

Engaging Learners In A VUCA World: The ‘Flip’ Side

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Abstract:

We exist in a world that evolves in the blink of an eye – a place marked by pandemics, wars, and relentlessly advancing technology. The VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) world has put our education system to test, with the challenge of staying relevant and engaging. Traditional teaching approaches struggle to connect with a generation of learners accustomed to fast-paced digital interactions and instant gratification, who seek relevance to the real-world. They do not equip them with the broader spectrum of skills required to thrive in this complex environment. Flipped learning, however, has emerged as an innovative pedagogy that aligns with the demands of the VUCA world and resonates with these learners. This paper explores how flipped learning fosters learner engagement across three key areas: student-content, student-instructor, and student-student engagement. It provides practical guidelines and a sample lesson plan for ESL teachers who want to dip their toes into flipping.

Keywords: VUCA world, Flipped Learning, Student engagement, ESL

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I. The VUCA World

The acronym VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity) aptly sums up the current global environment we live in, interwoven with the threads of constant change and unpredictability. We are living amidst serious geopolitical conflicts that bespeak the volatile nature of the present world. The Covid-19 pandemic is an unsettling testament to uncertainty and how it can completely change our lives in ways we could never predict. Meanwhile, the unprecedented pace at which technology is advancing, exemplified by artificial intelligence (AI) and automation, only hints at the complexity and ambiguity that the future holds for us.

VUCA in the Realm of Education

The term VUCA was originally coined by the US Army War College (Magee II, 1998), after the cold war and has been adopted and used widely in the context of business and leadership since. It is used to refer to change and the necessity to adapt to it (Tiefenbacher, 2019). As explained below, the concept can be extended to the current educational landscape, since the domain of education is not immune to the complexities and rapid changes that exist in the larger world.

- **Volatility:** The rapid advancements in technology impact education just the same way it does to other sectors. AI, for instance, has now become an important part of our lives, impacting the way we interact, work, and even learn. In our current educational system, that is rooted in stability and the transfer of knowledge and skills through teacher-centered approaches, technology and its ever-evolving nature calls for a shift in educational paradigms to prepare learners not only for challenges that exist today but also to equip them for the future.
- **Uncertainty:** The Covid-19 pandemic is a poignant reminder of the uncertain times we live in. It completely disrupted the traditional models of education; consequently, schools and colleges worldwide had to transition to remote teaching-learning overnight. Furthermore, with a rapidly evolving industry, driven by constant growth in technology, the nature of future jobs is highly uncertain. Educators and students alike might struggle to anticipate the kind of skills and knowledge required in the future. E.g., AI has given rise to roles like ‘Prompt Engineer’ and ‘AI Ethicist’. Similarly, the gig economy with its unconventional career options such as a social media influencer, a YouTuber, or a professional gamer, is challenging traditional career paths. This highlights the unpredictability of the future job market and necessitates the adoption of learning approaches that foster adaptability and continuous skills development.
- **Complexity:** Learners today come from diverse backgrounds with varied learning styles, mixed abilities, unique cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and different levels of digital literacy. Addressing this complexity of diverse learning needs warrants an approach that embraces diversity, creating inclusive and flexible learning environments where learners of all abilities can thrive.
- **Ambiguity:** In this constantly changing environment, educational goals are also evolving, which gives rise to ambiguity regarding what defines a well-rounded education today. We live in an interconnected and highly

digitalized world. The goals of education are no longer limited to academic achievement. Skills like adaptability, critical thinking, problem solving, and digital literacy have become more crucial than ever. Additionally, the traditional methods of assessing learner performance fall short of capturing the complete range of skills and abilities required to thrive in a VUCA world, creating ambiguity in evaluating educational success.

Engaging Learners in the VUCA Context

As we navigate through the implications of VUCA in education, a huge challenge stares us in the face – how do we engage learners in such a dynamic environment of highly advanced technology? Microsoft Corp. conducted a study in 2015, according to which the average attention span has decreased from 12 seconds to 8 seconds, which is less than that of a goldfish (Mcspadden, 2015). Within this landscape, sustaining engagement through traditional teaching approaches is an uphill task for educators.

According to a global report published by Oxford University Press (OUP) in 2021, that captured insights of teachers from 92 countries (including India), the greatest challenge that teachers faced during the pandemic was student engagement (India Education Diary, 2021). Engaging students in a VUCA environment is a problem as the traditional models of education, based on lecture-style of instruction, struggle to engage a generation that is used to interactive digital content and instant gratification. In an age when information is just a tap away, passive reception of knowledge in the classroom holds less relevance.

Way Forward – Call for Innovation

“Modern problems require modern solutions”. It is time we rethink our approaches and explore alternative and innovative pedagogies that align with the demands of today’s world. One such pedagogical approach that has emerged with the potential to address the challenges driven by the VUCA world is Flipped Learning.

The subsequent sections of the paper will discuss the concept of flipped learning, investigating its relationship with student engagement, and exploring how flipping the classroom enhances engagement across the three dimensions: student-content, student-student, and student-teacher interaction.

Understanding the Flip

Definition of Flipped Learning

In a traditional classroom, the teacher delivers the content via a lecture and exercises are assigned as homework. Flipped learning *flips* this traditional model of education by reimagining the concepts of group and individual spaces for effective learning. The Flipped Learning Network (2014, para. 2), defines flipped learning as:

A pedagogical approach in which direct instruction moves from the group learning space to the individual learning space, and the resulting group space is transformed into a dynamic, interactive learning environment where the educator guides students as they apply concepts and engage creatively in the subject matter.

In other words, in a flipped classroom, learners access the content at home (individual space) usually via instructional videos (or PowerPoint slides, readings, etc.), so that the freed-up class time (group space) is used for active learning activities and problem solving, under the guidance of the teacher.

The Core Principles of Flipped Learning

The Flipped Learning Network (2014) has established four pillars or key principles which serve as the foundation of flipped learning:

a) Flexible Environment

Flipped learning enables a learning environment which is flexible enough to accommodate individual learning styles and needs. It allows learners to access and engage with instructional content anywhere, anytime, and at their own pace. Moreover, it provides learners with the flexibility to choose how they want to learn and demonstrate their learning.

b) Learning Culture

Unlike the traditional model of education, which is teacher-centered, flipped learning makes a shift to active learning, where learners actively participate in problem-solving and application of knowledge. It cultivates a rich learning culture that encourages engagement, collaboration, and critical thinking. By moving direct instruction to the individual space, the group space is used to explore concepts in greater depth to promote deeper understanding in the learners.

c) Intentional Content

In this model, teachers constantly examine what they should teach directly and what the learners should explore on their own. By carefully choosing the content to be delivered outside the group learning space, they make the best use of class time by engaging learners in meaningful discussions, problem-solving, application-based learning, etc.

d) Professional Educator

The instructor in this model is a facilitator and mentor who guides students on their learning journey. They spend class time observing learners, providing guidance and feedback whenever necessary, personalizing instruction to cater to individual learner needs, and constantly tracking their progress. They also reflect on their own instructional practices and improve them by collaborating with fellow educators and accepting feedback.

What is Student Engagement?

Student engagement, a complex, multifaceted concept (Fredricks et al., 2004) is an important construct to take into account while discussing flipped learning as it has been linked to effective learning, motivation, and academic achievement (Appleton et al., 2008; Fredricks et al., 2004).

The Glossary of Education Reform (2016) defines student engagement as “the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education” (para. 1). However, there has not been a single, widely acceptable definition of student engagement. Researchers have conceptualized engagement in different ways over time, exploring various dimensions and factors that influence it (Astin, 1999; Fredricks et al., 2004; Kahu, 2003).

Considering the significant role of technology in various flipped learning environments, whether it is a fully online flipped course, a flipped hybrid course, or a web-enhanced course (Talbert, 2017), it is imperative to adopt a framework that acknowledges the affordances of educational technology and its potential to promote student engagement. Therefore, this paper draws on Leslie’s (2019) ‘Trifecta of Student Engagement’, a framework based on Moore’s (1989, as cited in Leslie, 2019) three essential areas of interaction in online courses: student-content, student-student, and student-instructor interaction.

Building on Michael Moore’s work, the Trifecta of Student Engagement framework emphasizes on: student-content engagement, student-student engagement, and student-instructor engagement that contribute to the overall engagement of students in a course.

Engaging Learners through the Flip

Flipped learning allows learners to engage deeply in their learning by cultivating a student-centric learning environment that encourages active participation in and outside the class, enables learners to take ownership of their learning, offers more flexibility and choice in terms of different learning styles and preferences, and creates personalized learning experiences. In this section, we now examine how this pedagogical model aligns with the three areas of student engagement.

Student-Content Engagement in Flipped Learning

By restructuring how time, space and activity are assigned in a class (Talbert, 2017), the flipped model provides learners with the opportunity to engage deeply with the content in their individual spaces. Using technology, learners can access instructional videos, e-books, online readings, etc. before coming to the class, allowing them to work at their own pace, review difficult concepts, and explore complex topics further, eventually leading to a deeper understanding of the content. Teachers can either share pre-recorded videos by other teachers that are publicly available on platforms like YouTube, Khan academy, TED-ed, etc. or create their own instructional videos integrating multimedia elements to increase engagement, capture learners’ attention and enhance their understanding and retention of information (Choi and Johnson, 2005, as cited in Leslie, 2019). Online platforms like Edpuzzle, Camtasia, Snagit, Flipgrid etc. allow teachers to record themselves, capture their screens as well as embed questions and quizzes in the video making it more interactive and engaging learners in self-assessment.

Moreover, flipped learning offers opportunities for personalizing content (Bergmann & Sams, 2015). Learners can choose the modality in which they want to learn and explore resources according to their learning preferences and needs. Authentic content like documentaries, case-studies, real-world examples, podcasts, vodcasts, vlogs, etc. is easy to incorporate in a flipped class helping students to connect the content with their own life experiences. “Engagement can occur when students have the opportunity to personalize course content and build a meaningful connection of course content to their lives” (Leslie, 2019: p. 82).

Student-Student Engagement in Flipped Learning

In a traditional classroom, there is limited interaction among learners due to constraints of time and direct instruction. However, the recovered class time in a flipped classroom is utilized for peer-peer interactions, group projects and collaborative activities. Flipped learning environments enable collaborative learning and peer interaction in synchronous as well as asynchronous group spaces. Learners can participate in real-time conversations, web-conferencing, and virtual group activities in synchronous environments. In asynchronous spaces, on the other hand, they collaborate at their own convenience, circumventing the limitations of time and place. The flipped model allows learners to engage in meaningful interactions with each other; they participate in discussions, exchange ideas, provide peer-feedback, collaborate on projects, and co-construct their knowledge.

Technology plays an important role here. E.g., online discussion boards allow learners to participate in asynchronous discussions where they can ask questions and seek clarifications, collectively solve complex problems, engage in debates, share their work (assignments, projects, etc.) for peer review and feedback, and reflect on their learning experiences. A variety of platforms such as Discord, Slack, VoiceThread, wikis, Google Docs, Jamboard, Padlet, etc. enable learners to collaboratively write and edit their work in real time, as well as comment and provide feedback on each other's work. Additionally, synchronous web-conferencing tools like Zoom, Google Meet, Webex, etc. facilitate real-time communication and collaboration among learners. They allow virtual class discussions to happen seamlessly, just like they would happen in face-to-face classrooms. This fosters a sense of community among learners and positively impacts their learning (Leslie, 2019).

Student-Instructor Engagement in Flipped Learning

In addition to engaging learners with the course content and enhancing peer-peer interaction, flipped learning also facilitates interaction between learners and the teacher. As opposed to a traditional classroom, in a flipped classroom, teachers become facilitators who guide learners through their learning process. They have more time and opportunities to interact with learners one-on-one or in small groups. This allows the teacher to give personalized feedback, respond to their questions and concerns promptly, provide individualized support, and track their progress.

Additionally, in online and hybrid flipped learning, digital tools like online journals, video-conferencing, e-mails, discussion boards, Learning Management Systems (LMS), etc. allow channels for continuous interaction between learners and the teacher, even outside the physical classroom. Online journals provide learners a space where they can reflect on their learning experiences, document their thought process, and share their progress and challenges with the teacher (Leslie, 2019). Teachers can read their students' entries and give their comments, suggestions, and engage in a conversation. LMS such as Google Classroom, Moodle, Blackboard, Canvas, and other platforms like Edmodo, ClassDojo, etc. make it easier for teachers to broadcast announcements, share educational materials, post assignments and also grade them. These LMS have integrated discussion boards where teachers can stimulate discussions with learners and provide feedback. Video conferencing tools such as Zoom, Google Meet, etc. help in increasing instructor presence and humanizing the learning experience for the learners in online environments.

Flipping the English Classroom: Practical Guidelines

The role of English teachers is an important one in the VUCA world. Fostering language proficiency is no longer enough to excel outside the classroom. Teachers bear the responsibility of preparing independent, self-directed learners who can think critically, analyze information, collaborate with diverse teams, adapt to new contexts, navigate the digital landscape responsibly, and communicate effectively. We now discuss some practical guidelines (followed by a sample flipped lesson plan) for flipping in a limited-resource classroom context.

1. Gauge access to technology

It is crucial to take stock of available technology before planning to flip. Begin by accessing the kind of devices learners have access to – smartphones, laptops, etc. and whether the access is personal or shared. Also identify the platforms available for communication and delivery of pre-class content. E.g., if LMS such as Google Classroom, Moodle, etc. are not feasible, due to various reasons (like limited internet connectivity), simple adaptations like using WhatsApp groups can be made to share materials and communicate with the learners.

2. Decide what to flip

It is better to start small than not at all. Instead of flipping the entire syllabus, begin by selecting a lesson or only a specific part of the lesson and gradually expand as comfort grows. For instance, consider flipping a grammar point integrated in the textbook lesson that the learners find most difficult or boring to learn in class.

3. Set clear learning goals

Define the learning objectives for the flipped lesson and communicate them clearly to the learners. It could be comprehending the overall text, using a particular reading strategy, mastering a grammar point, and so on. It is important that learners understand the purpose of the pre-class activities.

4. Utilize Open Educational Resources (OERs)

Leverage the free OERs available online. Use existing videos and other learning materials from platforms like YouTube, TED-ed, etc. that have been created by experienced ESL educators. As confidence builds, teachers can start creating personalized videos to suit the specific needs of their learners.

5. Keep the videos short

Whether creating your own videos or using existing videos made by other teachers, keep them short. Aim for videos between 5 to 8 minutes to ensure learners stay engaged. When creating new videos, make sure they are interactive. For instance, embedding questions in the video to check comprehension or simply asking learners to make notes.

6. Design pre-class activities

Develop pre-class activities that are engaging and aligned with the learning objectives. Integrate some kind of activity with each learning material to ensure active engagement with the content. The goal is to promote understanding, not just passive viewing. For instance, a small comprehension quiz using Google Forms can be accompanied by the video or learners can be asked to make notes. This is also a great way for the teacher to check whether the learners watched the video.

7. Design in-class activities

Design in-class activities that foster critical thinking, problem-solving, and application of learned concepts. Incorporate discussions, debates, role-plays, etc. related to the pre-class content. Make learners work in pairs and/or small groups to encourage collaboration. For instance, if the learners were introduced to the reading strategy 'previewing texts' through the pre-class video, the in-class session could focus on the application of it, where learners work in groups to extract key information from a given text using the strategy.

8. Design post-class activities

Craft post-class activities such as answering questions on a discussion board, reflective writing, collaborative projects etc. to consolidate learning or provide extra practice. These activities can also be viewed as opportunities for both formative and summative assessments.

9. Build a feedback mechanism

Encourage learners to share their experience with the flipped model, including their opinions, questions, challenges and suggestions. Use their feedback to evaluate the model and improve it over time. E.g., brief surveys or short informal interviews can be conducted to understand how learners are adapting to the new format and what improvements can be made.

Sample Flipped Lesson Plan

The sample lesson plan presented below is an excerpt from a comprehensive flipped learning plan designed for the lesson "The Tattered Blanket" (Telangana State SCERT English textbook *Our World through English*, class VIII).

Learning Goal: To understand, identify, and use noun phrases.
Technology Required: Device(s): Smartphone/laptop with internet connection Digital tools/platforms: Google Classroom, Google Forms, YouTube
Pre-class Activity: <i>Objective: To introduce learners to the concept of noun phrases.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learners watch a YouTube video on noun phrases assigned on Google Classroom. They answer a brief quiz (Google Form) based on the video content. <i>Language skills/aspects: Grammar, listening</i>
In-class Activities: 1. Review of pre-class content (5-7 min) <i>Objective: To activate learners' schema of the learned concepts.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Begin the session by briefly reviewing the flipped video on noun phrases. Engage learners in a class discussion to recap the main concepts learnt from the video. <i>Language skills/aspects: Grammar</i>

2. Game: 'Noun phrase scavenger hunt'

Objective: To enable learners to identify and analyze noun phrases.

- Divide the class into small groups and distribute printed copies of selected excerpts from the text "The Tattered Blanket".
- Each group must (a) identify and highlight noun phrases within their assigned excerpt and (b) analyze them (break down into the constituent parts i.e., modifier and head).
- After analyzing the noun phrases, groups present their findings to the whole class explaining why they selected each phrase.

Language skills/aspects: Grammar; speaking

Post-class activity:

Google Classroom discussion thread

Objective: To reinforce the learned concepts by allowing their application through creating original sentences with noun phrases.

- Post a discussion thread on Google Classroom, presenting a list of nouns from the text "The Tattered Blanket". E.g., blanket, cottage, daughter, briefcase, armchair, son.
- Learners must choose any one noun from the list, create a meaningful noun phrase with the selected noun, and use it in a sentence.
- After posting their response, learners must read their peers' responses, select one response, and comment on it providing feedback on their use of the noun phrase.
- They must mention whether the response is correct and why or give suggestions for improvement.

Language skills/aspects: Grammar; writing

II. Conclusion

With the challenge of engaging learners in a fast-paced, constantly changing, digitized environment, the need to adopt innovative pedagogies like flipped learning becomes more evident. Flipped learning transforms the traditional classroom by capitalizing on ubiquitous technology and reinventing what learners do in their group and individual spaces. It enhances their engagement with the content by providing personalized content catering to their individual needs, learning styles and preferences, and triggering their interest by using relevant, authentic resources. It fosters student-student engagement by allowing them more opportunities for collaborative work and peer-interaction, through the use of various technological tools and online platforms. Lastly, it promotes student-instructor engagement by equipping teachers with more time for individualized attention, personalized feedback and support, as well as digital tools that facilitate ongoing interaction with the learners outside the physical classroom.

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