Bridging the Gap: Highlights of the 1st Symposium of the Schools of Foreign Languages in the Aegean Region

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Abstract

Sharing scientific knowledge with all the stakeholders of foreign language teaching is as important as producing it in a systematic way. Besides, sharing effective practices in English language teaching is also as essential as publishing the theoretical findings of the relevant research in the field. Therefore, scientific events such as symposiums in the present context play a crucial role in unearthing the strengths and weaknesses in educational practices in any participating institution. Among the rare attempts and the first one in the Aegean Region of Turkey, the present symposium brought together a dozen universities sharing a number of standard features but implementing different practices for the same or considerably similar learning outcomes. The concurrent sessions held during the symposium cast light on the good practices in various schools of foreign languages offering English language preparatory programs. Topics such as quality assurance and accreditation, assessment and evaluation, curriculum development, leadership and management, professional development, and administrative issues were among the topics visited during the concurrent sessions. In brief, it was concluded that each institution had instances of best English language teaching practices while all had much to learn from others and put into practice for further development.

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Introduction

Scientific and academic events such as conferences, congresses, and symposiums are known to serve effectively to spread scientific knowledge by sharing the knowledge with the stakeholders and assessing it together in an academic sphere (Mercer, 1995). Moreover, such events are valuable opportunities for people from the same fields of study or interest to come together and be part of a common research and practice community (Wenger, 1998). In this way, they ensure that the cooperation and the knowledge-sharing process will continue after the event, as well. According to Hall and Longman (2008), scientific meetings encourage and spread new ideas and knowledge, and they have a central role in connecting researchers and practitioners from the same or similar professional and academic identities.

For all these reasons, Manisa Celal Bayar University (MCBU) School of Foreign Languages (SFL) intended to bring the academicians of the schools of foreign languages working at 15 different universities in the Aegean Region of Türkiye together to bridge the gaps among the institutions in the same geographical region. It was, in particular, aimed to discuss the key issues in foreign language teaching, suggest solutions to the problems and experiences, and share good practices in the field of foreign language teaching.

Method / Event

The event took place in the form of a one-day symposium rather than a conference to ensure that all the participants representing their institutions could find opportunities to contribute to the discussions. A total of 15 schools of foreign languages were invited to the symposium with no participant quota restrictions. In the end, participants from 11 universities took part in the event which has been the first attempt to bring together the representatives of the schools of foreign languages in the region within an academic context. Dokuz Eylül University, Ege University, İzmir Bakırçay University, İzmir Democracy University, İzmir University of Economics, İzmir Katip Çelebi University, İzmir Institute of Technology, Muğla Sıtkı Koçman University, Pamukkale University, Yaşar University were represented in the symposium as well as the hosting institution Manisa Celal Bayar University. Within the frame of the event, the number of concurrent sessions was determined and held under the following headings:

    Assessment and Evaluation,
    Curriculum Development,
    Leadership and Management,
    Administrative Issues & Student Affairs,
        Professional Development,
        Accreditation.

The participants were allowed to choose the session they would join and were encouraged to actively participate in the sessions. At the end of the day, conclusions drawn from the sessions were compiled by the session reporters and presented by the moderators to all the participants in a debriefing session.

Conclusions and Discussion

Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment is one of the basic components of foreign language teaching. Accordingly, assessment and evaluation units are important in shaping language teaching in the schools of foreign languages or preparatory programmes at universities in Türkiye. Therefore, the assessment and evaluation session of the symposium mainly focused on the problems the assessment units faced and how to overcome or minimize these problems. The main conclusions drawn from the two different sessions were related to six key issues.

The first topic discussed was the excessive workload of the assessment unit members and the place and importance of the assessment units at the schools of foreign languages in Türkiye. Since The Council of Higher Education (YÖK) does not specify any items related to the structure and workload of the assessment and evaluation units and their members in its regulations, the members in the units face many difficulties in terms of their workload and responsibilities. The excessive workloads of academics in higher education in Türkiye have been addressed by many researchers and Cenkseven and Dost (2007) state that excessive workload is among the factors affecting faculty members negatively. Ercan Demirel and Cephe (2015) address the problem in the context of the language instructors working at three different universities in Türkiye and assert that excessive workload along with working in testing and similar units is among the reasons causing burnout for the language instructors. İpek and Kanatlar (2018) also research the causes affecting foreign language instructors' motivation and conclude that excessive workload can be exhausting and demotivating. However, little or no research to date has focused on the workload of the assessment unit members in schools of foreign languages specifically. On the one hand, they have to work really hard in order to prepare tests and other assessment tools such as rubrics and in-class task evaluation forms. On the other hand, they try to keep up with their teaching responsibilities.

All the participants in the assessment and evaluation sessions agreed that it is essential to re-evaluate and re-plan the workload of the unit members for effective assessment. In fact, this issue has had a long history in the context of higher education in Türkiye and has been addressed by many of the schools of foreign languages administrators in yearly meetings held across the country. Since their first meeting held at Sıtkı Koçman University in Muğla in 2008, the administrators of the schools of foreign languages have addressed the need for assessment units (Testing Offices) in the schools of foreign languages. In addition, starting from their sixth meeting held at Sabancı University in 2012 until their last meeting held at Bolu Abant Izzet Baysal University in 2021, they repeatedly included their suggestions about the assessment units in the final declarations of the meetings. They especially focused on the importance of reducing the workload of the assessment unit members and improving their working conditions in the declarations starting from 2012 and onward (YDYO-TR Yöneticiler Platformu, 2022). To the best of our knowledge, no progress has yet been made to solve the problem even though the issue continues to be one of the hot topics in the field.

Increasing the language assessment literacy level of new assessment unit members and facilitating their professional development was another issue discussed in the symposium. Basic terms related to language assessment were presented by the session moderator and assessment concepts were discussed by the participants. Language assessment literacy refers to the language teachers' knowledge about assessing a language (Malone, 2013). According to recent research in the field, language teachers in Türkiye do not have sufficient language assessment knowledge (Mede & Atay, 2017). Another research concludes that factors such as years of experience in language teaching, educational background whether or not instructors

are graduates from an English Language Teaching programme, being graduated from the BA programme including a testing course, and attending training sessions specifically focusing on testing and assessment do not have an effect on language assessment literacy level whereas working as an assessment unit member has an impact on language assessment literacy level of the teachers and there is a significant difference between the ones who are in the assessment units and the ones who are not. (Ölmezler-Öztürk & Aydın, 2019). In line with this study, Yastıbaş & Takkaç, (2018) place importance on self-improvement in language assessment literacy and state that self-improvement in assessment depends on peer-assessed exam preparation processes and gaining experience in test preparation. Therefore, in order to increase the language assessment literacy levels of new unit members it is important to engage them with the assessment processes after sharing with them the basic concepts regarding language assessment essentials.

The next issue discussed in the symposium related to assessment was the exams such as YÖKDİL (Higher Education Foreign Language Test) and YDS (Foreign Language Proficiency Exam) which circumscribe assessment processes employed by the schools of foreign languages and preparatory programs at universities in Türkiye. According to the regulation published by The Council of Higher Education (YÖK) (2016), the students who can get passing scores on the nationwide language proficiency exams such as YÖKDİL and YDS are qualified to be exempt from language education in preparatory schools and can start their studies which are either partly or fully in English. However, this application seems to contradict the language assessment practices used by the preparatory school programmes. The language assessment procedures applied in these programmes include both formative and summative assessment applications in order to evaluate all foreign language skills of students throughout the education year. In this way, students gain confidence through these practices and use all foreign language skills effectively in their social lives and departmental studies. YÖKDİL and YDS exams, on the other hand, only focus on reading comprehension, translation studies, vocabulary and grammar knowledge of the test takers and lack any means of assessing listening skills along with the productive skills of writing and speaking. One study shows that the majority of the participants who took either the YÖKDİL or YDS exam stated that the exams did not really contribute to their foreign language learning processes and had a negative washback effect as they do not include all language skills (Polat, 2020). Therefore, all the participants in the session agreed that the re-evaluation of this application is required.

The exit level for Progressive and Modular System students was also discussed in the symposium. Modular systems refer to modules including different tiered language skills and knowledge levels through which students reach a proficient language level that is gaining popularity in language teaching (Tercan, 2018). However, the exit level of the students learning English in a modular system is a controversial issue in language preparatory programmes in Türkiye. While some preparatory programmes apply B1+ as their exit level, others prefer the B2 level. According to the research conducted by the British Council (2015), most students starting preparatory programmes regardless of their programme types in Türkiye are at beginner levels in English and it is "impossible" for them to reach B2 level at the end of the language preparatory programs which last for eight months (p. 70). A more recent study focusing on the modular system employed at a state university in Türkiye also asserts that a modular system aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) at B1+ as an exit level serves high-quality language education although there are still some problems related to listening and speaking skills (Duru, 2021). In line with these findings,

another study suggests that for an effective language learning program B1 could be the exit level (Coşkun, 2013). Accordingly, the participants in the symposium stressed the importance of having a convenient exit level irrespective of the system employed by the schools of foreign languages. Also, it was generally agreed that B1+ would be a more manageable exit level for modular system programs applied by the schools of foreign languages in Türkiye.

Concerning the exit level of the language programmes, the situation of the repeat students who fail a module and have to repeat it to get to the next level was also discussed. According to a study, students repeating the same module have serious motivation problems (Kuzu et al., 2022). Another study which specifically focuses on the burnout levels of repeat preparatory school students whose exit level is B1 points out that the burnout level of these students reaches the highest levels (Erakman & Mede, 2018). Besides, when the exit level is B2 or above, the motivation problem gets more complicated for the students failing the final module. Most of these students get discouraged and find it meaningless to study the last module twice because their departmental studies are partly in English which only requires thirty per cent of the courses in English. The participants in the session emphasised that the student motivation level in language teaching is very important as it directly affects the teachers' motivation. As a result, the importance of a convenient exit level for a modular system was once more pointed out.

Increasing the weight of formative assessment practices in evaluating writing assignments was the final topic discussed in the assessment session. Formative assessment is a means of assessing students' work during their production processes and involves various strategies focusing on feedback and continuous student engagement (Heritage, 2010, p.19). In the context of higher education in Türkiye, Uzun and Ertok (2020) research the opinions of students about exam-based summative assessment approaches and task-based formative assessment approaches in English language teaching and conclude that majority of the students in the research favour formative assessment approaches over summative ones. The efficiency of using formative assessment tools for writing tasks has also been researched and using a writing portfolio system is proven to be an effective process. Caner (2010) points out the positive impact of a portfolio system in teaching writing skills along with other language skills but also states that it is regarded as a burden by students. This dimension of the portfolio assessment for writing was voiced by some participants in the assessment session. It was also stated that since it requires a lot of time and effort both on teachers' and students' parts, it is difficult to apply in a large scale. Given the large number of students in the preparatory schools in state universities in Türkiye, the application was regarded as impractical.

The assessment session of the symposium was fruitful in that it provided the participants with the opportunity to exchange their ideas about different assessment practices employed in different schools of foreign languages in the Aegean Region. Furthermore, it demonstrated different assessment units in different schools have similar challenges related to assessment and evaluation processes. As a result, it provided insights for the participants and showed the importance of such events for further collaboration in the long run.

Curriculum Development

The curriculum session of the symposium aimed at supporting teachers to consider curriculum planning processes at their schools and sharing experiences to feel more confident

in their understanding of developing high-quality curricula and to improve the understanding of processes in constructing high-quality curricula. The session was held in two parts, each of which lasted 40 minutes. The participants in the sessions were mostly the instructors working in the curriculum units at their schools. Specifically, the session addressed four main themes:

· The role of the curriculum in EFL settings, specifically at Preparatory Schools of Universities

· The curriculum cycle

· Curriculum planning issues in Modular Systems

· The flexibility needed in Curriculum Planning in the changing world.

The goal of a successful educational program and effective curriculum planning must meet the needs and demands of society, the expectations and aims of the educational institution, the beliefs and backgrounds of the teachers and the student profile. Therefore, the curriculum development process requires review, revision, and constant change (Johnson, 2001). In all participant schools, it was seen that the curriculum is in accordance with the descriptive and pedagogical principals of The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), covering all the areas above. The language proficiency levels in the curriculum at participant schools are therefore reflected as A1, A2 (Basic Users) and B1, B2 (Independent Users). In most schools, while the exit level is B1+, in some it is B2. The main purpose of all Preparatory Schools is to provide general English knowledge to students who are not proficient enough and to provide some basic skills for their departments' academic language skills. It was all agreed that while these two objectives can be performed for students at A2 and B1 levels at the beginning of the Preparatory programme, starting with a group that does not speak any English(A1) can cause problems. The other important issue mentioned was the use of formative assessment in the teaching process. Most participants stated that they have increased the weight of alternative measurement tools such as presentations and portfolios in the total evaluation rate.

In all academic programmes, a curriculum design cycle includes needing analysis, setting objectives, material design, instructional activities, assessment, and evaluation parts. The dynamic nature of the cycle allows for curriculum modification or improvement via action plans and feedback. Throughout the year, the curriculum development units of the schools work on the components of the cycle to meet the needs and objectives of the school. During this part of the session, it was discussed how important it is to prepare weekly flow charts that direct the instructors on what to do and how to do it on each day of the curriculum plan. In this way, depending on the feedback from the instructors at the end of each week, the following flow can be rearranged and improved. At the end of this part, the participants of the session pointed out the fact that as the curriculum unit members of the schools must deal with all these issues in addition to their normal teaching duties, it increases their workload, which leads to exhaustion and motivational problems. The comparison between the participants from the state and private universities regarding their weekly lesson hours revealed that the number of lesson hours of curriculum members at private universities is much less than the ones at state universities.

Most universities in Türkiye have a one-year compulsory English preparatory programme for students whose departments have English as the medium of instruction. Two systems in preparatory programs, the modular system and progressive system, characterize the

regulation and organization of courses, the assessment and evaluation procedures, classroom practices and material development and design (Eraslan, 2019). The modular system can be defined as "a unit of work in a course of instruction that is virtually self-contained and a method of teaching that is based on the building up of skills and knowledge in discrete units" (Sejpal, 2013, p.169). While in a progressive system, English teaching is given throughout the year depending on learners' English level according to the placement test done at the beginning of the education year, in a modular system English is taught in different modules at the same time. Students move forward or fall behind their current levels (Eraslan, 2019). Because the English levels of the preparatory class students at MCBU were not as good as expected, the modular system started to be implemented from the 2021-2022 academic year onwards. In the curriculum session, the modular system was discussed regarding the implementation of the curriculum, and it was agreed that the effectiveness of the system largely depends on the number of students enrolling in the preparatory schools as it requires more classrooms, instructors and materials. This conclusion supports the findings of Coşkun (2013), who in his research found out that the modular system was ineffective because the resources of the school could not provide repeat classes with the extra materials and academic assignments and the number of instructors was not enough. Regarding curricular issues, the programme for the students who repeat the same level in the Modular system was also discussed. While some schools run the repeat class curriculum with the same instructional materials, some change the textbooks in these classes. In addition, these students enrol in the same classes as the students who have moved up the same level for the first time in some schools, whereas in some preparatory programmes there are classes where all the repeat students follow a specific curriculum plan. The conclusions drawn from the discussion on these issues were that it is not so effective to use the same textbooks with these students as they have already used them, and also they get bored in the lessons since they do not encounter new tasks. Furthermore, placing repeat students in the same class as new students may embarrass repeaters or reduce the motivation of new students. It was agreed that especially in State universities,   expecting repeat students to buy new textbooks in the same module is not realistic, and it was suggested that the repeat class curriculum can be supplemented by the online materials of the books and more emphasis can be given to workbook tasks.

Based on the social, economic, political and technological developments in the 21st century, expectations about the individual qualities needed are changing. In addition, these changes also affect education systems and the knowledge, skills and competencies that individuals must acquire (Cansoy, 2018). In this part of the session, it was discussed that it is necessary to make some necessary changes while planning the curriculum depending on the issues above. Firstly, the integration of technology in education is a real need for the students who grow up with the technology of the 21st century (Chapelle, 2003). Therefore, integrating the use of technological tools in the instructional activities to reach our curriculum objectives is a must, not a choice. Secondly, soft skills, also called generic skills, are emphasized in higher education today. These skills are personal and professional qualities that learners have in their professional lives in addition to their technical skills, and these skills such as leadership, communication, planning, adaptability, cultural awareness and relationship building can be emphasized more in our curriculum. Lastly, in today's education, students are expected to be active learners in the learning process. Therefore, in addition to planning for their academic achievement, we need to help them improve skills such as communication and interaction with society. In this regard, collaborative learning is essential for developing students' social

interaction skills (Ghavifekr, 2020). At the end of this part, all participants agreed on the fact that concepts such as digital integration, collaborative learning, and generic (soft) skills must be added to the curriculum planning process.

The curriculum session was very productive and guided for the participants to exchange information, identify common problems and propose solutions. The common view of all participants was that such meetings and symposiums should be held more frequently and regularly because curriculum groups in the participating schools want to feel that they are not alone in the systems they apply and the decisions they make.

Leadership and Management

The Leadership and management session of the symposium aimed to gather leaders including managers and unit heads to discuss the issues they had faced in managing their teams and the ways how to overcome those issues. The session lasted 50 minutes. There were 18 participants in the session and their roles varied from school directors to instructors. In the first part of the session, recent stressors related to their work were discussed. Two main themes emerged from the discussion and they were classified according to the duties of the instructors in their institutions. The first theme was named "Stressors for Staff with an Administrative Duty" and the second was named "Stressors for Staff without an Administrative Duty". The issues under these headings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Stressors for the Instructors

Stressors for Staff with an Administrative Duty	Stressors for Staff without an Administrative Duty
Very busy schedule	Workload
The high number of international students	Extra duties (like translation)
Lack of staff & contracted teachers	Strict schedules
Instructors refuse to get more lessons, extra hours and duties	Co-workers
Workload	Coordinators
Private problems of instructors (health or psychological)	Adaptation after Covid
Some instructors come late & skip exam duties. Other instructors have to cover their lessons.	Adaptation to new materials
Instructors refuse to teach evening classes because of money & long hours	Lack of facilities
Lack of facilities	Short notice duties
Translation tasks are given by the upper administration	The difficulty of work and private life balance
Lack of classroom	

In the later stages of the session, the psychological safety of the teachers was discussed. In this part, whether the psychological safety of the instructors was good or bad and how they could empower their psychological safety were the core of the session. In light of the discussions, delivering how to overcome those stressors and how to empower the psychological safety and well-being of the instructors may contribute to handling the issues mentioned in the session.

Professional Development

The Professional Development session of the symposium aimed at sharing ideas, experiences and practices of professional development units at preparatory schools of both state and private universities in the Aegean Region. The session was held in two parts, each of which lasted 40 minutes. The participants in the sessions were mostly the instructors working in the professional development units at their institutions. The first session addressed the practices of each institution whereas the second part addressed the problems and solutions during the practices.

Accreditation

The term "accreditation" cannot actually be used interchangeably with "quality assurance" although they may easily be misinterpreted in educational settings. Reeves (2019) emphasizes the distinction by describing the state of being "accredited" as the ultimate resulting mark of an institution or accreditation program carrying out the audit process. In the accreditation session of the symposium, therefore, the focus was more on the accreditation rather than the quality assurance process in general.

Internationalization of higher education all around the world has brought along the ever-growing interest in quality assurance and accreditation of educational practices by specialized bodies, and English language teaching programs were no exception, either (Harvey, 2006; Staub, 2019). Besides, there is evidence showing the need for a stronger focus on quality assurance in English language teaching in Türkiye (Staub, 2019) due to a number of deficiencies in foreign language learning (British Council, 2015). Lastly, the requirement of accountability as a result of the decrease in trust of state institutions has increased the popularity of quality assurance and accreditation endeavours (Kinser, 2014).

Among the leading conclusions drawn from the discussions in the accreditation session, one is noteworthy since it also points to the difference between accreditation and quality assurance as two distinct but related concepts: "the focus should be on quality assurance; accreditation is the natural result". The expression was further clarified by putting emphasis on the standardization of the practices and procedures, having an institutional policy of quality assurance, institutional transparency, and the learning outcome. Yet, above all, the quality itself should be put in the centre.

Dr. Donald Staub, the Chair of the concurrent session, noted that quality in a program could be found in the learning, teaching, and management components. In other words, all the major processes in an English language program should reflect the quality.

As the quality assurance labelling authorities, major accreditation schemes in Türkiye were also among the issues discussed. It was concluded that CEA, EAQUALS and DEDAK are the common schemes in the country and their standards are more or less the same although they are named differently. The examples presented by Dr. Staub were clear indicators of the similarity of the standards across different schemes. Another important point to consider is that accreditation standards are not prescriptive, and they do not force institutions to take any action, but the proof is required for any standard in all the accreditation schemes.

In brief, the session provided the participants with insights into a number of major themes regarding quality assurance and accreditation in English language programs in Türkiye.

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