

Bridging the Gap between Preparatory Classes and Freshman Courses in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper aims to introduce the integration of a new component into a preparatory year course that allows students both to develop critical thinking and academic writing skills, and cope with social science freshman courses at a higher education institute in Turkey. Today, in most European countries, a significant increase has been observed in English medium universities, which generally convey knowledge using a Western discourse pattern. Therefore, when asked to cope with academic writing which requires bringing multiple skills together such as researching, reading, annotating, critical thinking, analyzing, corroborating different resources and referencing, a considerable burden is placed on students' shoulders, causing a significant level of struggle. In order to fill the afore mentioned gap, and allow preparatory year students a smoother and substantial transition to freshman courses, in the preparatory year we implement a separate course entitled Critical Thinking for Social Sciences (CTSS). In this study we will detail the CTSS course method, describe its implementation into the preparatory year program and share the results of feedback collected via one-to-one interviews with students who took CTSS during the last academic year and who are now taking Social and Political Science.

Key Words: Critical Thinking, Academic Writing, ESAP, Turkey, Content based instruction

Introduction

Due to the high number of English medium universities in Turkey, Academic English language instruction has become an integral part of university education. For this reason, whether public or private, a great number of higher education institutions have a separate preparatory year that provide intensive English language teaching for students. Since it is called "preparatory year", it does not only aim to furnish students with academic English competency, but also transfer the academic skills necessary for faculty courses. Due to such a loaded responsibility, preparatory year programs require a very well designed syllabus integrating English teaching with academic skills.

It is a well-known fact that EFL/ ESL instructors and curriculum designers have the tendency to place pedagogy and language acquisition above content, and this generally causes a disassociation of preparatory year programs from the rest of the campus. "In the eyes of 'academic' teachers, then, the literacy instructors appeared to be unconcerned with the 'real stuff' of the university (Johns, 1997, p.75).

Benesch also criticizes ESL instruction that distances itself from teaching the required topics of an academic curriculum:

As long as the instruction in the [language] program is not integrated into the regular academic curriculum, no course in the program, however well designed and executed, is ever likely to rise above the status of an “exercise” in the minds of many students (Ponder & Powell, 1989, p.10)

However, it is generally the case that while trying to achieve both, curriculum designers may not be able to put an adequate weight on the content or content specific language because this may lead to a course which is too demanding. This may be entirely understandable due to the greatly loaded duties of curriculum designers in preparatory year programs; however, in order to bridge that aforementioned gap between the preparatory year and faculty studies, implementation of courses specifically targeted towards degree program modules is both preferable and manageable. The details of such a course will be explained in the progression of this paper.

As it is mentioned above, preparatory year program ESL/ EAP instructors and administrators are generally aware of the fact that there is often some incompatibility between the preparatory year and faculty studies. Whether murmured in committee meetings or arising from survey results, faculties may complain about the weak critical reading and writing skills of students, along with inadequate English competency, whether in the language of the natural or social sciences, business or medicine. Such comments could frustrate and even demotivate both professionally and psychologically ESL/EAP instructors who may be spending average 20 hours teaching academic English including skills such as reading, writing, speaking and use of English. In fact faculty demands ideally require preparatory year programs to instruct students simultaneously in three different areas: academic English, academic skills and the content that will address topics studied at least at Freshman degree level. Although this appears demanding, it is not unmanageable once the appropriate use of content-based instruction is applied. In this paper, the integration of a separate, content-based course called Critical Thinking for the Social Sciences (CTSS) into the Sabancı University Foundation Year Development (FDY) program will be analyzed in terms of its method, implementation and participant perception of its success.

The Importance of Content-Based Instruction for Turkish University EAP Learners

Before approaching the theory of content-based instruction (CBI), it is important to say a little on the pre-university education history of Turkish EAP students, as this is one of the key factors to consider while designing a curriculum addressing their needs. When the educational ideologies in Turkey are considered, it may be concluded that they hinder the development of critical thinking and the analytical approach, which are key components of academic success in arguably most departments. In Turkey, learning is mostly based on rote-learning and imitation, rather than originality; there is an internalization of knowledge which promotes replication only, reflected in assessment methods such as multiple-choice tests, written exams with single type of questions. Education, therefore, is exam-oriented and can hardly be said to foster critical thinking. Besides this, writing is not tested in any national exams, which leads the students to underrate its importance as a professional skill before they encounter it in an academic setting.

Turkish EAP students in preparatory year programs are expected to develop their English syntactically, lexically and grammatically, and also to acquire a completely new system of Western discourse patterns and academic skills, including critical thinking, critical reading, evaluating resources and researching, which in all probability, as explained, contrast with their previous educational history. Preparatory year instructors need awareness of this to develop appropriate materials and tasks to help students think critically and process new knowledge. As Pally argues

students preparing for college or professional training need to learn in their L2s not only the “information” of content areas but how to gather, synthesize, and evaluate it, and organize ideas of their own...” (2000, p.9).

For this reason, the remedy for such an audience requires a specifically designed course or curriculum that will address learner needs in order to increase the compatibility with their faculty courses. Realizing this need led to the emergence of the Critical Thinking for Social Sciences (CTSS) course in the Sabancı

University Foundation Development Year program which is rooted in content-based instruction. The essence of CBI is to integrate language and content learning; thus learners are expected to simultaneously acquire L2 *and* the content of academic subjects in that language (Lyster & Ballinger in Yi Lo 2014, p.142) and in line with this, CTSS

helps learners make the transition from language preparation and general academic skills to undergraduate coursework by introducing them to simplified versions of real tasks... (Mengi & Şendur in Gün Alayafi et.al., 2016, p.125).

This approach clearly overlaps with the rationale of CBI as it is

...an 'umbrella term' for approaches that combine language and content-learning aims even if there are differences in the emphasis placed on language and content" (Stoller in Cenoz, 2015, p.10).

It needs to be highlighted that there are several types of CBI and, as Lyster and Ballinger explain:

...content-driven programs promote language and literacy development through subject-matter learning and assess both content knowledge and language development in substantive ways. In contrast, language-driven programs focus on the development of target language proficiency but entail no high-stakes assessment of content knowledge (2011, p.280).

In terms of this distinction, CTSS aims to sustain a reasonable balance between language and content as it concentrates on some of the skills necessary for a particular undergraduate course, Social and Political Science, and although it can contain a sprinkle of the subject matter of the related course, content knowledge *is* required for a successful assessed written production and the group presentation.

The creation of a remedial support course for Freshman Social and Political Science (SPS)

Identifying SPS learners' needs

Kristin Şendur of Sabancı University's Academic Communications student support centre performed research to discover how to support Freshman SPS students who were clearly struggling with this compulsory component. Conducting interviews with Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences SPS instructors and teaching assistants, use of sources was identified as a key area of difficulty. Interviewees reported, for example:

(Learners) should read critically, but they're not ... they should look for evidence, evaluate the text, challenge the writer...

When (learners) read, they read it as the absolute truth...they're not aware of who said what.¹

Following this, Şendur had student sample writings read over by instructors to identify both their expectations of a successful, critical reasoning, and common errors made. She then performed a literature review on the issues adolescents have in analysing sources and performing written historical reasoning (Nokes, et al., 2007; Stahl et al., 1996 and Wineburg, 1991) and selected the remedial goals upon which the CTSS course was founded. In terms of disciplinary reading, the use of multiple sources leading to history as interpretation was chosen, and in disciplinary writing, knowledge transformation by using evidence to create a claim (thesis statement).

Course design

Şendur adapted the Stanford History Education Group *Historical Thinking Chart*² to create a heuristic of the source reading skills students would practice and aim to master. The theme of Roman gladiators was selected with a focus on the social, political and cultural, and primary and secondary source texts chosen accordingly. Their language was adapted to reduce the linguistic cognitive load, allowing learners room to focus more on content and critical analysis, and tasks were created for target skill introduction and

¹ Critical Thinking for the Social Sciences, SPS & CTSS Overview for SL powerpoint, Şendur, K. 2013, unpublished.

² <https://sheg.stanford.edu/historical-thinking-chart> , retrieved 01.01.2016

development and production. Each lesson was assigned a “guiding question” to give a focused purpose to its texts.

Course content³

- History & historical reasoning

To attempt to alter the prevalent mindset that history consists of a set of fixed facts, an attention-grabbing “history-experiment” is performed, where the lesson is disrupted by someone acting out in a manner calculated to distract the class. Students then attempt to objectively report what happened, filtering out judgement (Mengi & Şendur in Gün Alayifi et al., 2015). From the variety of information which is both included *and* omitted, learners begin to explore Howell and Prevenier’s concept of history as interpretation (2001).

- Critically evaluating primary sources

To approach the historical thinking heuristic (see above), a contemporary subject and source are used to make the idea of evaluating a source more tangible for learners. They view a photo of an untidy dormitory room, and must decide whether it represents a truthful portrait of the room, or if it has been biased in some way due to the context in which the photo was taken. Having been introduced relatively lightly to critically analysing sources, learners are exposed to textual and visual primary sources from the Roman period. Each time they are guided through the heuristic, eventually being required to evaluate a source and its author independently. Assessment of source evaluation abilities is achieved through the writing of short responses to two prompts, for example:

Question 1	Which 1 of the 3 facts (CB p19) might cause you to <u>question the reliability of</u> Suetonius’ account?
Question 2	Many historians believe that gladiator games showed Roman social hierarchy. Does this source support that argument? Explain your reasons.

Figure 1. Source Evaluation 1 task, Lesson 3, CTSS course program.

The analysis of visual sources includes the comparison of artifacts depicting embattled gladiators, as shown in Figure 2. Learners must decide how each helps answer a guiding question (Were gladiator games important to all Romans?), and what bias each may contain:



Primary source 1: Mosaic. This mosaic is in the entrance hall (atrium) of a very large Roman villa in Perl-Nennig (modern day Germany). It was made in the 2nd or 3rd century CE, during which time Germany was part of the Roman Empire.



Primary Source 2. Figurine. This terracotta (pottery) figurine was made sometime in the 1st-2nd century CE, under the Roman Empire. Roman terracotta figurines were usually mass produced.

³ For further and fuller description of content, see Mengi & Şendur in Gün Alayifi et al., 2015

Figure 2. Two visual sources from “Choosing Evidence & Developing a Claim” task, Lesson 5, CTSS course program.

Şendur also developed answer keys with sample student responses and grading justifications to ensure standardised marking of source evaluations. This resource is also invaluable as teacher training material.

- Constructing an argument

This is learned and practiced through a variety of exercises:

1. Annotating secondary sources

Learners read up to six texts written by historians and practice annotating the central theme(s) of paragraphs. This serves not only to draw attention to the argument structure of a text, but to build up background knowledge essential to writing longer responses (see 3. below).

2. Instruction on argument building

Throughout the course aspects of argument building, along with relevant lexis, are introduced in stages: writing a claim, supporting it with evidence, choosing relevant evidence, and corroborating and contextualising sources. Discrete tasks allow the learner to practice before putting the new skill to use in writing.

3. Document-Based Question (DBQ) response writing

Document-based question (DBQ) response writing of circa 250 words enables the learner to put into practice and hone the new skills mentioned in 1. and 2.. To answer a prompt fully, writers are required to develop a claim based upon the sources studied, to support it sufficiently with evidence from those sources, to explain how that evidence proves the claim, and corroborate and contextualise as appropriate. A sample prompt:

Task prompt:

Why did politicians sponsor gladiator shows?

Instructions:

- Write 250-300 words
- Develop an argument that accounts for **all of the evidence** i.e. all the different reasons for sponsoring games

Şendur developed a DBQ grading rubric, again with sample student writings, and a student version was also produced to provide feedback to ensure learners know what they are doing well, and also which areas need more practice.

Initial integration into the preparatory programme

At first CTSS was part of elective support material taught by Şendur at Sabancı University’s Academic Communications student support centre. She was later joined by Jonathan Smith, an Foundation Development Year (FDY) preparatory programme instructor as student interest and thus numbers rose. Student feedback was positive⁴ and following inter-faculty talks, CTSS was made compulsory for FDY students by integrating it into its top stream (exit level CEFRL B2) programme. With the shift to another department and program, the following actions ensured the development of a knowledgeable team, and a course which suited FDY learners:

- A dedicated team of instructors was chosen
- Those instructors had observed a full set of CTSS lessons and completed background reading on historical reasoning and writing among young learners, and on Rome and its gladiators
- Şendur trained up an instructor in the assessment method

⁴ Critical Thinking for the Social Sciences, SPS & CTSS Overview for SL powerpoint, Şendur, K. 2013, unpublished.

- Instructors brought their language teaching expertise to the course by developing more tasks to provide opportunity for practice and consolidation of the core writing and thinking skills
- The course was extended to 8 weeks
- Sources and task worksheets were placed in a booklet for students

Configuring the course

The very first CTSS team was naturally keen to gauge whether further change was necessary, and to that end made sure to collect instructor and learner perceptions on the success of the course. For instance, following that 2013-14 Fall semester, 5/8 CTSS instructors were not at all, or not very, satisfied with the pacing of activities within lessons, with similar results for timetabling and scheduling.⁵ This also appeared to have negative ramifications for learners:

*Lessons planned for 2 hours lasted for 3 or more actual class hours which led students' not being able to digest some important points / language.*⁶

In the learner forum held every semester to collect the student perspective of the preparatory programme, learners also felt that the course had been unreasonably tough.⁷ Such feedback is an important motivator that has led, and still leads, to the constant upkeep of the CTSS course. Over the semesters, significant elements that have been altered or developed have been:

- Lesson length

Increased from 2 to 4 teaching hours per week; lesson number was also made flexible according to timetabling constraints and student profile

- Written production

Number of DBQ tasks reduced to allow learners more time to digest information, and focus more on the process of writing. The chance to redraft a DBQ was also added for these reasons.

- Assessment

A certificate was introduced to encourage student participation and performance

This certificate was subsequently replaced by assigning CTSS assessed part of the FDY end of course grade. Written and oral production produced during lessons was assessed, and 60 minute exam added where students respond to a DBQ based on the sources read in class

- Marking

The DBQ rubric was simplified to make it more user-friendly when marking papers and the exam

Sample student DBQ papers given a standardised grade were provided as a guide for marking

Production tasks were incorporated into a workbook to make submission and grading practical

Future development

One challenge facing the teaching of the course is that the team is chosen relatively late in the day due to administration constraints. This means that the opportunity for pre-course training is extremely narrow, and to counter this, the following have been created or are currently underway:

- Student DBQ writing samples with standardised grades and justifications
- Student Source Evaluation writing samples with standardised grades and justifications
- A teacher's book of compiled lesson plans and answer keys (at present electronically available)

⁵ 2013-14 Fall CTSS Teacher Feedback survey, School of Languages, Sabanci University, unpublished.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ 2013-14 Fall Learner Forum minutes, School of Languages, Sabanci University, unpublished.

Maintaining relevancy and validity in our role of supporting preparatory students in their degree studies means that CTSS should keep in close contact with those stakeholders who seek to benefit from it, namely Freshman SPS students and their instructors. To this end, the following are either proposed or currently in practice:

- Mid- to end-of course survey of Freshman SPS students assessing their perception of CTSS' effectiveness
- Observation by course coordinators of SPS 101 and 102 lectures and discussions
- Liason with SPS instructors as to the current SPS format and learner needs
- The creation of a second version of CTSS with a new subject focus

Methodology of the Research for Student Evaluation of CTSS

The study was conducted at Sabanci University, Turkey, and was carried out on current Freshman SPS 101 participants who had previously taken CTSS. It is a descriptive research which examines the effectiveness of CTSS on student performance. In this study, qualitative data was gathered through interviews and a questionnaire, and the descriptive responses analysed.

Participants

The participants of the study included 24 Freshman Turkish students, all of whom had attended CTSS and were currently taking SPS101. The questionnaire was sent to more than 100 students through assistance of colleagues teaching Freshman ENG 101; however, due to the end of semester work and exams, only few participants could complete the questionnaire. Otherwise, 12 students, 5 female and 7 male, were also interviewed in person.

Data Collection Procedure

Each ENG101 instructor sent the questionnaire to his/her class via e-mail, and the responses were analysed. Additionally, the researcher randomly selected 12 participants to be interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured, and participants expressed their ideas and feeling according to questions (identical to those of the questionnaire) asked by the researcher. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Data Collection & Analysis

To obtain extensive data and gain a comprehensive understanding of student perception of the level of contribution of CTSS to their SPS101 performance, semi-structured interviews in English were carried out with 12 students using one Yes/No question with a follow up commentary question, and two open-ended questions. The data collected was content analysed, which required identifying common and significant points, themes and patterns in the data.

Results

- Question 1: Have you seen similarities between CTSS and SPS101? If yes, explain what these similarities are.

The first question of the study aimed to find out how much students correlate the skills and the content they learn in CTSS with those in SPS101. Results revealed that students found CTSS more similar to SPS101 in terms of evaluating visual resources to come to conclusions about a particular historical era. Few students responded that the topic of Roman Empire overlapped with the topic of SPS101, yet most of them emphasized that the way they use critical reading and academic writing skills in CTSS *are* similar to SPS101. This result may point to the fact that students have more the opportunity to strengthen the academic skills necessary for this particular undergraduate course than to build connections with the content.

- Question 2: How do you think CTSS in particular has helped you to cope with SPS and other freshman classes this year?

This prompt intended to discover a specific benefit of CTSS which students make use of in SPS101. Responses were very varied, and so it was concluded that the main advantages of taking CTSS were its opportunity to practice academic writing skills, note-taking, analyzing resources and using citations in writing. Again, CTSS did not directly seem to assist subject-wise, but importantly it did assist in reinforcing the necessary academic skills.

- Question 3: To better help you cope with SPS and freshman courses, in your opinion, how should the CTSS course change?

This aimed to elicit learner ideas for the improvement of CTSS. Almost all responses clearly showed that students desired a direct correlation between CTSS content and subjects covered in SPS101. It has to be noted that students accepted the fact that studying Roman Empire in CTSS does address one minor aspect of SPS101 content; however, it was suggested that a broader study of historical eras, as in SPS101, would be something learners feel would be towards their benefit.

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