. Individual students get the needed personal

support or new more difficult challenges, there's also time to stream the students whenever needed. In classroom co-operation the students can learn following their own learning pace. In difficult assignments teacher's help is available. Thanks to technology interactivity in the classroom increases.

Teacher's role changes from the deliverer of knowledge to the supporter of individual learning and self-guiding studies. Flipped Classroom is student centered, it emphasizes the student's own activity in learning and the interactivity of work between the students. In traditional method learning the course contents and testing how well the contents are remembered is in the center. Flipped Classroom method centers on self-guiding studies and teaching the students how to learn. Teacher's task has changed from teaching to understanding her or his students, their thinking processes and observing their learning. If it turns out that the students don't learn, the teacher has time for corrective action.



Picture adapted from University of Washington (<https://bit.ly/1KztXgL>)

Figure 3. Traditional classroom/flipped classroom

So, Flipped Classroom represents 1) the learner's own activity in the learning process, 2) interactive learning process between the students and 3) utilizing technology in teaching.

Flipped Learning is all about collective learning where the student can utilize the learning community and the teacher as a channel to her or his motivation. Flipped Learning is a learning ideology where the teacher gets the students used to independent and resourceful studying and supports a student's freedom of choice also from pedagogical point of view. Learning is approached from the perspective of an individual student's abilities, not as the same to all the students. The pedagogical starting point is the thought of a student as a capable maker of appropriate choices and willing to make use of her or his own learning potential. The teacher's role is to create suitable learning circumstances and to give the learner the power to plan, implement and assess the learning that takes place. Consequently, the learner finds motivation and she or he has the genuine will and the tools for lifelong learning.

To sum up, Flipped Classroom course has a clear structure and the course goals and contents are verbalized and introduced in a clear way. The teacher plans and prepares the course materials and assignments for the students to be studied independently prior the coming lesson. During the contact lesson the course material contents are elaborated and practiced more deeply and the teacher helps and counsels the student work when needed. For the purpose of course assessment and feedback the learning can be measured by small course time tests and learning assignments and give students short feedback on those. This way the student can follow her or his individual learning during the course. If these tests and assignments are diverse enough the final course exam is not needed.

## 2.3 Flipped classroom course materials in foreign language teaching

Using the often-mentioned video material is not a necessity in Flipped Classroom. A teacher starting with this method soon notices if videos are needed or not, depending on the course contents. The use of versatile and manifold material motivates the students, videos for their own sake are not needed. On the other hand, it is allowed to use materials made by other teachers or for example from the Net. Search words often help to find very clear and good quality video materials on for example grammar explaining in detail the theory and giving clear examples. This kind of materials in target language are excellent and offer the student also a chance to listen to the language in real situations. When using this kind of resources, it is important that the teacher follows copyright rules meaning the source of the material has to be clearly indicated.

The most time-consuming part of the teacher's work is to search for and find suitable course material. It pays off to create or at least plan Flipped Classroom course contents in advance as far as possible. The students should get the study material in good time, about a week or at least many days before the contact teaching. The teacher can then give them the contact lesson work materials only just the same day they have the class. If the teacher sees it good, the materials to be done before the class as well as the materials for the contact lesson work can be available for the students during the whole course. This way the student can know exactly what kind of skills are expected and can prepare her or himself as well as possible.

The teacher can offer the students basic or minimum level assignments to be worked with in the lesson and more demanding assignments for those that are interested in them. The students with lower skills level benefit from studying the prior lesson-assignments and materials several times and the teacher can, if needed, recommend this to them. However, it is the student's own responsibility to study the needed basic vocabulary so well that interactive working in the class is possible. For the sake of clarity, the teacher should clearly indicate what should be learned in each learning module or section.

## 2.4 What kind of assignments are suitable for Flipped Classroom?

Learning new vocabulary and phraseology are in the center of language learning. This kind of skills are perhaps easier to learn by reading different kinds of texts. The teacher can prepare content questions, vocabulary exercises, grammar exercises for the text materials. Also, exercises and various games related to specific vocabulary in the Net are efficient. Interview recordings and videos enable listening comprehension and content-based questions for the students to be answered in Finnish or in Swedish offer good practice.

Whatever the learning material is, it is essentially important to plan everything with the aim of preparing the students well for the contact class. The better the students master the prior lesson-material, the sooner they get to practice for example oral communication in the class.

# 3 RESULTS

## 3.1 Student feedback

During the project we have with great interest collected student feedback in the higher educational institutes in this project. The feedback turned to be mainly positive.

"I liked studying the course contents beforehand as much as I needed, then I'm already familiar with it when I come to the lesson".

"This method streamlines and makes contact lesson work more efficient when all the needed materials are already studied before the lesson".

"This was useful. The contact lesson work was about the materials I already had studied at home. I got the feeling "I know and I can"."

"This was really beneficial. It felt good to always know what was then talked about in the lesson".

"It was great to already be familiar with the theory when coming to the lesson".

"By doing the given studying before the lesson it was surprisingly easy to learn for the lesson and start remembering the vocabulary".

Most of the students are used to traditional method of teaching, there was also criticism in student feedbacks as we could expect:

“Some home assignments could have been taken up more thoroughly in the lesson. Plus, I’m also otherwise quite bad in Swedish”.

“Well, the teacher helped but in discussion exercises we were quite a lot on our own. I would have needed traditional teaching”.

“Too many assignments to be studied at home before the lesson. Some of that could have been taken up in the lesson”.

“Most independent home assignments were difficult because I need contact teaching in my language studies”.

### **3.2 Challenges from teacher’s point of view**

In the beginning of the course there is reason to emphasize the importance of prior lesson-assignments. Each of these assignment modules contains learning or competence objectives that the student should aim to reach. Doing the given assignments at home is essential for the student to reach these goals at least on minimum level. If the home assignments are successfully done, the Flipped Classroom work can concentrate on oral communication and the teacher can explain and illustrate the study contents that still might be unclear.

As it is sometimes the case the students might not have had time or remembered to do the needed assignments beforehand and this then hinders the contact lesson work.

The aim is to awaken those students that haven’t done the given prior lesson-assignments and to make them understand the importance and the essential role of this. This study material should be prepared so that the contents (for example vocabulary) are quite essential for the contact lesson interaction.

One solution could be the neglected assignments are done during the lesson, in which case there is no time for oral communication and interaction. The students who have prepared themselves at home could be “rewarded” by giving them some extra interesting bonus assignments or by giving them the role of guiding the other students’ class assignments.

## **4 CONCLUSIONS**

According to our experiences Flipped Classroom method suits well also to foreign language teaching. It is a flexible way to study and enables the reaching of individual goals and result to the students. Because all the needed study material is available for the students on electric platform during the whole course, they can spend as much time as needed for studying and getting prepared at home. This then motivates them when they come to the class well prepared and they also feel they learn better. However, this method challenges the students to take more responsibility of their own learning. All the students are not used to this independent responsibility and thus prefer the traditional method of teacher teaching the new course contents and then giving them assignments based on that.

Because the role of oral communication skills is essential in professional work life, Flipped Classroom offers an answer to this. In FC method the students can concentrate on quickly developing just those needed oral skills. From teacher’s perspective well done preparing of the study module and contact lesson is in the central role.

Our Google sites Flipped Classroom platform is an open resource area, free from charge and non-commercial purposes.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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