

Adattare La Metodologia della Classe Capovolta all'Insegnamento della Storia e Letteratura in Lingua Straniera

Keywords

flipped classroom, approach, history, literature, foreign language

Keywords - native language

classe capovolta, metodologia, storia, letteratura, lingua straniera

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Language

English

Peer Reviewers

No peer reviewers chosen yet

Created on

2019-02-27

Last modified on

2019-02-27

Submission date

2019-02-27

Status

Submitted

Attachments

No attachments.

Not rated yet.

Title (in English)

Adapting The Flipped-Classroom Approach To Teaching History & Literature in a Foreign Language

Abstract

In questo articolo illustrerò la mia esperienza di docente di Inglese in un Liceo Scientifico in Italia e come abbia adattato l'**applicazione della metodologia della classe capovolta all'insegnamento della Storia e Letteratura in lingua straniera**.

Poiché alla maggior parte degli studenti di un liceo Italiano viene richiesto un alto grado di apprendimento di concetti astratti, peraltro attraverso un metodo deduttivo piuttosto che un approccio più pratico, la loro **motivazione** e il loro coinvolgimento può diventare più difficile che in altri sistemi scolastici.

Oltretutto, la giornata scolastica di in media 5 ore antimeridiane lascia agli studenti **molto lavoro da fare a casa da soli**.

Ho iniziato con l'applicare la metodologia della classe capovolta per **umentare il coinvolgimento** dei miei studenti ma ho dovuto adattarla per **massimizzare il lavoro a scuola** e **ridurre quello a casa** per andare incontro alla motivazione limitata di alcuni.

Abstract (in English)

In this article I will illustrate my experience as an English teacher in a Scientific High School in Italy and how I have tailored the **application of the flipped classroom to teaching History and Literature in a foreign language**.

As most of the students of an Italian lyceum are asked for a great level of abstract learning, most of all through a deductive method of teaching rather than a matter-of-fact approach, their **motivation** and involvement may become harder than in other systems of Education.

The short school day of average 5 morning hours also leaves the students **a lot to learn on their own**.

I started by applying the flipped classroom approach to increase my students' involvement but I had to tailor it as to **maximize the school work** and **reduce the home work** to meet the limited motivation of some.

Introduction

Given the fact that the motivation of students is the most important spring for the effectiveness of the learning process and the acquirement of **actual skills and critical thinking**, the matter of **motivating the students is even more crucial in the Italian system of Education** where the approach of teaching is through a deductive method rather than inductive, through presentation of the topics rather than recognition and self internalization.

I am not going to spend words and time on the **recent replacement of the idea of pure knowledge with skill developing** as, in my view, the change has only been carried out more formally than substantially, being the change inconsistent with the student's further university curriculum, or the high school degree final tests themselves: in all of them what is checked and assessed is still knowledge over fragmented skills.

Then, the Italian average teacher, myself included, believes that in humanities real **culture is given not so much by the development of some topics in a fragmented patchwork** so to say, but rather by an overall view of **the historical and cultural background** of an age, before learning one of its specific topics (authors or works): in other words, we believe in the importance of the **contextualization of the single topic in a background**.

Namely, in history and literature the curriculum proceeds by **learning the historical, social and cultural background of ages chronologically**, from the most ancient to the most modern, deepening some aspects and reading some authors' texts.

Although the evolution of our educational system has enormously progressed by developing documents reading, it is clear that this view still includes **a lot of memorizing and theoretical learning rather than personal response**.

What makes it even more difficult and frustrating for students is the fact that different ages are approached at the same time, as **the school subjects related to humanities do not proceed in a parallel way**, thus giving a more confusing, fragmented and theoretical view of the topics.

Last, but not least, our school system is mainly based on a **short and compressed school day** with morning school sessions of 5 average hours and self-study to be spent at home; as our school assessment focuses on the oral and written presentation of the learned topics, this definitely requires **a lot of individual learning in the afternoon**, mainly entrusted to the student's good will.....

The usual outcome of this learning environment is a good involvement and **excellent cultural development in the students with good academic background, good self-learning methods** and high sense of duty; **for the rest of the classroom** the learning process, instead, consists in **learning the topic, -often by heart**, the easiest way in a foreign language - been interviewed and checked in written tests, and be done with it.

Some even give up; in order to involve them, teachers simply lower the goalsand raise assessment scores.

In other words, a lot of **boredom** for the students and a sense of **frustration** for passionate teachers.

Content

If the **flipped-classroom** approach is the modern answer to the growing need for involving students in the learning process and developing real skills and above all **critical thinking** rather than transferring knowledge from the teacher to the learner, then it must be the best approach to make History and Literature teaching in L2 more effective.

I had read about flipping the classroom with **skepticism**, like the time when you read about all the steps a good didactic unit should include and you realize that theory and practice differ a lot, when you only have three hours a week and you can only give each unit one tenth of the time required by its literal application.

But when I stumbled into the outcome of a real flipped classroom **I got fascinated**: it was love at first sight! – or at first bump, so to say....

Few years ago, I realized I needed to take my daughter away from her middle school class of too many students (33!), where she was losing her self-confidence and motivation, where I had the impression that at home she was coming across most of the topics for the first time instead of internalizing what she had learned at school, and where the teachers were complaining all the time about the students' (in)discipline and lack of involvement.

While I was trying to find a compromise between my daughter's resistance to moving to a smaller and quieter class and the need to restore her confidence and motivation, I had dinner with a friend.

She told me her daughter was attending a "**Senza Zaino**" ("bagless"=all-work-at-school) class in another school, applying the flipped classroom approach, and she had overcome her initial resistance to this approach as it was working wonderfully on her daughter's motivation to learning.

As soon as I had an hour off, I rushed to talk to that school principal and my daughter and I visited the class she could be put in. She got fascinated and I got speechless: the students of that class were working alone on some books, discussing in small groups in a very low voice..... and even without the attendance of a teacher, who had joined us at the principal's office! I am supposed to be a rather rigorous teacher, but I never have that kind of low voices and discipline in pair-work sessions in my classes, - let alone be when I have to leave them to a janitor's supervision! - and my students are supposed to be more disciplined, as they are in a high school, that is they are older and in a "stricter" environment!

Instead, what we had before us was **the best example of the learning process, where the students take direct responsibility of the learning** and what is more, by debating and exchanging ideas, they were reaching **critical thinking, which is the final goal of our efforts as teachers.**

My daughter moved to that middle school and classroom at once..... and I couldn't help thinking of this approach all the time.

I had always felt I was already applying a motivational approach to teaching, as I was using the **inductive method** (from real literary texts to overall conclusions) with my personal website and interactive software; what is more, given the **interdisciplinary nature of history and literature** and a bit of **economics** in my background, I always

strained on the one hand to refer to economic theories in historical policies or institutions, or comparisons of political choices to present ones, and on the other to introduce lots of multimedia materials, film extracts with hints at the movie language (personal bits of my passion)....

Generally speaking, I couldn't and I can't reproach myself for not giving my students **enough stimuli**, but there is always a catch: **rewarding results** (for the students, but also for their more and more exhausted teacher) and real language and literary skills **can be observed only in a small group of people**; confused ideas, no critical thinking of any kind and limited language skills are the outcome for the ones with acceptable sense of duty but wrong mechanical-repetitive approach to self learning; finally, **I gradually lose the ones** – even if a few- **who have no intention whatsoever to be involved** at school and, what is more, to spend even a small part of their time at home to review what they have learned (or rather they haven't learned) in the morning. At least, this is the feeling I have in my self-critical and a bit ambitious view.

As I have stated in the introduction, **our school system does not help the individual teacher to overcome the students' resistance to involvement** for some structural features, such as the **abstract approach** of most teaching, the **misalignment among the contents** of school subjects which does not help clarify and reinforce ideas, and above all the **short school day of only 5 average hours** which requires a great extension of the student's individual home work.

In addition, if **History and Literature are learned in a foreign language**, the students who do not develop enough linguistic skills in the first two years are consequently disadvantaged in the approach to paraphrasing abstract and complex ideas in a sophisticated variation of an unknown language.

And this is the worst thing of all: little by little, **the cultural alongside with the linguistic gap between the most and the least motivated in the classroom widens**, leaving me with more and more effort needed to make the classes sophisticated enough for the former and at the same time simple, matter-of-fact, or rather down-to-earth and linguistically basic for the latter.

In the light of the above, while I strain all the time to find stimulating (multimedia) material to make my classes more and more interesting and involving, my big issue is to find inspirational ways to make my efforts better rewarded among the weakest students.

When I came across the flipped classroom approach in its amazing application, I started at once to search for experiences of "Senza Zaino" classes in the high school..... to find out there were hardly any.

I then went back through the literature existing on the flipped classroom approach - without my initial skepticism- to find inspiration, but I soon had to face some big questions.

Firstly, flipping the class means to give the students material to go through at home by themselves in the first place and use the class work to scan, discuss, deepen and know in the bones at school. Thus, **the work needed at home by the students was too much and too difficult for the unmotivated and weakest students** of my higher levels. And if only one had not properly worked at home, the application of the method would instantly cut him off the debate on the topic in the following class work, with the result of even more detachment of the student from the curriculum.

And what about the Italian parents of a lyceum, ready to knock at the principal's door to say their children were not doing well because their teacher was giving assignments

without presenting and explaining the topic first? And of course, parents are always right.....

I had to find a way to **tailor the approach to maximize the school work, reduce the home work** and involve all the students.

I then started to think of a way to **flip the class within the school work** and namely within the explanatory part of the school class where, however hard I tried to start from concrete (authors' text extracts or main striking historical events) and involve the most detached by standing or sitting nearby, asking them questions, showing movie extracts and so on....I always notice a few absent-minded eyes

Thus I structured my class this way: I introduced the topic briefly, let's say the historical profile of a certain period, with warming-up information, and then asked the students **to find in the text the answers to some questions**, like the causes and the effects of an event; thirdly I had my students read the text, After some minutes, we all had **a debate** in which I involved my students in **answering bits of my questions**, and finally I asked for further details about the paragraphs read.

I soon realized that the **debate** following the individual reading was **much more lively** and participated than my previous presentations of the topics: many more students were volunteering to answer the questions and take part in the discussion.

But I could still notice the **difficulty and the slow pace of a few students** and realized they were translating the paragraph into Italian in order to understand it, which is absolutely the worst thing to do!

Yet, for them it was necessary: **because of the lack of explanation from me**, given their poor linguistic background - and I dare say their lack of familiarity with individual study- **what they were reading was completely unintelligible**.

I then came up with the idea of **splitting the preparatory part into very little bits** to make goals simple and approachable by everybody and to diversify the session by shifting from one mode to another all the time.

So I started to ask the students to read very short paragraphs, with one or two very simple questions, in order to shorten to only few seconds the waiting time for the quickest.

Little by little, I also asked them to paraphrase the paragraphs in pairs in order to **avoid some students' translations into Italian and maximize their linguistic skills**. This also had the additional but not secondary goal of reducing the individual study at home.

Finally, I then started to put questions about the **students' judgments and ideas** on the topic, say how democratic or tyrannical the policy of a sovereign was, but only gradually and after a few paragraphs and specific discussions.

Conclusions

As I stated before, in my field of teaching, differently from other subjects, **the involvement of the students with the most serious linguistic gaps is gradually less and less possible**, as the more sophisticated ideas are to be understood and reported in a more and more complex foreign language.

Almost in each level of the History and Literature courses, that is from the third level, **there is at least one student whose linguistic background is so low** for a number of reasons, and who would need a greater level of tenacity to **overcome the gap with his**

mates.

Unfortunately, these very students show a surrendering attitude, often widespread in all the school subjects. **The little or no home work at all usually matches the waiver to any critical thinking** in the form of a superficial approach to learning and a mnemonic attitude which the student has no intention to abandon.

In my limited experience of only the current year's experiment with the the flipped classroom approach, **I wish I could say that the latter is involving also these few most obstinate and unmotivated students**, that it is working on their self-confidence.....but I cannot say it as yet.

I am positive that **much better results could be achieved if we had a longer school day** for the students to work with their peers and their teachers, **to avoid counting on their individual sense of duty.**

I do therefore intend to work with the flipped classroom approach on these students' motivation and self-confidence in the lower levels, so that their linguistic gap may not prevent them from getting involved in the historical topics in the higher levels.

On the other hand, I am observing **an overall better involvement of the rest of my students** – the majority of each level, after all - in the preparatory sessions; this can clearly be seen in the increased liveliness of the debates following the pair reading and paraphrasing of texts.

This is particularly positive, as **it mainly concerns usually lazy students**, that is the ones who work at home in a fragmented way. I cannot honestly say that these students do the class work out of their cultural curiosity on the topic in the first place, rather than for the opportunity to show their involvement and be scored positively without working much at home.... But I can definitely say that the general involvement of the class is visible even with them, and that **my efforts needed to involve my students are reduced.**

Last, but not the least for me, **most students seem to better identify the main issues of the topics, to think more critically and to find a degree of pleasure** in doing it, even with the reluctant ones.

As to my daughter, the approach worked beautifully to restore her involvement in the learning process and improve her self confidence in the middle school years.

Unfortunately, in her high school the approach is more traditional and is not developing those achievements any further.

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