

Flipped Learning with Turkish Students: Issues of Dissonance to Possible Harmonization

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Abstract

Flipped Learning is a rapidly expanding, popular methodology. It is becoming a talking point at educational conferences and in academic studies, and its use is growing worldwide. As it grows, certain questions surface which demand thoughtful consideration. Do issues arise in the implementation of Flipped Learning in settings which could be considered culturally diverse from the settings in which the movement began? If so, how should these be addressed? In order to answer these questions, three studies based on Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions were conducted in a Turkish foundation university context. The results suggest that in order for the pedagogical assumptions of Flipped Learning to be accepted and put to use, certain values could be discussed and behaviors developed and which would build even more bridges between the learning philosophies of both student and teacher in the MEF University English Language Preparatory Program. The results of this study will prove beneficial in helping both parties identify what areas of disagreement or misunderstanding might appear and how to effectively address these in order to create a healthy learning environment.

Keywords: MEF University, Flipped Learning, Flipped Classroom, Hofstede's cultural dimensions, intercultural competence, educational cultural convergence (ECCO)

Introduction

Background to MEF University

The story of the start of MEF University is worth repeating as it highlights key concepts within a student-centered education. In 2013 the rector, Prof. Dr. Muhammad Şahin, invited a select group of seasoned academicians and then, at a later date, a group of students from some of the best universities in Turkey. He explained to them what Flipped Learning entailed and asked them what they thought. The results seemed to reveal a generational gap. The professors were not overly impressed; however, students loved the idea. (Interestingly, this ad hoc survey seems to match with more formal research performed in multiple undergrad and graduate settings [Bormann, 2014].) Dr. Şahin trusted the students and MEF University opened its doors September 2014 to its first freshman cohort as the "World's First and Only Flipped University."

Goals of this study

Particularly relevant for this study is the recently published study by the British Council, "The State of English in Higher Education in Turkey" (2015). One of the eleven improvement recommendations suggested is "communicative methodology", and "all teachers should undergo training in techniques for incorporating student-student interaction at every stage of the lesson, with speaking integrated into every activity, regardless of the skill being practiced." The potential impact of such a suggestion would be increased motivation of the students and increased skills and confidence. Based on the Council's

suggestion, this study aims to bring such motivation, skills, and confidence to fruition through the creation of an active classroom, via Flipped Learning.

Flipped Learning, though, is a creation of several American educators. Questions arise when the context of such pedagogy is transported outside America. If “Cultural competence [is] an essential aspect of classroom harmonious relations” (McKeown and Kurt, 2012) how will the Flipped Classroom hurt or help the teacher and the student? Further, as McKeown and Kurt (2011) explain with the “Educational Cultural Convergence” (ECCO) model, “intercultural competence is a way to address cultural anxiety.” This study aims to show that identifying areas of possible dissonance in the interaction of people from two different cultures will go a long way in creating intercultural competence. Dealing constructively with these areas of dissonance would then set up the possibility of having a suitable environment for learning the English language. Establishing suitable environments for learning the English language could become a renewable cultural resource.

Finally, this paper will not be a critique of the MEF University English Language Preparatory Program (ELPP). It is also not a discussion of the pros and cons of Flipped Learning per se. The goal of this study is to evaluate the attitudes that MEF University ELPP teachers and students have toward Flipped Learning as well as on possible points of connection between these teachers (all foreign passport holders) and students who are exclusively Turkish.

Deconstructing Flipped based on Hofstede’s Dimensions

A brief history of Flipped Learning

Flipped Learning has its origins in several educator’s works. Initially, in the late 1990s Eric Mazur developed peer learning (2015). Dr. Mazur was concerned that his students understand the “whys” of the formulas rather than just focusing on problem solving per se. Then there is the work of Alison King (1993), who initiated the “guide on the side” terminology; Wes Baker (2000) and the “classroom flip”; Lage, Platt, and Treglia (2000) and the “inverted classroom”; Salman Khan (2011) and the Khan Academy in 2006; and, finally, Jonathan Bergmann and Aaron Sams (2012). These latter three educators (along with Eric Mazur) introduced videos into their teaching as pre-classroom work, replacing the lecture. Following that development, Bergmann and Sams (2014) transitioned to speaking of Flipped Learning which fulfills, at least for them, the ideal educational environment produced by an equal mix of curiosity, content, and relationship along with instruction via web-based technologies prior to class and face-to-face interaction in class.

The Flipped Network (2014) is also instrumental in promoting the advances of Flipped Learning. According to the Network, Flipped Learning involves four pillars, following the acronym FLIP: (1) flexible environment “where students choose when and where they learn”; (2) learning culture in which “students are actively involved in knowledge construction”; (3) intentional content “in which students develop conceptual understanding”; (4) and professional educator who is “less visibly prominent... [but remains] the essential ingredient that enables Flipped Learning to occur.” The Flipped Network defines Flipped Learning as “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.”

Finally, Bergmann and Sams (2014) talk repeatedly of “giving the control” over to the students. In fact, they suggest that if a teacher must have control over his or her classroom, then that teacher shouldn’t attempt flipping the class since this contradicts the Flipped Learning ideal which places the students learning at the center. What Bergmann and Sams mean is that in a Flipped Learning environment, classroom time should be devoted to more “student-directed and inquiry-based learning.”

Flipped Learning’s relationship to Hofstede’s scale

Following this brief introduction to Flipped Learning, a closer look at Flipped Learning vis-a-vis the cultural dimensions established by Hofstede is essential. The questions and results from the surveys are based on the work of Geert Hofstede, the Dutch social psychologist who pioneered the cultural dimensions, as well as that of Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov (2010). Geert Hofstede came up with the first four dimensions. The other two dimensions are based on the first four, and are useful expansions. They include the work of Michael Harris Bond (1988), who, with support from Hofstede, came up with Long-Term Orientation as well as the work of Michael Minkov (2007) who included Indulgence.

The following deconstruction is not of all Flipped Classrooms, but the Flipped Learning happening at MEF University. Since all Flipped Classrooms are different, even those at MEF, this deconstruction is preliminary. That said, it is vital that the attempt be made and then serve as a point of reference for the students' and teachers' survey scores. Turkey's results (and others) are also discussed for sake of comparison.

First, Hofstede describes power distance (PD) as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010). So, for example, Turkey has a higher score (66), which means that people in Turkey tend to be "dependent, hierarchical" and the "superiors [are] often inaccessible." The "ideal boss is a father figure" and teachers are the center of the educational system (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010). Flipped Learning, on the other hand, is decidedly low on the PD dimension. It is student-centered and the focus in the classroom is on equality between teacher and student—the two actors are focused on sharing knowledge. Solicitation of answers empowers the student not the teacher. The teacher is a guide, not a sage. The teacher is alongside of the students and not lecturing. As mentioned above, Bergmann and Sams (2014) note that relationship (and not the strict maintenance of hierarchy) is essential to learning.

The second dimension is individualism (IND). This is "the degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members" (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010). So, in this dimension Turkey (with a score of 37) is a "collectivistic society" in that the group's value is more important than the individual's value. Further, in-groups such as "families, clans or organizations...look after each other in exchange for loyalty" (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010). Flipped Learning is higher on the IND dimension. In Flipped Learning, individual scores matter, so even within group work, Mazur (2015) and the MEF ELPP have developed rubrics which test the individual's learning. Further, working at one's own pace is part of many Flipped mastery classrooms (Bergmann and Sams, 2012). A higher score on individualism also means people's personal opinions are solicited and encouraged.

The masculine (MAS) dimension is next and is defined as the range of motivation. Is it being the best (masculine) or liking the job (feminine)? Hofstede describes Turkey this way: "Turkey scores 45 and is on the Feminine side of the scale. This means that the softer aspects of culture such as leveling with others, consensus, sympathy for the underdog are valued and encouraged. Liking what you do is also a revelation of a more feminine dimension to the culture. Conflicts are avoided in private and work life and consensus at the end is important" (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010). That said, a score of 45 also reveals that the culture as a whole is closing in on the MAS qualities of being driven by competition, achievement and success (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010). Flipped falls in the middle of the MAS dimension. For example, for peer-to-peer instruction to work, the masculine idea of competition is discouraged (Mazur, 2015). And group work involves helping one another and going at one's own pace, rather than seeing who is best or finishing first. The Flipped Learning in the ELPP seeks to create a classroom where everyone's ideas are encouraged but not necessarily for developing consensus. But, specific targets and goals, a masculine idea, are put forward for the students to achieve. On the other hand there is not a high level of competition between students in the MEF ELPP as far as final grades are concerned.

The fourth dimension is uncertainty avoidance (UA). UA is understood as "the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations and have created beliefs and institutions that try to avoid these" (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010). Turkey's score is 85 and, therefore, underscores the Turks desire for the multiplication of laws and involvement of the government. Further, Hofstede also notes, "For foreigners [Turks] might seem religious with the many references to 'Allah,' but often they are just traditional social patterns, used in specific situations to ease tension" (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010). Flipped Learning falls below 50 on the UA scale. Teachers in the ELPP help students focus on exploration of ideas (in speaking/writing exercises), and they solicit concepts (in grammar and vocabulary) rather than dictate ideas. Further they may sometimes need to say, "I don't know" if a question is asked outside of the expertise of that particular teacher. Of course, there are grammatical rules to be followed (in those speaking/writing exercises) since words mean one thing and not another; but, there is an openness to the demonstration and usage of such grammar and vocabulary. Of course, regularly scheduled quizzes and assessments helps Flipped Learning in the ELPP from going lower on the UA scale

Fifth, long-term orientation (LTO) is the dimension which measures "how every society has to maintain some links with its own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future" (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010). Turkey's score (46) demonstrates that it is neither

exclusively past oriented nor future oriented. It is unlike some societies, like Saudi Arabia (36) which score low and demonstrate a high preference for the past, their traditions, and establishing absolute truth. It is also unlike future oriented societies which are more pragmatic and focused on economy in order to help safeguard against future possibilities (like France—63). Further, countries which score higher on this scale also reveal a greater priority in education (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010). Flipped Learning falls slightly higher than 60 on the long-term orientation (LTO) dimension. In the MEF ELPP, English is taught in order to prepare students for the future. Therefore, failure is not a result of chance and success is a result of diligence, a quality marked higher on the LTO dimension.

As the name suggests, the final dimension, indulgence (IDG), measures the overall extent to which people allow their impulses to control them or restrain these impulses (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010). The lower and person's score is on this dimension reveals a weaker control over one's desires and impulses. The stronger a person's score is, the stronger their control over impulses. Turkey has a 49 for this scale and therefore falls in the middle with no dominant idea about IDG. (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010). The UK, for example, has a higher score on this dimension (69) while Russia has a low score of 20, which means their society is overall more restrained, cynical, and pessimistic and seek to control the gratification of their desires (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, 2010). It is somewhat difficult to gauge where Flipped Learning falls on IDG. As far as MEF ELPP is concerned, freedom of speech is encouraged. The result may be lively discussion where students focus on giving their ideas and potentially talk over one another. Plus, as Hofstede notes, the more indulgent one is, the more they see a higher level of self-efficacy, rather than control residing outside of themselves (Hofstede, Hofstede, Minkov, 2010).

Most common pitfalls of MEF ELPP teachers

The Cultural Compass Report contains 42 questions all designed to highlight a person's position within the six previously discussed cultural dimensions and to suggest areas of potential dissonance ("pitfalls" in Hofstede's language) when interacting with people from another country. When the results of the participant's answers vary significantly from the average preferences within the country of interest, pitfalls are flagged. The Cultural Compass Report differentiates between pitfalls that are most likely, those which have a big chance, those which have a fair chance, and finally, those which have a small chance of happening.

The MEF ELPP has thirty-five non-Turkish English Language instructors with native-like fluency. Of the 35 teachers all but six come from Europe and North America. One teacher each comes from the following six countries: Australia, Brazil, Iran, the Philippines, South Africa, and Uzbekistan. Nineteen teachers completed the Cultural Compass Report. Due to space considerations, the pitfalls listed below include only those from the top two categories. The number following shows the frequency.

In all likelihood...

1. you may demotivate your students by showing up not fully prepared (x9)
2. you may demotivate your students if you tell them that you don't have precise answers to all their questions (x8)
3. you may underestimate the time and energy required to create trust among you and your students (x7)
4. you may wonder why students don't disagree with you at all. If they do, however, please be on guard (x7)

There is a big chance...

1. you may get annoyed by the fact that parents try to give you favours so that you will give their son or daughter preferential treatment (x13)
2. you may get annoyed that your students don't like to be confronted with surprises (x6)
3. you may feel at a loss when you have found out that students in your host country are motivated quite differently to learn from the way students are motivated to learn in your home country (x6)
4. you may be surprised that your students don't contradict you, not even when it must be clear to them that you tell them nonsense (x6)

5. you may be pleasantly surprised that your students try to please you all the time, but after some time you may get bothered (x5)
6. you may get the feeling that your students are too dependent on you by indirectly soliciting a lot of control from your side by checking whether they understood you well (x5)
7. you may get frustrated if your students will neither volunteer to give an answer nor ask you a lot of questions, only if you address a particular student may an answer be given, but then only hesitantly (x5)

Most common potential pitfalls of MEF ELPP level 4 students

Eighteen Level 4 students completed The Cultural Compass Report as “Students Studying Abroad.” Here are the most common submissions for the students who chose to identify their country of interest in western schools (US, UK, Canada, Germany, and the Netherlands). Since some of the pitfalls were found in both the “in all likelihood” and “there is a big chance” categories, I decided to use a simple point system to reflect both the weight and the frequency of these pitfalls. If they occurred in the “In all likelihood” (IAL) category, they received four points. If they fell in the “there is a big chance” (BC) category, they received three points. From those results the most common pitfalls were these:

In all likelihood...

1. you experience the people around you as cold and aloof. They literally try to keep you at a distance (x3; BC x4)=24
2. you may feel lost by the fact that you are not being treated in a hospitable way (x4; BC x2)=22
3. you may feel too much challenged by your friends and acquaintances who think that they will please you if they can let you experience all kind of weird things (x3; BC x3)=21
4. you may get annoyed that your counterparts are apparently not able to read the clear messages you send them when they have upset you or when you don't want to go along with what they want you to do (x3; BC x2)=18
5. you may wonder why status seems to be much more important than at home (x1; BCx4)=16
6. you may be seen as timid by not giving your personal opinion about everything and nothing (x3)=12

There is a big chance that...

1. you may wonder why most people around you don't respect your emotions and feelings (x7)=21
2. you may get upset by the boastful and gloating manner in which many people around you present themselves and/or their country instead of being humble= (x6) 18
3. you may demotivate many people around you if you are not giving positive feedback about them regularly (x5)=15
4. you may start looking down on people around you who are playing around too much, so it would be difficult to build up good relationships with them (x5)=15

Suggestions based on survey results

The following results might at first glance seem fairly obvious to anyone who has worked in MEF University ELPP. That said, what has been a given now stands on firmer, statistical support. Of course, some or all of these suggestions might be happening in the classes at MEF. But, even in those case, the stastical data would argue for their continuation. Finally, not every pitfall will receive attention in the following suggestions.

It would seem clear from the students surveys (SS) and the teacher's surveys (TS) that the MEF ELPP students will need time to continue to be oriented to Flipped Learning more fully (cf. SS, IAL 3, 6). This could happen at orientation 2016 or alternatively instructors may make this a fairly regular part of their classes, to not only encourage their students to do pre-class and post-class tasks but to share the rationale of the in-class tasks as well. To build confidence in learners as speakers of English, they will be asked questions of self-reflection, which are highly valued in Flipped Learning.

Along the same lines, perhaps discussions could be held about what motivates students as the survey indicates this might be an area of dissonance (cf. TS, BC 3). However, teachers might want to make sure that, while exploration of new ideas is a part of Flipped Learning and some questions don't have right or wrong answers (cf. TS, IAL 2), assessments find a significant place in the curriculum. After all, assessments play a large part of the Turkish educational system and therefore will not surprise the students.

Teachers will probably need to explore the students' feelings about the reality that the answers given are the correct answers because they accurately reflect the student's ideas—not because they conform to the teacher's ideas or to any norm (cf. TS, IAL 2). The teachers should seek to create a classroom where collegial disagreement is not only possible but sought after for the purpose of enabling students to express themselves confidently (TS, IAL 4). At the same time, teachers should realize that, as the Turkish proverb states, "sheep separated from the flock are eaten by the wolves." Thus, advocating only for highly alternative views on sensitive Turkish issues might not be conducive to an interactive learning environment. It could feel isolating for some students. Thus, discussions of this nature might be more productive outside of the classroom.

Next, the ELPP students could benefit by understanding the nature of individual competence vis-a-vis group competence. Flipped Learning emphasizes both. Of course a large amount of pressure from students' friends, parents, and other well-wishers will be met with an awkward feeling that the teachers are being asked to give the candidate special consideration (TS, BC 1). Perhaps teachers can minimize this occurrence by encouraging discussion which highlights the advantages and disadvantages of collective approaches vis-a-vis individualistic ones. Teachers might want to solicit and highlight collective attitudes from collective societies which are beneficial in their university life as well as most jobs (for example, building consensus as well as compromise). This would help build trust and give support to the students' feelings (SS, IAL 1, 2; BC 1). On the other hand, teachers might want to remind the students that individual grades reflect the skill level they have achieved and that, in the future workforce, individual skill sets and abilities are scrutinized.

Teachers at MEF ELPP could consider ways in which they can further build their credibility among Turkish students. A Flipped teacher is a *professional* educator. If trust is difficult to earn (TS, IAL 3), then not coming in prepared or not displaying confidence might lead some Turkish students to believe the teacher is not qualified. Building confidence in the students by knowing the answers to grammatical, vocabulary, or usage questions would go a long way in establishing trust. Further, knowing some things about Turkish culture certainly builds trust in that the student sees effort from the teacher to know Turkish priorities, which is part of establishing good rapport (and therefore, a building block within an interactive learning environment). Some of the ELPP teachers have wisely focused projects on Turkish foods, customs, and traditions.

Teachers might aim to implement more and more autonomy into the classrooms, potentially allowing the students themselves to determine at least a part of how they are going to fulfill learning objectives (cf. Flipped Mastery). This freedom might be hard, initially, for the students or teachers to handle, given the results of the study (cf. TS, BC 2, 6, 7; SS, IAL 6). However, incremental steps toward this are absolutely necessary in establishing the confidence that students need in English and in the Flipped Classroom.

Students might feel the teachers are cold and aloof if they don't completely understand the hidden signals students give (SS, IAL 4). Perhaps discussing this aspect of Turkish culture (i.e., body language) would lead to advances in this area and a minimization of the feeling of the lack of warmth and respect on behalf of the teachers toward the students (SS, IAL 1). If relationship is a key element in Flipped Learning, this conversation seems like a way forward.

It would seem likely that the students would be helped to realize that the teachers are globally-interested, curious and, often, confident people (cf. SS, IAL 3; BC 2). Curiosity is a part of the foundation of Flipped Learning. Therefore, discussion of other culture's foods, customs, and religious practices enhances everyone's perspective and could potentially spur the students' own curiosity to learn more. Moreover, students would be helped to understand the difference between personal preference and personal attack. That is, if someone doesn't care for *iskender* or *işkembe*, this doesn't mean that they dislike all Turkish food and, by extension, Turkish culture.

The teachers might wish to help students become comfortable with not only expressing themselves on particular subjects but also learning ways to pass the question. For example, simple phrases or words can be used when the student hasn't had time to think through a question and needs more time

to consider the idea. The students, would have opportunity to consider what their thoughts are on an idea as well as allow them a culturally appropriate way of saying, "I'd rather not say" or "I'm not ready yet." Flipped Learning promotes this kind of content.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted potential pitfalls (or, alternatively, areas of dissonance) as a result of deconstructing Flipped Learning and reflecting on the attitudes of MEF students and teachers toward learning with someone from another culture. Of course, more research could focus on other suggestions--and avenues of implementation of these suggestions--based on the survey results. However, the suggestions given could be the catalyst for having a Flipped Classroom which is even more interactive and where content, curiosity and relationship all merge and form an even better learning environment--giving the students more and more confidence--in the MEF ELPP.

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