



## WeChat-Based “English Argumentative Writing” Flipped Teaching for EFL Students

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**Abstract:** English argumentative writing is an important and challenging course for English as Foreign Language (EFL) students since it is closely related to well-rounded English knowledge and skills, including English writing skills. In this study, a flipped learning approach was introduced to teach EFL students’ “English Argumentative Writing”, and took a unit as an example to expound how this method is employed. Moreover, by analyzing the students’ reflective contents, the strengths and weaknesses of this approach are reported. These findings could illuminate those who intend to conduct a simple and effective learning mode to motivate EFL students’ argumentative writing and to cultivate them to be a well-rounded person.

**Keywords:** information technology; WeChat; flipped classroom; English writing teaching; holistic education; teaching efficiency; classroom revolution

### Introduction

The advent of digital learning is not a merely some kind of internal “experiment” within the broader educational environment. It is a social, economic and cultural shift of startling proportions from which the higher learning cannot insulate itself. China’s higher education is no exception because technology-driven learning brings new strategies, practices, tools and resources. “The Internet has become the primary medium of English-language writing for many second language speakers around the world.” (Matsuda, et al. 2003:162)

The past decade witnessed the growing nationwide use of the new technology-driven approach in English writing in China, too. Moreover, the article written by Chen Baosheng (Minister of Education of China) in *People’s Daily* on September 29, 2018 emphasized that the “classroom revolution” should follow the basic principle: “Class teaching should be student-centered. Personalized, diversified and high-quality education should be presented for different-level students, and teachers should promote students to learn actively, cultivate their minds to their

fullest potential and develop in a well-rounded way”. Consequently, the time has come for the teachers to reform classroom teaching and conform to the principle “Classroom teaching reform is the core of education reform”.

Currently, there are some problems in the teaching of English argumentative writing in China, such as unclear teaching objectives, monotonous teaching content, lack of teacher-student interactions in classrooms, and failure to implement personalized teaching concepts. Therefore, some researchers reckon that the effect of English writing teaching doesn’t stand to the students’ academic, social and technical needs. However, the importance of English writing is unquestionable. Writing is also one of the important ways of international communication.

The present study endeavors to invite WeChat to teach “Writing for English Argumentative Essays” for English majors in a university in China. As a result, the attempt of this paper is to answer the following research questions:



1. Can this WeChat-based teaching method improve the students' writing experience, writing motivation and engagement of Chinese undergraduates?

2. Can this WeChat-based teaching method optimize quality teaching resources?

3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of flipped classroom?

## 2. Literature Review

### Flipped classrooms in English language teaching

In 2007, American chemistry teachers Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams from Woodland Park High School first proposed a teaching model for flipped classrooms and applied them to the classroom to cater for students who were struggling in learning (Bergmann & Sams, 2012).

“Flipped classrooms or flipped learning refers to instructional practices whereby students learn the content through various technology-based materials (e.g. video recordings, narrated presentations, podcasts, and course notes) before attending class, instead of being delivered in the classroom within class hours as is the conventional practice”. (Muge Adnan, 2017:206)

The recent decade saw many studies on the flipped classroom (Moffett & Mill, 2014). There is a vast host of research into flipped model which can generally be divided into comparison (Lin Chi-Jen, et al. 2018) and non-comparison studies (Yu Zhonggen, et al., 2016). Comparison studies make an attempt to compare the effectiveness of the same course by flipped versus conventional mode. In the flipped mode, test results and interview are commonly-used methodological approaches. However, non-comparison studies often locked on course design, how to implement, learning satisfaction (Yu Zhonggen, et al., 2016:298; Enfield, 2013; Galway et al., 2014), students' attitudes and academic achievements (Yu Zhonggen, et al., 2016).

The research method is quantitative, qualitative or quantitative with the qualitative research methods (Yu Zhonggen, et al., 2016: 298) or semi-structured interviews (Kong, 2014).

## 3. The Relevant Concepts

### Research methods

This study is qualitative research which employed a descriptive way to expound how to teach English writing with WeChat and the reflection on this research is indited by the students.

### Participants

Participants were all English majors who have learned the course “English basic writing.” 30 undergraduates in the same class were to stand for the target population. They were between 19 and 22 years old. Among them, 3 were males, and 27 were females. All the participants reported that they showed deep passion on WeChat and could deal with online learning technologies used in this study. They are divided into 6 groups.

### Research instruments

The research instruments in this study included WeChat class group (which has been established last semester) and 批改网 (*pigai wang*) (<https://www.pigai.org>) (the students can write the essays and submit on this net. Through the corpus system, the scores and suggestions are given simultaneously when the students submit their drafts, and the students can revise and improve their essays according to the suggestions.)

WeChat, developed by Tencent company in January 2011, is a mobile synchronous free communication tool. This app brings convenient communication and interaction for peers or group communication and interaction by text messaging, hold-to-talk voice message, one-to-many messaging, photo and video sharing, location sharing and contact information exchange (<http://weixin.qq.com>). Therefore, it is convenient and useful to be used in the present study.

### The WeChat-aided flipped classroom

The flipped treatment of the research required students to learn and internalize the writing skills on their own prior to physical attendance to the class. They should also complete the pre-tasks before class. In case they have any difficulty or problem, they could communicate with peers or the teacher in class WeChat group. Lecture videos and abundant related materials were available in order to facilitate students' learning before class.

Students were also required to actively participate in learning activities, group discussion, idea sharing, problem solution and presentation. The teacher supervised the class and organized activities. When necessary, the teacher would explain difficult questions, present the writing skills and join their discussions.

## 4. The WeChat-based flipped classroom in practice

### 4.1 Research Background

The study was conducted on a Chinese public university's ‘Advanced English Writing’ course, delivered as a 16-week compulsory senior-year course in School of Foreign Languages.



The course aims to provide a solid basis for English writing with the help of technology.

The textbook is *Modern College English Advanced Writing* which is edited by *Mei Renyi* and published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. It is designed to provide students with 10 content-based units which are comprised of 6-7 articles of the same topic from different aspects in each unit. The former articles are written by native writers and the latter three articles are written by Chinese students. It is conducive to broaden the students' vision and to think critically after reading these articles of the same topic. At the same time, it brings a weighty burden for those struggling students to write clearly without expert supervision, and it is also difficult for instructors to focus classroom time on lecturing and demonstration how to write in limited class time.

**Table 1 Course Contents**

Unit	Course Content
One	Meaning of Life
Two	Health
Three	Love and Marriage
Four	E-education
Five	Environment
Six	Capital Punishment
Seven	Technology
Eight	Poverty
Nine	Communication
Ten	Globalization

From the students' reflection, the textbook is their preference because a vast majority of them figure that the topics in this textbook are closely related to their daily life, which arouses their interests to learn. Furthermore, a theme is written from multiple angles and good writing methods in it can be imitated.

**4.2 Design and practice**

Writing is a cyclical process of psychological cognition and thinking creation, which interweaves information collection, outlining, drafting, feedback and revision. As we all know, in the actual teaching process, these four stages are working together. In this study, WeChat-based teaching approach is carried out which aims at gradually cultivating students' writing interest, improving writing self-efficacy, and allowing students to actively study excellent essays, collecting writing materials and modifying sentences. The following is Unit Three titled "Love

and Marriage" in *Modern College English Advanced Writing*, WeChat-based teaching mode of this unit is illustrated.

● **Preparation**

On the weekend before class, the topic was shared in the class WeChat group. The teacher placed four videos/ppts in the class WeChat group: The first video is the themed and relevant vocabulary of the unit. The second video is about the theme of the unit and topic sentences of each essay. The above two parts can be guided by the teacher or completed by the students themselves which should be shared in the class WeChat group. The third video is the ways in which the articles and paragraphs of the unit are developed. The fourth video is exemplified a summary writing of one of the articles.

Simultaneously, according to their own preferences, the students are required to select a song, a video, an article, etc. which are related to the theme and share them in the class WeChat group. The students are instructed to preview the texts of the unit, and to watch videos and covering course materials shared by the teacher and the students in the class WeChat group before attending class.

**Purpose:** Let students learn more about the topic-related knowledge to broaden our vision, be familiar with the topic and lay a sound foundation of words and sentences to the following writing.

● **In-Class time**

First, the teacher spends about 15-20 minutes to check the students' completion and comprehension of the four videos/ppts.

**Table 1 Vocabulary (The first video)**

Love and Marriage		
	English	Chinese
words	equilibrium	平衡
	intimacy	亲密
	regime	生活规则
	breakdown	分解
	burnout	倦怠
	fade	逐渐消逝
	hallmark	特点
	plight	困境
	newlyweds	新婚夫妇
	...	



		...
phrases	slip away ebb away undergo great changes ...	溜走 渐渐衰退 经历巨大的变化 ...

**Purpose:** When filling in the above table, students may accumulate the words they may be employed in their articles. In addition, more concerns can be given to the effective and proper usage of words and collocation.

**Table 2 Sentences (The second video)**

**Topic sentences**

Article One: The balance of the heart includes the emotional, intellectual, spiritual, social, and physical needs of the individual.

Article Two: The article expounds the plight of marriage burnout, the reasons of marriage and the actions to prevent marriage burnout.

Article Three: The article discusses the contemporary issues in marriages.

Article A: We should take marriage as a rose garden and love as the roses in the garden.

Article B: If love is flower, marriage is the fruit of the flower. The growth of both the flower and the fruit need careful consideration. The key to happiness is in your hands.

Article C: People’s concept of marriage and their attitude toward marriage have been undergoing great changes.

**Sentence patterns**

I mean you should always strive for a better relationships that needs great constancy, respect, communication, care, tolerance and so on.

What is marriage? Marriage is actually much more than just being together.

The flipped classrooms have hit the spotlight as a pedagogical approach to foster the students’ innovation (Yu Zhonggen, et al., 2016: 298), improve their learning motivation and interest, enhance the students’ English writing performance (Lin Chi-Jen, et al., 2018), improve learning outcomes (Day & Foley, 2006; Schroeder, et al., 2015), facilitate and sustain creative writers (Pasqua, Lena, 2017), improve students’ attendance and

engagement (Chen et al., 2014), encourage self-directed learning (Schultz et al., 2014). However, there are also some negative comments about this model. For example, Strayer (2012) found some students had difficulties connecting pre-class and in-class activities. Filiz & Kurt (2015) also have doubts about its suitability for certain disciplines and may decrease instructor responsibility due to prerecorded materials.

Nowadays, just a few studies can be found on the adoption of this approach for EFL teaching and learning (Mehring, 2016), not to mention English writing teaching. Current researches on writing is locked on Business English writing (Yu Zhonggen, et al., 2016; Lin Chi-Jen, et al., 2018).

**Purpose:** Pointing out the topic sentences may guide the students to acquire different angles of interpreting the same topic, which is conducive to provoke their critical thinking and help the students’ to find a proper and controversial theme. In the meantime, sentence patterns models how to write correct and effective sentences.

The above two tables indicate that detailed study of this kind is necessary, because a phrase, a sentence, or even a single word, may be of great importance to take the students’ writing into a high level.

**Table 3 The development methods of the essays and paragraphs(The third video)**

Article	The whole essay	The paragraphs
Article one	general-specific-general	analogy, definition
Article two	problem-solution	example,
Article three	chronological order	cause-effect
Article A	effect-cause	analogy, definition
Article B	effect-cause	definition,
Article C	chronological order	comparison

**Purpose:** After finishing this table, the students have a clear idea of the ways of developing an article and paragraphs.

**Table 4 The summary of the essays (The fourth video)**

The Summary of “Balanced Heart: Seeking Equilibrium in Intimacy”



The author expounds how to deal with the relationship between the couples in the regime. Furthermore, he emphasizes the need to “balance the heart” and defines all aspects of this equilibrium: emotional, intellectual, spiritual, social, and physical balance. Many hazards can afflict all age groups. If there is the marriage dilemma in the bond between the two hearts, then considering these five areas of intimacy may allow the hearts a fresh place to pour their energy.

**Purpose:** Summary writing is a must for Chinese undergraduates and the requirement of TEM-8 (Test for English Majors-Band 8).

Second, the students are invited to spend 45 minutes writing their drafts on the net (<http://www.pigai.org>). If they get stuck, they can resort to the net or their peers. The teacher walks around the classroom to give them supports or suggestions. When finishing their drafts, they should submit them on the net. Third, after submitting the drafts, the students correct mistakes in spelling, punctuation, grammar, idiom and etc., and also see to it that we have not omitted any important point and that it reads well as a connected whole.

**Purpose:** Change students’ habit of procrastinating in writing

● **After class**

After class, their improved drafts are further modified by their group peers and the teacher in each group. This step is to make

sure that the students can express thoughts clearly, concisely, and effectively. And most importantly, they can write in strictly logical order. More attention is paid on the content (which is the “soul” of the paper), organization, sentences. Diction and mistakes in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and other mechanics should also be discovered and corrected to cross out whatever is unsatisfactory.

● **Improvement (The next period)**

The first way is that two model essays are recommended to the students. Another way is to compare one student’s first draft with the final draft. The teacher guides the students to find out how “something” is expressed clearly, accurately and appropriately.

**Table 5 Teaching process flow chart**

	<b>Before Class</b>	<b>In-class</b>	<b>After-class</b>	<b>improvement</b>
Teaching activities	1. Forming WeChat Group and divide the students into six groups; 2. The teacher shares four videos/ppts into the class WeChat group; 3. Students share the relevant contents into the class WeChat.	1. The teacher’s support and instructions; 2. The students write the first draft; 3. The students modify the first drafts by themselves.	Peers review; The teacher’s evaluation;	1. The teacher’s comment on model essays 2. Students’ reflection
Teaching premise	WeChat group	classroom; <a href="http://www.pigai.org">http://www.pigai.org</a>	WeChat group	classroom

**Students’ Reflection**

**The contents in class WeChat group**

*Regarding the contents in class WeChat group, I think it is very helpful to broaden the horizon and accumulate writing materials.*



*The WeChat articles increases the amount of reading. By reading the words, the memory becomes more profound.*

*My vocabulary is expanded as result of an accumulation of words and phrases after reading these articles.*

*The materials might function as education and entertainment.*

#### **The Textbook**

*The topics of the textbook are closely related to the students' learning and life which can evoke our interests to explore and to write.*

*The content and problem design of the articles reflect the cross-cultural vision as much as possible (the contrast between Chinese and Western cultures) and the consciousness of the times (the contrast between the past and the present), the language quality (language authenticity) and thought inspiration in order to truly Stimulate students' interest in discussion and facilitate writing imitation.*

#### **The teaching method**

*The teaching process is designed to explain, deduct, and train the writing skills of words, sentences, paragraphs, and essays in writing so that students can truly understand the specific application of basic writing skills by continuous reinforcement.*

*I really like this teaching approach. Reading and exercises before writing can make me familiar with the topic, accumulate the relevant vocabulary, and let me have something to say when writing.*

*Corrections from peers, teachers, and revision (www. pigai.org) made me correct the mistakes of the article in time.*

*I like this teaching approach because it makes me something to say and something to imitate. Timely revision and feedback can remind me of the mistakes in writing immediately.*

#### **5. Discussion**

##### **(1) Convenience**

This model is ideal for classrooms with limited technology. Flipped teaching is the inevitable development of the times. In the past, flipped teaching often required schools to be equipped with hardwares such as high-tech multimedia classrooms and videos. Due to the different conditions of each school, it may be difficult to implement. However, the use of WeChat group in this research is a simple way: First, because most students now have smart phones. Second, WeChat has many inherent functions, including video, information searching, sharing and chatting, and also it can meet all the requirements in

the writing teaching process. WeChat-based approach overcomes the equipment inadequacy of some schools.

In addition to equipment, the need to record videos in advance is a challenge for some teachers because video recording with a video recorder requires certain technology or cooperation with a technician. However, if necessary, the teacher can employ the inherent WeChat video to record the teaching contents by himself or herself independently.

Besides the aforementioned conveniences, there is another one. It is universally known that teaching videos in flipped teaching methods often require a separate platform [such as “Google Drive or upload them to YouTube to create a writing playlist” (Catlin Tucker, 2018: 84)]and students need to log in. WeChat-based model is an exception. After the teacher finishes recording, he/she will share the videos directly to the WeChat class group, and the students can learn these videos according to their capabilities and time.

##### **(2) Timely**

In traditional approaches, one teacher should guide 20+ students through a one-size-fits-all lesson, it is a heavy burden to provide individualized instruction and timely feedback, let alone giving support if some students get stuck.

The application of the Flipped Classroom Model solves the lingering old problems in conventional mode. First, short video tutorials or ppts that introduce individual parts of the writing process in each unit not only free up teacher's time, but also self-pace the students' skill sets and language abilities.

Because the flipped classroom model prioritizes the process, the teacher can provide support, feedback and individual attention to the students as they developed their writing knowledge and abilities in different teaching process timely.

The model moves the actual writing into the classroom. With the help of the peers and the teacher, a vast majority of my students can complete their drafts in the classroom timely, which avoid students' delaying spending hours of their time outside of school on writing tasks. Therefore, this approach removes the obstacle in the orthodox teaching mode.

##### **(3) Promotion**

The first is to promote students' deep learning. Besides the contents of the textbooks, the diversified and multi modal information (text, images, audio, video, etc.) which were shared in the class WeChat group optimize quality teaching resources and is conducive to students' “deep learning”. The students may



acquire different angles of interpreting and comprehending the same thing or the person.

The second is to advance their writing knowledge and skills. After reading and/or watching these materials, the students may accumulate the themed and relevant vocabulary, sentence patterns, learn how to develop paragraphs and organize an essay, etc.

The third is to better the interaction. This model highlights the interaction of both teachers and students, paying particular attention to students' engagement and participation in different teaching process, and attaching great importance to the professional development of teachers.

The last one is to promote the development of students' information capabilities. By guiding students how to collect, classify, sort out and quote the useful information, the students' information literacy and critical thinking skills may be taken to a higher level which is the critical capabilities to write an argumentative essay.

Undeniably, this method also has some deficiencies just as read in the students' reflection. It is clear that considerable time, meticulous planning, and preparatory work are required to design, develop, and deliver course content, generating substantial workload for instructors. Scientifically validated resources and "how these resources are integrated into the overall approach is what matters" (Tucker, 2012).

### Conclusion

This study combines WeChat, 句酷网([jukuwang](http://www.jukuwang.org); <http://www.pigai.org>) with traditional classroom and expands the experimental teaching by flipping the classroom. The WeChat-based teaching method overcomes many fatal flaws in traditional EFL English writing teaching, such as insufficient input before writing, the delay in finishing the first draft and getting timely feedback from the teachers.

As for the teacher, this teaching method is easy to manipulate and effectively integrate the teaching objectives of teaching, optimize quality teaching resources and educate the students to be well-rounded persons. In term of the students, this method may ease students' writing anxiety, stimulate writing motivation and improve the students' writing experience, and engagement of Chinese undergraduates.

Of course, the production of pre-class video contents or ppts plays a key role in the success of this teaching mode; whether students can complete each teaching task step by step is also a question that teachers should take into account.

In a word, WeChat-mediated "English Argumentative Writing" flipped teaching for EFL Students is providing a portal to upward teaching efficiency for EFL students' writing ability.

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