

**LAYING the FOUNDATIONS of a EUROPEAN UNION-STANDARDS
COMPATIBLE FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING PROGRAM on the WEB**

M. Semih SUMMAK

**Faculty of Educational Sciences, Gaziantep University-Turkey
(e.mail: summak@gantep.edu.tr)**

A. Elçin Gören SUMMAK

Faculty of Educational Sciences, Gaziantep University- Turkey

Mustafa SAMANCIOĞLU

Faculty of Educational Sciences, Gaziantep University- Turkey

ABSTRACT

The study aimed at designing a virtual learning environment compatible with European Union foreign language teaching standards and investigation of the feasibility of Gaziantep University's ICTs infrastructure for such an instruction mode. The actual design was based on the "claronline" software where an "asynchronized" model was preferred and the application of all the components such as access to a virtual text, forum, speeded message delivery and exchange, bulletin board, on line examination and evaluation channels have been made available to the end users. European Language Portfolio and European Language Passport concepts were examined extensively through literature survey. Findings revealed that the firmly established infrastructure and human resources of the Gaziantep University would serve as a solid ground for the delivery of foreign language teaching programs virtually.

Key Words: Web-Based Education, EFL teaching, European Language Portfolio, EAQUALS

M. Semih SUMMAK is an assistant professor affiliated with Gaziantep University. His research interests include management of virtual learning environments, graduate education management and conducting joint studies in an emerging interdisciplinary field; "educational neuroscience".

A. Elcin GÖREN SUMMAK is an assistant professor affiliated with Gaziantep University, Faculty of Educational Sciences. She is mainly engaged in futurism in educational programs. Her research interests include, developing educational material for the virtual learning environments and the neurological process in brain-compatible learning.

Mustafa SAMANCIOĞLU is a doctoral student at the Faculty of Educational Sciences, Gaziantep University. He is specializing in instructional software development.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the process of maintaining full membership negotiations with the European Union (officially since October, 2005) and as a signatory state of the Bologna Declaration, Turkey has been challenged by strict educational measures which require large scale undertakings of institutional and structural change initiatives. Bologna Process “is a creation a common frame of reference to understand academic grades that are easy to interpret and compare, so as to increase mobility opportunities for students, teachers and researchers within the EU countries” (Clement et al, 2004).

Among others, one of the most challenging change arenas is the EU-standards-compatible foreign language instruction in Turkish formal education system. For example, European Language Portfolio introduced by European Council, serves as a means of promoting awareness of a European cultural identity and helping language learners to keep track of their language learning achievements and intercultural experiences (EAQUALS, <http://www.eaquals.org/news/archives.asp>).

It is obvious that Turkish national education system, now strongly favoring the status-quo, seems to pose serious difficulties in meeting the full membership criteria of the EU, in terms of educational qualifications and standards. Currently, poor command of foreign languages (especially English) is seen as the major obstacle to student and staff mobility in EU member countries. And an increasing number of English medium courses has been implemented at undergraduate and postgraduate levels across Europe, to facilitate EU integration and improve the competitiveness of the educated population in the European labor market (Miclea, 2003, p. 266). However, the debate on English language teaching, among Turkish educators, has centered around whether English language instruction should be through content in English-medium schools or via intensive English language classes inserted into the national curricula at all levels (Doğançay-Aktuna and Kızıltepe, 2005, p. 258).

In fact, the debate would be on the accessibility of an EU-standards-compatible English language instruction at all levels of formal and life-long education. The need for this study has prompted from lack of studies and initiatives to serve as an infrastructure for the achievement of internationally recognized and EU-compatible English language teaching programs. Such initiatives are of great importance because, multilingual communication is at the heart of European cross-national cooperation to be assured by “EAQUALS” (European Association for Quality Language Services) Standards. In this sense university-based preparatory (foreign) language teaching centers are expected to be highly functional and equipped with technology-driven programs rendering learners with EAQUALS-Standards compatible services.

2. PROBLEM and the RATIONALE

The Bologna Declaration signed in 1999, aims at establishing a European area of higher education to be fully realized by 2010. Turkey as a signatory state of the Bologna Declaration and a full membership candidate of the European Union, has been challenged by an urgent need to modify its conventional subject and teacher-centered teaching methodologies towards student-centered, constructivist ones. Among others, being one of the problematic fields, conventional media and methodologies dominating foreign language teaching programs should be reconsidered within the European area of higher education framework.

Hence, web-based-driven learning environments seem to be capable of transforming conventional pedagogies by meeting existing and future learner needs in a society where ICTs will have impact almost on all facets of life. Research findings support the belief that virtual learning environments are, in some cases, much more productive, effective and cost-efficient, when foreign language teaching pedagogies are considered. The literature does report several experiences of genuine successful e-learning approaches in the field of foreign language(s)

teaching (Cahill and Catanzaro 1997; Ridley et al. 1995; Blake and Delforge 1999; Soo and Ngeow, 1998; Adair-Hauck et al. 1999, Vogel, 2001) from diverse geographical regions.

Having known the advantages of virtual environments over conventional foreign language teaching methodologies, we sought to answer the following major research question: *Will it be possible to design a pilot web-based English teaching program compatible with European Union Language Passport requirements?*

3. TOOLS and APPROACH in the DESIGN PROCESS

A typical web-based software is composed of three layers, these are: the user, manager-executive and data base layers (Cebeci, 2006). All of these layers were provided in the design and an asynchronous model was implemented. Distance delivery mode was student-centered where the focus would be on individual development, paving ways to constructivist pedagogies. The software and the other design technologies found in the original version of GATUDEM (short for; Gaziantep University Virtual Language Learning Portal) are as follows:

HTML, PHP and JavaScript Languages

Dev-C++, EditPlus Code Editors

Microsoft Visual Studio 6.0 Web Design and Editor

PhotoShop 6.0 Graphic Design and Editor

Apache Web Server

MySQL Data Base

Macromedia ShockWave Flash Player,

RealPlayer 10, Multimedia Player

Microsoft Internet Explorer and Mozilla Firefox as web browser

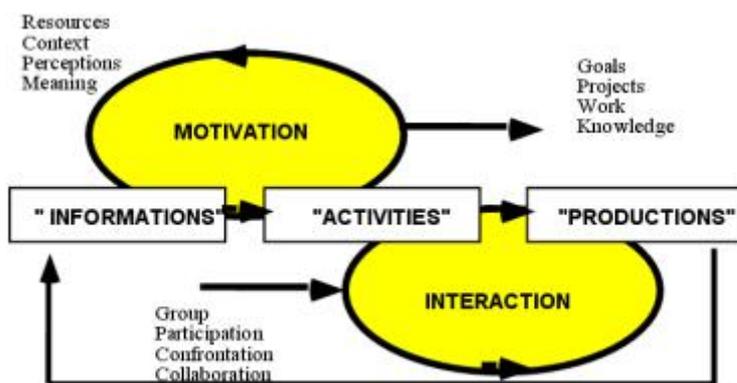


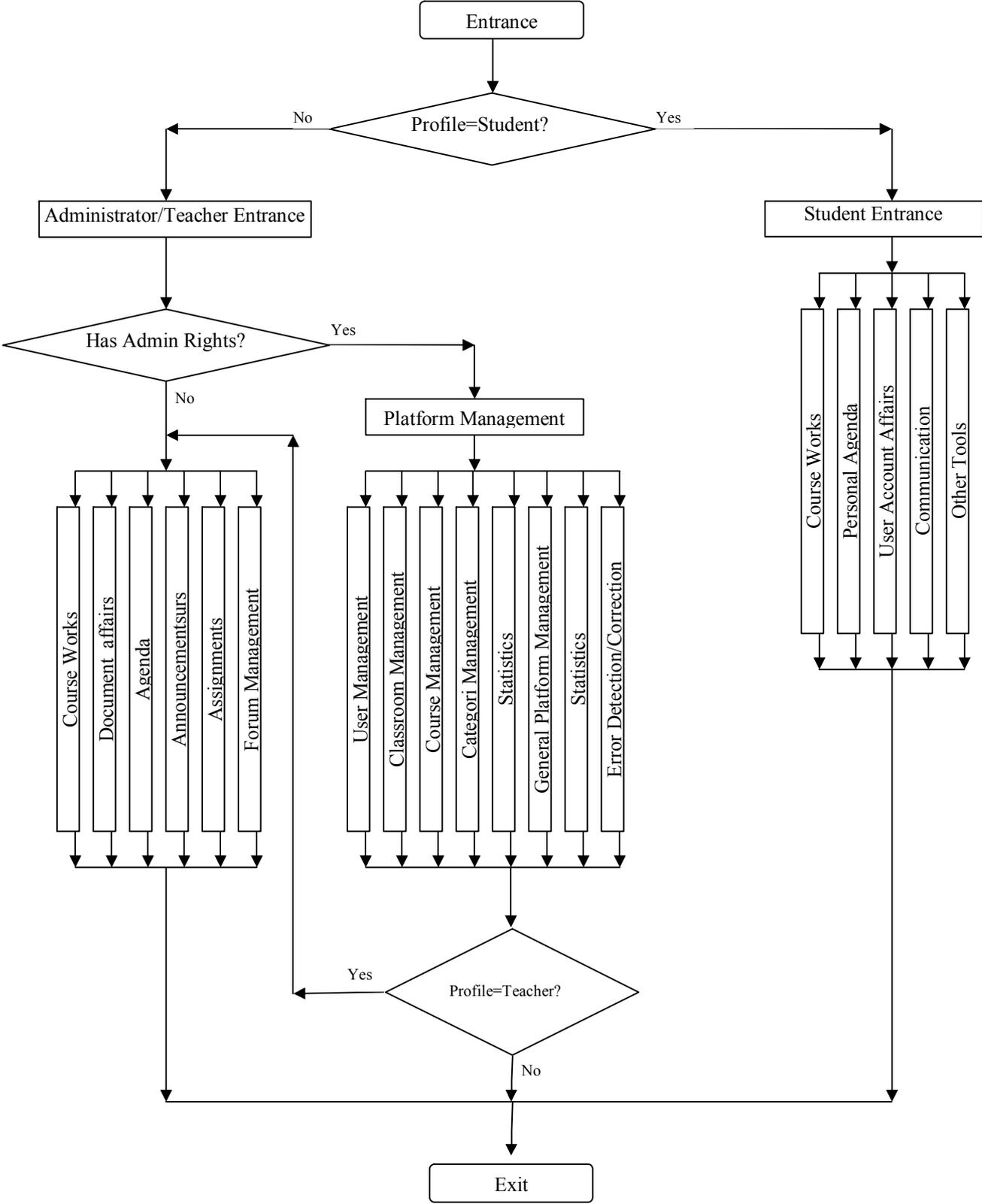
Figure 1. Pedagogical Model of the GATUDEM (adapted from Lebrun, 2002)

4. PURPOSE and METHODOLOGY

This study attempted at designing a virtual learning environment to serve as a model in laying the foundations of a European Union-standards compatible foreign language (English) teaching programs for Turkish students. The significance of the study comes from its pioneering efforts in creating a web-based program, to be considered as the foundation of a prospective project, bearing a web-based instructional media compatible with EU foreign language learning standards. It also sought to provide an exploratory practice in the design of a virtual language learning environment that may help future designers have a thinking-starting ground available for the development of new versions.

In the development of GATUDEM, ‘Claroline’ (www.claroline.org) software has been taken as a the framework and base program. Adaptation of the program language to Turkish, constituted the bulk of whole development process and almost 5000 lines of code has been translated into Turkish.

Figure 1. Algorithm of the GATUDEM Software



5. PEDAGOGICAL DIMENSIONS of the GATUDEM

Virtual learning should not be seen as a simple replacement of the conventional classrooms, but as an enriched extension of the classical content providing individualized, collaborative, interactive, exciting and effective learning opportunities. To achieve the educational value to be added by virtual environments, collaborative learning strategies (Chang, 2001) and constructivist learning principles (Kanuka, 2002) should be incorporated through appropriate technologies and virtual classroom management approaches. Based on the Mioduser et al.'s (1999) comprehensive analysis, pedagogical dimensions of the website constructed can be summarized as follows:

Table 1. Pedagogical Dimensions of the GATUDEM

Instructional configuration

Individualized instruction

Web collaborative learning

Instructional model

Directed

Instructional means

Information-base tools (limited)

Structured

virtual environment

Interaction type

Browsing, event

Multiple choice questions (optional)

Simple activity

Expert consultation (optional)

On-line tool

Cognitive process,

Information retrieval (limited)

Memorizing (can be added)

Locus of control

Student and software environment controlled (mixed initiative)

Feedback

Human asynchronous

Help functions

Technical help

Learning resources

Within Website resources,

Linked WWW resources,

Ask an expert or a peer

Evaluation

EU Language Passport compatible tests and standardized testing material

Figure 3. GATUDEM's Main Page



Figure 4. Students' Page at GATUDEM

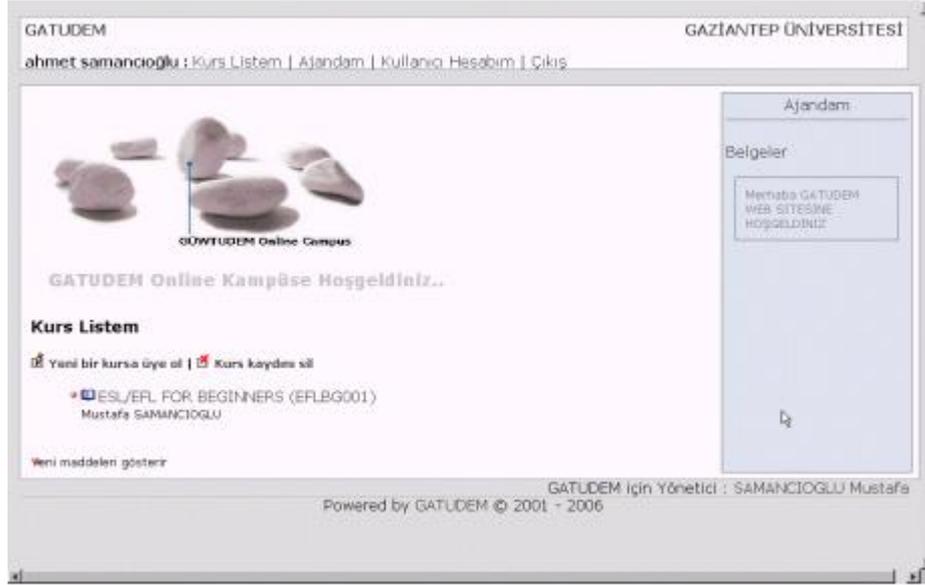


Figure 5. Course Registration Page at GATUDEM



6. CONCLUSION

This initiative undertaken by educators and a computer specialist clearly showed that distant delivery of a web-based European Union-standards compatible English teaching is technically possible and feasible in Gaziantep University, Turkey as a local leg of an international collaboration. However, academics, with Social Sciences background, need some further training, instructional support and more involvement in the Information and Computer Technologies.

GATUDEM, as an adapted software, holds promise in that an international project to be based on this initiative, would provide a virtual learning environment for Turkish students compatible with European Union Language Passport standards.

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