STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ADOLESCENT ENGLISH LEARNERS IN FLIPPED CLASSROOMS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

As the fastest-growing segment of the school-age population, English learners have recently—and deservedly—become a focal point of school improvement efforts in communities across New England. English language learners now comprise 8.5 percent of a Massachusetts’ student population, and a full 18.5 percent of Massachusetts speak a home language other than English. An historically underserved population, English learners and former English learners lag far behind their native English-speaking peers on state assessments in reading, math, and science, and are significantly less likely to earn a diploma. As schools in Massachusetts and across the nation are called on to raise standards and close achievement gaps, they need effective strategies for serving English learners in particular.

Flipped learning, which blends in-person and online learning to maximize student and teacher interactions, is a student-centered approach to instruction that shows potential for accelerating the progress of English learners. In a flipped classroom, traditional roles and functions are switched. Students access direct instruction, including teacher lectures, online and on their own time, while valuable class time is freed up for students to engage in interactive lessons, collaborative work, and projects, while receiving personalized support from the teacher. This study attempts to address a gap in research about flipped learning’s impact, using descriptive methods to illustrate how flipped learning can be used to improve the language and content acquisition of adolescent English learners.
This study examines flipped learning practices in “Patriot High School,” an urban, demographically diverse school in Greater Boston. Research was carried out from January to December 2014, approximately a year and a half after the school had first piloted flipped learning in its freshman academy and six months into school-wide adoption.

**School background**
- 1,709 students
- 55.6 percent speak a language other than English at home
- 10.9 percent are considered limited English proficient
- 75 percent live in poverty

**Methodology**
The research team used a combination of interviews and observations to create a portrait of flipped learning at Patriot High School and to identify the features of flipped learning that stakeholders view as more important in supporting the academic development of English learners, as well as their areas of concern.

*Interviews:* Researchers interviewed 19 teachers who instruct English learners in a range of classrooms settings (mainstream, ESL, and sheltered content), as well as 12 students and five parents. Using a semi-structured interview technique, the interviewers presented ideas and themes raised in prior interviews, building from the diversity of perspectives toward consensus. Interviews ranged from 46 to 72 minutes and were conducted in students’ and parents’ native languages as well as English.

*Observations:* Researchers spent 112 hours observing classrooms and the school’s common spaces to create a portrait of flipped learning practice. These ethnographic observations as well as interview data were used to select four focal classrooms for additional observation and to develop a classroom observation protocol. Researchers observed each focal classroom for a minimum of three hours and video recorded for deeper analysis.

*Analysis:* Researchers used qualitative and participatory research strategies to analyze field notes, interview transcripts, classroom video-recordings, and other artifacts. Study participants informed the research questions and helped to prioritize among ideas raised. Interview data were coded and analyzed thematically using an analytic inductive approach.
FINDINGS

Patriot High School was still in the early stages of implementing a flipped learning initiative at the time of the study—just halfway into the first year of school-wide adoption. The newness of the initiative afforded researchers the opportunity to learn from stakeholders’ evolving understanding of flipped learning practices and to explore their emerging insights and concerns. Here, we summarize key themes from the study.

**Toward a Shared Definition of Flipped Learning**

Initially, many faculty believed flipped learning to be primarily about technology, but as teachers explored the approach together, their understanding grew more complex and their definition of flipped learning became embedded within the school’s broader mission to help a diverse student body excel academically. Patriot High School’s official working definition of flipped learning is: a dynamic, student-centered approach to teaching diverse students that may draw on technology to support student learning, participation, and assessment.

Researchers discovered a fair amount of variety in teachers’ definitions of flipped learning. However, four ideas were fairly consistent.

*Flipped learning is student-centered.*

In a flipped classroom, students take greater ownership of their learning. They engage with content and each other using different modalities (e.g., text, audio, video) and have opportunities to monitor their own progress and make choices about what and how they learn.

*Technology is a facilitator, rather than a requirement.* Although technology is emblematic of flipped learning and can be used to enhance independent and group learning, teachers used technology in different ways, to different degrees, and in combination with many other practices. Ultimately, technology was seen as one tool among many.

*Instruction is deliberately differentiated.*

In a flipped classroom, teachers are able to individualize instruction, assessment, and learning trajectories for students with different levels of skill and English proficiency.

*Teaching and learning are dynamic.* Flipped instruction takes place in the, here-and-now, allowing for unplanned pedagogical moments as well as more structured activities.
Patriot High School’s definition of flipped learning continues to evolve as teachers, students, and community members explore its possibilities.

**Contextual Factors that Support Flipped Learning**

Through interviews and observations, researchers identified several contextual factors that appeared to support the adoption of flipped learning and foster the conditions needed for teachers and students to make the most of the instructional model.

*School structures, investments, and conditions:* Teachers pointed to a number of school-level factors that supported flipped learning, including a block schedule conducive to student-centered lessons; ongoing investment in technology by the district and school administration; a safe school community that allowed teachers to focus on learning rather than behavior; and a stable staff and committed leadership that ensured teachers had the time and collegial support required to develop their practice.

*Teacher leadership and professional development:* Teachers also stressed the importance of sustained and differentiated professional development related to flipped learning. Researchers noted significant teacher ownership of the practices, thanks in part to the many opportunities teachers had to meet with peers and share innovative practices through online courses, common planning time, and informal networking.

*Parental involvement and resources:* While parents were included in early communication about the adoption of flipped learning, those interviewed reported experiencing a diminished role in their children’s learning, perceiving technology as a barrier to their involvement. The staff also identified parental engagement as an area to work on moving forward.

**Advantages of Flipped Learning for English Learners**

In classroom observations and interviews, researchers found numerous examples of flipped learning approaches well suited to the language and academic development of English learners. Four themes help explain why flipped learning seemed to be particularly effective for this typically underserved population.

*Immediate and sustained access to content:* The availability of online resources provided constant access to multimodal course content (including videos, podcasts, and posted classroom discussions) and translation support. This enabled English learners to explore and revisit materials at their own pace and draw on their native language where helpful.

*Redefined student-teacher relationships:* Teachers were more available during class time to connect with individual students and attend to their particular learning needs. Teachers said that this time helped them build more caring relationships with students and contributed to increased awareness and understanding of in students’ lives in and out of school.

*Differentiated assessment and self-assessment:* Through creative use of time and technology, students had more opportunities to self-assess and reflect on their own learning. Teachers, meanwhile, were better able to differentiate assessments while maintaining high expectations for all students.

*Ample opportunities to acquire and practice language:* Increased in-person and online interactions with peers and teachers provided English learners with more opportunities to practice academic English in meaningful contexts.
This examination of flipped learning at Patriot High School breaks new ground in describing an innovative approach to teaching diverse adolescent learners. The findings suggest that the model is particular promising as a means of improving outcomes for English learners. Several insights stand out as particular important for future research and for educators considering adoption.

1. Flipped learning is not static. The Patriot High School community developed their own definition of flipped learning within their specific institutional and community context, and their understanding and use of flipped learning practices continues to evolve.

2. Flipped learning is more than technology. Technology alone does not necessarily lead to enhanced learning, and technology was only one of many hundreds of factors that the Patriot High School community identified as important to effort to make learning more student-centered.

3. Flipped learning facilitates a more student-centered practice. As the traditional role of the teacher gives way to student-led interactions in a flipped environment, teachers witness student progress in real time, getting to know their students better and see where they need support. The result is a more motivating learning experience for all.

4. School context matters. A number of critical investments and school structures helped create an environment in which teachers and students could focus on innovation and learning. Without such conditions, we might see flipped learning reduced to the use of iPads, rather than the transformational instructional initiative documented here.

The study revealed a great potential for using flipped learning approaches to enhance the school experience of English learners. Further research is needed to shed light on the how particular methods influence student learning and to establish these patterns across a wider sample of schools and students.
The Nellie Mae Education Foundation is the largest philanthropic organization in New England that focuses exclusively on education. The Foundation supports the promotion and integration of student-centered approaches to learning at the high school level across New England—where learning is personalized; learning is competency-based; learning takes place anytime, anywhere; and students exert ownership over their own learning. To elevate student-centered approaches, the Foundation utilizes a four-part strategy that focuses on: building educator ownership, understanding and capacity; advancing quality and rigor of SCL practices; developing effective systems designs; and building public understanding and demand. Since 1998, the Foundation has distributed over $210 million in grants.

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