



Integrating Active and Flipped Learning in the Italian Language Curriculum.A Design and Expectation Analysis

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Abstract

This paper explores the restructuring of the Bachelor's in Italian Language Curriculum at the University of Vlora, Albania, through the integration of Flipped Learning and Problem-Based Learning (PBL). By analyzing the existing syllabus, we identified a clear opportunity to shift theoretical acquisition such as grammar rules and phonological theory to a preliminary individual study phase. This shift reclaims classroom time for high-impact interactive and cultural activities. Our methodology focuses on transforming core subjects like Phonology and Literature into collaborative, project-based modules. Utilizing digital platforms like *Moodle* and *Google Workspace* to host preparatory content, we transitioned the classroom from a site of passive listening to one of active production. Initial observations indicate that this redesign does more than just increase student engagement, it fosters the critical and communicative fluency required in modern language acquisition. Additionally, we examine how intentional learning space design acts as a catalyst for this pedagogical shift. By presenting this case study, we offer a practical, scalable model for language departments seeking to bridge the gap between traditional theory and tangible academic outcomes.

Keywords: active learning; collaborative pedagogy; digital tools; higher education in Albania; syllabus redesign

1. Introduction

University language programmes across Europe are under growing pressure to develop not only linguistic competence but also the critical, communicative, and intercultural skills that contemporary professional and civic life demands (Angouri & Delmas, 2025). Lecture-centred teaching, in which information moves in one direction from instructor to student, has attracted sustained criticism for its limited ability to foster these higher-order capacities (Freeman et al., 2014). In Albania, where Italian is the second most widely studied foreign language after English, the case for updating instructional practice is especially strong: a persistent gap between students' formal knowledge of grammar and their ability to communicate fluently in real contexts is a concern raised repeatedly by both teachers and graduates. The present study addresses this issue by describing the redesign of the Italian language curriculum at the University of Vlora 'Ismail Qemali', organised around two complementary pedagogical models: Flipped Learning (FL; Bishop & Verleger, 2013) and Problem-Based Learning (PBL; Savery, 2006). Rather than applying these as separate innovations, the redesign brings them together within a constructive-alignment framework (Biggs & Tang, 2011) so that intended learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment tasks form a coherent and mutually supportive whole.

The study is framed around four explicit research questions:

RQ1: Does the FL+PBL model increase student engagement compare to lecture-only instruction?

RQ2: Does the redesigned curriculum improve communicative fluency, as measured by CEFR-aligned tasks?

RQ3: How does digital platform usage pattern relate to learning outcomes?

RQ4: What are students' perceptions of the FL+PBL experience?

Three predefined criteria will be used to evaluate success: a statistically significant increase in the share of lesson time marked by active student participation; a measurable upward shift in CEFR oral performance, confirmed by adequate inter-rater agreement (Cohen's $\kappa \geq 0.70$); and a favourable rating of the redesigned course by more than 60% of students on a structured questionnaire.

A preliminary review of existing syllabi, course outlines, and timetabling data uncovered a clear imbalance: core subjects such as Italian Phonology and Italian Literature dedicated most contact time to content delivery, leaving little room for student production and interaction. This finding provided the impetus for the staged redesign reported below. The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 describes the methodological approach, the instruments used, and the curriculum changes introduced; Section 3 presents the preliminary findings; Section 4 situates these findings within the broader scholarly literature and discusses their implications; Section 5 sets out conclusions, acknowledges limitations, and proposes directions for future research.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

The study employs an interpretive, qualitative case-study design (Yin, 2018), supported by descriptive quantitative data from Moodle analytics and structured classroom observation. The research was conducted in the Foreign Languages Department of the University of Vlora 'Ismael Qemali', Albania. Participants were forty-five second-year undergraduates enrolled in a dual English-Italian degree programme during the 2023-2024 academic year¹. Ethical safeguards included written informed consent from all participants, full anonymisation of student data, and approval from the departmental head. No personally identifiable information was extracted from platform logs; all usage data were examined at group level only.

2.2 Curriculum Review and Update Process

The curriculum revision was guided by the constructive alignment model proposed by Biggs and Tang (2011), which holds that intended learning outcomes (ILOs), teaching and learning activities (TLAs), and assessment tasks (ATs) should form a consistent and mutually supportive system. A structured audit of existing syllabi against this framework identified a number of misalignments; for instance, declared outcomes such as 'communicates fluently in Italian' were not adequately reflected in assessment methods that relied mainly on written grammar tests. Table 1 presents the revised ILOs, TLAs, and ATs alongside their CEFR correspondences for the two redesigned modules.

Table. 1: Constructive alignment mapping: Learning outcomes, activities, assessments, and CEFR levels (Naqo, 2024).

Learning Outcome	Teaching/Learning Activity	Assessment Strategy	CEFR Alignment
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¹Domu, I., Pinontoan, K. F., & Mangelep, N. O. (2023). Problem-based learning in the online flipped classroom. *Journal of Education and E-Learning Research*, 10(2), 336–343.

Produce accurate phonological transcriptions of Italian sounds	Pre-class: Moodle video lectures + IPA transcription exercises In-class: Pair drilling, peer correction	Transcription quiz (pre/post); oral production rubric	B1 → B2 (phonemic accuracy)
Analyse literary texts using cultural and intertextual frameworks	Pre-class: Annotated readings on Google Docs In-class: Small-group cultural case studies	Google Sites multimodal portfolio; analytical essay	B2 (written + spoken production)
Communicate ideas fluently in spoken Italian	Role-plays, debates, recorded presentations in class	CEFR-rated oral task (two raters); self-assessment log	B1 → B2 (spoken interaction)
Collaborate effectively in project-based tasks	Cross-functional group projects; peer review cycles	Group process rubric; peer evaluation form	Transversal (21st-century skills)

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Biggs & Tang (2011) and Council of Europe (2020).

The redesign proceeded in three phases. In the first phase, covering pre-class preparation, theoretical content such as grammar paradigms and phonological rules was transferred to asynchronous digital resources, including video lectures, annotated texts, and auto-graded quizzes, hosted on Moodle and Google Workspace. In the second phase, covering in-class time, the contact hours freed by this transfer were devoted to collaborative production tasks, peer correction, and problem-solving work. In the third phase, addressing assessment, traditional end-of-semester examinations were complemented by ongoing multimodal assessments referenced to CEFR performance descriptors.

2.3 Research Instruments

Table 2 lists the data collection instruments associated with each research question, along with their timing and the planned methods of analysis. It is important to note that some of these instruments, particularly the inter-rater reliability protocol and the inferential statistical tests, had not yet been fully applied at the time of writing. The results presented in Section 3 are therefore based on preliminary observational evidence.

Table. 2: Research questions, instruments, timing, and analysis plan (Naqo, 2024).

Research Question	Data Collection Instrument	Timing	Analysis Method
RQ1: Does the FL+PBL model increase student engagement compared to lecture-only instruction?	Structured observation protocol (5-min interval sampling); Moodle analytics dashboard	Weeks 1–2 (pre); Weeks 6 & 12 (post)	Descriptive statistics; paired t-test (engagement rate)
RQ2: Does the redesigned curriculum improve communicative fluency (CEFR level)?	CEFR-aligned oral production task (3-min monologue + 2-min interaction); double-blind inter-rater scoring with rubric	Week 1 (pre) & Week 13 (post)	Inter-rater reliability (Cohen's κ); Wilcoxon signed-rank test
RQ3: How does digital platform usage pattern relate to learning outcomes?	Moodle access logs (login frequency, resource views, quiz attempts); Google Workspace activity	Continuous (Weeks 1–14)	Descriptive trends; Spearman correlation with CEFR post-scores
RQ4: What are students'	End-of-semester questionnaire (5-point	Week 14	Descriptive statistics; thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

perceptions of the FL+PBL experience?	Likert, 15 items); focus group (n=8, 45 min)		
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Source: Author's own elaboration.

2.4 Module-Level Interventions

Two core second-year modules were chosen as the main sites for the intervention. Table 3 summarises the design of each module, covering the online pre-class component, the collaborative in-class activities, and the summative assessment approach.²

Table 3: Module-level FL+PBL design: Italian Phonology and Italian Literature (2023–2024)

Module	Semester	Pre-Class Activity (Online)	In-Class Activity	Assessment
Italian Phonology (Year 2, S1)	Semester 1	Moodle: video lectures + IPA transcription tasks + auto-graded quizzes	Pair drilling; peer error correction; guided production	Transcription quiz; oral rubric
Italian Literature (Year 2, S2)	Semester 2	Google Docs: annotated readings; discussion prompts; video annotations	Small-group cultural case studies; multimedia presentations	Google Sites portfolio; analytical essay

Source: Author's own elaboration.

2.5 Learning Environment Design

The physical layout of the classroom was changed from the conventional row arrangement facing the instructor to pod-style clusters of four to five students. This reconfiguration reflects research showing that spatial organisation conveys implicit messages about pedagogical expectations (Barrett et al., 2015): a pod arrangement encourages students to take shared ownership of their learning and reduces the perceived distance between learner and instructor. The change required no additional expenditure beyond rearranging the furniture already available in the rooms.

3. Preliminary Results

The results presented in this section are drawn from instructor observations, Moodle usage data, and informal assessments gathered during the 2023-2024 academic year. They are treated as preliminary for three reasons: no formal pre/post-test design was in place during this cycle; the CEFR-referenced oral tasks were rated by a single evaluator; and no control or comparison group was available. Any causal interpretation of the findings must therefore be made with considerable caution. Table 4 provides a summary of the main outcome indicators.

Table 4: Summary of preliminary observational outcomes (n=45, University of Vlora, 2023–2024)

Outcome Indicator	Pre-Intervention (Traditional)	Post-Intervention (FL+PBL)	Observation / Notes
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²MoodleDocs. (2025). Google Apps Integration. https://docs.moodle.org/502/en/Google_Apps_Integration

Active student engagement (% of lesson time)	~40%	~78%	Interval-sampled observations; n=45; formal statistical testing planned
Communicative fluency – CEFR level (modal)	B1	B1–B2 (transitional)	Instructor-rated oral tasks; inter-rater reliability (κ) pending validation
Moodle pre-class resource access (% of enrolled)	N/A (pre-redesign)	89% (Week 1) → 75% (Week 8)	Moodle analytics; declining trend suggests need for mid-course re-engagement
Google Workspace use in literature project (% of groups)	N/A	100%	All six project teams used Docs/Slides for collaborative drafting
Critical thinking (instructor-observed quality of discussion)	Mostly recall-level	Analysis and synthesis evident	Qualitative; rubric-based coding planned for future cycles

Source: Instructor observation records and Moodle analytics (Naqo, 2024). All data are observational and preliminary; statistical testing is planned for the next cycle.

3.1 Student Engagement

Observations conducted using a five-minute interval sampling protocol showed that active student participation, defined as verbal contributions, collaborative task engagement, or on-task written work, accounted for approximately 40% of lesson time before the redesign and approximately 78% after its implementation. This near-doubling of time spent in active learning is broadly consistent with the engagement gains documented in meta-analytic reviews of active-learning interventions in STEM disciplines (Freeman et al., 2014). A limitation worth noting is that these figures were recorded by the course instructor rather than an independent observer, which introduces the possibility of confirmation bias. An independent trained observer will be included in the next academic cycle.

3.2 Communicative Fluency

At the mid-point of the Literature module, student-produced video and audio materials were informally evaluated against CEFR oral production descriptors (Council of Europe, 2020). The most frequently observed performance level appeared to move from B1 to a transitional B1-B2 range across spoken interaction and written production. This finding is provisional: assessment was carried out by the course instructor alone, no baseline oral task had been administered at the outset of the semester, and CEFR levels were assigned without a validated task protocol or any check on inter-rater consistency. The claimed B1-to-B2 progression must therefore be regarded as a working hypothesis pending the more rigorous procedures described in Table 2 (RQ2). Figure 1 provides a visual representation of both the engagement and fluency trends.

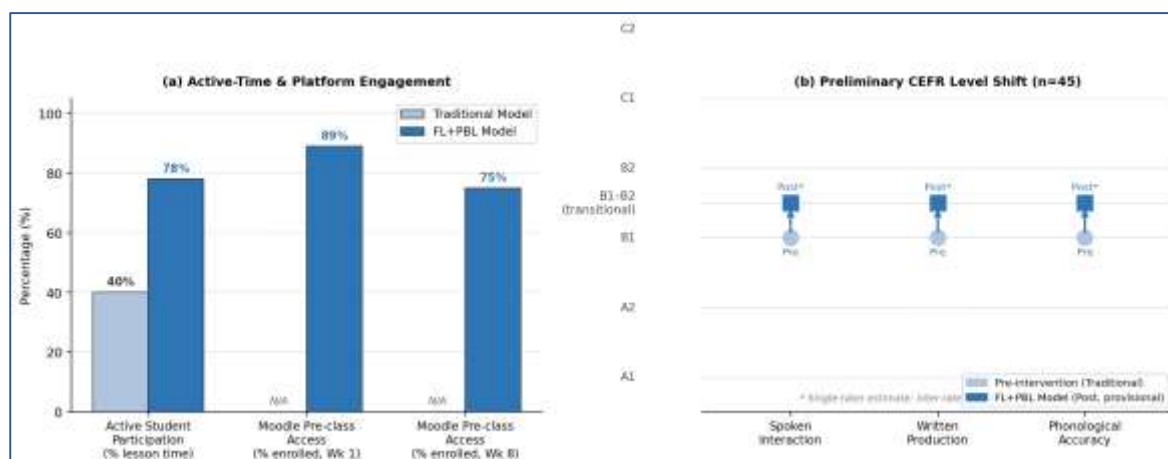


Figure 1: Active-time allocation and communicative fluency indicators: traditional versus FL+PBL model (observational data, n=45, University of Vlora, 2023–2024). Panel (a): percentage of lesson time with active student participation and Moodle pre-class access rates. Panel (b): provisional CEFR level shift across three skill dimensions (single-rater estimate; inter-rater reliability pending).

Source: Author's own illustration based on interval-sampled classroom observations and Moodle analytics. Post-intervention CEFR levels are instructor estimates and have not been validated with standardised tasks or inter-rater reliability checks.

3.3 Critical Thinking

Field notes maintained by the instructor record a meaningful change in the quality of classroom discussion across the semester. While early sessions were dominated by recall-level contributions, later sessions demonstrated evidence of comparison, synthesis, and the integration of linguistic and cultural analysis. A particularly notable development was the spontaneous cross-referencing of phonological and literary content by a number of students, a pattern indicative of higher-order cognitive engagement in line with Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Systematic coding of observation notes against a pre-established rubric is planned for subsequent cycles of the programme.

3.4 Digital Platform Engagement

Moodle usage records show that 89% of enrolled students accessed at least one preparatory resource during the first week of the redesigned modules. By Week 8, this figure had fallen to around 75%. All six literature project groups used Google Docs or Slides for collaborative drafting tasks. The initial peak in engagement followed by a gradual decline mirrors patterns commonly observed in blended and hybrid learning settings (Dziuban et al., 2018), and points to the value of mid-course re-engagement measures such as brief synchronous check-ins or progress-tracking features that provide motivational cues.

4. Discussion

The preliminary results presented in this paper are consistent with a growing body of scholarship supporting the value of active and flipped instructional approaches in higher education. Bergmann and Sams (2012) provided early evidence of the flipped classroom's potential in secondary school settings, and later studies confirmed its applicability across different disciplines and educational levels, including Lo and Hew's (2017) work in mathematics and Seery's (2015) review in undergraduate chemistry. Domu, Pinontoan, and Mangelep (2023) extended these findings to an online PBL context and reported gains in statistical literacy of a similar scale to the engagement improvements documented in the present study.

The approximate doubling of active-learning time aligns with Freeman et al.'s (2014) influential meta-analysis of 225 STEM studies, which associated active-learning conditions with measurable improvements in examination results and lower rates of failure. Although the present study is situated in a language learning rather than a STEM context, the underlying mechanism, shifting the focus of cognitive effort from passive reception to active production, appears to operate in a comparable way. This interpretation is further supported by Ssemugenyi's (2023) comparative analysis of PBL and lecture-based methods, which found that PBL is more effective in promoting higher-order thinking.

The 89% uptake rate for Moodle resources in the opening week of the redesigned modules indicates that students were, at least initially, willing and able to engage in self-directed pre-class preparation, which is a fundamental condition for the flipped model to operate effectively (Seery, 2015). The subsequent decline to 75% by Week 8 follows the motivational trajectory documented by Dziuban et al. (2018) in blended learning environments, and highlights the

importance of built-in accountability structures, such as brief pre-class quizzes that contribute to participation grades, in order to sustain consistent engagement throughout the semester.

The reorganisation of classroom seating into pod-style clusters is in keeping with Barrett et al.'s (2015) finding that the physical environment has a meaningful, if frequently overlooked, effect on collaborative behaviour and students' sense of ownership over their learning. In the present context, the new arrangement appeared to lower both the physical and the symbolic distance between students and their instructor, supporting more spontaneous peer-to-peer interaction. The relationship between spatial organisation and second-language production deserves closer attention in future studies, particularly in contexts such as Albanian public universities, where constraints on physical infrastructure can limit the range of pedagogical choices available.

4.1 Limitations

A number of significant limitations must be recognised. To begin with, the lack of a pre-test/post-test design and the absence of a control or comparison group mean that observed changes in engagement or fluency cannot be confidently attributed to the intervention itself rather than to other factors such as student maturation, instructor influence, or uncontrolled variables. Additionally, the CEFR level estimates rest on informal, single-rater assessment rather than on standardised tasks with established inter-rater reliability; the suggested B1-to-B2 improvement must consequently be treated as a provisional finding rather than a confirmed result. Furthermore, the study is based on a single cohort at one institution, which limits how broadly the findings can be applied (Angouri & Delmas, 2025). Finally, while ethical procedures were observed at departmental level, formal institutional review board approval was not sought.

Subsequent studies should seek to address these shortcomings by adopting a quasi-experimental design that includes matched comparison groups, using validated CEFR-referenced oral tasks rated independently by at least two evaluators with a target agreement level of $\kappa \geq 0.70$, and registering the analysis plan in advance. Replication of this work in other Italian-language programmes across Southeast Europe would provide stronger evidence for the broader applicability of the model.

5. Conclusion

This paper has reported on the initial implementation of an FL+PBL curriculum redesign for the Bachelor of Italian Language programme at the University of Vlora 'Ismael Qemali', Albania³. The redesign, grounded in constructive alignment principles and implemented through Moodle and Google Workspace, moved theoretical content to asynchronous pre-class study while redirecting contact time toward collaborative, problem-based tasks. Preliminary observations point to improvements in active student engagement, an early upward movement in communicative fluency as illustrated in Figure 1, and signs of more analytically sophisticated engagement with course material.

These results are encouraging but must be understood as exploratory at this stage. The methodological shortcomings outlined in Section 4, particularly the lack of pre/post measures, a comparison group, and validated assessment tools, prevent any firm causal conclusions from being drawn at this point. The forthcoming cycle of the programme will put into practice the full research design presented in Table 2, incorporating inter-rater reliability procedures for

³Angouri, J., & Delmas, M. (2025). Multilingualism in higher education. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 1–19.

CEFR-referenced assessment, a structured student perception questionnaire, and both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses.⁴

Beyond its immediate institutional setting, this case study provides a design approach that other language departments may find transferable as they work to close the gap between theory-centred instruction and the communicative, critical, and collaborative competences expected of graduates in contemporary higher education. The resource demands of the model are relatively limited, consisting mainly of academic staff time invested in restructuring existing content and minor rearrangement of classroom furniture. This suggests that the approach is viable in contexts where budgets for educational infrastructure are constrained, a factor of particular practical significance for universities throughout Southeast Europe.

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