

# The Curriculum Design of SPOC-based Online and Offline Blended Teaching Model of *English Linguistics* in Flipped Classroom

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Received: February 16, 2022

Accepted: March 17, 2022

Online Published: March 22, 2022

doi:10.5430/elr.v11n1p11

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/elr.v11n1p11>

## Abstract

Based on the problems in the current teaching of *English Linguistics*, the paper expounds on an online and offline blended teaching model of *English Linguistics* in a flipped classroom which consists of four components: before class, during class, after class and assessment. Among them, the offline class is divided into three stages: inspection, discussion and deepening. Then the author summarizes the major problems existing in the practice of SPOC-based flipped classroom: low proportion of students' participation in interaction, poor effect of flipped classroom caused by teachers' failure to deal with the relationship between the offline class and online teaching video, and insufficient technical support to the platform. Finally the solutions and suggestions are discussed respectively for the sake of the enhancement of teaching quality and effects. The practice and exploration of this blended teaching model provides a way to integrate modern information technology in the teaching of theoretical courses and provides constructive suggestions for the teaching reform of English major courses in universities.

**Keywords:** SPOC, flipped classroom, online and offline blended teaching model, *English Linguistics*

## 1. Introduction

*English Linguistics* is one of the kernel courses for University English majors. This course aims to systematically impart English linguistic knowledge to students and improve students' cognition and accumulation of that knowledge so as to expand the denotation of language learning and stimulate students' interest in language learning. It covers the core branches of linguistics: phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Through learning these branches, students can master the terms and methods of language analysis, which can be applied to the description and analysis of English and its varieties. Therefore, *English Linguistics* plays an important role in the study of English language. However, with the current teaching of *English Linguistics* and its teaching effect unsatisfactory in China, the reform and innovation of the teaching model becomes imminent.

As Internet + technology keeps developing, relevant ministries and commissions of the state have launched the *Educational Informatization 2.0 Action Plan*, which emphasizes that we should constantly explore new models of education development in Internet + context, comprehensively promote the construction of network courses, and effectively embody the actual effect of educational informatization in the two key segments of teaching and learning. Meanwhile, the sudden novel coronavirus pneumonia has accelerated the development of online teaching and learning in higher education, and made teachers reflect on it. How to make full use of the technology to help traditional classroom teaching install the wings of internet teaching to improve teaching quality has become a significant topic which has aroused teachers' attention.

## 2. Problems in the Current Teaching of *English Linguistics*

With the development of society, the education system in China has accelerated the pace of reform in order to adapt to the market economy. English majors at all levels, represented by language courses, are also facing reform, but there are some problems in the implementation process.

### 2.1 Inexpediency of *Linguistics Curriculum*

In order to meet the demand for English talents in various industries, colleges and universities in China have added compound majors such as foreign trade, finance, Teaching Chinese as Foreign Language, industry and agriculture. In order to make compound talents have more practical ability, they have also supplemented practical courses, so that students have no time to take into account linguistic theory courses. One survey shows that the non-opening rate of

linguistic theory courses in Universities in China is as high as 20% (Zhang & Ma, 2021: 113). Fewer and fewer linguistic courses lead to students' inability in mastering professional linguistic knowledge. However, in order to cope with TEM-8 (Test for English Majors-Band 8) and postgraduate entrance examination for English majors, students' study of linguistic theories is particularly important, which makes the inexpedient setting of courses in colleges and universities increasingly prominent.

### 2.2 Singleness of Teaching Method

Teaching method is a vital factor to obtain the expected teaching effect. Scientific and reasonable methods can help us achieve twofold results with half the effort. Nevertheless, the current *English Linguistics* teaching in Colleges and universities of China has not been fully developed, and there exist some deficiencies in the teaching methods (Li, 2019; Zhang & Fan, 2021), which are mainly reflected in the following three points:

First, a certain number of university teachers still adhere to the traditional teacher-oriented teaching methods by carrying out indoctrination teaching for students (Li & Feng, 2017); students lack the opportunity of active learning and thinking and since their dominant position is ignored, their learning initiative can not be cultivated and promoted.

Second, according to the online survey made by the author, 84% of the 85 students who are presently enrolled in the author's course hold that *English linguistics* is theoretical and boring, to which they attribute their lack of learning motivation. So, some interesting teaching methods should be adopted to arouse students' thirst for linguistic knowledge. At present, when teachers innovate the teaching methods and organizational forms of *English linguistics*, they seldom apply situational teaching and group learning, probably resulting in students' low interest in learning.

Third, through the interview with the 35 English teachers in the author's university, it is found that many teachers have less understanding and mastery of modern information teaching methods, and 34% of them can not skillfully apply them to teaching. It is one of the reasons that lead to the difficulty in improving teaching efficiency, and obviously affects the innovation of teaching methods. For example, some English teachers fail to understand the connotation and requirements of Internet + education, lack comprehensive understanding of Internet related education, its application ability, and personal information literacy, so it is difficult to enrich the information-based teaching means.

### 2.3 Lack of Practical Teaching in English Linguistics

The teaching goal of *English Linguistics* is to improve students' linguistic competence, and the ultimate direction of language learning is to apply it in practice. Therefore, the theoretical teaching of *English Linguistics* is inseparable from practice. Integrating practice into theoretical teaching can not only effectively improve its teaching efficiency, but also promote the application of linguistics. Still, at present, teachers generally ignore the practical part in the teaching of *English Linguistics* (Li, 2019). The specific problems are as follows:

First, teachers do not attach much importance to the practical use of English linguistic theories. The teaching hours of the course are limited whereas the course content is difficult, which leads to the increase of teachers' teaching pressure. More often than not they only pay attention to the theoretical teaching in class and ignore its combination with practice out of class.

Second, the assessment system of *English Linguistics* is not perfect. The usual examinations are limited to the evaluation of students' mastery of theoretical knowledge with the exclusion of assessing students' practical ability, resulting in the neglect of practical teaching of the course. Accordingly, the students' practical ability is inferior.

Third, teachers' own practical experience and ability are insufficient. Teachers lack the awareness of combining theoretical knowledge with practice, coupled with the defects of their own practical teaching ability. They usually do not pay attention to the collection and construction of practical teaching materials. Hence, there are no rich practical materials that can be used in classroom teaching, which will certainly undermine the teaching effect.

To solve the problems in the teaching of *English Linguistics*, it is urgent for linguistic teachers to carry out teaching reform so that they can set a new model to adapt to the present situation, keep up with the technological development in education and significantly boost their teaching effect.

## 3. Online and Offline Blended Teaching Model of *English Linguistics* in Flipped Classroom

SPOC (Small Private Online Course) is a small-scale restricted online course, which is an organic integration of MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) and traditional classroom teaching. SPOC is teaching resources used as a teaching solution for small-scale and specific groups. Its basic form is to use MOOC lecture video or online evaluation and other functional auxiliary courses in traditional campus classes. Flipped classroom, also known as

inverted classroom, emphasizes the transformation of the traditional classroom teaching mode, organically integrates online teaching and classroom teaching, forms a hybrid form of educational guidance, and takes mobile network technology as the support to guide students to use the network platform for autonomous learning outside the classroom (Lage, Platt & Treglia, 2000; Zhang, 2021: 42). During classroom teaching, teachers provide students with professional guidance. In after-school review, they use video and audio forms to consolidate students' learning foundation, break the limitations of traditional education, stimulate students' learning interest, cultivate students' autonomous learning ability and practical operation ability. In the flipped classroom, the roles of teachers and students, students' learning environment and teachers' teaching methods will be converted. Students are in the dominant position and are no longer limited to classroom learning. Teachers can fundamentally improve the quality of teaching work in all aspects with the help of network technology and multimedia technology.

The flipped classroom model can be divided into the following three processes: before class, during class and after class (Qu, 2019; Shang & Yu, 2019). Before class, students can watch videos, audio or other teaching materials uploaded by teachers in advance to understand and master the content to be learned in the subsequent class. In class, students mainly discuss and debate specific points that might effect confusion or doubts to them by means of teamwork, so as to achieve an in-depth understanding of knowledge. After class, they review and reinforce the knowledge learned before and during class.

The SPOC-based online and offline blended teaching model of *English Linguistics* has been tried in the first round of teaching in the author's three classes from September 2021 to January 2022. The following are the concrete design and procedures.

### 3.1 Before Class

Before class, teachers assign the previewing tasks on the learning platform: Zhejiang Institutions of Higher Learning Online Open Course Sharing Platform (<https://www.zjooc.cn>). Students are required to complete the tasks before the subsequent offline class.

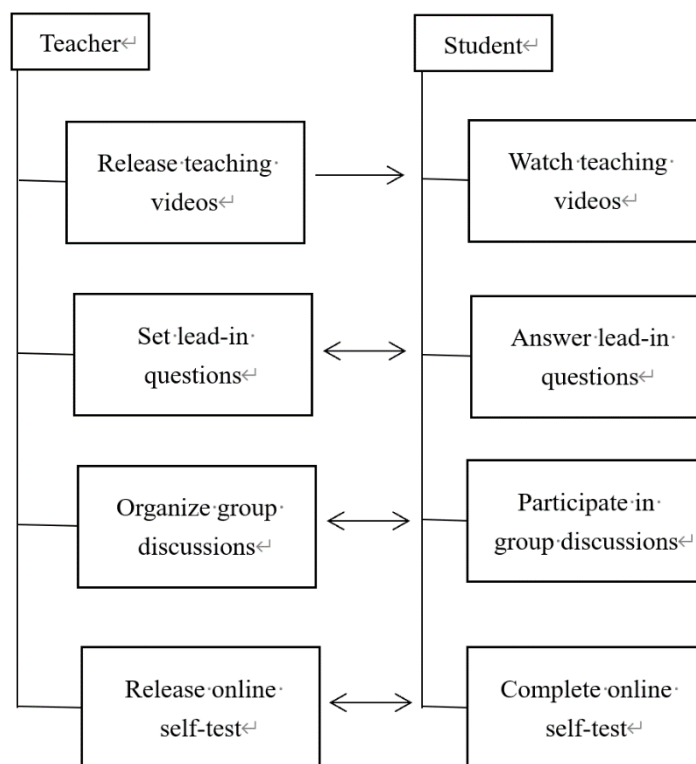


Figure 1. The Teaching Model Before Class

As shown in Figure 1, teachers release teaching videos concerning what will be taught in the offline class through the afore-mentioned learning platform every week according to the syllabus. Firstly, teachers split the knowledge contained in each chapter of the textbook *A New Concise Course in Linguistics for Students of English* under the guidance of the student-centered notion. The fragmentation of MOOC is not to compress the content into small

videos, but to connect the complete knowledge in series. Often, the explanation of a certain topic is definitely not finished at one breath. There will be a series of processes, such as the introduction of questions, the preliminary answer to questions, the deepening of questions, the comprehensive explanation of questions and so on. For example, Figure 2 is the knowledge structure of the first chapter of the course: Introduction to Linguistics, which connects the basic concepts of linguistics in a fragmented form, and explains the two basic concepts *language* and *linguistics*. As to the first concept, teachers elaborate its definition, design features, functions and origin. The second concept is concerned with the definition of linguistics, the scope of linguistics and its important distinctions. All these knowledge points are skillfully drawn together and advance gradually in due order.

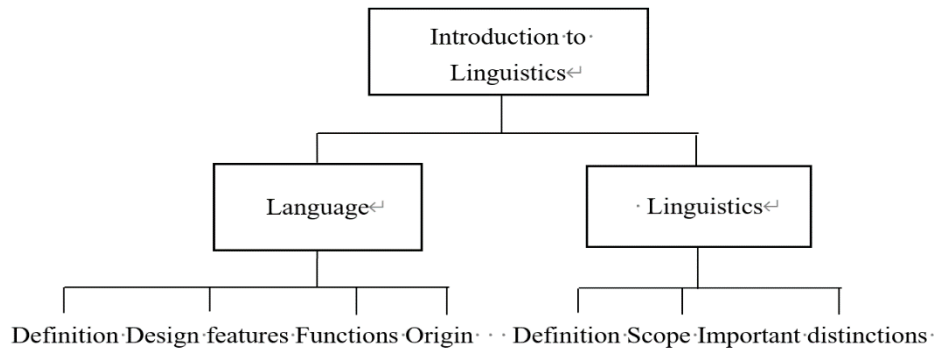


Figure 2. Knowledge Structure of Chapter 1

At present, MOOC theory generally believes that the general video length is about 7 minutes (Ma, Bao & Wu, 2016: 77). The video recording time of each knowledge point in *English linguistics* is set between 5 and 10 minutes, so that it will be easier for students to concentrate on, understand and absorb the theories and principles they need to master. Then, according to the knowledge points of the course, i.e. key points, difficulties and doubts, the teacher explains the content in the form of instruction or demonstration with the multimedia means of text, image, picture, chart, animation, video, audio and courseware. This graphic audio-visual form makes the teaching content rich and colorful, enhances the teaching attraction and learning interest, stimulates students' learning enthusiasm and autonomy, and then improves the learning effect. Students can log in and watch videos through the computer terminal or mobile terminal of MOOC platform for autonomous learning. While releasing teaching videos, teachers should put forward the questions that can direct students to learn from simplicity to depth, and guide them to sort out and master the knowledge. And then teachers organize students to discuss some difficult points or problems that they are most confused about. Figure 3 is one of the questions posted by the teacher and the discussions held by the students centered on the given topic.

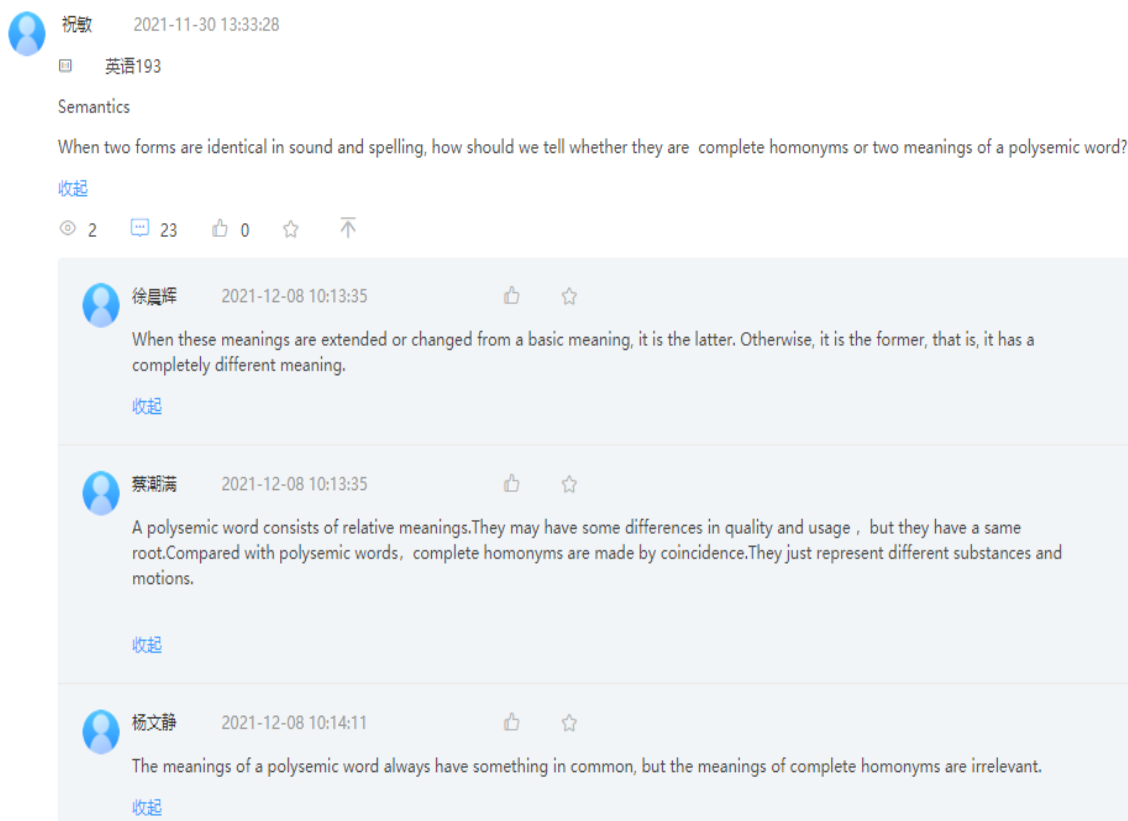


Figure 3. The Posted Question and the Discussion Centered on It

In order to preliminarily test the students' mastery of basic theories and concepts, teachers design an online self-test for each chapter, consisting of 10 multiple choice questions. The students are required to finish the test within the given time after they have watched all the videos of a chapter. Teachers can find the questions with higher error rate through the background data, which will help them determine the focus of the classroom teaching.

### 3.2 During Class

In the teaching model of SPOC-based flipped classroom, the offline class instructed by teacher is divided into three stages: inspection, discussion and deepening.

#### 3.2.1 Inspection

Through questioning students in class, teachers inspect the effect of them watching online videos before class, so that they can find out the difficulties and conduct in-depth discussion during class. For example, by asking the questions "What is the context" and "What are the differences between sentence meaning and utterance meaning", teachers can get to know whether students have grasped the basic concepts of pragmatics and realized the role of context in understanding the intended meaning of a speaker. Some students actually have difficulty in differentiating utterance meaning from sentence meaning, they neglect taking context into account when they analyze lexical meanings in a sentence, as they think they can get the exact meaning of the sentence "The seal could not be found." with no need to recover its preceding or subsequent sentences. This discovery will pave the way for teachers to get ready for further discussion about context.

#### 3.2.2 Discussion

In combination with the knowledge points contained in the videos watched by the students and difficulties they may encounter in autonomous study before class, teachers give the topics for discussion and organize group discussion in class. For example, in order to let students clearly distinguish utterance meaning from sentence meaning, teachers set the following topic for students to discuss: What are the sentence meaning and utterance meaning for "It is cold here"? Teachers offer three pictures to show the situations when the utterance occurs (See Figure 4, 5 and 6).



Figure 4. Situation 1(Air-conditioner off in winter)



Figure 5. Situation 2(When someone goes into the room and decides to take off the coat)



Figure 6. Situation 3(When someone goes into the room and finds the window wide open)

After students discuss within the group and group speakers make a report of the results for the whole class, teachers direct them to find their misunderstanding of the two concepts on their own. By the agency of sharing their ideas and thoughts, they voluntarily clarify the two concepts for themselves. Sentence meaning is abstract and decontextualized. It is stable and constant, which can be obtained through predication analysis. The no-place predication (Be Cold) just reflects its sentence meaning. Utterance meaning is concrete and context-dependent. It is the realization of sentence meaning in a certain context, hence varies from context to context. “It is cold” can mean someone asks you to switch on the air-conditioner, or tells you not to take off the coat, or asks you to close the window, all depending on the situational context it occurs.

In the discussion stage, teachers answer the students' questions, guide and inspire the students to find the answers to the questions instead of giving the answers directly. In this way, students' curiosity will be generated and they will pay more attention to the instructions, meanwhile thinking independently about the questions raised by teachers.

### 3.2.3 Deepening

After the two stages, teachers then get prepared to further deepen the knowledge points in the video in their offline class, focusing on the analysis of concepts and the specific application of theories. For example, based on the students' self-study of Chapter 6 Pragmatics and their discussions concerning some basic concepts and theories like conversational implicature and Cooperative Principle, teachers instruct them how to apply Cooperative Principle to the analysis of actual conversations to get the conversational implicatures. Teachers select a conversation from Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* for illustration.

Lord Polonius: What do you read, my lord?

Hamlet: Words, words, words.

Lord Polonius: What is the matter, my lord?

Hamlet: Between who?

Lord Polonius: I mean, the matter that you read, my lord.

Hamlet: Slanders, sir: for the satirical rogue says here that old men have grey beards, that their faces are wrinkled, their eyes purging thick amber and plum-tree gum and that they have a plentiful lack of wit, together with most weak hams: all which, sir, though I most powerfully and potently believe, yet I hold it not honesty to have it thus set down, for yourself, sir, should be old as I am, if like a crab you could go backward.<sup>1</sup>

Here, Hamlet is pretending to be insane. His answer "words, words, words" has violated the Maxim of Quantity for it provides too little information. When Polonius pursues his question by asking "What's the matter", Hamlet deliberately misunderstands "the matter that you read" for "affairs between people", violating the Maxim of Relevance. His final answer violates the Maxim of quantity for it provides more information than required; it violates the Maxim of Quality with the strange comparison between growing younger and walking backward; it violates the Maxim of Relevance by talking about things that he is not reading.

By first letting students analyze the conversation by themselves, then pointing out their inaccuracies and eventually releasing the sample answer for students to compare with their own, the concepts of conversational implicature and Cooperative Principle get penetrated and the comprehension of these notions becomes distinct and precise.

### 3.3 After Class

After class, students consolidate their linguistic knowledge and have a systematic grasp and in-depth understanding of the basic concepts and theories through the following online forms, such as cooperative research work, essays, and online questions and answers. For example, after students have studied one of the design features of language – cultural transmission, they know that language is culturally transmitted through teaching and learning rather than by instinct. The mere concept does not suffice to let students master its connotation. For this reason, teachers assign the following teamwork to students:

*Watch the film Tarzan—the Ape Man(1932), and discuss the following question: How is the story of the ape man related to the design feature of language—cultural transmission?*

*Write about 200 words, entitle your essay and add a list of the names of your team at the end of your essay.*

By exploring the vivid and lively examples in the film that can support the view that language is non-instinctive, students dig out the underlying reason for the ape-man Tarzan's failure to communicate with Jane since he lives in the jungle, isolated from the human society, that is, although human beings are born with the ability to acquire language, the details of any language system have to be taught and learned, which shows why Tarzan can only utter animal calls instead of human languages. And later he learns to speak some simple English words under Jane's instruction. Students' comprehension of the concept *cultural transmission* is thus strengthened in the context of a romantic and adventurous story.

### 3.4 Assessment

The MOOC platform can accurately count the data generated in the teaching process and realize comprehensive and

<sup>1</sup> The script is accessed from <http://www.artsdome.com/Shakespeare/Hamlet/hamlet-Act2-Scene2.htm>

visual statistical analysis of teachers' teaching, students' learning and course visits, so as to help schools and teachers better evaluate teaching management. Based on the online and offline blended teaching method of *English linguistics*, the final score of the course is composed of the following parts: video viewing (5%), online discussion (5%), teamwork (10%) and essay (20%). The above scores are obtained through the MOOC platform, and the scores of the offline final examination account for 60%.

#### 4. Problems of the Blended Teaching and Its Solutions

The author has completed the first round of SPOC-based online teaching of *English Linguistics* on Zhejiang institutions of higher learning online open course sharing platform. The teaching objects are 87 students of Grade 2019, with a total of 50 teaching micro videos. In addition to watching the teaching videos, students also have the following online learning tasks: learning of linguistics expansion materials (7 Texts), 7 online discussions, 7 online tests, 3 group assignments and 1 essay. After completing this round of SPOC-based online teaching, teachers have proposed to apply for conversion to MOOC for further promotion to English Majors in other universities.

In this round of online and offline blended teaching, teachers found the following problems in the construction of English linguistics online course:

First, not all students can actively participate in online course learning. For example, for the discussion posts sent by teachers, only nearly half of the students reply. The content of some replies is relatively simple and perfunctory. The enthusiasm of students' online learning needs to be improved.

Second, teachers are not familiar with the teaching model of flipped classroom, and sometimes fail to deal with the relationship between the content of offline classroom teaching and that of online teaching video, which may lead to mechanical repetition between the two. How to improve the offline teaching efficiency and effect also needs to be further probed.

Third, some settings of MOOC platform are unreasonable. For example, the transmission of the video data to the platform cannot be uploaded in batch, and the video must be transmitted individually. Students cannot join the courses offered by teachers on the platform by themselves. The input of students to the online class must be completed by teachers, which increases the time invested by teachers before class. It is also an urgent problem to improve the setting of the platform to make the operation more time-saving and convenient so that aged teachers can easily manage it.

Based on the above problems, teachers will actively find solutions and constantly improve the online teaching platform of *English linguistics*, so as to raise the teaching quality and effect. In response to the first problem, teachers will enhance students' understanding of SPOC-based teaching model in flipped classroom and improve students' participation in online class through flexible and diverse teaching skills, meticulous work style, patient and painstaking working attitude. As to the second problem, teachers will use their spare time to participate in various trainings for online course construction and try to fully understand all the procedure of SPOC-based blended teaching, so as to make effective use of the online teaching platform. To deal with the third problem, teachers will actively communicate with the platform technicians, feed back the problems encountered in the use of the platform, and put forward constructive opinions and suggestions, in order to gradually improve and solve the adverse factors in its use.

#### 5. Conclusion

To sum up, the SPOC-based flipped classroom is a new model of teaching and learning in the mobile Internet era. The PC and mobile terminals of MOOC courses are fully developed and utilized to realize "students learn anytime and anywhere" and "teachers guide students to learn anytime and anywhere" in the mobile environment. The digitization of academic statistics is clear at a glance. However, in teaching practice, there emerge some problems, such as low proportion of students' participation in interaction, poor effect of flipped classroom caused by teachers' failure to deal with the relationship between offline class and online teaching video, insufficient technical support to the platform and so on. When talking about these problems, the author also explores solutions to them for the sake of the enhancement of the teaching model of SPOC-based English linguistics flipped classroom. The practice and exploration of this blended teaching model displays a way to integrate modern information technology in the teaching of theoretical courses and provides constructive suggestions for the teaching reform of English major courses in universities.

#### Funding Details

The paper is supported under the Grant[2020-k37]: The First-rate undergraduate course construction project of Zhejiang University of science and technology "English Linguistics".



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