

# Flipped Classroom in College English Language Teaching in China: A Systematic Review

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## ABSTRACT

In China, technology-driven advancements have prompted innovative approaches to English language teaching, with the flipped classroom gaining popularity among instructors. While there is increasing enthusiasm among instructors in China regarding the adoption of the flipped classroom, comprehensive research on its effectiveness in this context is lacking. In light of this, using a systematic literature review approach, this study seeks to examine trends and findings in flipped classroom instruction in English language college education. A total of 106 publications from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) were reviewed and analysed. The findings revealed a growing adoption of the flipped classroom since 2013, with a focus on its teaching application. Challenges and benefits were identified, providing valuable insights for both instructors and researchers.

**Keywords:** college English language education, flipped classroom, systematic review

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## Introduction

In its broadest sense, the flipped classroom is an instructional approach that reverses the

conventional roles of homework and in-class instruction, allowing learning to extend beyond the confines of the classroom (Bergmann & Sams, 2014). The rationale behind this approach is to

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enhance class time efficiency by transitioning away from the traditional method where instructors use valuable class time to introduce concepts through lectures. Instead, instructors can create video lectures, screencasts, or vodcasts that effectively teach students the concepts, allowing for more interactive and collaborative activities during class sessions (Milman, 2012).

It is widely understood that mastering a new language demands dedication, perseverance, and consistent effort. To improve outcomes from learning a foreign language, students should engage in activities to improve and build upon the amount of language that is being learned. It is difficult for a foreign language teacher to incorporate all that is needed to be taught in the classroom setting. Classroom time is considered one of the best times for teaching, flipping the classroom can help by using technology to move the learning part of your class home and using your time in class to do homework type exercises where you can give one-on-one help (Milman, 2012). Several studies have investigated the impact of the flipped classroom on the academic performance of learners. It has been reported that the flipped model consistently enhances students' speaking skills (Abdullah et al., 2019). Other scholars have found that this pedagogical approach improves students' writing and reading skills as well as listening skills (Ahmad, 2016; Ekmekci, 2017; Mo & Mao, 2017). Moreover, the flipped model fosters student participation, possibly as a result of the hands-on learning approach it offers (Jensen et al., 2015).

In comparison to the United States, China has been slower to adopt the flipped classroom model. While the approach has been a prevalent topic of discussion worldwide since 2011 already, it wasn't until the year 2013 that pertinent academic literature on the topic became available

in China (Yang, 2022). However, the approach grew rapidly in higher education in China over the next decade. This was due in part to the fact that the Chinese Ministry of Education was pushing for creative teaching approaches, and educators inside China are embracing the notion. For instance, the 13th five-year plan (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2016) encouraged universities to use advanced modern information technology, such as the creation of micro-courses.

In arrangement with the mandates from the Ministry of Education, teachers in higher education institutions across China investigated the feasibility of the flipped classroom and its impact on English language learning. Lu (2014) conducted a comprehensive study to evaluate the practicality of coordination of the flipped classroom in college English instruction. Discoveries uncovered that actualising a micro-lesson-based flipped classroom education is attainable. This assertion finds further support within the work of Cui and Wang (2014), who came up with a model for applying this approach in college English teaching. Additionally, extra inquiry has highlighted that the flipped model fosters increased interaction between teachers and students (Li & Wu, 2015), enhances student motivation (Zhao, 2022), and cultivates their creativity (Lu, 2016).

Although instructors in Chinese higher education institutions are progressively excited about the flipped classroom method, research on the effectiveness of the flipped classroom in college-level English language education is scarce. Deng (2019) did a literature review of this model and managed to present several examples of the theoretical research and practical practices of flipped classroom research in China. However, a notable gap arises – the

absence of clear inclusion and exclusion criteria and a comprehensive exploration of potential drawbacks associated with the flipped classroom model. The need for these vital components calls for a more thorough examination. Particularly, the review did not indicate clear criteria for including and excluding studies, which leaves the reader questioning the comprehensiveness of the analysed literature. Additionally, it did not give an exhaustive examination into not as it were the positive angles but also, the downsides of adopting the flipped classroom.

In response to these identified gaps, this study adopts a systematic review of existing literature to address the following research questions:

- RQ1: What are the trends in flipped classrooms in college English language teaching research in China?
- RQ2: What are the main findings derived from the existing body of literature?

#### **Methodology**

The first method employed in this study was the systematic review approach which according to Uman (2011) involves the selection of relevant studies from the available literature. The power of systematic reviews is their ability to provide interpretative analysis by use of past research knowledge thereby testing the generalisability of the findings across different population which may assist in reducing bias and improving reliability enhancing decision-making (Mulrow, 1994). Researchers conducting systematic reviews follow the protocol method identified by Kowalczyk and Truluck (2013) to ensure that the

results of changes are not only reliable but are also practical in decision making. Researchers using a systematic review wants to ensure that all relevant information is analysed and combined giving the study an overall consistency, reliability and validity.

#### **Data Collection**

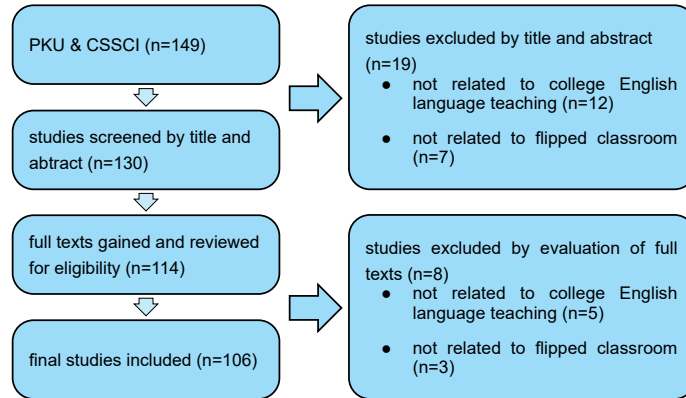
On May 04, 2023, a systematic search was conducted in China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the largest academic journal database in China, with comprehensive holdings in literature. The advanced search functions of the journal database were utilized in order to find the relevant articles in this particular search. Normally, Peking University Core (PKU) journals and Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) journals are thought to be the top level in Chinese academic journal database. The results are given below. The literature published in these journals is representative, authoritative, and of guaranteed quality. Subsequently, the filtering criteria were set to include only sources from PKU and CSSCI. The search query was set as follows: Subject = “college English” and Subject = “Flipped Classroom” (exact match). The language of the literature was set to Chinese, and the time range was set from the starting year to the present time. Out of the results received, only research studies were considered for analysis.

The search returned 149 articles. These articles were then screened and evaluated (see Figure 1 for a detailed description). Following the entire process, after excluding duplicate studies, there were ultimately 106 studies left for review.

To ensure inter-rater reliability, following searches in CNKI, two separate reviewers, both

Figure 1

Diagram of the Systematic Review Process



academic researchers, autonomously scrutinised the collected set of studies based on titles, abstracts, keywords, and, if required, full texts. Their objective was to eliminate studies that did not align with the predetermined eligibility criteria. To assess the consistency between the choices made by these independent reviewers in study selection, Cohen’s Kappa was employed. The resulting inter-rater reliability value of K stood at 0.74, indicating a good level of agreement between the two reviewers (Viera & Garrett, 2005).

**Data Analysis**

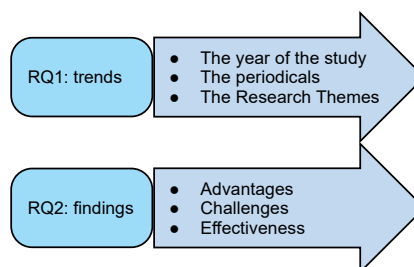
The content analysis method was adopted. As outlined by Fraenkel and Wallen (2000), content

analysis is frequently employed for textual analysis, enabling the comparison, contrast, and categorisation of data. To begin with, a Microsoft Excel document was utilised to create a form that would capture the findings of the analysis. The form encompassed various sections that directly aligned with the research questions, including the year of the study, the periodicals, research themes, and the advantages and challenges of the implementation of the flipped classroom in college English teaching (see Figure 2 for a detailed description).

Each article was thoroughly read, and the relevant information was entered into the form. After that, Microsoft Excel was employed to analyse the data by arranging codes and

Figure 2

Categories of Research Questions



categories. This included the arrangement of codes and the creation of categories to identify patterns and trends. Content analysis encouraged a thorough investigation into the research landscape concerning the integration of the flipped classroom in college English language teaching in China.

**Findings**

**Trends in Flipped Classroom in College English Language Teaching Research in China**

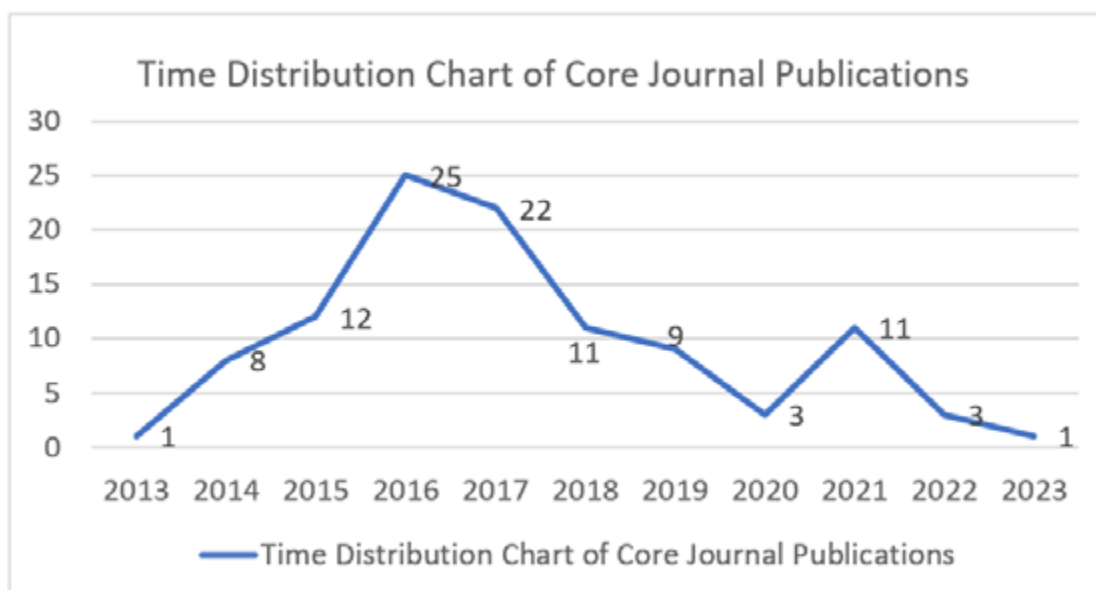
*a) The Year of the Study*

The research landscape of flipped classrooms in college English is delineated in Table 1. The study shows that research in this area began later, with a prominent emergence in 2013. A significant

increase in published articles from 2014 to 2016 indicates an increase in researchers’ interest in the subject during that time period, with 2016 being the year of the highest research outputs suggesting that researchers’ level of focus and interest was highest in the scholarly investigation of flipped classrooms at that time point. After that, the research outputs dramatically dropped until 2018, indicating the lull in the research activity happened less than 3 years. From 2018 onwards, a slow rise can be seen with fluctuations till 2021. This intricate pattern indicates that the phenomenon of the flipped classroom, particularly in the discipline of college-level English, has been a subject of continued investigation and fascination. Here, educators and researchers, rather than merely tracking or emulating trends, are positioned as far more critical, approaching the topic with greater gravity and introspection.

**Table 1**

*Time Distribution Chart of Core Journal Publications*



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However, it is noteworthy that while there has been a slow upward trend in recent years, the overall production of high-quality literature on this topic has remained quite low over the past decade. It may reflect a lack of awareness or training among educators regarding the flipped classroom model, leading to hesitancy in implementation. Additionally, institutional support and resources may be insufficient to encourage innovative teaching methods. Furthermore, the cultural context and traditional pedagogical practices in China could inhibit the adoption of new approaches. Addressing these factors is crucial not only for improving English language teaching but also for fostering a more adaptive and effective educational environment that meets the needs of students and educators alike.

### b) *The Periodicals*

The distribution of journal sources with more than two published articles is presented in Table 2. The extensive variety of journal sources

indicates a gradual increase in popularity and research interest surrounding the implementation of the flipped classroom approach in college-level English language teaching. The journal with the most published articles, computer-assisted Foreign Language Education, is considered a cornerstone publication in the field of foreign language teaching. *Modern Educational Technology*, the second-ranked journal, is a core journal in the field of educational technology. This is primarily pertinent to the focus of this study, which is flipped classroom in college English language teaching. Flipped classrooms are closely linked to educational technology, as their characteristic feature is supported by information technology. This correlation indicates the integral role technology plays in supporting the characteristic features of flipped classroom.

### c) *The Research Themes*

The distribution of research themes is presented in Figure 3. The research topic that has the highest

**Table 2**

*Distribution of Periodicals*

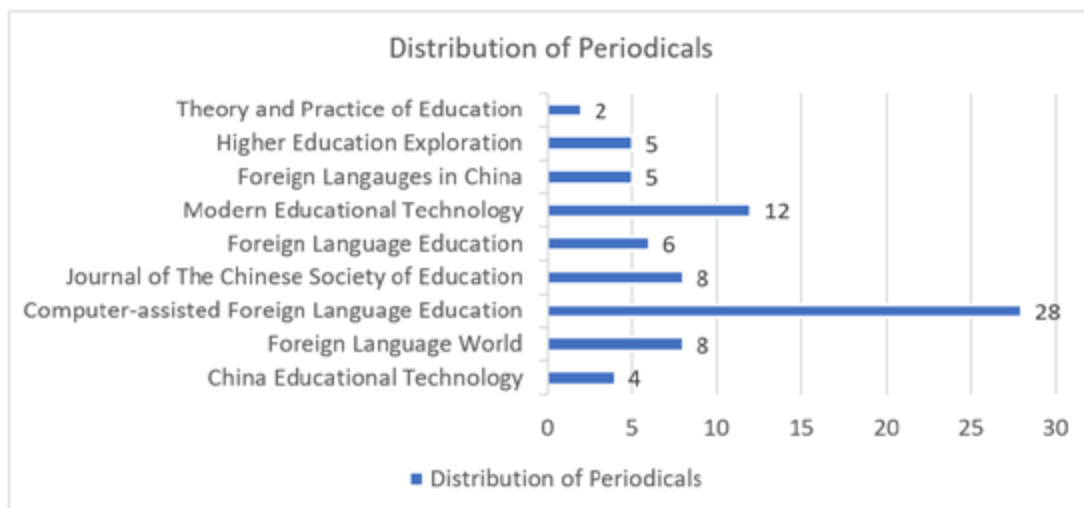
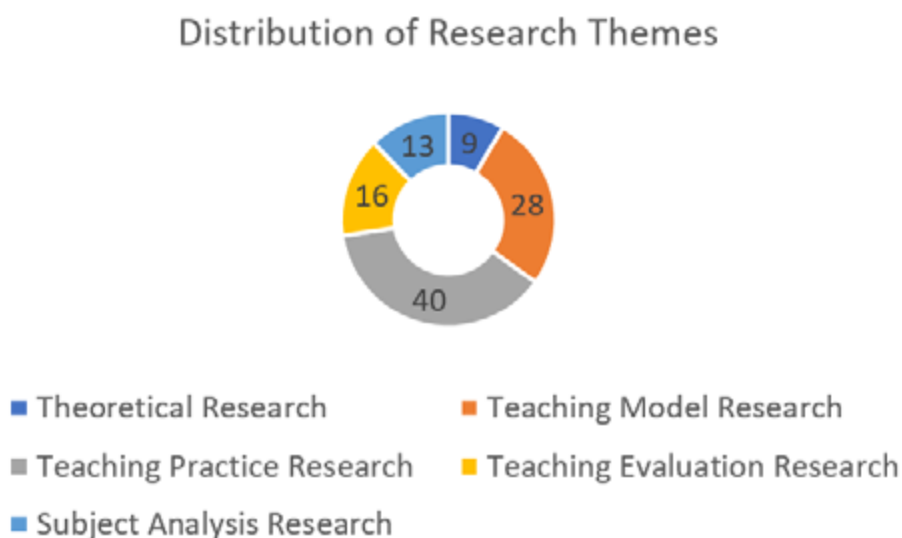


Figure 3

*Distribution of Research Themes*



number of papers is “research and application of Flipped Classroom teaching practice in college English”, comprising 40 articles. This suggests a strong emphasis on practical implementation and outcomes in the context of college English education. Following closely, the second most researched topic is “research on Flipped Classroom teaching mode and construction”, with 28 articles, indicating considerable interest in understanding the framework of this approach. The third most researched topic is “evaluation of Flipped Classroom teaching”, accounting for 16 articles, indicating a noteworthy focus on assessing the effectiveness and impact. The remaining research themes involve both teachers and students in flipped classrooms, along with theoretical investigations into flipped classroom teaching, comprising 13 and 9 articles respectively. The wide range of research topics covered in this study showcases a thorough investigation into different aspects of the flipped classroom method. This provides valuable

information for educators and researchers in the college English language education field.

#### **The Main Findings of the Flipped Classroom in College English Language Teaching Research in China**

To address RQ2, the author examined the advantages, challenges and effectiveness of the flipped classroom from the available literature, which is presented in the following section.

##### **a) Advantages**

Table 3 outlines the benefits of adopting the flipped classroom model in college-level English language education in China. The frequently cited advantages consist of enhancing learner engagement (n=16), increasing learning achievement of learners (n=13), and improving learner motivation (n=11).

Table 3

*Advantages of the Flipped Classroom in College English Language Teaching in China*

Advantages	n	Sample Article
Improving the learner engagement	16	Cao (2020)
Increasing the learning achievement of learners	13	Yuan (2019)
Improving the motivation of learners	11	Sun (2016)
Improving the learning confidence of learners	7	Wang (2016)
Providing a learning environment at learners' own pace	6	Li and Ge (2020)
Improving the speaking skills of learners	6	Xia (2021)
Enhancing the learning interests towards English	5	Zhang (2018)
Improving the vocabulary learning strategies of learners	4	Huang and Lu (2016)
Reducing the learning anxiety of learners	4	Huang (2021)
Enhancing the higher-order thinking skills	3	Xu (2017)
Improving the listening skills of learners	3	Tian et al. (2019)
Improving the academic performance in English	2	Li and Chen (2023)
Fostering a positive attitude toward the language learning process	2	Wang and Zhang (2013)

*b) Challenges*

Table 4

*Challenges of the Flipped Classroom in College English Language Teaching in China*

Challenges	n	Sample Article
Extra workload for teachers and students	6	Wang and Wu (2017)
Indigenous struggle - technology rejection problems	3	Chen (2019)

Table 4 displays the obstacles encountered when adopting the flipped classroom approach in college-level English language education in China. The most frequently mentioned challenges involve increased workloads for both teachers and students (n=6) and issues related to technology rejection (n=3).

*c) Effectiveness*

Table 5

*Effectiveness of Flipped Classroom in College English Language Teaching in China*

Findings	n	Articles
Flipped Classroom is more effective	13	Dong (2021), Zhang (2021), Yang (2019), Wang et al. (2018), Li and Cao (2017), Wang (2016), Liu (2016), Wan (2016), He (2016), Wu (2015), Li (2015), Hu and Wu (2014), Xu and Li (2014)
Flipped Classroom makes no difference	2	He and Qin (2022), Liu (2016)

Table 5 presents the effectiveness of the flipped classroom model in the context of college-level English language education in China. A total of



15 articles examine this efficacy by comparing it to conventional teaching methods. Among these articles, 13 studies concluded that the flipped classroom is a successful pedagogical approach, whereas 2 studies reported that it makes no difference in college English language teaching.

### **Discussion**

The analysis provided enables us to develop a clearer and more intuitive perspective on the research landscape of the flipped classroom in college English language teaching in China over the past decade. When examining the distribution of literature by publication year, it becomes evident that research commenced relatively late. According to statistical analysis of academic journal publications on the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), relevant research papers began to appear in 2013. As for quantity, the introduction of the flipped classroom into college English teaching attracted significant attention from researchers, with rapid growth in the initial years. However, there was a trend of declining publications in 2016 and 2017, followed by a slight increase in the number of publications in core journals in 2021. This indicates that college English flipped classroom teaching has entered an adjustment phase, moving away from its initial immaturity and relative lack of direction. In the coming years, there will likely be a shift towards more rational consideration of the flipped classroom in college English teaching.

From an analysis of research topics, it can be observed that the topic with the highest number of papers is research on the practical implementation and application of the flipped classroom in college English teaching at the university level. This indicates that researchers have shown the greatest interest in this area.

Following this, the construction of teaching models for the flipped classroom in college English teaching is another highly studied research topic in this field. However, there is relatively less research on other influential factors related to college English flipped classrooms, such as theoretical aspects of flipped classroom teaching in college English teaching.

Looking at the advantages of the flipped classroom approach in the field of college English teaching, the most commonly reported advantage is enhancing the engagement of learners. The adaptable characteristics of this approach enable it to cater to a wide range of classroom requirements. It achieves this by affording students additional out-of-class time and aiding educators in identifying areas where their students require additional support (Marks, 2015). As a result, the favourable outcomes of flipped classroom approach are expected. Nonetheless, implementing the flipped model in college English classrooms can present challenges. As highlighted in the reviewed research, these challenges include the additional workload for both teachers and students, along with issues related to technology rejection. Nevertheless, studies comparing the flipped classroom approach to traditional teaching have shown its enhanced effectiveness.

### **Conclusion**

This study focused on the research trends and the major findings of flipped classroom research in college English language teaching in China. The comprehensive analysis of the research landscape surrounding the flipped classroom in college English teaching in China over the past decade provides valuable insights into its evolution and current status.

Research on the flipped classroom approach in 2013 was not as prevalent as it is today, based on CNKI publications. There was a surge in publications from 2013 to 2016, but this was followed by a period of adjustment, marked by a decline in publications from 2017 to 2020. However, by 2021, there was a gradual increase in important publications on flipped classroom in key journals. This is evident that the flipped classroom has gained considerable attention among researchers.

The increasing popularity of the flipped classroom method in college English instruction indicates a shift towards a more deliberate approach. Researchers have mainly concentrated on the practical impacts and results of implementing the flipped classroom model in higher education, showing a strong interest in assessing its practical effects. While there has been significant focus on creating teaching methods for the flipped classroom in university English classes, there has been relatively little research on theoretical aspects and other factors. The flipped classroom technique is becoming more popular because it enhances student engagement and performance in college English classrooms. Although there are challenges to teachers and students, in particular increased workload and technology issues, studies show that the benefits outweigh the drawbacks.

One major challenge to the research was the incomplete reliance on the CNKI database for sourcing relevant literature. While CNKI is a widely used and comprehensive database in China, heavy reliance on this one source might restrict the breadth of the literature review. As a result, findings and conclusions on the entire landscape of research on the flipped classroom approach in college English teaching in China might not be fully captured. Future studies in the flipped classroom approach may include

additional databases to ensure a more thorough review of the literature.

Future research direction in flipped classroom approach may include the following:

- More research should be done examining how flipped classroom affects student results, engagement, and overall learning.
- Teachers who are thinking about flipping their classrooms should make sure they understand how it works before making the change. Teachers need to be well-prepared to successfully implement this new approach.
- Flipped college English teaching can be challenging for teachers. Therefore, it is important for the institution to promote collaboration and share insights to effective teaching among teachers.
- Successful flipped college English teaching relies on using technology efficiently. Teachers and students need to be trained to have easy access to and understanding of the required technology for a smooth integration into the teaching and learning process.

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