Δια σταυ ρώ σεις

Μελέτες στη διδακτική
των ξένων γλωσσών
και πολιτισμών
τη γλωσσολογία
και τη μετάφραση
αφιερωμένες στην
Πηνελόπη Καλλιαμπέτσου - Κορακά

Μαρία-Χριστίνα Αναστασιάδη
Γιώργος Ανδρουλάκης
Ιωάννα Αντωνίου-Κρητικού
Wilhelm Benning
Yves Chevalier
Ρέα Δελβερούδη
Δήμητρα Θεοφανοπούλου-Κοντού
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Ευαγγελία Καγκά
Ρινέττα Κιγιτσιόγλου-Βλάχου
Ευάγγελος Κουρδής
Πηγή-Δάφνη Κουτσογιαννοπούλου
Αργυρώ Μουστάκη
Φρειδερίκη Μπατσαλιά
Σπυριδούλα Μπέλλα
Ιφιγένεια Μποτουροπούλου
Μαρία Παπαδάκη
Μαρία Παπαδήμα
Σοφία Παπευθυμίου-Λύτρα
Μάρω Πατέλη
Εύη Πετροπούλου
Δέσποινα Προβατά
Αργυρώ Πρόσκολλη
Αγγελική Ράλλη
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Αγγελική Τσόκογλου
François Weiss
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Developing innovative learning practices in tertiary education: A case study

Sophia Papaefthymiou-Lytra

Περίληψη

Η πλειοψηφία των νεοεισερχομένων κατ' έτος φοιτητών/τριών στα ξενόγλωσσα τμήματα των Πανεπιστημίων μας χρειάζονται συστηματική βελτίωση της γλωσσομάθειάς τους, ούτως ώστε να αποδώσουν ικανοποιητικά στις σπουδές τους και αργότερα να ανταποκριθούν στις επαγγελματικές τους ανάγκες. Στο άρθρο αυτό περιγράφεται σύντομα το ειδικό πρόγραμμα γλωσσικής κατάρτισης του Τμήματος Αγγλικής Γλώσσας και Φιλολογίας και γίνεται εκτενής αναφορά στις επιλογές που έγιναν για να βελτιώσουμε ιδιαίτερα τα προφορικά αγγλικά των φοιτητών/τριών μας. Για την υλοποίηση του προγράμματος βελτίωσης των προφορικών αγγλικών, υιοθετήθηκαν μαθησιακές πρακτικές που απορρέουν από την εκπαίδευση ενηλίκων, την εκμάθηση γλωσσών από τους ενήλικες και από τις πρακτικές της εξ αποστάσεως εκπαίδευσης. Συγκεκριμένα, παρουσιάζεται η φιλοσοφία του προγράμματος, η δομή του μαθησιακού υλικού που ετοιμάστηκε γι' αυτό, οι μαθησιακές και διδακτικές πρακτικές που εφαρμόστηκαν στην πράξη και η διαδικασία αξιολόγησης που υιοθετήθηκε.

1. Introduction

Students entering a foreign language faculty in tertiary education in this country are faced with the challenge to freshen up and/or upgrade their L2 language skills in order to succeed in their university studies. It is important to mention here that the Faculties have no say in the decisions taken for the language level of the University entrance exams. As a result, the range of students' level of language proficiency may vary sometimes dramatically.

Taking the Faculty of English Studies, University of Athens as a case study, each year the language level of the students entering the Faculty varies. There is a concentration of students in B1 and B2 levels as defined by the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (*CEFR* for short; see Council of Europe 2001). This proficiency level, however, is not considered high enough for successful studies in the Faculty.[1] In the first four semesters, to

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[1] Since 1998 students entering the first semester have taken a diagnostic test to appraise their

upgrade their level of English, students are required to take four compulsory language courses, namely, *Academic Discourse* in the first semester, *Translation: Practical applications* in the second semester, *English Phonetics* in the third semester and *Texts and Genres* in the fourth semester.[2] In the first semester, students sit a diagnostic test so as they will know what their strengths and weakness in L2 are while at the end of the fourth semester students are required to sit a rigorous summative language test aspiring to test students at C2 level language proficiency.

Due to the number of students entering the Faculty of English Studies each year and the limited resources in instructors and classrooms, it has been very difficult to provide enough language instruction to students exploiting the face-to-face traditional mode of language teaching practice. To overcome this obstacle and further boost the students' language skills, in 2001 the language committee of the Faculty agreed that the writer of this paper develops a language scheme and coordinates the production of two language improvement components,[3] one for oral skills the other for writing skills, to complement the second and third semester language courses mentioned above. Each component covers 20% of the students' final grade per course. Students are expected to get a passing grade for both the compulsory course and their language improvement component. Of interest to us here is the oral skills component which is part of the third semester course *English Phonetics*.[4]

In this paper, I will report the steps taken to advance students' oral language skills using innovative learning practices deriving from adult education, adult language learning and distant learning practices. In other words, I

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actual level of English. Statistical analyses of the diagnostic tests have shown that the language proficiency of 20% of the student body entering the Faculty is below average; it falls between levels A2 and B1 in accordance with the *CEFR* language level scale. The language proficiency of 50% of the students entering the Faculty is average; it falls between levels B1 and B2. It is only 30% of the student body entering the Faculty that has attained language proficiency good enough to carry out studies at the Faculty successfully. Their level is beyond C1 (reported in *Faculty of English Studies: Assessment Report, Developmental Plan*, 2009, p. 9).

[2] For details about the courses see *Οδηγός Σπουδών του ΤΑΓΦ (2008-09)*. Also see http://www.enl.uoa.gr.

[3] For details about the language improvement components and the material see *Οδηγός Σπουδών του ΤΑΓΦ (2008-09)*, pp. 114-118. Also see http://www.enl.uoa.gr.

[4] In preparing the learning material for the oral skills component, I have collaborated closely with my colleagues E. Antonopoulou and M. Sifianou as well as V. Mandeli a teacher of English seconded in the Faculty. The program for oral skills development was first administered in 2003-04.

will discuss the rationale of the component, the structure of the learning material developed and the learning-teaching practices adopted as well as the assessment procedures followed. It is worth mentioning here that the rationale and a good number of the practices have been successfully applied in the Hellenic Open University (HOU) under- and post-graduate programmes. It was worth exploring, therefore, whether it would hold true in an under-graduate programme of a conventional university after it's been properly modified for the new learning environment.

2. Adults and distant learning: the rationale

As mentioned, the philosophy of the component was based on adult education, adult foreign language learning and distant learning principles. It largely aimed to develop learner autonomy and independence making language learning a student's personal and social responsibility. Thus, it aimed to increase exposure to English beyond the classroom instruction time in a collaborative, self-determining and supportive environment. Although our students would encounter this type of learning practices for the first time, much resistance was not expected due to the fact that Greek university students (like Greek society) attribute an instrumental value to education which is primarily linked to the advancement of one's career and the attainment of formal and informal qualifications, which is considered an individual's responsibility (see Koulaidis *et al.* 2006).

In the context of adult learning and adult education, Rogers (1996, 35-36) convincingly argues that adults as learners are characterized by *maturity* and *experience*, a sense of *perspective* that "will lead to a sounder judgment about themselves and the others" as well as *autonomy*, responsible *decision-making* and *voluntariness*. It was exactly arguments of this type and my work at the Hellenic Open University[5] that urged me to adopt adult education strategies and distant education practices to develop the component. The philosophy and the structure of the learning material, therefore, aspired to address the needs of adult learners (cf. Sifakis 2003).

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[5] Since 1996 I have been collaborating with the HOU as an Academic Responsible developing and coordinating their post-graduate degree MEd. in TESOL (ΜΠΣ-Ειδίκευση Καθηγητών Αγγλικής Γλώσσας). In the context of this degree I coordinated and supervised the writing of ten different modules (i.e. courses). The writing teams included experts from Greece and abroad.

According to the literature, therefore, the students who would take the component are expected to be experienced learners having gone through compulsory education and having studied English for a good number of years although as individuals they may have attained different degrees of oral proficiency.[6] It is acknowledged that they will have developed preferred learning styles and strategies, which may differ from individual to individual (see Wenden 1991; Robinson 1997). Besides they are expected to have developed critical thinking, learning how to learn practices, confidence in making choices and taking action to fulfil goals and objectives and to be able to judge themselves and others fairly when necessary.[7] At the same time, they are anticipated to wish to do better in their academic studies in order to enhance their career perspectives upon graduation by taking control and responsibility of their own learning (cf. Ellis & Sinclair 1989; Papaefthymiou-Lytra 2004). Consequently, as the literature indicates, our adult 3rd semester students are hopefully expected to have fully understood by now what it is expected of them as university students, or else what the *social roles* and the social responsibilities of university students are. In the light of distant learning practices adopted in this learning material, therefore, students are expected not only to work at home in their own leisure and pace but also in small self-selected groups aiming at developing and sustaining peer teaching practices. Thus taking decisions and attaining language goals are not only autonomous and voluntary endeavours suiting the needs of individuals but also collaborative; indeed, group work is an essential element of this material; otherwise, it is not possible for student learners to polish up and/or develop their oral skills further.[8]

In this learning context, students are expected to become *proactive* to their learning needs and wants and to make use of a new set of social roles as the new learning situation demands of them. After all, there will be no instructors around to facilitate and organize things for them on a weekly basis. As a matter of fact, students are expected to play the role of managers and make

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[6] English is a compulsory course for students in primary and middle school. English is an optional course for students in high school. A good number of students have also attended classes in private language centres or have had private tuition.

[7] For a persuasive discussion of the learning parameters as capacities that seem to be observable in adult learning, see Brookfield 1980.

[8] For the significance of personal goals in negotiating regulation strategies in group work at universities, see Violet & Mansfield. 2006.

use of relevant regulation skills since they are requested to form and work in self-selected groups (up to five members in our case). At the same time, they are expected to show a high degree of self-discipline and self-control in their independent self-study for those parts of the self-study material they cannot or do not want to cover in groups. In other words, adult students are encouraged to constantly move across a continuum of learning practices, namely, from collaborative learning practices to self-directed learning practices and *vice versa*. They are presumably expected to manage their own learning as well as making use of learning how to learn practices and relevant regulation strategies to maintain group ties (cf. Papaefthymiou-Lytra 1997b; Violet & Mansfield 2006).

Another social role students are expected to develop is that of the skillful negotiator based on discovery collaborative learning. Contrary to the usual practice in distant learning material but also in conventional adult EFL course books[9] in the learning material developed for the present component there is no key available for the listening and oral skills tasks of the self-study material. The reason being that students through negotiation and detailed listening are expected to reach a consensus concerning the tasks at hand, thus developing self-confidence and independence in undertaking learning initiatives, making decisions and solving problems and conflicts through interaction and collaborative action. In this way the learning mode of the material is emphasized rather than the teaching mode. Otherwise, the key becomes a substitute teacher. Thus finding a collaboratively negotiated solution to a problem of listening comprehension or oral interaction becomes a means to an end, the end being to enhance learner oral skills, awareness and metacognition. Besides, such practices help students develop self-determining learning as opposed to reproductive learning where the key role is left to teacher initiatives (for a comprehensive discussion, see Kember *et al.* 2003).

What's more, in this new learning context for a conventional university set up, the students are to become engaged in regular self-assessment and other-assessment thus playing the social roles of self and other-assessors interchangeably. This is to be attained through reflection on own and other performance since these roles are best played in the context of a critical reflective approach to self or other evaluation, where personal responsibility for stu-

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[9] See Tomlinson *et al*. 2001 for an interesting appraisal of a good number of EFL courses for adults.

dents' language choices through *noticing* is highly appreciated (cf. Roberts 2002). Personal responsibility through *noticing* leads to awareness of what constitutes effective negotiation and monitoring enhancing group participants' understanding of their learning and communicating styles and preferences as – resources and constraints – in the act of listening and communication. The interdependence of self-assessment with autonomous learning, self-monitoring and awareness is pointed out by a host of researchers such as Benson 2001; Dickinson 1987; Papaefthymiou-Lytra 1997b and 2001; van Lier 1994; Wenden 2002, among others. To achieve this objective, in the learning material in question, for instance, students are advised to tape their performance and reflect on it as a group by doing awareness raising activities suggested in the material, thus enhancing awareness and metacognition. This is in accord with the findings reported by Lee *et al.* (2000) who state that their adult student subjects preferred to learn by in-class discussion and reflection as opposed to lectures. To facilitate reflection and metacognition further a glossary is provided drawing from the compulsory Linguistics courses students take in the 1st and 2nd semesters of their study or the English Phonetics course they con- concurrently take with the oral skills component in the 3rd semester (see also section 3.1.).

As stated, following the practices of distant education, in this learning (social) environment there is no teacher available to attest to the outcome of learning on a weekly basis, as is the case in a conventional classroom situation. Nevertheless, officially students meet their instructors four times during the semester, namely, three times for facilitating purposes and the last time for assessment purposes, see section 3.2 below for further details. Instructors are also available for group or individual consultation on demand during their weekly office hours throughout the semester.

3. The component for oral skills development *cum* assessment

In this section, I will provide a brief account of the self-study material developed for student language improvement, the methodology adopted, the tutorial sessions and the assessment procedures used.

3.1. The self-study material and its methodology

The self-study material comprises of a booklet entitled *The Listening and Speaking Component: Self-Study Material* accompanied by three tapes for listening practice.

In the *Introduction*, the rationale and the content of the new component is delivered. Students are encouraged to network in groups of five and work together to develop oral skills and negotiate answers to the problems set in the listening/speaking material. Next, the introduction describes how the material has been designed and the skills and abilities students are expected to develop and/or practice. The introduction also briefly explains what some basic characteristics of successful listeners and speakers are and how students can train themselves and each other to become good listeners and speakers using the self-study material in question while practicing the good listener/speaker strategies. Last, the introduction provides advice to students as to how best they can use this self-study material while engaging in self-assessment practices. Students are expected to self-assess themselves using the descriptors of the *Can-do Statements* for overall listening comprehension, overall spoken production and overall spoken interaction of *CEFR*. On finishing working with the self-study material students are encouraged to self-assess themselves again using the same *Can-do Statements* and see what improvements they have made.

The main body of the material consists of three different types of material. *Type 1* learning material combines listening and speaking tasks. It consists of eleven units. Concerning listening it includes a variety of authentic material (real life conversations, radio programs, interviews), extracts from films (on video or DVDs from where the sound is only currently retained) or selected ready-made listening EFL tape-recorded material of C1 or C2 level with appropriate tailored-made worksheets for listening comprehension. The tasks developed vary from open-ended questions to fill in grids to take notes. The tasks aim to develop students' understanding of the functional value of the language they listen to or are invited to produce in the oral work part of the material. As stated, there is *no* key provided, the aim being to make students listen to recordings several times and through negotiation reach a conclusion about the listening tasks. If the group cannot agree, they can always contact their instructors for advice during their weekly office hours.

The speaking tasks are usually tied up to the themes of the recordings that the students have listened to for listening comprehension purposes. The idea is to orient students to the subject of discussion to follow, and help them activate action schemes and relevant vocabulary. It involves a role-play or a discussion. In all cases, the speaking tasks involve students in discussion and negotiation where they are encouraged to put to practice the characteristics of a good speaker and listener. Students are encouraged to tape the speaking tasks they

carry out as a group and use the recordings to *reflect* on their performance and others' performance while doing the particular *awareness raising* and *meta-cognition tasks* included in the speaking section of the self-study material. Through reflection and awareness raising students are expected to consolidate learning and good language use (cf. van Lier 1994; Papaefthymiou-Lytra 1997a and 2001).

Type 2 self-study material consists of fifteen short authentic-to-purpose advanced recorded dialogues that include rather lengthy parts of speakers arguing for or against the topic of discussion.[10] Students are expected to listen to the dialogues on their own or in groups and take notes of the topic discussed, the characters involved and the position they take towards the topic of discussion, the context of situation etc. in order to practice listening further and enrich their vocabulary for oral interaction purposes.

Type 3 self-study material consists of eight short extracts of authentic conversations of an advanced level.[11] It aims to consolidate and provide further practice to students for their *English Phonetics* course. Students are expected to listen to the extracts and do the assigned listening tasks. The second task in particular, focuses students' attention on the suprasegmental (prosodic) features of the dialogues, one of the themes covered in their compulsory *Phonetics* course.

As mentioned, the self-study material is accompanied by a *glossary*. The glossary was considered necessary as a reminder of meanings of terms to be used in carrying out the metacognitive and metalinguistic aspects of the particular tasks developed for the self-study material. Given that the over-whelming majority of the students will eventually become teachers of English as a foreign language, it is necessary for them to develop fluency in the language but also matacognitive and metalinguistic awareness about the language. The terminology used is drawn from language acquisition, phonetics and phonology, discourse analysis, conversational analysis, sociolinguistics, pragmatics and politeness theory among others. In this way, there is an attempt made to link the compulsory linguistics courses (namely, *Linguistics I & II* and *Phonetics*) the students have taken or are taking in the *Department of Language and Linguistics* of the Faculty with the self-study material they will be working

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[10] The recorded material comes from a cassette accompanying the Students' book *Points Overheard*, London, Macmillan, 1978.
[11] From Crystal & Derek 1975.

on. In other words, they are invited to link theory with practice. As perspective teachers, they are expected to have a sound knowledge of English as a subject-matter but also to have developed metacognitive awareness of it through critical reflection.[12]

3.2. Administration procedures and tutorial sessions

During the semester, instructors meet their class as a whole twice. They also meet their students in groups of five they have voluntarily formed twice in the semester. All in all, each student meets the instructor four times in the semester. The whole class sessions and the group sessions are scheduled in advanced and specific tasks are carried out.

In the beginning of the semester, the component instructors meet their class students for a whole class session and explain the rationale of the component, how the material was set up and why as well as how the students are expected to work and why. Next, during the first half part of the semester, each group of five meets their instructor for a listening and oral skills tutorial session. During the tutorial students take a mock listening and oral skills test in real time, very similar in nature to *Type 1* listening and speaking self-study material, thus becoming acquainted with the listening and oral skills test they will all take in the second half of the semester. Besides, the group and the instructors discuss questions concerning the self-study material and any other problems the group members may have faced so far during their self-study collaborative work.

After all class students have had their tutorial sessions, the class as a whole meets the instructor for a second whole class session. Students have a chance to ask questions and instructors have an opportunity to point at problems and difficulties the students have faced during the tutorials and prepare them for the listening and oral skills test to come. In the second half of the semester, each group of five meets again for the listening and oral skills student assessment session. There are twenty-five special mock tests prepared for the tutorial sessions and forty tests prepared for the student assessment sessions.[13]

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[12] For a discussion about critical reflection and teacher education, see Yost *et al.* 2000.

[13] In 2007-2008 new tests for student assessment were produced to replace the old ones applying all necessary changes that practice and research judged necessary. In this phase, I collaborated closely with my colleague E. Antonopoulou as well as V. Mandeli and A. Georgountzou who were component tutors.

3.3. Student assessment

A criterion-referenced test is adopted for assessment.[14] A special assessment scale has been devised to cater for the particular needs of our students. As mentioned the self-study material covers the 20% of the final grade. Of the 20 points allocated to the oral test 5 points go to listening comprehension and 15 points go to the highest speaking level a student is hoped to have achieved by the 3rd semester, namely, the post-proficiency level. The specific assessment scale aims at assessing students' performance at the C1, C2 and post-proficiency levels. Students do not get any credit if they score below the expected levels of proficiency described below. They are expected to sit for the test again in September. If they fail again they fail the course altogether. The *CEFR* descriptors have been adapted to our needs and further refined so as to define and describe each proficiency level, see Table 1 below. It is hoped that by setting a demanding test students will work harder to achieve their goals.

LEVEL	DESCRIPTORS (Salient features)
Beyond C2 level	**Post-proficiency level** Has excellent communication skills, namely, participates confidently and effectively in turn taking; is able to initiate conversation as well as to respond effectively; can help others sustain conversation. Has an excellent command of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms with awareness of connotative levels of meanings. Hesitations are usually due to a reflection on content rather than linguistics insufficiency. Structures, functions vocabulary are always accurate and appropriate; can convey finer shades of meaning precisely by using, with accuracy, a wide range of modification devices. Can backtrack and restructure around a difficulty so smoothly that the interlocutor is hardly aware of it. Pronunciation skills in particular reflect the description provided in the analytic assessment scale.

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[14] It is beyond of the scope of this paper to fully present and evaluate the assessment instrument used. Suffice it to say now that a criterion-referenced test is one that is deliberately constructed to yield measurements that are directly interpretable in terms of specified performance standards. Such tests are constructed to support generalizations about an individual's performance relative to a specified domain of tasks.

C2 level	**C2 level** Has very good communication skills, namely, participates effectively in turn taking; can initiate conversation as well as respond satisfactorily; can help others sustain conversation. Has a very good command of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms with good awareness of connotative levels of meanings. Speech flows smoothly, although there are occasional hesitations due to content difficulties or possible search for a word or structure. Structures, functions vocabulary are generally accurate and appropriate. Can backtrack and restructure around a difficulty smoothly and effectively. Occasional errors in pronunciation indicate they are not up to post-proficiency level yet
C1 level	**C1 level** Has very good communication skills, namely, participates effectively in turn taking; can initiate conversation as well as respond satisfactorily; can help others sustain conversation. Has a good command of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms with good awareness of connotative levels of meanings. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously, almost effortlessly. Speech flows smoothly, there is little obvious searching for expressions or words or avoidance strategies, only a conceptually difficult subject can hinder a natural, smooth flow of language. Structures, functions vocabulary are generally accurate and appropriate. More than occasional errors in pronunciation clearly indicate they are not up to C2 level yet.
Inadequate	**B2 level (and below)** Can use the language fluently, accurately and effectively on a wide range of general, academic, vocational or leisure topics, making clearly the relationship between ideas. Can communicate spontaneously with good grammatical control without much sign of having to restrict what s/he wants to say, adopting a level of formality appropriate to the circumstances. Poor pronunciation performance clearly indicating students are not up to C1 level yet.

Table 1

B2 level performance and below indicates poor performance for the standards we hope our students to attain; therefore, students get no credit at all and are advised to improve their English in order to pass the course. From a statistical point of view about 1/4 of the students fail to pass the oral skills exam in the first go and re-sit it in September in accordance with the Greek university evaluation system.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I presented the philosophy the learning material for the listening and oral skills component were based on. An important aspect of this philosophy is that despite cultural differences, which are to be expected, there are certain educational values and social roles that characterize all adults as learners. University students as adults should be treated accordingly and allowed to take responsibility of their own learning. So trying out different learning practices in tertiary education is an important element for student development as well as for improvements at university education.

Next, I described in some detail the learning material developed for the listening and oral skills component that are linked to the *Phonetics* course. I also referred in some detail to tutorials and the assessment sessions as well as to the administration procedures adopted. Last, I described the performance levels our students are expected to achieve while studying at the Faculty of English. Let's keep in mind that the majority of them aspire to become teachers of English. Relevant research concerning the oral skills material evaluation, the assessment procedure as well as student beliefs, concerns, benefits and learning outcomes is in progress, but reporting on preliminary results is beyond the scope of the present paper.

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