Backstage story of a successful online course experience

Història entre bastidors d'una experiència d'un curs en línia d'èxit

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Abstract

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic caused by the new type of coronavirus, lecturers at all universities in Turkey, as in other countries, taught synchronous and/or asynchronous online courses.

Whether you have taught very few or a lot of online courses, both you and your students are less likely to enjoy them compared to face-to-face teaching. However, when the correct steps are followed, it is indeed possible to hold enjoyable and academically fruitful online classes.

This article shares the processes previous to, during and after the implementation of successful online courses along with qualitative student reflections on these courses held in the spring semester of 2020 in the English Language Teaching and Education Department at Erciyes University, Turkey.

Students' comments reveal that compared to other online courses they have taken during the same period, these courses started smoothly, were more successful, were not different from their face-to-face experiences with me, had very well-planned target assignments, didn't leave them in a sink-or-swim situation, reflected current issues, and prepared them for the future. Students also state that the courses helped to give them an idea of how to plan successful online courses, even though they still prefer face-to-face education if given the chance to choose.

Keywords

Online teaching, student reflections, English Language Teaching program, Higher Education, performance-based task-oriented assignments.

Resum

En resposta a la pandèmia de la COVID-19 causada pel nou coronavirus, el professorat de totes les universitats de Turquia, tal com ha passat en altres països, ha hagut de fer classes en línia sincròniques i/o asincròniques.

Tant si ha impartit pocs cursos en línia com molts, el més probable és que el professorat i també el seu alumnat no en gaudeixin tant com dels cursos presencials. Tanmateix, si se segueixen els passos correctes, es poden dur a terme classes virtuals entretingudes i acadèmicament profitoses.

Aquest article presenta els processos que cal aplicar abans, durant i després de la implementació de cursos en línia per tal que siguin satisfactoris, juntament amb reflexions qualitatives dels estudiants respecte d'aquests cursos, impartits durant el semestre de primavera de 2020 en el Departament d'Educació i Ensenyament de la Llengua Anglesa de la Universitat d'Erciyes, a Turquia.

Els comentaris dels estudiants posen de manifest que, en comparació amb altres cursos en línia que van seguir durant el mateix període, aquestes classes virtuals es van començar a impartir sense contratemps, van tenir més èxit, no van ser diferents d'altres classes presencials que havien fet amb mi, presentaven una planificació de les tasques molt acurada, no van deixar els alumnes desatesos, es van fer ressò dels problemes del moment i els van preparar per al futur. Els alumnes també afirmen que els cursos els van ajudar a tenir una idea sobre com planificar amb èxit cursos en línia, tot i que, si poden triar, continuen preferint l'ensenyament presencial.

Paraules clau

Ensenyament en línia, reflexions dels estudiants, programa d'ensenyament de la llengua anglesa, educació superior, assignació de tasques concretes basades en el rendiment.

Introduction

We have been facing the biggest and worst crisis that humanity has experienced since World War II or the flu epidemic of 1918. The COVID-19 pandemic caused by the new type of coronavirus has radically changed everything we have been taking for granted and it has caused us to change the basic activities involved in our way of living, working, shopping, travelling and education.

Due to the lockdowns and the school and university closures, online teaching has been started up all over the world. This in turn has created many challenges for lecturers. Of course, some universities had made considerable progress in distance education, but no one expected that millions of students would have to begin a similar process at the same time and, unfortunately, many faculty members did not have any educational experience in distance or online teaching either.

Such a chaotic situation is never easy. So maybe what we really have to do is to stand back and remind ourselves of some key priorities. Yes, we should be grateful for the

digital tools we have because they allow us to continue doing our job under difficult conditions. But what should the ultimate goal be?

This was the question I tried to answer as I prepared my roadmap before starting my online classes. Actually, the answer was clear in my mind since it was closely related to the basics of my teaching philosophy. The answer was: I should carry out my job as efficiently as possible, without making it a point to use as many new tools as could be; sticking to the motto "sense and simplicity" that I always apply to my classes and writings; implementing a learning-centered process that I likewise always advocate; never leaving students in a sink-or-swim situation; instilling a classroom culture that values meaningful assessment not only for grading but also for real learning, something which I always defend; not compromising on my face-to face classroom teaching principles as far as possible; and ultimately making sure that everyone was doing their best.

The purpose of this paper is to share with the readers of *Revista Catalana de Pedagogia* what I have done as a university lecturer in my online courses by explaining the preparation of the lessons and the preparation of the students for the lessons, the teaching of the classes, and the assessment of the students, including their qualitative reflections on these courses.

Context and development of the proposal

After the official announcement of outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey and the closure of the universities between March 16th and 30th, I envisioned that the classes would be held online. Therefore, without compromising on my general teaching principles, I prepared a list of DOs and DON'Ts so that the online classes could be held in exactly the same way as my face-to-face teaching. After preparing the lists, I took early action in that same week, I got in touch with a 4th-year student who is highly skilled in technology and online platforms in order to prepare the course entitled "Professional Development for Foreign Language Teachers" (İÖP 406), appointing him as class representative. My goal in starting with the senior class was to help these students to graduate without delay or disruption.

To carry out our course, I gave the names of several online programs to this student and asked him to find out which one we could use most effectively, agreeing to hold an online meeting the next day. On the basis of his research and his briefing on the online platforms, we decided to use the program called "Discord" for carrying out my online courses. The following factors affected our decision:

1. The program was simple to install and use, and no fee was required.

2. Its interface was very practical and easy to understand, at least for me.

3. It had the capacity for at least 50 people and camera sharing for up to 20 students at the same time.

4. There was no time limit on its use.

5. And most importantly, the class representative whom I had appointed had been using this program for a long time, so he was familiar with it.

After deciding on which online platform to use, the class representative, myself and two more students from the class who had been using the program for a long time held a trial mini-class. During the trial session, we were satisfied with both the sound and video quality. At the end of this process, I asked the class representative to announce to his classmates that we would be using this program to carry out our lessons synchronously. I instructed him to form a classroom group and to lead and guide his classmates on the use of the program before the lessons started. We held our first online class on March 24, just one week after the university was shut down. Online courses officially started at the university on March 30th.

After initiating the process with my 4th-year students, I turned to my course designated "İÖP 302, Teaching Foreign Language to Children", with two groups of 3rd-year students. I learned from the senior class representative that there were students using Discord in both classes. On hearing this good news, I got in touch with these students via e-mail and shared my Discord ID for further communication. In my meeting with these students, I told them that we would carry out our lessons synchronously via this program. I appointed them as class representatives and asked them to talk to their classmates, create a classroom group in this program, introduce the program to the other students, and conduct several trials. We planned our first lesson for the following week and started these classes on the day and at the time planned.

I chose to hold the online classes with both the 4th- and 3rd-year students on the same day and at the same hour as our actual face-to-face lessons. In this way, I hoped that they would not feel strange and would carry on with their routines as usual.

The university decided to switch to the online teaching process on March 23 and the process began on March 30th after a week of preparation. This process was carried out in both synchronous and asynchronous format. Erciyes University is one of a total of ten research universities in Turkey, with 2,000 academic staff members, 5,534 students, 18 faculties, 7 institutions, 10 vocational schools, and 38 research centers (Erciyes University, n.d.).

Here, it might be useful to say a few words about higher education in Turkey. The higher education system in Turkey is supervised by the Council of Higher Education (YÖK). YÖK is an autonomous institution which is responsible for the planning, coordination and governance of the higher education system in Turkey in accordance with the Turkish Constitution and the Higher Education Laws. Today a total of 7.5 million students (125,000 international) are studying in 207 universities in Turkey (YÖK, 2019). This makes Turkey the second largest country of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) after Russia. In the time of the pandemic, Turkish higher education has responded the situation in a timely and active way (Saraç, 2020).

Considering the number of students, lecturers and courses in a system such as that of Erciyes University with nearly 50,000 users and 6,000 courses, unavoidable problems have occasionally arisen due to the complexity involved. In this respect, my decision to use a program independent of the university system proved to be well conceived and appropriate.

a) *Professional Development in Foreign Language Teaching (İÖP 406)*

"Professional Development in Foreign Language Teaching" is a unique course which is not taught in similar departments and faculties at the undergraduate level in Turkey. This course, specifically designed by me, aims to strengthen prospective teachers' determination to achieve high standards in their professional development and to make a career in teaching. During the course, teacher candidates learn about professional development activities conducted locally, nationally and internationally, gaining awareness of the drawbacks and shortcomings of such activities. This course also ensures that students are prepared for the professional support they need to become better teachers, before starting the profession.

I have been using and advocating performance-based alternative assessment systems for more than two decades for evaluating students. Students form groups of two or three and carry out the tasks determined at the beginning of the semester.

My theoretical lectures usually last two or three weeks and group activity for mid-term and year-end grades starts right after my lectures. Students themselves decide on the group members and the performance week.

For this course, groups were to interview a school administrator and at least two teachers on professional development and then share their results with the class. The groups themselves determine the questions to be asked in the interviews, but, in any case, these questions basically include what administrators and teachers understand by professional development, the importance of professional development in teaching, what they have done most recently for their own professional development, etc. When classes were suspended, three groups had not yet performed their mid-term activities. Accordingly, these three groups performed their group activities in an interactive, synchronized and camera-open format. Video records of these presentations were also kept.

Once the midterm assessment activities had been completed, for the final assessment I designed one target assignment for each week for the remaining six weeks. I assigned the tasks one week early so that the students could prepare them better and more professionally. They were instructed to hold a group discussion about the target assignment and to participate actively in the discussions and write down their reflections on these target assignments in the format assigned to them.

We also agreed that each student should submit his/her written reflections to the class representative as a Word document on weekly basis. These target assignments were:

- ✓ To watch English lessons on EBA TV (Ministry of National Education, Education Information Network), carrying out a critical observation and evaluation of the teachers in these lessons.

- ✓ The effect of the COVID-19 process on education/teaching. They were to read the article "Uzaktan eğitimde çocukları nasıl yönlendirmeliyiz"/How should we guide children in distance education? (Altan, 2020), share it with some parents and discuss the parents' views with the class. This article was written by me in Turkish and published in an online newspaper.

- ✓ The social dimension of education. They were to discuss the social impact and role of the teacher.

- ✓ Evaluation of the future of the teaching profession in the perspective of online teaching (Is online teaching a support or an alternative to face-to-face education?

- ✓ Evaluation of the online course İÖP 406 (What were your experiences in this course? What did you like about it and what did you dislike? What did you observe when comparing my online lessons with my face-to-face lessons? If you had a choice in the future, would you choose online or in-person face-to-face classes? Why?).

b) Teaching Foreign Languages to Children (İÖP 302)

This course is a continuation of İÖP 301. Its purpose is to teach foreign language teaching techniques and practices through games, activities and stories to prospective English language teachers. In the fall semester course, İÖP 301, after my theoretical presentations, students performed activities in groups of two and imparted game-based micro teachings to their peers.

In the case of the spring semester course, İÖP 302, the students were also instructed to perform activities and to impart story-based micro teachings to their peers. By the time the classes were called off, the midterm activities were completed in Class A but two groups of Class B were unable to complete them due to the shutdown. I consequently gave these groups a target assignment so that all the students would be starting the online courses on an equal footing. This target assignment consisted of four questions to be answered in a predetermined format. The questions they had to answer were:

- ✓ What are the characteristics of young learners?

- ✓ How do you teach young learners?

- ✓ What do young learners want?

- ✓ What do you focus on when teaching young learners?

After receiving their written answers, just as for the İÖP 406 course, I started my İÖP 302 online courses with 3rd-year students. Once again, I designed one target assignment for each week for both classes, giving the assignments one week earlier so that they could make observations and be ready for an active discussion during the online classes. All the students were asked to contribute to the discussions actively. They were also instructed to write down their reflections on the target assignments in a predetermined format and to deliver them to the class representative. At the end of the semester, the class representatives sent the students' files to me as a portfolio via e-mail. This written format, along with the classroom participation, formed the basis for the students' final grades. The students' reflections were assessed via an original rubric that I have been using for many classes for a long time.

The target assignments I gave to the students were:

- ✓ To watch MoNE (Ministry of National Education) online courses either on the English language or any other subject on EBA TV, and to be prepared to discuss them during the online session (including both positive and negative aspects).

- ✓ To watch a few online English language lessons on MoNE's EBA TV and to be prepared to compare and to contrast the performance of the English teachers in these programs with their own performance during the micro teaching sessions.

- ✓ observe a child watching an online lesson and/or to talk to him or her for his/her views on it. What is his/her opinion of the lesson? Benefits, criticisms, etc.

- ✓ What would you do if you taught online at a State school?

- ✓ What do you think about the use of technology in English language teaching? Develop and discuss the pros and cons.

- ✓ Evaluation of the online course İÖP 302: what were your experiences in this class? What did you like and what did you dislike? What did you observe when comparing my online lessons with my face-to-face lessons? If you had a choice in the future, would you choose online or in-person face-to-face classes? Why?

Results of the experience

Participants and format

There were 34 students (11 males, 23 females) in the 4th-year İÖP 406 course, and a total of 47 students (32 males, 15 females) in the two 3rd-year İÖP 302 courses. Randomly selected student reflections, with only minor editorial corrections, will be presented under some headings.

Student reflections and implications

I am really happy and grateful to find out that almost all of the students are satisfied and happy with the content and the way the course is carried out. I strongly believe that the roadmap I drew up and the content I prepared before starting the lessons played an important role in student satisfaction.

"I enjoyed attending your online classes during this stressful period."

"Thanks to this lesson, I realized that a qualified teacher is not only a person who acts according to the system and only gives/finishes the lesson, but one who creates the system himself, keeps his students motivated in the lessons interactively, and keeps the lessons alive as in face-to-face education."

"My online learning experience with you was better than other online courses as it provided effective and real communication."

"I think your class was better than any other online courses I have taken, in terms of student inclusion, participation and the topics discussed."

"Thanks to this course, my prejudices about online courses have changed."

"First of all, I am really happy to have these sessions with you because they did not only comprise lessons strictly speaking, but also dealt with the meaning and the real issues of life."

The use of an online program, Discord, which was familiar beforehand to some students, and these students' guidance of their classmates and their provision of the necessary support, acting as agents of change to help their classmates and to support them before, during and after the courses, contributed to the online courses' success.

"As the class representative, I had additional duties like collecting assignments and checking whether everybody was online. I was also the person who taught my fellow students how to use the program since we used Discord for the online classes and I am competent in it. These responsibilities were a little difficult but I think it was a good experience for me in the end."

"We were informed about the lesson before starting, so there were no questions left in our minds."

"After downloading Discord, we learned how to use the program thoroughly under the guidance of a friend. In that way, we solved issues like sound ahead of time and I think this helped us a lot in the following weeks. Thanks to the sample lesson in the first week, our other lessons ran smoothly."

Following the rule of "sense and simplicity" in the planning of the courses and the assignments, focusing and insisting on a learning-centered teaching atmosphere, and giving students a series of meaningful real-life target assignments which never left them in a sink-or-swim situation contributed to the success of my online courses.

"I liked the fact that our weekly tasks were easy to understand and not confusing."

"The tasks assigned each week allowed me to better understand and evaluate the process and they were very meaningful."

"One of the things I loved the most about the lesson was that the weekly tasks dealt with real-life issues."

"I didn't have any problems with the assignments or our missions because they were about the real world and were always of current interest. The lessons were a continuation of each other and the connection never broke off."

Providing an interactive uninhibited classroom atmosphere in which everybody felt free and was given the opportunity to speak and communicate freely helped everybody to do their best, contributing greatly to the success of the online course experience.

"This was the only really interactive online course... During the classes, I was able to express my opinions freely and receive immediate feedback or constructive criticism."

"Our online course was entirely based on interaction, so it was the best one of all in comparison to other online courses. I was able to learn about the ideas of my fellow students and to freely share my own."

"What I liked the most were the group discussions on the assigned topics. I heard the voices of some of my classmates which I did not hear in most of the face-to-face lessons."

"I was also more active in online classes than in face-to-face classes. I felt more comfortable sharing my ideas."

The fact that online lessons were no different from my face-to-face classes was voiced by almost all students and this is a good indication that the online process has achieved its purpose.

"Your online classes were not much different from your face-to-face classes. […] So being online was an advantage, not a handicap."

"The classes were no different from your face-to-face classes and I felt like I was in the classroom. In fact, it was more effective than face-to-face lessons, as everyone actively participated."

"The online lessons were almost the same as my face-to-face classes with you."

As mentioned earlier, the Discord program allows up to 20 screens to be opened at the same time, but as a result of our evaluation, we decided not to turn the screens on during the classes until it was really necessary. Although I respect some students' opinions that they were not so happy and comfortable because they did not see their classmates, a few students' reflections relating to their home conditions proved and supported that it was a correct and appropriate decision not to open the screens during the classes.

"It was bad not to see my friends' and the lecturer's expressions and gestures."

"What I did not like was that there was no eye contact or gestures involved, which at some points made me feel like I was talking to a wall."

"The setting of the online classes was not very comfortable or suitable for me."

"I had some difficulties finding a suitable place at home and accessing the Internet for classes."

I would like to draw special attention to the importance, for the success of the course, of giving performance-based task-oriented target assignments and of making my general assessment by the same method. Performance-based alternative techniques, which I have been using and advocating for decades, were a perfect fit for this process. I assure that, if things are done correctly and conscientiously, both success and satisfaction are inevitable. This method of assessment is of course not a new practice, but in distance learning it is important that the assessments we design for students should ask them to apply their new knowledge to new situations. Performance assignments do this and create engaging multi-stage opportunities for students to demonstrate what they know. It may be understood from the students' reflections that a culture that values meaningful assessment is created, a culture in which real learning takes place and not just an endeavor to get good grades.

"You drew our attention to the important points in this process and you didn't give meaningless assignments or have us read meaningless texts."

"The topics that we covered were of current interest and showed us how to draw up a road map for our professional lives."

"The fact that these topics were current issues made the discussions enjoyable and enabled everyone to take an active part in the class."

"We were informed about the lesson before starting, so there were no questions left in our minds. The tasks given each week allowed me to better understand and evaluate the process and they were very meaningful."

The contribution of timely meaningful feedback to students and their qualified involvement in the process can also be noticed in the students' reflections.

"During the courses, I was able to express my opinions clearly and to receive immediate feedback and constructive criticism."

"Of course, there were pros and cons and some Internet-related problems, but sharing our ideas with everyone, receiving timely and quality feedback, and listening to our usually silent friends' voices was quite relaxing."

It may also be noticed that students welcomed the fact that the online classes were held on the same day and at the same hour as usual, taking attendance as if they were face-to-face classes. It is important that there was no negative feedback from any students, except one, about taking attendance.

"During the lessons, we met all the requirements of face-to-face education, including regular and timely attendance."

"Everyone had the right to speak equally in the classroom environment, and also the attendance was efficient and not ignored by anyone, so it was no different from the real class environment."

As for students' preferences between face-to-face and online courses, if they were to be given a choice in future, the great majority state that although they had a successful online experience, they would still choose face-to-face teaching. Even so, some students said they would prefer online teaching.

"Until I attended this course, I would have preferred all my courses to be face-to-face, but I have now learned that even if a course is held online, with proper planning it can be effective. If I could choose in the future, I would prefer the online platform for theoretical courses."

"If I had to choose between online or face-to-face education, I would definitely choose face-to-face."

"I can say from my experience that thanks to online lessons, students can be more autonomous and even more relaxed and active. However, if I had to make a choice in the future, I would still choose face-to-face teaching."

Conclusions and discussion

I strongly believe that to make online learning better and more effective, it is more important for educators to rethink how they do their jobs and carry out their teaching

rather than to undergo additional training and possess better technology. Beyond all practical questions about access, devices and curriculum, the most important thing is what educators actually do during their online teaching.

Basically, I believe that an effective online education plan should be one that guides learning and holds students' attention on their tasks, calling for high quality direct instruction by the teacher, with well-designed and planned complementary assignments for students so that they can practice, create, read and explore. Indeed, this mixed approach, along with the main objectives I have mentioned above, formed the basis of my online courses.

Obviously, it was a great advantage not to use the communication platform planned and put into service by the university. This decision helped me to move more freely, not to challenge my abilities and not to deal with any of the technical problems caused by an excessive use of the university platform. It would be a good idea, instead of choosing a platform with which students are not acquainted or a platform like Zoom, Skype, etc. that everyone uses extensively, to choose a simple meaningful platform that some students are already familiar with, and for there to be some people who can provide immediate help in solving any difficulties with it. It is also a good idea to choose a class representative instead of trying to communicate with all of the students, except under special circumstances.

It is likewise important to appreciate and heed our students' warnings when they point out potential errors in the process, especially at the beginning of the process, or when they alert us to technical issues with the tools we use. It is very important for them to know that their voices are heard and that their contributions are valuable. We want to recreate our classroom relationships online and students should know that we are there for them. I have to confess that learning from students has made a significant contribution to the success of this process.

Although it is very important not to let technology dominate your relationship with students, it is even more important not to let technology interfere with the teacher's personality and his or her teaching.

Conducting the lessons on the same day and at the same time as face-to-face teaching creates an important impression of normality for the students. Likewise, I think that taking attendance is useful.

I also think it is helpful to focus on creating a good balance between academic growth, social and emotional development, and the overall well-being of our students (Conley, 2015). While it is generally recommended that online lesson times must be kept as short as possible, I held classes for the same amount of time as usual and achieved even more in one or two lessons in comparison to my face-to-face lessons. This is an interesting and important point that should be carefully examined with a view to future studies.

I planned and implemented project-based learning that was not constantly connected to the computer screen and did not require further time in front of the monitor. This involved such activities as watching lessons on TV from a critical point of view, meeting with families, observing students, and evaluating their own progress. I also made sure, however, that I took an informed approach to research and project-based learning. I

used direct instruction to give the basics and made formative assessments to make sure that the students understood what I was expecting from them and were aware of what I was aiming at.

My online lessons also followed the order and procedures that I apply in my face-to-face teaching: communication with students, taking care of both their academic and social-emotional well-being, and the order of assignments (Conley, 2015). We should not overlook these priorities on starting up assessment practices either.

Since online learning reduces teachers' oversight, students need to take ownership of their learning. This issue, unfortunately, is a very obvious deficiency in many education systems, especially in Turkey. The awareness that students are responsible for their own learning should be acquired at a very early age. I think the main reason for many unsuccessful online courses is hidden in this detail. Students were forced to do dozens of assignments and to take online tests at once – but they weren't ready for them. A well-planned, meaningful and goal-oriented online lesson should never include any sink-or-swim assignments at all.

Assessment should be part of the classroom culture rather than being limited to a student's grade at the end of the term. Likewise, assessment should be used to support student learning, not for accountability or external motivation.

Being physically away from classrooms can be a good opportunity for contemplation or inner awareness. Helping and guiding students to think deeply with open-ended targeted assignments will make a significant contribution to their professional development.

The methods and results included in this study are of course only known to be valid for this group. It is essential to carry out similar experiences in different settings and with different groups in order to be able to compare the results.

We have gone through and are still going through a process unlike any other in our memory. We do not know what next year will be like. For this reason, I think the elements in this study are worth trying out so as to avoid inconsistencies and emotional confusion.

It is hoped that this paper will give an idea of this teaching experience in terms of both its procedures and contents for those who plan to design online courses in the future.

Acknowledgments

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