



Steps towards flipping classes in Higher Education: ESP

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Abstract

The paper investigates the gradual transition from traditional methods of language instruction to delivering teaching material in a blended format and reports on some of the findings of a research grant dedicated to measuring the impact of flipped learning on students' development of productive skills. This transition reconsiders the learning/teaching stages and aims at both reducing teachers' lecturing time in class and increasing students' speaking time, so that more emphasis is given to productive oral activities and to fostering fluency. The process of reversing the learning and teaching stages prompts changes in the curriculum planning, in restructuring part of the materials available and reconsidering the role of both language instructor and student. These aspects are submitted under the concept of flipped learning and pinpoint the first steps involved in creating video materials for students in Cultural Tourism. The author reflects on choice of material (units, topics), curriculum changes (task-based and competence-based syllabi), comparing different learning environments and also on the advantages and challenges of implementing flipped methods. The benefits of transitioning from traditional to blended-learning methods stem from several aspects regarding the educational spectrum and its stakeholders. At the institutional level, it serves the language policy of the university and its long-term strategy of developing more blended teaching corpus and of encouraging multicultural and intercultural awareness through foreign language learning and teaching. At the European level, the focus on the proliferation of blended strategies, on Open Educational Resources and on facilitating the development of transversal and cross-sector skills are proof of the changes that need to be adopted by all European universities. At the local level, students' needs and their preparation for a mobile, ever-changing labor market acknowledge the role of language instruction in formal and informal interaction, inside and outside the classroom.

Keywords: flipped learning; productive skills; fluency; blended learning

1. Introduction

The ever-changing landscape of education and of the role of its stakeholders have generated a constant preoccupation for defining, redefining, thinking and rethinking educational policies so that they meet the needs of a geographically, culturally and linguistically *mobile* society. In the context of academic instruction, such policies acknowledge the increased emphasis on competence-based teaching and learning and on fostering the autonomy of the learner.

Academic departments, language centres or institutes responsible for the development of the students' communicative skills have also adapted their strategies and means so that they cater for the specific needs of their future graduates in search of job opportunities which should put their set of field-specific knowledge and competence to good use.

1.1. LSP and European language policies

The awareness of social *mobility* whereby individuals have the possibility to apply for different positions in various cultures has led decision-making factors and important administrative bodies to the conclusion that language instruction *for specific purposes* deserves closer examination and support, as it guarantees a better chance at adapting to and succeeding in the professional context: “Lafford (...) notes that the European Commission, the Council of Europe’s Language Policy Division and the European Centre for Modern Languages encourage and support the growth of LSP in Europe under ‘societal and governmental pressures to create multilingual, mobile EU citizens in Europe with an understanding that knowledge of how the target language is used in culturally appropriate ways in professional settings would improve their opportunities for international employment’.” (Gollin-Kies et ali., 2015: 35)

1.2. LSP and local language policies: the case of Babeş-Bolyai University

Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania, is the second largest university in the country, with over 40,000 students learning at 21 faculties, committed to preserving and enhancing the multicultural and plurilingual character of an advanced research academic body. The University has adopted an official document governing the language policy of its members (students and teaching staff alike), which has been gradually revised and amended according to various financial, economic and social (inter)national constraints. The current Language Policy has been in function since 2013 and is available only in Romanian at <http://senat.ubbcluj.ro/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Politica-lingvistica-UBB.pdf>. Its main objectives are:

- Supporting the linguistic development of future specialists in the main research, occupational and vocational fields;
- Facilitating the dissemination of research results in the three languages of the lines of study (Romanian, Hungarian, German – the official language and the main minority languages);
- Developing general and specific communicative skills in the most important modern languages;
- Respecting the European language policy and its focus on plurilingualism;
- Internationalization of academic programmes;
- Curricular adaptation aimed at boosting competitiveness on the labor market;
- Supporting and improving language acquisition, certification and the calibration of international standards;
- Assisting the implementation of interdisciplinary programmes, in which the learning, teaching and testing of languages for specific purposes play an important part.

That is why constant efforts are made at both institutional and individual levels to respect, improve and implement the guidelines of the Language Policy in all aspects of our professional practice.

2. LSP teachers: from language instructors to “professional educators”

Language instruction for non-philologists at Babeş-Bolyai University is managed by two Departments of Modern Languages for Specific Languages, each responsible for a different set of faculties and of (sub-)fields. These Departments are responsible for both the language teaching and testing of non-philologists through mandatory courses (varying from 2 to 4 semesters) and for the (additional) development of communicative skills for specific purposes through a relatively small number of elective courses (mostly BA level). At the end of the mandatory cycle of language instruction, the students sit a language test for specific purposes in view of obtaining a language certificate. In order to be able to graduate and join an MA programme, the language proficiency level on the certificate should be B2.

The “reality” behind these principles of the Language Policy is complicated by a series of variables which, sometimes, add to the already difficult position that languages for specific purposes hold inside the specific field: linguistically heterogeneous groups, the number of students per group (30-35), a limited number of hours of language instruction per week (2), divergent expectations from the stakeholders, financial constraints, etc. Moreover, the question of face validity of testing has created an unfortunate washback effect whereby the emphasis on assessment outgrows the importance of teaching and learning. Face validity is “concerned with whether the test looks valid to the stakeholders – the test-takers, employers, academics and so on.” (Gollin-Kies et al., 2015: 107). In LSP, this adds additional weight and pressure to the act of language instruction. Hence, the search for individual solutions to institutional problems has led LSP teachers to reconsidering their role and impact in preparing students, to revising learning and teaching strategies and to constantly readjusting their curricula.

Our concern for providing our students with the necessary and appropriate communicative tools is doubled by a need to foster learner autonomy in a specific purpose context. Going beyond the oversimplified understanding of “autonomy” as “freedom from external control”, we share a perspective similar to Littlewood’s autonomy framework, which reconsiders the question of learner autonomy as “interdependence” between “an individual innate capacity” (Hamilton, 2014: 12) and the affirmation of that capacity in a specific “context”.

Table 1. Littlewood’s autonomy framework (apud Hamilton 2014: 40)

Autonomy as communicator	Autonomy as a learner	Autonomy as a person (in a foreign language learning context)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to use the language creatively – the expression of personal meanings. • The ability to select strategies for communication in specific situations – independently navigating texts and social contexts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to work independently (e.g. self-directed learning). • The ability to select suitable learning strategies within and beyond the classroom – supporting language development and extending the communicative range. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ability to express personal meaning. • The ability to create personal learning contexts (e.g. interacting beyond the classroom) – seeking opportunities for independent reading, joining target language groups beyond the classroom.

Littlewood’s features of autonomy match our vision of the role of LSP instruction as the means by which students’ communicative skills are developed, improved and assessed alongside cross-sector ones. We are aware that it is insufficient to study and work on developing learner autonomy as something that exists in isolation; rather, we believe that LSP

instruction should prepare the individual learner to function in a specific context. As in Sari Luoma's definition, context – at least in what assessing speaking is concerned – “refers to everything in the speaking situation except the talk that is being produced at a particular moment. Thus, it includes practical aspects of the situation such as the place where the talk happens, and cognitive and experiential aspects such as the language-use experiences that the speakers bring to the situation and the goals they have in a particular conversation.” (Luoma, 2011: 30)

For this reason, we have decided to restructure our teaching strategies so that we prioritize the development of productive skills, especially speaking for specific purposes, of fluency and autonomy of the foreign language learner in a specific context. In attempting to do this, we have found that a transition from the traditional model of language instruction to an alternative one was clearly needed.

Thus, the relatively recent approach brought forth by the *flipped learning* model answers a number of questions and professional dilemmas, such as:

- How can I increase my students' speaking time beyond the limits of the schedule?
- How can I make sure that I made the best use of the teaching time in class?
- What can I do in order to motivate my students to dedicate more time to learning a foreign language without appearing to do so?

The flipped learning model claims to be a “pedagogical approach in which direct instruction moves from the group learning space to the individual learning space, and the resulting group space is transformed into a dynamic, interactive learning environment where the educator guides students as they apply concepts and engage creatively in the subject matter.” (see definition formulated by the Flipped Learning Network, available at: https://flippedlearning.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/FLIP_handout_FNL_Web.pdf). Put simply, a “flipped classroom is one in which material traditionally assigned as homework are now done in the classroom”. (Lockwood, 2014: 1)

Flipped learning “flips” Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of the cognitive processes at stake when solving tasks in and outside the class. Thus, the classic pyramid of remembering-understanding-application-analysis-evaluation-creation (the first two or three usually at work in class, while the rest are traditionally engaged in doing homework) is reversed bottom-up, emphasizing higher-order thinking skills and cognitive processes *in* class rather than *outside* the classroom context.

This triggers the revision of curriculum planning, teaching methods and assessment, as well as that of the definition and role of the LSP teachers. One of the four pillars of flipped learning pleads for the reconsideration of the teacher in general as “professional educator”, understood as having an even more “demanding” role than in the traditional classroom model. Professional educators facilitate the activation of the students' higher order cognitive skills *in* class, as part of the teaching script, after having assigned lower-order cognitive tasks *outside* of the class, as homework. Assigning the students the responsibility of acquiring the knowledge necessary to be able to solve a more difficult task in class is one of the ways in which the autonomy of the language learner is built step-by-step.

3. A slow and painful transition: flipping ESP classes

The transition from the traditional to the flipped model is still a work in progress and our belief is that, in the current context of institutional policies, a semi-flipped model is enough to prepare us for further changes.

As a teacher of ESP for students in Cultural Tourism, I have slowly flipped activities, alternating the traditional and the flipped model with an experimental group. How does flipped learning work in practice?

- The teacher prepares a section from the teaching material (ideally an original piece of material delivered to the students in audio or video format, but not necessarily);
- At home: mandatory - the student reads/watches/listens to the material;
- At home: optional – the student does exercise(s);
- In class: the student *applies* what he/she learnt at home.

Contrary to the myth that, due to the flipped learning model, the role of textbooks will diminish leading to their ultimate disappearance, I have found that traditional teaching materials are still very useful in transitioning from one formula to another. As an enthusiast of a semi-flipped approach to ESP, I combine original materials (audio or video recordings using screen capture technology, such as SnagIt, hosted on a repository) with textbooks, coursebooks and other teaching auxiliaries.

“Clipping out” lecture-style sections of the teaching script and “exporting” them as homework proved especially useful with communicative tasks (such as open-ended speaking tasks like role-plays) and the task-based assessment of speaking. As the field of Cultural Tourism is generous in the recurrence of such tasks and examples of formative assessment, the flipped learning model made it possible for the students to engage in more meaningful speaking activities *in class*.

To give an example of the potential benefits of flipping class activities, consider the extract from the Oxford English for Careers – Tourism 1, written by Robin Walker and Keith Harding and published in 2006, the textbook we use with first year students in Cultural Tourism, in both traditional and flipped format. The main objective of the activities in the extract focuses on introducing the components of a SWOT analysis and its use in measuring the marketing potential of a certain business.

Table 2. A SWOT Analysis (activity adapted from Walker, Harding, 2006)

Traditional model	Flipped model
<p>IN CLASS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening activity (“Listen and tick the features that the Leisure Product Manager mentions in the table below”): 6 min. (3 min. X 2) • Remembering & understanding (“In pairs, discuss and list the following features as Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities or Threats”): 10 min. 	<p>AT HOME</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening activity (“Listen and tick the features that the Leisure Product Manager mentions in the table below”): 6 min. (3 min. X 2) • Remembering & understanding (“In pairs, discuss and list the following features as Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities or Threats”): 10 min.
<p>AT HOME</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysing and evaluating (“Think of a city you know well and decide what you think its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats are. Design a SWOT analysis of the city.”): 30 min. 	<p>IN CLASS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysing and evaluating (“Think of a city you know well and decide what you think its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats are. Design a SWOT analysis of the city.”): 30 min.

The first obvious benefit is the economy of time; 15-16 minutes out of the total 120 minutes might not seem that important, but when LSP classes are already faced with schedule constraints, such a gain is viewed as substantial. A second advantage of flipping in this case is the chance to assist students in solving higher-order cognitive tasks. Thus, the teacher-as-professional-educator closely monitors and scaffolds students’ performance on more important

activities, as compared to the traditional mode in which such activities would be given as homework.

4. Instead of conclusions: side notes on *flipping*

Up to the present stage of flipping our learning and teaching methods, few drawbacks have been identified, mostly in relation to work discipline and to the students' expectations from LSP classes. Thus, there are still cases in which some of the students fail to process the material given as homework "before the class" and, therefore, are unprepared to solve higher-order cognitive tasks in class. In the flipped model, homework is essential in that it provides the input and the "contextualization cues" (Douglas, 2000) for in class activities. For students with a lower level of language proficiency who do not manage to go through the videos before the face-to-face class, a short sequence of peer instruction proved to be a possible solution, as it reduces the pressure of tackling the material individually and it harnesses the principles of scaffolding. In general, though, the impact of the flipped model on this category of students "benefits from the making use of videos and screen casts" and they usually perform better in exams (Stannard, 2015).

Overall, the gradual transition to the (semi-)flipped model has introduced members of the LSP teaching staff with possible solutions to institutional problems; it is a step away from the traditional model and another step forward in the direction of blended-learning and the creation of original Open Educational Resources paving the road to internationalization of education.

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