

Teaching the Grammar of English Through the Flipped Classroom in Nigerian Higher Education Institutions

Charles Zaure Sabe, PhD

Department of Arts and Social Sciences Education
Gombe State University

Abstract

In Nigerian higher education institutions, it is perceived that English grammar is taught largely using the traditional face-to-face lecture. Students find such lectures difficult to capture while taking down notes, thus missing significant points. This paper argues that the traditional face-to-face lecture aspect of teaching and learning, which is a major component, can be improved upon to maximise learning opportunities through the flipped classroom which takes advantage of technology. Typically, it makes use of online lecture videos or other digital tools, with their obvious advantage of rewind and fast-forward as the students may require. A sample lecture meant to be posted online for students to watch at home before a class session has been included in the paper. It is on the characteristics of verbs: mood, number, person, tense, and voice. A schedule for in-class activities has also been included. The paper, therefore, aims at explaining the essence of the flipped classroom and demonstrating its use as an innovative approach to active teaching and learning of English grammar, geared towards students' communicative competence.

Keywords: grammar, flipped classroom, technology, higher education.

Introduction

As observed by Adeyanju (2018, p. 47), “grammarians define ‘grammar’ as the structure of words (i.e. morphology) and the structure of sentences (i.e. syntax)”. Of course, the structure of words involves varying the form of a word to showcase, comparison, gender, mood, number, person, tense, or voice. The structure of sentences, on the other hand, involves the construction and role of phrases, clauses, and sentences. Murthy (2007, p.3) maintained that “grammar is primarily concerned with the study of language. It explains to us the difficulties and problems involved in learning language and it guides us on how language is effectively used in our day-to-day life”. Corroborating the definitions above, Ayodele, Ajiboye, and Kiyawa (2011, p.57) noted that when we study how words are formed, the various classes of words, how the words are combined to function in sentences, etc., we are in the realm of grammar. In the same vein, Murthy (2007) asserted that:

Unless we have mastered grammar, we do not or cannot speak or write English correctly. Besides, the English language is closely related and associated with grammar and it is entirely based on grammar. English is very much controlled, conditioned, and regulated by grammar (p.3).

The significance of grammar is still reflected in Adeyanju's (2018, p.47) statement that “grammar is vital to both speaking and writing English at any level as well as for editing and

proof-reading any given document.” According to him, accurate and mature sentences are evidence of a good education. This explains the place of grammar teaching in higher education, especially in Nigeria where English is a second language and so needs to be taught very well. While acknowledging the need for teaching grammar, Oyetunde and Muodumogu (1999, p.38) explained that “what is not encouraged is a mechanical or artificial approach to grammar teaching”. This is where the problem lies as it is common today to observe grammar being taught in its bare form, thus making learning difficult, with little comprehension. Indeed, grammar teaching should be communicative, that is dealing with grammar in use. It should involve all the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, thus suggesting a meaningful approach. This approach facilitates communicative competence which Yule (2010, p.194) defined “as the general ability to use language accurately, appropriately, and flexibly”. In this case, the first component, which is a grammatical component, involves the accurate use of words and structures. The second component, which is the socio-linguistic component, is the ability to use the language appropriately, observing the subtle cultural nuances of the native speakers of the language. The third component is strategic competence which involves the ability to put forth a message efficiently, giving an equivalent of concept that may not be easily forthcoming. Supporting the notion of communicative competence, Ayodele, Ajiboye, and Kiyawa (2011, p.58) cautioned against the mere ability to recite the rules of grammar. Students should, therefore, be taught grammar for everyday communicative use, which in turn facilitates communicative competence.

On the question of learning grammar, Verghese (2007, p.41) counselled that it is “necessary for us, to whom English is a second language, to learn the grammar of the language”. Verghese maintained that this is because the second-language learner has to make a concerted effort to master those aspects of the language which account for grammaticality, unlike the native speaker who has intuitively internalised the grammar of the language. The emphasis here is that the knowledge of grammar is more important to a second- language learner than a native speaker. Yusob (2018) explained that in the teaching of English as a second language, grammar is considered as one of the significant skills to master, and that learning grammar has been part of language skills since it is a fundamental feature of a language.

The fact that the English language in Nigeria is taught as a second language, has a far-reaching implication on its teaching and learning. Consequent upon this situation, English has to be taught and learnt very well. In keeping with this principle, the teaching of grammar in Nigerian universities, is the prescription of the National Universities Commission, through its Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards.

The teaching and learning of English in Nigerian higher education institutions generally involve the following:

- (1) Lectures
- (2) Tutorials
- (3) Language laboratory work
- (4) seminars
- (5) Group work
- (6) Class exercises

(7) Assessments and feedback.

Oyetunde (2010, p. 1) argued that the lecture, which is the standard method of teaching almost all subjects in most tertiary institutions is where learning takes place. Hinged on the preceding statement, he emphasized that quality education depends largely on two factors—the lecturer and his or her lecture. What is to be noted here is that “how a lecture is planned and delivered will determine whether or not students will learn, value learning, and be able to apply what is learned” (Oyetunde, 2010, p. 1). Unfortunately, in the Nigerian context, students are hardly allowed to apply what is learned. Rather they dread the grammar lessons. Yusob’s (2018) evaluation of English grammar lessons in Malaysia applies to the situation in Nigeria:

At every level of learning institution, the teaching of grammar is always perceived as the most difficult skill to teach...and the most boring skill to learn. Therefore, if there is any mention of grammar in classroom, it will cause students to have moments of anxiety. To overcome this, language instructors have to do their best to make grammar teaching as a non-threatening, imaginative and useful activity within the English curriculum... (p. 149).

Indeed, the lecture aspect of teaching and learning, which is a major component, can be improved upon to maximise learning opportunities through the flipped classroom. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to demonstrate the use of the flipped classroom as an innovative approach to active teaching and learning of English grammar, geared towards students’ communicative competence.

The Essence of the Flipped Classroom

The flipped classroom is indeed a form of innovative teaching (e.g. Santikan and Wichadee, 2018; Kaushik, 2016; Touzani, 2016; University of Sussex, 2018; Karabulut_Ilgü, Cherrez and Jahren, 2017; Bergmann and Sams, 2016; Herreid and Schiller, 2013; Educause, 2012). Typically, Touzani (2016) counselled that:

If this is your first contact with the Flipped Classroom and you want to know more about how it works and what benefits it can bring to your teaching, we recommend that you visit our article ‘Flipped Classroom Model: 5 reasons you should be using it’.

As explained by Educause (2012):

The flipped classroom is a pedagogical model in which the typical lecture and homework elements of a course are reversed. Short video lectures are viewed by students at home before the class session, while in-class time is devoted to exercises, projects, or discussions. The video lecture is often seen as the key ingredient in the flipped approach, such lectures being either created by the instructor and posted online or selected from an online repository (p. 2).

Essentially, the value of a flipped class is in the repurposing of class time into a workshop where students can inquire about lecture content (earlier viewed), test their skills in applying knowledge, and interact with one another in hands-on activities (Educause, 2012, p.3). The instructor directs or facilitates during the class time as appropriate. It can be noted that in the flipped classroom “direct teaching is taken outside the classroom and put online on the learning platform using lecture videos and presentations, enabling the learners to learn at home or their own space anywhere, by interacting with the materials” (Kaushik, 2016, p. 16). Explaining how the flipped classroom works, Educause (2012, p.3) stressed that “there is no single model for the flipped classroom_ the term is widely used to describe almost any class structure that provides pre-recorded lectures followed by in-class exercises. Broadly speaking, the in-class work may involve discussions giving clarifications on content, carrying out individual or group assignments, testing on what the students have learned outside class. On the whole, the flipped classroom approach is flexible in that the instructor chooses what aspects of the model to flip.

According to Herreid and Schiller (2013):

In the flipped classroom model, what is normally done in class and what is normally done as homework is switched or flipped. Instead of students listening to a lecture in class and then going home to work on a set of assigned problems, they read materials and view videos on genetics before coming to class and then engage in class in active learning using case studies, labs, games, simulations or experiments.

Counting on the background information above, Herreid and Schiller (2013) presented a guiding principle of the flipped classroom that “work typically done as homework (e.g. problem solving, essay writing) is better undertaken in class with the guidance of the instructor. Listening to lectures or watching videos is better accomplished at home. Hence the term “flipped” or “inverted classroom”.

Technology is a constant companion of the flipped classroom through its various tools such as computers, tablets, smartphones, apps (software programmes used on mobile devices), cameras, and other digital tools. They are very important in flipping the classroom. Educause (2012) aptly described the advantage of the use of video over the traditional lecture thus:

In a traditional lecture, students often try to capture what is being said at the instant the speaker says it. They cannot stop to reflect on what is being said, and they may miss significant points because they are trying to transcribe the instructor's words. By contrast, the use of video and other pre-recorded media puts lectures under the control of the students: they can watch, rewind, and fast-forward as needed.

A point of emphasis in the Educause’ (2012) message above is that the use of video and other pre-recorded media put lectures under the control of students. Indeed this is a remarkable advantage. This advantage notwithstanding, Yale Poorvu Centre (2018), after observing that flipped activities required more vigorous work and thinking from students in the class, insisted that “ flipping also does not ease instructor time”. They added that in many cases instructors

have more to prepare, between developing quality lecture videos and designing active in- class practices with efficient assessments to measure impact. On the whole, Mitchell (2014) cited in Karabulut_Ilgü, Cherrez, and Jahren (2017), asserted that the “flipped learning...is probably one of the few pedagogical innovations that have received considerable attention and interest”.

Teaching the Grammar of English Through the Flipped Classroom

Presented below is a model for the flipped classroom on grammar. The grammar lecture on the characteristics of verbs forms the material to be posted online for students to study at home before the class session. Verbs are associated with five primary characteristics: Mood, Number, Person, Tense, and Voice (e.g. Strumpf, 2012; Ilmii.com, 2017). The verb expresses these characteristics through its conjugation.

Characteristics of Verbs

Mood

In grammar, the mood of the verb or phrase is the form that a verb takes to express a statement, a command, a wish. There are three moods: the indicative, the imperative, and the subjunctive. In the indicative mood, the verb makes a statement of fact or asks a question. Examples:

1. Statement of fact: My brother likes swimming.
2. Question: Have you bought the water?

In the imperative mood, the verb gives a command, makes requests, or gives advice. Examples:

- 1 Command: Run to the door.
- 2 Request: May I go out?
- 3 Advice: Be polite and considerate towards your classmates.

In the subjunctive mood, the verb is used to express a wish, conditional clauses implying a negative. Examples:

- 1 Wish: I wish I were in Jos.
- 2 Conditional clause: If he were interested in schooling, he would have applied for admission.

Number

The number of a verb is expressed by a word form which shows one or more is meant. While a singular verb refers to only one person or thing, a plural verb refers to more than one. Examples:

1. Singular: He drinks water every day.
2. Plural: They drink water every day.

Person

In grammar, the verb takes three different persons: first person (I, we), second person (you), and third person (he, she, it, they). Examples:

1. First-person (singular): I am reading.
2. First-person (plural): We are reading.
3. Second-person (singular): You are reading.
4. Second-person (plural): You are reading.
5. Third-person (singular): He is reading.

6. Third-person (plural): They are reading.

Tense

Tense is the form of a verb that shows the time of the action or state expressed by the verb or verb phrase. Tense is often distinguished from time. They are two different things, yet tense is embedded in the time since time is independent of any language. By tense being embedded in time is explained by the fact that tense shows whether an action, activity, or state was, is, or will be completed or be in progress accordingly. While the idea of time is viewed as the present, past, and future, tense refers to the verb form or forms used to express certain time affiliations. Typically, ‘I dance’ refers to the present time, ‘I danced’ refers to past time, and ‘I shall dance’ refers to the future time.

The expression ‘simple tense’ refers to tense forms that consist of one word. For example, ‘come’ and ‘came’. Following this explanation, therefore, we can conclude that there are only two simple tenses in English:

Present Simple	Past Simple
Come	Came
Go	Went

Other tenses consist of two or more verb forms, and so they are not simple, they are verb phrase or compound tenses.

The table below is a conjugation of the verb ‘dance’, to consolidate what has been learnt.

The conjugation of the verb ‘Dance’

	Simple/compound	Progressive	Perfect	Perfect Progressive
Present	I dance You dance He dances She dances We dance They dance	I am dancing You are dancing He is dancing She is dancing We are dancing They are dancing	I have danced You have danced He has danced She has danced We have danced They have danced	I have been dancing You have been dancing He has been dancing She has been dancing We have been dancing They have been dancing
Past	I danced You danced He danced She danced We danced They danced	I was dancing You were dancing He was dancing She was dancing We were dancing They were dancing	I had danced You had danced He had danced She had danced We had danced They had danced	I had been dancing You had been dancing He had been dancing She had been dancing We had been dancing They had been dancing
Future	I shall dance You will dance He will dance She will dance We shall dance They will dance	I shall be dancing You will be dancing He will be dancing She will be dancing We shall be dancing They shall be dancing	I shall have danced You will have danced He will have danced She will have danced We shall have danced They will have danced	I shall have been dancing You will have been dancing He will have been dancing She will have been dancing We shall have been dancing They will have been dancing

Under normal circumstances, ‘shall’ is used for the first person singular and plural (I, We) while ‘will’ is used for all other persons (You, He, She, it, they).

Voice

In grammar, ‘voice’ refers to a form of the verb that denotes its subject either active or passive. Where the subject of the verb does the action it is termed ‘active voice’; where the action is done to the subject, it is termed ‘passive voice’. While the active voice emphasises the doer of the action, the passive voice emphasises the action or the receiver of the action. Examples:

1. Ahmadu killed the snake (active voice).
2. The snake was killed by Ahmadu (passive voice).

In number one above, Ahmadu, being the subject of the sentence did the action. Here we say what the subject did (killed the snake). The emphasis is on Ahmadu the doer of the action. The verb is, therefore, in the active voice. In number two the action was done to the snake being the subject of the sentence. Here we say what happened to the subject (was killed). The emphasis is on the action ‘killed’ or the receiver of the action, snake. The verb here is in the passive voice.

Distribution of Learning Materials

As pointed out by Educause (2012), “there is no single model for the flipped classroom_ the term is widely used to describe almost any class structure that provides pre-recorded lectures followed by in-class exercises”. For the present model, therefore, a quality video of the above lecture, on the characteristics of verbs will be posted online for the students to watch outside the classroom. The lecture video will also contain a short quiz to provide feedback on what learnt.

The In-class Session

The in-class session of the flipped classroom is for greater efficiency. Essentially, the in-class activities for this model include discussions, exercises, and projects. The teacher introduces the subject matter for the session by reminding the students of the key areas of the lecture on the characteristics of verbs: mood, number, person, tense, and voice. Key issues on each of the five items above will be discussed. For example on ‘mood’, the discussion will dwell on the indicative, the imperative, and the subjunctive moods. On ‘number’ emphasis will be on singular and plural verbs. On ‘person’, students will note that there are three persons: first, second, and third; together with their corresponding pronouns. On the question of ‘tense’, twelve tenses will be discussed. Also, the distinction between ‘time’ and ‘tense’ will be made. On ‘voice’, students should note that English has ‘active voice’ and ‘passive voice’ and that each tense can convey both active voice and passive voice.

Exercises covering the five areas are crucial in this model of the flipped classroom. Typically, students may be asked to put the verb into the correct form, active or passive, present simple or past simple, imperative or subjunctive mood, etc. At this stage of the in-class session, the teacher is expected to watch out for students who would require help. Of course, they will be allowed to ask questions on areas that require clarification.

The third stage of the in-class session could be a project to be completed by students in groups, on the conjugation of a verb of their choice, covering the twelve tenses.

Conclusion

A key issue conveyed in this paper is the need to use the flipped classroom in teaching, learning English grammar in higher education institutions. This is to boost learning value in students through the help of technology for the fact that students in higher education institutions are disposed to independent studies, they can best handle technology tools to aid learning. The paper, having explained the state of the art in grammar teaching in Nigerian higher education, it points out the need to improve on grammar teaching since students have to learn English very well, as a second language in Nigeria. Furthermore, the paper discusses the qualities of the flipped classroom and a full explanation of how it works by utilising digital tools. It presents the teaching of the characteristics of verbs in higher education institutions. First, the paper presents the study material meant to be posted to the students online in the form of a video lecture. Posting the video lecture online is to enable the students to watch it and get familiar with it before the following class session. During the class session, the lecture is discussed, with exercises and a project to be carried out to consolidate what the students have learnt.

Recommendations

Counting on the advantages derivable from flipping the classroom, the paper recommends:

- (1) The use of the flipped classroom model of teaching and learning in Nigerian Higher Education Institutions
- (2) The sustainable provision of digital facilities for use by teachers and students
- (3) Studies in the effectiveness of the flipped classroom in comparison with the traditional lecture method.

References

- Adeyanju, T. (2018). *Mastering English language skills*. Kaduna: TeeKay Educational Services.
- Ayodele, S., Ajiboye, T., & Kiyawa, M. S. (2011). *Teaching and learning languages*. Ibadan: Evans Brothers (Nigerian Publishers) limited.
- Bergmann, J., & Sams, A. (2016). Flip your classroom: Reaching every student in every class. Retrieved from [www.amazon.com/Flip-Your Classroom Reaching](http://www.amazon.com/Flip-Your-Classroom-Reaching).
- Educause, (2012). 7 things you should know about the flipped classroom. Retrieved from <https://library.educause.edu/resources/2012/2/7-things-you-should-know-about-flipped-classroom>.
- Herreid, C. F., & Schiller, N. A. (2013). Case studies and the flipped classroom. *Journal of College Science Teaching*, 42(5), 62_66. Retrieved from <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1011743>
- Ilmii.com (2017) Verb, functions of a verb, characteristics of a verb, kinds. Retrieved from <http://ilmii.com/verb-functions-verb-characteristics-verb-kinds-verb-examples-exercises>.
- Karabulut_Ilgü, A., Cherrez, N. J., & Jähren, C. T. (2017). A systematic review of research on the flipped learning method in engineering education. Retrieved from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/bjet.12548>

- Kaushik,M.(2016). Technology-supported pedagogy in higher education: Approaches and trends. In M. Menon (Ed.), *Emerging Trends in higher education Pedagogy* (55-71). Wawasan Open University: WOU Press.
- Murthy,j.D.(2007).Contemporary English grammar. Lagos; Book master.
- Oyetunde,T.O. (2010). *Effective lecturing and teaching*. Jos: LECAPS Publishers
- Oyetunde,T.O. & Muodumogu,C.A(1999). Effective English teaching: In primary and secondary schools. Jos: Conference on Educational Improvement.
- Santikan & Wichadee. (2018). Flipping the classroom for English language learners: A study of learning performance and perceptions. Retrieved from www.researchgate.net/publication/327967409-flipping.
- Strumpf, M., & Douglas, A. (2012). *The complete grammar*.New Delhi: Goodwill Publishing house.
- Touzani,M.(2016) Flipped classroom:3 practical examples of how to turn your lessons on their heads. Retrieved from <https://www.behance.net/miriantouzani>.
- University of Sussex, (2018). Flipped learning. Retrieved from <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/skillshub/?id=309>.
- Vergheese, C.P. (2007). *Teaching English as a second language*. New Delhi: Sterling publishers private limited.
- Yale Poorvu Centre for teaching and learning. (2018). Flipped classroom. Retrieved from <https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/flipped-classroom>.
- Yule, G. (2010). *The study of language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.
- Yusob,K.F. (2018). Challenges of teaching grammar at the tertiary level: Learning from English lecturers' insights. Retrieved from. <http://journale-academiauitmt.uitm.edu.my/v2/index.php/home.htm/>