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From “sage on the stage to guide on the side”: a case study of a transition to flipped English language learning in a higher education setting in Turkey

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Abstract

This case study of the establishment of a flipped language learning environment chronicles the construction of a dynamic second-language context where in both students and instructors identify as co-learners. The setting is a foundation year English language program at a new English-medium university in Istanbul. To align to a flipped classroom pedagogy adopted throughout the university, the preparatory foundation year program was designed and implemented with a flipped learning approach. Uniquely for Turkey, the students are Turkish (L2) speakers and instructors are L1 foreign native speakers. This inquiry reveals a shift in practice of instructors within this flipped language learning environment. This shift is not focused solely on technological or teaching techniques used, but on collegial relationships fostered, the shifting balance of power between teacher and student, and the ways in which knowledge is created, not consumed. Students are placed at the center of the learning process, actively participating in thinking and discussing while making meaning for themselves. The instructor’s role is to facilitate student’s interactions with each other and with the material: there is construction of meaning in addition to language skills development. Collective, supportive, reciprocal and collaborative adaptations by both instructors and students are noted within this technologically enhanced learning environment. The use of adjunct e-tools, online resources, and apps is explored as a springboard for expanding instructor teaching strategies, and, the use of dialogue as a shared renewable resource. Both successes and areas for further development are elaborated. This paper will be of interest to administrators and instructors interested in furthering their understanding of flipped classroom approach for English language learning, as well as to teacher trainers in suggesting implications for in-service training.

Keywords: flipped classroom, English language preparatory program, collaborative construction of meaning.

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Background

A flipped classroom is one in which students are introduced to content online, prior to their university lessons, and then practice working through the material with the instructor during class time (Knewton, 2015). Students watch pre-recorded videos online or do other tasks prepared by the faculty member, and then come to their lectures to work on the problems ready with questions and some background knowledge. In terms of Bloom’s revised taxonomy (NIU, 2014), this means that students are doing lower levels of cognitive work outside of class, focusing on higher forms of cognitive work in class where they have the support of their peers and instructor (Karbach, 2014). This approach, while offering additional flexibility to students, also increases the opportunity for instructors to meet individual student learning needs.

In Turkey, preparatory language students complete modules of 140 class hours to fulfill European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) requirements aligned to the Bologna Process of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA, 2016). The MEF ten-month preparatory language academic year is divided into four modules, each seven weeks in duration. Students at MEF are initially tested with an online testing instrument (Versant English Placement Test: Pearson, 2016) to determine their language levels. Students move through CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Council of Europe, 2016) language levels 1-4 during the preparatory year program and, if successful, proceed to their respective faculties. At the outset, it should be noted that all faculties at MEF University use English as Medium of Instruction (EMI) (Dearden, 2014).

In this context, flipped learning combines the use of technology to deliver content together with traditional face-to-face teaching: the student receives input both online before class, and during face-to-face classes with instructors. MEF University is the first university in the world to apply flipped learning university-wide. The design and implementation of flipped learning at MEF University can be found in a recently published volume (Şahin & Fell-Kurban, 2016).

Early in January 2014, to align to the aims of MEF University, and with a mandate to create a unique, interactive and engaging English language program, it was decided to mirror a flipped approach in the English Language Preparatory Program (ELPP) using a flipped learning approach. A number of decisions were made to:

- use an integrated skills approach
- set the exit standard at a threshold B2 level
- focus on communicative functionality, particularly speaking
- aim for facility in English for General Purposes (EGP)
- introduce Academic English skills in compulsory freshman English courses
- place students into classes of mixed ability
- integrate digital materials within the learning management system
- use formative assessment throughout the modules
- allocate grades for online work completed

With these decisions collectively made by the team of 14 instructors, there began a seven-month design process. It may be interesting to note that these instructors were hired to participate in the planning phase and were not design experts, although within the group there were a number of tech savvy instructors and others with a background in curriculum design or assessment. There was no silver bullet: it was a situation of learning by doing, of making mistakes and correcting them, and of finding solutions to problems as encountered. Therefore, this process was a great opportunity for the teachers in learning collaboratively; they discussed their beliefs on language learning, they agreed on their expectations from the students, they became aware of their own practices. The whole process was an in-service teacher training teachers went through raising their own consciousness in a collaborative way.

Creating Resources

To adapt to a flipped learning approach, not previously attempted in English language teaching (ELT), there was a need to create pre-class materials. After looking at which skill areas they could generate more student-centered active learning in the classroom, it was decided to focus on grammar. From past experience, teachers had spent a lot of class time on grammar teaching that they felt was not necessary. Their idea was to put the grammar item into practice *during* lessons where communication with others was the key, and to leave the knowledge aspect to the online portion of learning. It was also noted that grammar could be more readily tested through discrete point, self-grading quizzes online.

The ELPP team wanted the grammar presentation videos to be publisher agnostic, to avoid having to recreate the videos if the course books were changed. For this reason, the videos were specifically aligned to CEFR learning outcomes and not to the contents of course books. At the end of this process, the ELPP instructor teams created 250 videos, using apps readily available.

Each ELPP language class came equipped with a generic Smart-board, and every MEF student was supplied with a tablet. Based on these technical aspects and the suitability of the content of available digital materials, OUP *New English File* interactive e-text was chosen as the closest fit for a flipped environment. These interactive e-books were supplemented by the *Oxford Online Skills Program* (OOSP) (OUP, 2016) to be used for after class consolidation and reinforcement. Effectively, students would be using all digital materials

To support and enrich the online program consisting of Blackboard materials and quizzes and OOSP, a pronunciation program called English Central (English Central, 2016) was purchased as well as the OUP Digital Library (OUP, 2016) reader series.

Creating an ELPP Assessment Structure

For placement into ELPP levels or faculty, an ELPP-designed multiple-choice test to assess reading, comprehension, vocabulary and grammar was used with all incoming students. These results indicate which students are ready for beginner or elementary levels. For students who achieve higher results, they sit the online Versant English Placement Test (VEPT), (Pearson, 2016), to determine the appropriate placement in either level 3 or 4, or whether students can start in faculty. VEPT was chosen after a lengthy task team inquiry into available online testing options. It was the only affordable online testing instrument that assessed all four

skills, plus vocabulary and grammar, provided instantaneous results (needed due to the quick turnaround between student registration and assignment to faculties), and had certified reliability.

For ELPP level assessments, it was decided to create an assessment structure that would provide both continuous formative assessment for reading, writing, listening, vocabulary and grammar, and, an end-of-module summative assessment for reading, writing, listening, vocabulary and grammar, for each level. These assessments were aligned to CEFR ‘Can do’ statements. For each level, the weightings were: 30% online assessment; 30% quizzes and class assessments; 30% End of Module examination (EOM); and, 10% class participation.

Courses were set up in Blackboard sandboxes for each level. Once these sandboxes had been completed, they were cloned to the number of sections needed, and instructor information and scheduling details were added. The courses were ready to be populated by students.

Lessons Learnt from the First Year

MEF University ELPP began with its first cohort of 419 students in September 2014. Over the first year, there were teething problems, some challenges, and many successes. In this section, successes and areas for development are explored.

1) Success: students are comfortable using technology

In the planning phase of the ELPP, there was some apprehension from team members and administration concerning student use of digital materials, completing work online, or following input from class with online sources. However, this apprehension was soon dispelled when students arrived. The students appreciated the mobility and flexibility afforded by a flipped program, and valued being able to earn assessment points based on online work. They were comfortable reading and learning from tablets, and already used to accessing materials online. It emerged that students were comfortable with flipped learning. Quite often students found technological solutions to issues that the instructors had not thought of, such as taking screen shots of completed work online if issues arose when trying to save the work. If the work was not saved, then the students could prove that they had completed it and had been trying to save it online.

2) Success: the creation of a narrative dialogue space

While the MEF ELPP content and curriculum may be similar to other preparatory programs in Turkey, the delivery is a first. The combination of online and class input created a narrative dialogue loop. Taking knowledge transfer out of the classroom and dedicating class time to student-centered activities, a space was opened for learners to initiate discourse. Instead of the traditional approach whereby instructors attempt to get students to speak, multiple opportunities for student discourse were embedded within the program, allowing students to easily initiate discussion. For example, instructors found new ways to generate and provoke interaction and discussion with adjunct social media tools such as Vine, and Instagram, and by using student-generated video clips to create peer dialogue. Students were self-reliant in terms of meeting the expectations built into the program, co-constructing knowledge through thought-provoking interactions with both peers and instructors, and enjoyed the self-regulation to decide where and when they could study.

3) Success: student satisfaction

The results of the MEF ELPP 2014-2015 surveys conducted indicated high levels of student satisfaction with the program. In the Module Two survey, for example, 353 students completed an online survey and provided positive responses (excellent 60%; very good 21%; good 14%) to questions regarding their online participation. More than half of respondents provided comments indicating that they wanted more speaking activities but wanted to keep the same balance of technology, in and out of the classroom. These results suggested that a suitable balance was being achieved in the location, duration and accessibility of content and activities. In Module Three, 269 students completed an online satisfaction survey, a 67% response. By Module 4, a lower response of 58% may indicate that students had settled into the routine of the flipped ELPP program.

During the first two modules students were surveyed about what aspects of the program they completed with consistency. It was found that by the end of October, 90% of students were doing the pre-class assignments every day or most days; 92% were checking Blackboard daily or most days; 54% were checking OOSP online homework, with 28% only checking it some days. However, it was discovered that email is not a significant part of current student communication patterns: only 39% checked their university email account daily or most days.

Responses showed that 50% of students spent 1-5 hours outside of class studying English. 28% reported that they spent 6-10 hours outside of class studying English; and, 22% spent 11-15 hours outside of class studying English. Surprisingly, 0% did no additional study outside of class. Outside English study included completing OOSP tasks, online assignments, or watching English TV, English Central, or films, or reading (including OUP digital readers). 40% of students reported never missing a class and the majority 56%, missed a few classes during the module. Finally, 70% reported that their English had improved over the course of the module. The pass rate exceeded all expectations at 84%.

Areas for Development:

1) Online materials and learner awareness

There was an intensive adaptive phase at the beginning of the year for students, many of whom came from less technologically equipped high schools. The number of student help issues decreased substantially from an average of 34 help issues per day in mid-September, to an average of two per day by mid-October. After that point, most help issues had been successfully resolved, including adaptations experienced by transfer or late-start students. Students help issues included:

- Downloading OUP e-books online;
- Accessing and using the OOSP app materials;
- Familiarizing with Blackboard use;
- Adapting to tablets;
- Negotiating MEF University email;
- Registering to English Central pronunciation materials;
- Registering to the OUP digital library reader series.

During these times, support was provided during by sending technical personnel to introduce the program to students and staff, by being onsite during the beginning of modules, answering enquiries via email, and observing ways that the delivery of the content could be improved. Coordinators were also available in order to troubleshoot issues.

One reason for the high number of help issues was the number of online resources that had been chosen to enrich the program. With each one requiring different log-ins from students, some students forgot their passwords or what portions, or how, or where, they could access the materials. In addition, there was a high need for IT support at the end of modules for assessments and level changes, as a lot more time is required to sandbox new courses and register students to new courses and materials with their access codes.

2) Need for flipped learning training

Although students were comfortable using technology, it did not mean they were effective learners with technology. The amount of learner support needed to be increased during new teacher orientation sessions, and also with each instructor to share with students during their initial lessons. This orientation helps instructors to become more supportive facilitators of language learning and, students to become more effective flipped learners.

3) Ongoing assessment/weighting

The team learned that what gets graded gets done. It was felt that if students had not yet had a lesson, it was unfair to grade them on their online work, and it was decided to give students a standard grade. So long as they completed 50% of the online work, they would receive a grade of 100% (worth 30% of the overall course grade). While this system was supposed to be motivating for the students, things did not turn out that way. As the overall grade for online work did not actually represent their achievements on the quizzes, simply their participation in up to 50% of them, the results did not correlate with the rest of the assessments, particularly the EOM. After completing a co-relational analysis of the respective assessment areas, it appeared that this approach may have acted as a disincentive for some, as only half of the quizzes had to be completed to get a full grade. As a result the weighting was changed: 20% online assessment; 35% quizzes and class assessments; 35% End of Module examination (EOM); and, 10% class participation

Changes for the Second Year

Based on lessons learned from the first year, the flipped structure was maintained but several aspects were improved in the second year.

1) The Number of Online Materials

While there was a rich online learning environment for ELPP students, including both mandatory and optional activities and materials, this had proved to be challenging both from a technical point of view regarding getting all the students registered and logged in, and also from the point of view of cognitive load for students who had so much choice of what to access. In the second year, the focus shifted to streamlining online resources to ensure they were directly relevant to the content covered from the course book, and related to Blackboard materials. It was

decided not to renew OUP Digital Library as it had a very low uptake; learners who used it, used it a lot, but it was not effective to augment student learning for a majority of students. This streamlining obviously had a positive impact as, at the start of the 2015-2016 academic year, as IT help issues were less than 10% of those of 2014-2015.

2) Videos

Regarding the videos that ELPP instructors had originally made, it was agreed that to redo a number of the videos to improve their quality and effectiveness for the students, and augment the selection. Another 50 videos were created during the 2015 summer break.

3) Flipped Learning Training

What had emerged from the first year was that more flipped training was needed for both instructors and students. In order to provide more exposure to a flipped approach, a two-hour, flipped hands-on training session was created for incoming instructors wherethey complete online activities prior to the session, and then join a workshop for consolidation and discussion activities. In the second year, to streamline the adaptation phase for student, the ELPP Continuing Professional Development Coordinator provided a session to the instructors demonstrating how to support their students in accessing and using digital resources. These instructors then individually gave similar sessions to their students in the first lesson with videos created for this purpose.

4) Resources

Although OOSP had provided useful reinforcement tools, it was generic and not directly related to the course book content. It was necessary to find a product that would provide a more relevant link between the course books used in class and the online consolidation.

Pearson emerged as a solution for both of these issues. Firstly, Pearson had additional level course books with flat text but digitalized. Secondly, *My English Lab* online program had been developed into the equivalent of an online workbook for each of the course books available in their range, and included online assessments. This meant that students studying from a course book in class could then be directed to relevant workbook materials online for consolidation after class. The relevance of *My English Lab* outweighed the requirement for interactive e-text digital books, so a shift was madeto these products. It is to be hoped that more course books will be available as interactive e-books in the near future.

Discussion: from *sage on the stage* to *guide on the side*

Prior to their lessons, students are required to watch the input grammar video at Blackboard and then answer related questions (incremental grades are assigned based on student responses). Students come to class ready to engage with the instructor on the grammar topic as they have already viewed the video, completed the concept-checking questions and finished a short quiz based on the topic.

Instructors are able to collect data on individual student progress based on their online work completed before class (at Blackboard), from reinforcement exercises completed online (OOSP) after the class, and, from additional exercises assigned by the instructor. Having access to student progress data allows instructors to tap into the learning styles of their students, address individual

concerns, and plan for tutorial hours dedicated specifically to meet student needs either individually, in small groups, for multiple groups, or in some cases, for the entire class. For example, if a student is not completing the work, or if the student is unsuccessful with an online portion, then the instructor can meet with the learner during tutorial hours to mutually find a solution to the difficulty.

With access to the materials prior to lessons, students have an advantage of knowing ahead of the class what is the grammar topic, and practicing the grammar points. This knowledge shifts instructor practice away from a grammar-focused teaching approach to a more communicative style where the student interacts with the material and with peers. Instructors can then ask questions about the grammar topic and move directly to controlled and freer practice. It has been noted that students can move more quickly through the materials, using more speaking in their classes with instructors and/or peers, and can bring more of their relevant life experience to their learning of English.

Students ask questions about the pre-class materials and reflect on the information received (and can also share ideas via online components such as Blackboard discussion boards or by the use of various apps). With this model of curriculum delivery, ELPP instructors are repositioned alongside the learner as alternative sources of support and information and facilitators, that is, as “guides on the side” rather than as guardians of knowledge and teacher-centered, that is, “sage on the stage”, so aptly coined in this phrase by King (1993: 33). Such a shift in practice challenges not only teacher practice as traditionally conceived, but also their abilities to manage students who are more dynamically engaged in learning. This shift in pedagogy is premised on the ability of students and teachers to establish reciprocal relationships through language and other means.

In this dynamic ELPP context, a shift in teaching practice was anticipated, but not intentional from a design point of view, and, developed organically while using a flipped learning approach. With less time dedicated to formal teaching, particularly that of grammar and vocabulary, instructors began emphasizing dialogue, characterized by purposeful questioning and chaining of ideas into coherent lines of thinking (Ubuntu, 2016). This focus shifted control away from the instructor using speaking prompts, or question and answer techniques, to finding and exploring student responses. By listening and responding to what students actually say and do, instructors positioned themselves to support individuals more effectively in their language learning. This approach fits with a constructivist framework where learners are active participants in the teaching-learning processes.

The shift in practice was stimulatingly collective (teachers and learners addressing learning tasks together), reciprocal (teachers and learners listening to each other, sharing ideas and considering alternative viewpoints), and, supportive, that is, “learners articulate ideas freely without fear of embarrassment over ‘wrong’ answers or halting language errors, and, help each other achieve common understandings” (Alexander, 2008, pg. 112-113). Additionally, instructors had the opportunity to become more autonomous, trying new teaching ideas with the support of administration and colleagues. However, traditional classroom practices are ingrained, and from a student perspective, especially at the beginning of the academic year, there remains a strong sense that instructors are expecting certain answers, and that the learning will be teacher-

directed. Students find their pathway to a different type of learning.

It may be useful to note that MEF ELPP instructors complied a variety of strategies as a means of encouraging and developing in-class dialogue including:

- using questions to check meanings and concept check
- pausing for think-time
- allowing learners to express ideas fully
- using words such as ‘perhaps’ and ‘might’ as invitations to a range of possible actions
- offering new content relevant to the unit theme, not necessarily from the course book
- developing a line of argument linked to student responses
- staying with a sequence of connected questions
- accepting responses without evaluating them
- providing opportunities for students to participate actively by building on their interests
- giving time for learners to ask questions and make clarifying statements

These mechanisms are indicators of shift in teaching practice in which there is the creation of a narrative dialogue space, and a shift to a focus on student learning needs.

Conclusion

Having gone through a period of application, analysis, and evaluation of the approach, assessment, materials and products in the first year, a number of modifications were made in the second year. Based on instructor and student feedback related to the program, and on student pass rates, the program is continuing to develop and innovate. The MEF English Language Preparatory Program has emerged as a leader of innovation in preparatory English language education curriculum delivery.

Instructors contribute to the development of the program, by introducing their particular area of interest to better connect with students, including, for example, social media, gaming principles, or refining writing. Mining available student progress data is used to reflect on ways to improve the program and examine the efficacy of course design, or assessment.

Students contribute to the development of the program, by sharing their ideas through surveys and anecdotally, introducing area of technology that them and better serve to connect with the own unique backgrounds, the materials, and other students.

Ongoing student feedback is used to make changes in the program, adapt teacher practice or to change strategies with particular students, and, serves to illustrate a case in which practice can be used to inform theory, and in which instructors willingly and enthusiastically shift their role to co-learners as “guides on the side”, rather than in their role as “sage on the stage”. The whole process of going through a change in the delivery of instruction also created modifications in the teachers’ perceptions of their own roles and the way they communicate with their students. Thus, flipped learning environment was a medium facilitating opportunities for in-service teacher training created with a mutual enthusiasm.

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