

## Three reasons to flip your English lessons and how to do that

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### Abstract

The paper is aimed at revealing the matter of using flipped classroom techniques when teaching Maritime English. It's been proved that the 21<sup>st</sup> century sets new requirements to the competencies students need to acquire during their education thus demanding from teachers to search for and actively apply new and modern teaching strategies along with the traditional face-to-face learning. The introduction of computer-based technologies into the system of education can help to motivate students and increase their interest towards the material presented. It also allows for the round-the-clock access and availability of learning materials which are delivered via Internet and are stored at special data-bases at the same time giving equal opportunities to access them from all over the world.

We believe that such approach is also beneficial for English teachers as well because by placing the materials on-line and having students already familiar with the topic during the classroom-time provides teachers with the opportunity to save precious time for developing key language skills and competencies – speaking and/or writing – by organizing group discussions, debates, presentations and peer teaching instead of lecturing or making them read long technical texts. Though, of course, there are some limitations which are determined by the specific features of a language lesson and which should be taken into consideration when planning a flipped English lesson.

The paper suggests key ideas of how to 'flip' your English lessons depending on the year of education and the level of the group. We also suggest a practical example of how to organize a 'flipped English lesson' with the students and what lesson format may be suitable for such an occasion.

**Keywords:** communicative approach, innovative techniques in teaching foreign languages, blended learning, flipped classroom.

**Introduction:** Over the last few years the national strategy of Ukraine in terms of high education development has been aimed at satisfying the need of renewal and modernization in compliance with the requirements of the European Union (*Ugoda pro asotsiatsiyu, 2014*). Besides, the strong demand of international maritime community to increase the English language proficiency among future seafarers and thus to enhance safety of life at sea makes us

face the need to change the traditional classroom face-to-face teaching approach where a teacher is a "sage-on-the-stage" into more flexible, student-centered and accessible on-line-based methodology allowing for students to work at the material, study it independently and for teachers to become "guide-on-the-side" monitoring students' performance and facilitating their activities in the classroom.

Moreover, in today's rapidly changing and complex world, students need much more than a traditional academic approach which provides them with theoretical knowledge to be successful and competitive. They need a broader set of knowledge and skills that enables them to understand, navigate, adapt, and thrive in response to novel and complex problems and contexts. The set should for sure include:

- interpersonal skills (communication and collaboration skills, as only working collaboratively students cooperate to identify and suggest solutions to academic, social and professional problems);
- intrapersonal skills (positive mind sets and learning-to-learn skills, as the world is changing rapidly around them and students need to be able to respond to the changes and keep up with the modern tendencies and trends of both professional and social areas of their lives. It will help them to monitor and direct their own development in terms of Life Long Learning);
- cognitive skills (critical thinking and problem solving skills which allow for the application of tools and techniques gleaned from different sources to formulate and solve a problem. This will include data analysis, reasoning, conclusion making, etc.).

So, as educators we need to think about appropriate approaches and techniques which will help to create the opportunities for students to build the essential competencies, think about the ways and methods of applying them at the lessons and introducing them into our practice remembering the fact that students should not be plunged into extremely new teaching and learning environment harshly and heedlessly as the effect may appear to be quite opposite of what has been expected.

So, at Kherson State Maritime Academy we tried to analyze the possibility of flipping our Maritime English classes and work out a step by step procedure for doing this at the lessons.

Flipped English classroom – why to do that?

A flipped classroom is a pedagogical approach in which a conventional notion of a classroom-based approach is inverted, so that students get an opportunity to master the material needed at home at a convenient time and at a pace which is suitable for them. In such way, the lower level of learning (according to Bloom's taxonomy) such as remembering and understanding is happening at home, meaning that the lower level of cognitive work is done before the class.

Thus, a teacher's class-time activity shifts from lecturing, presenting or demonstrating to working with small groups of students or one-on-one with those who most need the teacher's help (Rosen D.J., Stewart C., 2014).

In the majority of resources we have studied on the issue of flipped classes the main argument for flipping the classroom which was presented by researchers is that it changes the traditional classroom approach where a teacher is "typically the central focus of a lesson and the primary disseminator of information during the class period" (Ryback D., Sanders J., 1980). But we, at Kherson State Maritime Academy, have actually managed this problem with the introduction of a communicative approach to language teaching suggested by the Model Course 3.17 in Maritime English. Within the framework of this approach our teachers follow its basic principles, one of which says that teaching should be student-centered (IMO Model Course 3.17, 2009). Another thing is that as language teachers we do not have so much of a material to lecture the students about, to supply them with long and complicated explanations of principles or phenomena as, for example, the teachers of chemistry, physics and the like.

So, for us it was a disputable matter if we really need a flipped classroom approach and if the number of its benefits is bigger than the number of challenges it brings forth. All the teachers of English language department for deck officers were asked to speculate on the matter for a while and then share their ideas at one of the Faculty Development Sessions we regularly conduct at KSMA. And as the result it appeared that there are still some important benefits we may have from implementing this approach though there are still some limitations we need to consider to make the process useful, productive and effective.

Among all the reasons we discovered there were top three named by all the teachers and we want to share them here.

The first and the most important reason is that at KSMA we are not just English teachers but Maritime English teachers and it means that what we actually do is CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) and thus there are some topics and materials which should be learned and understood by students at home before they come to the class. The students must master English together with their professional topics such as cargo handling aspects, collision avoidance, safe working practices, mooring and anchoring and the like. So, they will develop their English speaking and/or writing skills when discussing their professional issues, formulating and suggesting the ways to solve professionally-related problems and for that purpose they will need to get some idea and familiarize with the content of what they are going to talk/write about first. And as the revised Bloom's taxonomy suggests, they do need to cope with "understanding" and "remembering" first and only then start "applying" and "analyzing"

stage of their cognitive work. And it is quite obvious, in our opinion, which part it is better to leave for home and self-studying and which one should be done in the class.

Yet another reason for implementing the flipped classroom approach when teaching Maritime English is the language level of the students who enter KSMA (or any other educational institution). Unfortunately, though English is taught in all Ukrainian schools starting from the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, we still face the reality of low-level English language proficiency. To cope with the situation in the best way, we at KSMA group the students according to their language level by suggesting them a division test at the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> academic year. Students with the best results go to groups 111 or 112 and students with lower results are shifted to groups 113, 114 or 115 correspondingly. Teaching materials for different groups are chosen according to the level of English skills so that the information is not too easy or too difficult for students. Actually, the idea is to use info which is a bit challenging and demands some effort from students. Thus, flipping the class and delivering information online allows for the multiple and repeated reviewing and/or rereading until the idea is quite clear for everybody. Students are provided with the possibility to go through the material in detail at their own pace as many times as they need without feeling ashamed or uncomfortable as, for example, when seeing that other students can do it faster or that they understand it better at the lesson. So, all the students in such a way get a chance to learn and understand the key concepts of the topic and then perform at the lesson at their best during collaborative activities of discussion, debating, project-making, etc.

And the last but not the least important reason for flipping our English lesson was, of course, motivation. As we all know motivation is an important factor that can greatly influence the achievements of learners without which even individuals with the most remarkable abilities do not accomplish long-term goals. There are many things that can motivate students (good marks, praise from the teacher, opportunity for promotion or getting a specific position, etc.) but one of the most effective ways, in our opinion, to motivate students is to make them interested in what is going on around them. It is not a secret that a young person of the 21<sup>st</sup> century cannot imagine his/her life without digital online technologies and the time he/she spends online and using gadgets is immense. So why not to use this affection for educational purposes? With the introduction of flipped classes students can watch the presentations as many times as they wish from a computer at home, work, a public library, or in the program or school computer lab. Increasingly, students who do flipped learning are also watching the instructional videos from portable digital devices such as smart phones or electronic tablets. Studying process in such a way becomes more engaging and entertaining allowing for the growth of interest and additional motivation leading to the quality and effectiveness promotion of the educational process.

Nevertheless, all above mentioned benefits of flipping your English classes may actually end in failure if done without appropriate preparation and required consideration. Our teaching experience at KSMA shows that you can't just flip a class whenever you want to. Actually, we insist that the 1<sup>st</sup> year cadets, who just enter the Academy are already overwhelmed by the great change they experience concerning the organizational issues (number and duration of lessons, the obligation to keep duty, the discipline they are faced with, etc.) and they do need the time to get used to them and to realize what is wanted from them. So, we suppose that the 1<sup>st</sup> semester is a kind of adaptation period for our cadets. Besides, their level of professional knowledge is quite low at this stage of their education and we need only to start developing their self-studying skills and let them gradually learn how to learn by introducing only some elements of flipped classes instead of flipping the whole course at once. Later on, with the course of time, with the practical experience they will gain during their shipboard practices, they will become more and more mature and able to discover, learn and understand the information by themselves having the classroom time left for collaborative work, group discussions, project makings and the like.

Another thing we need to mind is the initial language level our cadets have when entering the Academy. With low-level groups (114, 115) the approach may work, of course, as it provides a possibility to re-watch and re-read the information as many times as needed, but at the same time can be problematic to apply as there is always a risk to post material which is too difficult or challenging for cadets so they may start doubting their ability to cope with it and feeling ashamed to admit it at the lesson and thus losing the possibility to catch up with going-on.

So, the main idea a teacher needs to keep in mind when starting flipping a class is that the introduction of this approach must be considered, deliberate and staged beginning with some elements of flipped classes first, then gradually moving on to a flipped lesson and then, probably, to the whole flipped course. Such gradual implementation will allow for both teachers and students to grasp the idea of what is going on better, to notice the most challenging points in the process and to think about the ways for improvement.


Here we suggest some ideas of how to flip your English lesson. As the lesson was conducted with the 1<sup>st</sup> year cadets of KSMA (the period which was previously recommended only for introducing some elements of flipped classroom) the lesson cannot be considered fully flipped and shows the way how to teach students to learn themselves but mindful monitoring and guiding of the process is strongly required at this stage.

The flipped learning approach has two main elements to consider: the direct instruction part at home and the interactive face-to-face element in the classroom (Sharples M., Adams A., 2014).

So, we strongly believe that the first thing you need to do is to figure out when and why to flip your class, i.e. a teacher should understand that the flipping process should be done at the stage when students may feel free to discover some additional profound details about the topic they are learning at the moment. It means that the key concepts, main vocabulary should be introduced during traditional lessons to allow students to concentrate on the content but not struggling independently through unfamiliar and sometimes too complicated language. For our flipped class we chose the topic “Hazard signs” in the module Personal Safety Aboard (Welcome Aboard, 2019). During the traditional lessons we with students learnt the information about different groups of warning sign used on board ships, they practiced how to describe the appearance of the signs and recognize them from the description. Plus, we discussed the functions and the message each sign delivers to seafarers and people aboard. Having assumed that the main concepts and vocabulary have been mastered by the cadets we suggested them to work individually and to explore the detailed information about hazard signs.

And here comes another important thing to remember about flipping your lesson: you must provide your students with precise and clear instruction of what to do at home. It means that such instructions as “watch a video about...”, ‘read about...’ or ‘learn about’ will not work, especially with the students who only try this approach for the first time. They need to have a clear understanding what to pay attention to, how to distinguish important facts and what final outcome they need to achieve as the result of studying at home. This will help students to learn how to learn and to understand when the aim is achieved and they may feel confident about their knowledge or if they still need to work upon the topic and search for more information or explore the issue better.

For our purposes (as we aimed at providing our students with the information about the type of risk a hazard sign warns a person about) we supplied them with a print out of a hazard sign (the pictures were distributed among the cadets at random). As there are 12 cadets in the group, we chose 4 types of hazard signs to be explored: explosive, corrosive, toxic/poisonous and biohazard. After that we assigned the task “Surf for the information about your type of hazard sign and complete the table”:

| <b>Sign</b>   | <b>Type of danger</b> | <b>Examples of substances</b> | <b>Shipboard places</b> | <b>Risks</b> |
|---|-----------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|
|  |                       |                               |                         |              |

With that the first element (the direct instruction part at home) is done and we proceed to the next important element – the interactive face-to-face element in the class. At this stage students

meet and engage with peers in different purposeful activities. As at KSMA we widely use communicative approach to the English language teaching we mostly use different types of pair and group work, activities based on collaboration and the like. So, in this specific situation we found it preferable to combine flipped classroom approach with the peer instruction method. 12 cadets were exploring the information about 4 types of hazard signs so it was possible to arrange them in groups of three first and give them time to share and compare the information they had found, to learn from each other the additional information they had missed or couldn't understand at home. By the end of such group discussion the cadets were able to come to final agreements on the main items presented in their tables and had quite clear idea about the risk type identified by the sign they had. During this stage of the lesson the teacher was monitoring the discussions and, being a facilitator, guided them where necessary. The next step of the lesson procedure included whole class peer instruction. The representative of each group had to present the key concept ideas about the type of danger according to the sign they had while other groups were to complete the tables with the relevant information. The cadets were encouraged to ask questions, to inquire about some details to make everything clear about the piece of information presented. At the final stage of the lesson – Production (if to follow PPP lesson format suggested by the Model Course 3.17) – the cadets were engaged into problem-solving activity. During this stage they had to actually apply the conceptual knowledge of what they had learnt before. For that purpose the teacher rearranged the groups to provide for the opportunity to work with other people. Each group was given the instruction to develop the list of safety guidelines for "crewmembers who were about to work in a space labeled with one of the hazard signs". The instruction list was to include not only the recommendations but also the reasons to follow them to help people to be aware of all potential risks. At the end each group presented their guidelines and other groups were encouraged to ask questions or comment on their group-mates' performance. So, proceeding from the above, we may conclude that the flipped classroom approach may give both teachers and students the possibility for interactive, engaging and motivating educational environment which will make the language learning process more interesting and efficient, will provide for the development of critical thinking and give students the chance to learn how to learn. It also saves precious classroom time for the development of key language skills and competencies – speaking and/or writing – by organizing group discussions, debates, presentations and peer teaching instead of lecturing or making them read long technical texts. Further exploration of the flipped English lessons will allow for the elaboration of lesson plan formats and methodological recommendations and guidelines of

how to implement the approach at different levels within the framework of life-long learning and continuous education.

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