

## Good Practice Blended Learning & Flipping the Classroom in Foreign Language Education

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### Abstract

*Today, business-related higher education in Belgium has to deal with a complex situation in foreign language education, and specifically for French. First, we see how the general level of incoming students decreases every year. Often, first-year students barely achieve level A2 at the start of their higher-education studies, where the expected level is at least B1. Even though French is the second foreign language in Flanders (Dutch speaking part of Belgium), and children are introduced to the beautiful French language when they are 10 years old, today's students are barely motivated to learn and speak French. They assume they can solve everything with English, which is absolute nonsense considering the bilingual context of Belgium. Further, we notice a growing influx of foreign students (e.g. from the Netherlands), and these students often have little or no basic knowledge of the French language. But in this group, we also find bilingual students with French as first or second language. The significant discrepancy between the different language levels of the students causes traditional education and classical teaching methods to fail, as there is always a specific group of students who are insufficiently supported or challenged and thus drop out. Up to about two years ago, we used to focus on the average students, but we were often criticised by French-speaking students, who found the lessons to be uninteresting, not challenging enough and lacking in quality. From the professional field we received feedback that the French language level of our graduating students was insufficient. As a result, many students did not qualify for certain jobs, even though they had the right diploma. As a motivated and passionate French lecturer, these past few years I have been looking for methods to deal with the linguistic diversity in my class groups and to support and coach every student individually to help them achieve a higher level. Thus, blended learning and flipping the classroom became the basic principles of my approach. With these two principles, I was able to make my lessons interactive, motivating, authentic, language-supportive, self-guiding and talent-creating.*

**Keywords:** *Blended learning – flipping the classroom – Foreign language education – e-learning – French;*

### 1. Introduction

Over the past five years, French lecturers at Artevelde University College (Ghent) have been confronted with three challenges. The first challenge is the high degree of heterogeneity in the mastery of the basic French language (knowledge and skills). Secondly, the lecturers have witnessed an increasingly higher level of absenteeism. The last problem is the low success rate at the end of the course. To address these issues, the teachers team looked for innovative ways to increase differentiation among students, to raise self-direction and to stimulate spontaneous use of their foreign language skills during contact hours. Under my guidance, French lecturers teaching within the field of Office Management took on the challenge of redesigning the course of second-year students. Even though there is still considerable debate about the benefits and impact of the educational concept of 'blended learning' and 'flipping the classroom', this team succeeded in increasing the language skills and the attendance considerably. Preliminary results show a positive effect on the success rate, but further study is needed.

This paper will firstly analyse the initial challenge with which the French lecturers were confronted in previous academic years. Secondly, the paper will describe the new approach adopted in the French course 'Communication professionnelle 2', as well as the specific teaching methods that are student-centred and based on flipping the classroom.

### 2. The initial challenge

Nowadays, business-related higher education in Belgium has to deal with a complex situation in foreign language education, and specifically for French. First, we see how the general level of incoming students decreases every year. French is the first foreign language in Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium, and children are introduced to the French language when they are 10 years

old. Nevertheless, students are barely motivated to learn and speak French. Neglecting the bilingual context of Belgium, in which the French language has an official position that equals Dutch, Belgian students assume that English is the *lingua franca* of the 21st century and thus the only language that really matters. More than half of first-year students barely achieve level A2 at the start of their higher-education studies, whereas the expected level is at least B1.

Furthermore, our department notices a fast-growing influx of foreign students, for example from the Netherlands, because of the Belgian low entry fees in higher education. Even though those international incoming students are highly valued and more than welcome at Artevelde University College, the limited or absent basic knowledge of the French language causes a significant discrepancy in a student group already characterised by a difference in language level.

This discrepancy between the different language levels causes traditional education and classical teaching methods to fail, as there is always a specific group of students who are insufficiently supported or challenged. In addition to this, there was also the problem of the practical organization of the courses: class groups of minimum forty students take this course at a weekly ratio of 3 hours in a row. First, the large groups did not allow a lot of oral practice. Presentations had to be rushed and only confident students dared to take the opportunity to speak French during a spontaneous oral exercise. Neither did the practical organization of the courses leave enough room for individual writing practice. Students always had to work at least in pairs, in order to maintain an acceptable amount of correction work for the lecturer. However, pair work has of course its own disadvantages and does not allow lecturers to give individual feedback, which students really desire.

### **3. A blended learning and flipped classroom model**

Our traditional foreign language education faced a vicious circle, leading to unmotivated and/or frustrated students who stopped attending classes and risked failing the courses. The initial challenge described above encouraged the lecturers to remodel the course. The first step in this process was the transition into a blended learning and flipping the classroom approach, which allows a more student-centred approach. The lecturers created learning paths integrating vocabulary, grammar, listening comprehension and reading comprehension exercises based on existing and newly developed materials.

Introducing these obligatory learning paths in the course 'Communication professionnelle 2' was a unanimous decision of the French lecturers' team.

During classes, more in-depth exercises and activities are linked to the digital preparations, necessitating the thorough understanding and preparation of the digital paths. The Edumatic platform offers a track-and-trace system, thereby giving the lecturer the opportunity to check what the students exactly did on the digital paths and how they performed during the exercises. The lesson schedule clearly indicates which digital paths should be completed for each course, enabling students to prepare each course individually and at their own pace. Students who did not prepare the digitalised exercises are not allowed to attend class and are sent to the media library to finish their preparations.

In compensation for the additional preparations students have to do outside the classroom, the lecturers give the same course of 1.5 hours two times by splitting the class group into two smaller groups of 20-25 students. This new approach implies that the lecturers still teach three hours per class group, but that students have 1.5 hours of preparation at home and only attend a weekly course of 1.5 hours. Working in smaller groups allows the French lecturers to teach in a student-centred and interactive manner.

Under my direction, the French lecturers team remodelled the classical courses into workshops and conversation tables. In this stimulating and safe atmosphere, students are invited to continuously improve their French competences. Depending on the exercise, students are offered immediate individual feedback on their performance or receive a general overview of frequently made oral and written mistakes. We also introduced guest speakers, to train not only our the students' ear to real-world spoken French, but also their notetaking skills.

### **4. Preliminary results**

The implementation of learning paths and the transition from a classical teaching method to a student-centred and interactive style took place in the academic year 2017-2018. Because of this recent paradigm shift, data collection is still ongoing, which means that a profound study using statistical analyses of the success rate is not yet possible. However, the teachers team noticed a considerably increasing attendance of well-prepared students, who were looking forward to improving their language skills during class. Also, the lecturers experienced more prepared and motivated



students during their course. Furthermore, a strong correlation was discovered between the prepared learning paths, the more in-depth interactive exercises during class and the students' score on these topics at the final exam.

In the next couple of years, considerable attention will be devoted to learning analytics. This will allow us to draw specific conclusions about findings collected within a three- to-five-year period. Not only will we focus on confirming preliminary results mentioned above, but also in finding correlations between thorough preparations of the digital paths, class attendance and success rate for the final exam. During this analysis, we will also evaluate the relation between productive (speaking and writing) and receptive (reading and listening) competences. In order to confirm the effectiveness of this innovative teaching approach, success rates of previous years will also have to be compared with that of the following years.

Further research is also needed to determine how students and lecturers perceive this type of educational innovation. In the first place, we will need to question the students on how they feel about the introduction of the learning paths and novel teaching methods. Additionally, we will have to explore how we can improve the mentoring towards self-directed education. Furthermore, we will have to survey how we can create autonomous and agile students who are not only ready for the second-year courses, but also for the 21st century job market. Secondly, it is essential to make an inventory of the lecturers' needs and hurdles. Indeed, the transition from classical teaching methods to a blended and flipping the classroom approach also has repercussions for the lecturers in question. To meet their specific needs, train-the-trainer workshops could be organized. Finally, it is our goal to receive valuable input and feedback from other programmes and international partners.

It has become clear that the French lecturers team felt the need to address three important issues, namely the heterogeneity, the high level of absenteeism and the low scores. The introduction of adequate teaching and learning paradigms does not happen overnight. On the contrary, it is a part of a continuous process of quantitative and qualitative research involving students, lecturers and the international community.