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To What Extent Can Multimedia Lessons with Formative Assessment Bridge the Language Gap for HE Learners Working in a Second Language?

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WED: To What Extent Can Multimedia Lessons with Formative Assessment Bridge the Language Gap for HE Learners Working in a Second Language (Teo Tureli)

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Millions of students worldwide, and over 300 000 students in Turkey attend English medium universities in their home countries. In these universities all teaching, assessment and learning materials are in English, which is a second language for almost all the students. To be successful, learners need to be able to understand and communicate using advanced English language structures and there is a close correlation between grades and English language competence since all teaching, assessment and learning materials are in English.

Before they start taking classes in their departments all students are expected to have an advanced or effective operational proficiency level of English. Most students attend English language preparatory classes for a year or more and all take a language test to `prove` that their English language skills are at or above B2 level (Common European Framework) before starting to take classes in their departments.

However, most students beginning their classes in their departments have problems in using one or more language structures. Faculty, especially those teaching Academic English and writing heavy classes notice these problems in student essays, presentations and assignments. Unfortunately there is great diversity in student language problems and the curriculum, large student/teacher ratios, time constraints and assessment policies prevent teachers from addressing these and the problems are passed on and often persist.

According to Michael Swan (2005), a doyenne of EFL teaching,

`Languages have structural features that are complicated and hard to learn. For learners to master them, adequate experience, understanding and use of these features are necessary. Where time is limited and learners have little out-of-class exposure (as in most language-teaching situations the world over), this can only be brought about with the help of pedagogic intervention: explicit teaching and systematic practice informed by a syllabus of known problems.`

The artifact I propose to present is aimed to provide modules where such students can find explicit instruction, with follow up language practice through formative testing and language

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production using translation activities. Each module addresses a single language structure/grammar point. Faculty identify student's language gap and direct her to a module relevant to the student's language problem (eg: passive voice, noun clause, tenses).

In a typical module students will first watch a video explicitly explaining, in the students' native language, when and how to use the language structure and how to produce it. Next the module will test basic understanding through multiple choice, cloze and matching exercises and provide simple feedback to the student. This is followed by open ended and translation questions to provide opportunity for the student to 'create' sentences using the target language structure.

In my presentation I will explain my artifact, providing a representative module with a short video explanation, followed by examples of the question types and language production practice included in the module.

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[Stefanie Anyadi](#)

1:40pm 24 January 2015 [Permalink](#)

Sounds interesting, Teo! Is your idea that academic staff in the various subjects identify problem areas and then suggest remedial modules to students? My concern would be that

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academic staff might not be willing to participate as they might see it as not their job, and also might not have the relevant skills/knowledge to identify problem areas. Or is this task carried out by dedicated and trained staff? Will be interesting to find out your ideas!



[Teo T](#)

9:03pm 25 January 2015 [Permalink](#)

Hi Stefani,

Thank you for your comments and very useful questions.

The modules are meant to be open, stand-alone lessons - each with a video `explanation` followed by practice & production of a single language point. So in theory students could choose to access any module without any direction and academic staff in any department could direct students to appropriate modules if they wanted to, but I wouldn't expect that to happen much. Like you say academic staff in the various subjects - an Economics lecturer for example, might not have the relevant skills/knowledge or time to identify problem areas and language problems would be beyond their remit anyway.

Instead it would be Academic English/English for specific Purposes teachers who might want to direct students to these modules. My university and most English medium universities abroad have classes in Academic English (also variously called Academic Writing, Freshman English, Communication 101/102, English 101/102 etc.) which are usually compulsory for credit classes with a strong focus on reading based writing, meant to bring students from an IELTS 6-7 level to a level where they are able to independently do all the research, writing, presentation etc. required by their undergraduate studies.

Academic English teachers usually have the relevant skills/knowledge to identify problem areas and the motivation to help students overcome these problems. They see in student assessments and writing repeated weaknesses (like word order, tenses, noun clauses, passive voice, modal verbs etc.) where the student is either misusing or avoiding using particular language structures.

In an ideal world a teacher could spend an hour or two with a student explaining and modeling the problem language structure, test understanding and have the student produce increasingly complex versions of that language structure. Due to high student/teacher ratios, curriculum restrictions and lack of time as well as the variety and lack of uniformity of problem areas most of these problems are usually not really addressed. Within these limitations a conscientious teacher is able at best to indicate problem areas to the student, but can do little to follow up on this. These modules are intended to provide a place for such a teacher to direct students to.

I hope this answers your questions. hopefully I will be able to give more details of my context at the conference.

See you :)



[Dave Martin](#)

12:22pm 2 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

The quote is very interesting Teo. *'pedagogic intervention: explicit teaching and systematic practice informed by a syllabus of known problems.'* I am looking forward to

seeing how that applies to language teaching and am also wondering, will this have relevance in other contexts?



[Stefanie Anyadi](#)

9:59am 7 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Thanks, Teo, that sounds like a great resource and I can imagine that it might be of interest to lots of other universities. Might it be possible to adapt one of the existing English language tests to check for competency in specific structures? You could then run the same test later to see how your intervention improved the student's knowledge.

I really like Hugo's ideas about authentic assessment, I think that can be very motivating for students. I guess your students wouldn't be assessed, but could you maybe get them to engage by asking them to produce language structure-related questions? That way they'd have to engage with the material and the questions they generate could then also be used by other students to revise? PeerWise is a really good system, if you're interested in the collaborative building of a question bank.



[Teo I](#)

11:33pm 10 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Thank you for your comments Stefani. I have been thinking along the same lines and hope to develop this further and pilot several approaches as I do so – animations, talking head type videos, text and their combinations - and also carry out before and after tests to see if there is any change in learner competence. Currently my plan is to have a group of EAP teachers creating questions but I also like the idea of students generating content – tho I'm not sure about how it would work in practice.



[Dr Simon Ball](#)

11:00am 12 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Your questions and comments from the live conference presentation are below:

- ▶ Hopefully more and more universities demanding minimum level of 6 in READING and WRITING (speaking and listening inflates their scores)
- ▶ But even students with the same levels can vary widely in their ability, so tests not very reliable...
- ▶ What do you think about mobile language apps like Duolingo? Is this helpful for the type of students you are teaching?
- ▶ what happens to the students who don't have a good enough level? later on
- ▶ Do their English language skills impact their grades directly, i.e. are their essays marked on style, grammar etc?
- ▶ why did you choose language skeleton?
was the most problematic?
- ▶ What is the OU marking policy for a student with English as a foreign language?
- ▶ Do you feel there is a taboo amongst your students around admitting to language deficiencies, once they get into learning subject content 'proper'?
- ▶ I wonder whether insights from linguistics, e.g. underlying structures, might help

students. Might understanding more theory about structures help with improving language production?

- ▶ Love the choice of videos and text based approaches
- ▶ How useful do you think the comparative linguistics approach is for learning languages? Isn't it better just to separate the systems?



[Jane Ballans](#)

2:19pm 13 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Hi Teoman, sorry to have missed your live presentation however I've heard the recording and was really pleased to be able to find your developing artefact on here. A really interesting use of video and text.

I occasionally have to mark and grade the work of my students with English as a second or additional language and always find it challenging.

Do you have clear guidelines for this?



[Teo T](#)

10:17pm 21 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Hi Jane,

It's hard to suggest guidelines without knowing your context, the task and the level of English of the students in question. I think the key is whether the student is able to provide the required content. If the language problems are minor and don't impede understanding then I would probably not intervene very much, wouldn't reduce their grade because of small mistakes and instead I would encourage them to further focus on content. If on the other hand the learners sentences frequently don't make sense or seriously hinder understanding I would indicate this to the student perhaps by underlining all such sentences and would probably also add a minus point to the grade to encourage the student to improve.



[Teo T](#)

10:24pm 21 February 2015 [Permalink](#)

Thank you everyone for listening to my presentation and for the comments and questions. My responses to questions and comments are below:

- ▶ *Hopefully more and more universities demanding minimum level of 6 in READING and WRITING (speaking and listening inflates their scores)*

I'm not sure that speaking and listening always inflate their scores, but reading and writing skills are often more important in determining the amount of difficulty HE students face when learning in a second language. So it might be a good idea for universities to require stronger results for the reading and writing parts of these exams and the higher the

minimum level expected the better of course, but 6 should be the absolute minimum level for all skills.

even students with the same levels can vary widely in their ability, so tests not very reliable...

I agree that the language tests - most commonly IELTS and TOEFL - are not always very reliable or uniform. It is not uncommon for the same student to get two very different results in consecutive attempts at a test even though their language skills are essentially the same in both attempts. There can also be significant variation in the grades given to the speaking and writing sections which are difficult to grade precisely - in norming sessions for these exams I have often witnessed the same papers and recorded speaking exams being given extremely different grades by different examiners.

Another problem is that students have different aptitudes for such tests or cramming for the tests and some teachers teaching to the test, which all result in a reduction in the reliability of the result.

- ▶ What do you think about mobile language apps like Duolingo? Is this helpful for the type of students you are teaching?

Anything that increases student exposure to and use of English whilst keeping the learner engaged and interested can be very helpful. Duolingo and other mobile apps and even things like multiplayer video games requiring communication are all very useful to some learners. The gamification in Duolingo is motivating and especially the translating activities help the user learn vocabulary and formulate sentences. There are many weaknesses such as a lack of more advanced language/grammar input, the sometimes non-sensical, often bizarre sentences that come up and the `computer voice` used in the listenings.

- ▶ What happens to the students who don't have a good enough level? later on –

These students often need to spend much more effort and time on course materials, and have a generally more frustrating experience in their discipline area classes. Some universities offer more continuing language support than others for these students and many learners improve through self-study and being exposed to the language. Other students get by somehow and complete their studies without any real improvement in their language skills.

- ▶ Do their English language skills impact their grades directly, i.e. are their essays marked on style, grammar etc?

Some research and anecdotal evidence suggests that incoming students` level of English is a major determinant of the grades the student subsequently receives in area courses. Their essays and other assignments in their discipline area classes are not directly graded for style, grammar etc., but generally speaking learners with language structure problems will lose grades because they will be less able to summarise, express complex ideas etc.

- ▶ why did you choose language skeleton? was the most problematic?

No specific single reason. It is a problematic area for many students in my context and a fundamental one. I also thought that it might be better suited to an animation type

approach.

- ▶ What is the OU marking policy for a student with English as a foreign language?

I'm not sure but I would be interested to learn. I'm guessing that there would be no grade allowance for language weaknesses or extra support to help them overcome these. I would imagine that in distance education language weaknesses would cause the learner even more problems than in a f2f environment where access to other learners and faculty is easier.

- ▶ Do you feel there is a taboo amongst your students around admitting to language deficiencies, once they get into learning subject content 'proper'?

I haven't found there to be any such taboo, but frequently there is a resistance to having to further develop language skills in parallel with having to learn the subject content 'proper'.

- ▶ I wonder whether insights from linguistics, e.g. underlying structures, might help students. Might understanding more theory about structures help with improving language production?

There certainly needs to be a good understanding of a structure before the learner can use it but of course there needs to be a balance to this. Too much theory/metalinguage can also be very distracting and unhelpful. The key is for learners themselves to use and produce the target structure, so my approach has been to provide some theory/understanding followed by lots of practice.

- ▶ Love the choice of videos and text based approaches.

Thanks!

- ▶ How useful do you think the comparative linguistics approach is for learning languages? Isn't it better just to separate the systems?

There is some debate on this point. While some advocate ignoring completely and making no use of the learners' native language knowledge, others advocate its extensive use. Both extremes of view/approach are largely discredited but still widely used in language teaching. In practice even very advanced students frequently tend to formulate their ideas/sentences first in their native languages then translate into English - or at least make extensive use of their native language. A complete separation of the languages ignores this point and fails to make use of a potential tool. I don't advocate extensive use of a comparative linguistics approach, but making use of learners' native language for explaining and modeling language structures learners find problematic and making use of translation as a practice activity can be quite useful.

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