

Media and Technology in the Teaching of Corpus Languages after the Pandemic: the Syriac Language at the University of Salamanca

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ABSTRACT

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led to a worldwide compulsory shift from face-to-face teaching to virtual teaching and e-learning at all levels of the educational system. The teaching of the Syriac language, one of the subjects comprised in the Degree in Hebrew and Aramaic Studies offered by the University of Salamanca, Spain, changed from a traditional method with ICT support to a more active one, the Flipped Classroom, adapted to the features of a corpus language. In this paper we aim to show this process of adaptation and the results from several Teaching Innovation Projects compiled over the last four academic years.

KEYWORDS: *Flipped Classroom, Corpus Languages teaching, Syriac, University of Salamanca*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and the global health emergency altered most aspects of the society. One of the measures adopted by several governments for the mitigation of the situation was the lockdown and the restriction of the free movement of people. In the field of education, it forced a shift from face-to-face teaching and class attendance to virtual teaching and e-learning based on synchronous and asynchronous lessons. This policy, which affected all levels of regulated education, resulted in a significant increase in the application of ICT to employ resources, design materials, develop active methodologies and guarantee online global open access, with the aim of maintaining the regular lessons at home.

The University of Salamanca, following the directives from the Spanish Government, established online teaching and e-learning for all its academic programmes until the end of the academic year 2019–2020. Moreover, USAL launched an institutional contingency plan for virtualising subjects through its own platform, Studium. The entire teaching staff was compelled to change their methodologies and make use of ICT to a greater extent than before, or even for the first time.

The Degree in Hebrew and Aramaic Studies offered by the University of Salamanca was affected as well. This Degree encompasses several subjects whose main content is corpus languages, which are usually taught using traditional methods. In the case of the Syriac language, online teaching forced a change in the methodology from a Grammar-Translation Method with the support of ICT to a more active one, the Flipped Classroom, adapting it to the features of a corpus language.

Prior to exposing the process of changing methodologies, we consider it appropriate to provide context for Syriac as a corpus language within the Aramaic linguistic group, along with its teaching within the framework of the Degree.

The Degree in Hebrew and Aramaic Studies of the University of Salamanca

The University of Salamanca, founded in 1218, is one of the oldest universities in the world and the oldest Spanish university in continuous operation. Hebrew and Aramaic Studies enjoy a long-standing tradition at this institution, which dates back to the 14th century. Nowadays, these two fields are the focus of the Degree in Hebrew and Aramaic Studies, which was established along with other degrees in the academic year 2010–2011 according to the European Higher Education Area Guidelines. It is based on Saussure's definition of Philology, which links the study of language to literature, history and culture. (Saussure, [1916] 1967: 13–14) The added value of this Degree lies in its unique curriculum within the European Higher Education Area because it has an equitable distribution of ECTS credits and hours between the two fields, Hebrew Studies and Aramaic Studies.

In relation to Aramaic Studies, the main goals of the Degree acquire specialized knowledge of the languages and dialects of the Aramaic linguistic group, recognizing the value of Aramaic literature, and developing historical and cultural awareness of the significance of Aramaic-speaking peoples in regional and international contexts.

The Syriac language is the main content of two semester-based subjects taught in the first year of the Degree, titled *Aramaic Language I* and *Aramaic Language II*. The aims of these subjects for the students are the acquisition of tools to deal with a text and get an understandable content through analysis, commentary, and translation, while also fostering the global understanding of a text and subsequent critical reflection on it with the support of literature, culture, and history of Syriac-speaking peoples, which they study at the same time.

Syriac language¹

Before discussing the didactics of the Syriac language, we consider it relevant to offer a short historical overview. Syriac belongs to the Aramaic linguistic group, which is embodied in the Semitic family of languages. This is the distribution of Aramaic into five main stages based on Fitzmyer (1979) and adopted by most scholars, such as Yildiz (2000a) or Rubin (2008), among many others.

- I. Ancient Aramaic (950–600 BC)
- II. Imperial Aramaic (600–200 BC)
- III. Middle Aramaic (200 BC–AD 200)
- IV. Late Aramaic (AD 200–1300 AD)
- V. Modern Aramaic (1300 AD to the present)

Syriac is one of the most important languages of the Aramaic linguistic group, spanning the Middle and Late Aramaic stages. It had been originally spoken since third or second century BC in 'Urhay, Edessa, now Şanlıurfa (Turkey), located 50km from the border with Syria. The city and its surrounding area have been inhabited since ancient times and have historically served as significant crossroads. Because of the early spread of Christianity in the region, it had been adopted as liturgical and cultural language by the new Christian communities in the Eastern Roman and Sassanid empires since 3rd century CE.

The Christological controversies about the nature or natures of Christ caused a dogmatic schism in the 5th century along with a geographical and linguistic division into two dialects, Eastern and Western ones. The Syriac language reached its peak during the 7th and 8th centuries, when these communities disseminated across the East to present-day India and China for a missionary purpose. Besides, their scholars played a significant role in the history of knowledge transfer. They translated scientific and religious works written in Greek into Syriac, which were

¹ The term *Syriac* derives from the toponym *Syria*. During the 6th century BC, the *lingua franca* of the Near and Middle East was an Aramaic *koiné*. In 538 BC, Cyrus the Great allowed the Jewish people to return to their region from exile in Babylon and they maintained the Aramaic language, as it is shown in the Old Testament. According to *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* ([1967] 1997), the term *'arāmīt* appears in the verses of 2 Kgs 18, 26, Ezr 4, 7 and Dan 2, 4 and could be translated as “[in] Aramaic [language]”. However, the Septuagint (2006) and the Vulgate ([1969] 1994) translated this word as *συριστι* into Greek and *syriace* into Latin, respectively. This is since the Greeks associated the name of the area where the Jewish people lived, Syria, with the language of its inhabitants, Syriac, although it was a dialect of Aramaic which was spoken throughout the entire Near and Middle East. Subsequently, Saint Jerome made use of the same term as the Septuagint in the Vulgate. Yildiz (2000b: 274) argues that this name is artificial and lacks historical bases, but it is commonly used by most of the scholar community.

later translated into Arabic sponsored by Abbasid caliphs. Finally, these works were rediscovered in Latin Medieval Europe.

After the Muslim conquest, the Arabic language progressively replaced Syriac as the cultural and vehicular language, leading to a significant decline in its use by the 14th century. Today, Syriac remains the liturgical and literary language of several Christian churches spread across the Near and the Middle East, as well as other parts of the world.

The study of this language, along with other Aramaic and Oriental languages such as Hebrew, Arabic and Chaldaic or Chaldean in Europe, experienced significant growth during the Council convened in the French town of Vienne between 1311 and 1312. The teaching of these languages was ordered through the establishment of chairs at the medieval European Universities of that time, including Salamanca, Oxford, Paris and Bologna, in order to spread the Christian faith among the non-Christian peoples.

The first generation of European scholars appeared in the 16th century, devoted to the printing of grammars, Biblical versions and the texts included in the Polyglot Bibles of Antwerp (1569–1572), Paris (1628–1645) and London (1654–1657). They were assisted by the support of Aramaic-speaking priests. During the 18th century the First Custodian of the Vatican Library, the Maronite polymath Joseph Simon Assemani (1687–1768), among other Papal legates, brought to Rome a huge amount of Syriac manuscripts from various monasteries in Egypt, Syria and Lebanon. This compilation labor, and the arrival of new manuscripts at the British Museum and other European libraries during the 19th century led to the peak of Syriac studies.

Between the 19th and the 20th centuries, this subject became independent from the field of theological studies and developed into a secular field of research, undergoing a significant increase in all areas, including language, literature, history and culture, not only in Europe but all over the world. Nowadays the development of information and communication technology (ICT), and the global access to internet have led to an unprecedented boom in Syriac studies. This has enabled the access to virtual teaching, the digitization of manuscripts and discontinued works, freely available online, or the publication of digital volumes and journals, and other projects.

Syriac as a Corpus Language

Langslow (2002: 23–24) uses the term *Corpus Language* to describe a language which is still spoken and written in the present but does not have exclusive native speakers. This definition can encompass Classical and Biblical languages such as Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Syriac, among others.

The teaching of Corpus Languages has traditionally made use of the Grammar-Translation Method, which has as a main goal the understanding and study of texts in their original languages. (Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 5–7) It is different from the first aim of studying Modern languages, which is communication. According to this method, the teacher explains the grammar in a deductive way and in the language of the students, who memorize it along with lists of vocabulary. The grammatical knowledge acquired is applied to the analysis, translation and back-translation of literary pieces. Therefore, the focus is not on oral communication but on reading and writing skills, and learning grammar is a means to understand foreign literature, rather than an end in itself.

Since the 20th century, several scholars have advocated for the use of communicative methods in teaching Corpus Languages as well as Modern languages, even though they have distinctive features and aims of study: Modern languages have real native speakers and their main learning goal is to use them as a vehicle of communication, whereas Corpus languages are not unique mother tongues and the main purpose of learning them is to understand written texts, so grammar plays a different and more prominent role in corpus languages than in modern languages instruction. (Hakola & Kilunen, 2008: 677–679)

The teaching of Syriac at the University of Salamanca

The teaching of Syriac at the University of Salamanca follows the European Higher Education Area Guidelines, which promote the student-centered learning approach, the acquisition of skills and competences and the use of active methodologies with the support of ICT. (Martínez Lirola, 2007: 37)

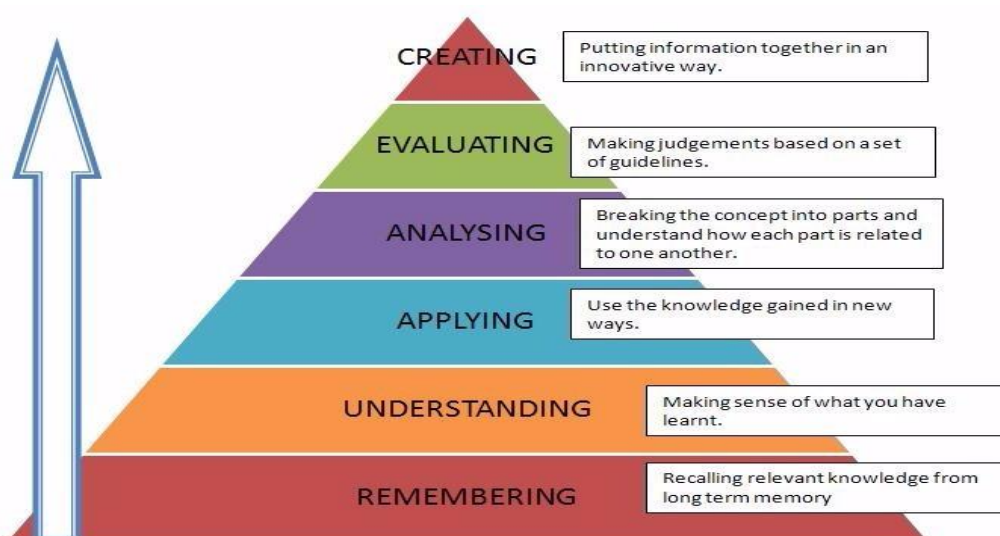
Before the pandemic, the teaching of Syriac language used the Grammar-Translation method with the support of ICT. (García González, 2020) Students were trained to carry out morphological and syntactic analyses to obtain accurate translations and comprehension, being able to offer critical reflections about it based on the extensive philological knowledge acquired. The institutional virtual

platform Studium provided them with permanent access to the materials and digital resources but also enabled asynchronous communication with the teacher.

As stated above, after the outbreak of COVID-19 the faculties of the University of Salamanca were forced to make the transition from face-to-face teaching to e-learning and to convert the subjects to an online format. As a result, during the last months of the academic year 2019–2020, we created some videos with the planned content that were available for students on Studium, along with exercises they had to do and upload to the platform in order to get online feedback. This pilot experience led to the full implementation of the Flipped Classroom methodology, which we have been practising since then.

Flipped Classroom methodology (FCM)

Traditionally, in-class time is focused on the transmission of information from the teacher, the main active agent, to the student, the passive receiver, through expository teaching, while the autonomous worktime outside the classroom is devoted to practical activities. The Flipped Classroom consists of switching or flipping the cognitive processes involved during the face-to-face class and the autonomous worktime outside the classroom. According to Bloom's Taxonomy presented in 1956 and revised by Anderson & Krathwohl (2001) on the six levels of increasing cognitive complexity, the two lowest ones are practised outside the classroom because they may be carried out by students independently, whereas classroom worktime is dedicated to the other four higher levels because the support of teachers is necessary.



Therefore, the main goal of the Flipped Classroom methodology is to achieve active, autonomous, significant, and permanent learning for students, in accordance with the EHEA Guidelines.

This methodology is included in blended learning and can be described as a combination of remote and face-to-face teaching. It emerged at the end of the 20th century and experienced a boom at the beginning of the 21st century due to technological development and the integration of ICTs in education. (Prieto et al., 2021: 157–158) Nowadays digital materials and resources for learners are hosted on secure digital platforms with permanent online access and download options.

FCM provides advantages for both students and teachers. On the one hand, this methodology encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning process, learning times and places. Besides, it fosters active, significant and permanent learning through student involvement allowing class time to focus on complex cognitive processes with the support of the teachers.

On the other hand, teachers can identify difficulties or problems through the feedback provided by students given by the students. They offer real-time feedback during lessons, carrying out formative assessment. Moreover, they must carry out significant planning, content selection, creation of activities and materials, and the design of formative assessment.

Flipped Classroom for Syriac language teaching

For the implementation of the Flipped Classroom in Syriac language teaching, we followed the Curriculum development process, divided into three phases. The first one is the Planning phase, focused on identifying learners and their needs regarding the context. The Design phase is the second one, where we consider competences, objectives, and content along with the chosen methodology and materials. The third and last phase is the Evaluation phase, which includes criteria, types, instruments, and agents of evaluation.

During the Planning phase we established a distinct student profile based on age, nationality, labour and family situations of the learners using statistical data. Since the first academic year of the Degree in Hebrew and Aramaic Studies, 2010–2011, until 2022–2023, a total of 40 students have enrolled in the Syriac language courses, *Aramaic Language I* and *Aramaic Language II*, of which 15 are women (37,5%) and 25 are men (62,5%).

Most of them are in the age range 21-25 years old, 13 out of 40 (33%) falling within this category. As a result, these students show a higher level of intellectual maturity than other younger peers and they typically have previous university training. Besides, their decision to enrol in this Degree is conscious and based on true and real interest in these Studies. Their age influences their personal and family situations as well. Some of them have a job while studying and may be caretakers in charge of dependents, either adults or minors, circumstances that are less common among younger students.

Regarding the nationality, out of 40 students, 13 are from other countries (32,5%), with only one being an Erasmus student. More precisely, 6 are from European countries (15%), 6 from Latin America (15%) and one from Saudi Arabia (2,5%). This indicates the international interest in this Degree within and beyond the EHEA, highlighting the high number of non-Spanish-speaking students.

In the Design phase, in alignment with the objectives and competences, we decided to implement the Flipped classroom methodology. As previously mentioned, teachers provide information to students, who work on it before the lesson and outside the classroom, so that face-to-face class time is for practising and deepening their understanding of the content, resolving doubts and doing activities. The course consists of three hours per week, one hour on Wednesdays and two hours on Thursdays. Therefore, students have the materials available online for download from Thursday through the following Wednesday to work on them.

Regarding the materials, our main tool is a series of twelve videos we have created focusing on the Syriac verbal system. We have also designed a specific template for taking notes easily from the videos, based on Cornell Notes System², although its use is not compulsory. The last self-made resources are verbal paradigms and exercises for analysing verbal forms.

Finally, the Evaluation phase comprises both summative and formative assessments. For the first one, we gather quantitative data through written tests made up of the same exercises. For the formative assessment, we receive qualitative information collected during the class, where we dedicate time to complex cognitive processes, and we offer immediate feedback to the students.

² Cornell Notes System is a note-taking system devised by Walter Pauk, professor at Cornell University, New York, in the 1950s. It consists of synthesizing the most relevant aspects of each subject using a sheet of paper divided into four different areas in order to write down key ideas, lecture notes and a summary of the most important points. (Pauk & Owens, 2011: 235 277)

Teaching Innovation Projects

The results of the implementation of FCM for Syriac teaching have been compiled and analysed through two Teaching Innovation Projects (TIPs) we have conducted in recent academic years. These projects are carried out within the annual call convened by the University of Salamanca³.

In the framework of these two TIPs, we designed three surveys to gather students' feedback and opinions on the Flipped Classroom methodology, and assess their learning performance. These surveys, created using Google Forms, contained open and closed questions and had to be filled in at different points during the semester. The first one was a preliminary survey to find out if the respondents were familiar with this methodology and their access to the internet and electronic devices, essential for the implementation of the Flipped Classroom. The second one was conducted during the course and asked students about different aspects of FCM, along with a self-assessment of their performance. The third and last survey is an end-of-course questionnaire, which is focused on getting students' final feedback on this experience and a final self-evaluation of their evolution as learners, along with their suggestions for improvement and other aspects they would like to highlight.

We have chosen several items from the third survey in order to show the opinions of the respondents about the Flipped Classroom methodology and their performance as students, along with their final considerations about this experience. To make the information more accessible, we have gathered the answers of the students, a total of 5 respondents, 4 women and 1 man. The man is Chilean and one of the women is French; the others are Spanish. 3 of the women are in their twenties, whereas the French woman is 36 years old, and the Chilean man is 43. None of them has other jobs or personal responsibilities, such as caring for children or dependents.

FCM Practical aspects items

The first four items present a series of statements about different aspects of the Flipped Classroom Methodology that are answered using a Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *agree* to *strongly agree*.

³ ID2020/0159 *Implementation of Flipped Classroom methodology for Late Eastern Aramaic* and ID2022/0234 *Student' self-evaluation during the Corpus Languages teaching-learning process: Late Eastern Aramaic*.

Item 1 includes five statements related to the material used in this methodology:

1. I have been able to easily access the material via Studium.
2. The material was sufficient to understand the contents.
3. The videos contain the necessary information to follow the course.
4. The exercises have helped me to consolidate the contents of the course.
5. The number of exercises designed by the teacher was sufficient.

All students have chosen *agree* or *strongly agree* as their answers for these statements. 5 out of 5 *strongly agree* with the first statement, whereas for the fourth and the fifth statements 4 out of 5 *strongly agree* along with 1 *agree*, and for the second and the third statements there are 3 *strongly agree* and 2 *agree*.

Item 2 presents four statements referring to various practical aspects:

1. The planning of the course seemed adequate to me.
2. The distribution of the work throughout the term has been adequate.
3. The face-to-face classes have focused on reinforcing the knowledge previously acquired in an autonomous way.
4. This methodology has allowed me to realize my strengths and weaknesses.

The character of the answers is similar for this item. Statements 1 and 2 gather 4 *strongly agree* and 1 *agree*, the third one reaps 3 *strongly agree* and 2 *agree*. However, the fourth and last one collects 2 *strongly agree*, 2 *agree* and 1 *disagree*.

Item 3 follows the dynamics of the previous questions, in this case with statements about the role of the teacher:

1. The teacher explained the methodology at the beginning of the course.
2. The teacher presented the weekly autonomous work according to the planning.
3. The teacher adequately solved the doubts that were raised.
4. The teacher's explanations were essential for me to understand the contents.

All answers are *strongly agree* for the statements 1 and 2, along with 4 *strongly agree* and 1 *agree* for the third statement and 3 *strongly agree* and 2 *agree* for the

fourth and last statement. The opinions of the students are favourable, according to the results.

Item 4 finishes with six general statements about the Flipped Classroom Methodology:

1. The FCM is effective for corpus language learning.
2. The face-to-face classes are necessary to solve doubts and consolidate the information.
3. Audiovisual material always accessible allows for adequate time management.
4. The teacher's guidance is essential to follow the course.
5. This methodology adapts to the learning pace of each student.
6. The commitment of the students to the course is necessary for this methodology to be effective.

This item earns a majority of *strongly agree*, such as the second statement, while the sixth and last one shows 4 *strongly agree* and 1 *agree* along with 3 *strongly agree* and 2 *agree* for the third statement. Nevertheless, statements number 1, 4 and 5 have received 4 *strongly agree* and 1 *disagree*.

As we can observe, most results on different aspects of the Flipped Classroom Methodology such as materials, practicality, the role of the teacher and other issues are highly positive, despite the unfavourable opinion of a single respondent.

Self-evaluation items

The next item we want to show asks students to self-evaluate their performance in this subject through various statements, following the same Likert scale as before.

1. I consider that my commitment towards the subject has been adequate.
2. I believe that I have taken advantage of the opportunities this methodology has offered me.
3. I have tried to organize my time in order to keep up with the course.
4. This methodology has made it easier for me to learn the Syriac language.

One respondent *disagreed* with all the statements, in comparison with the other four students who have selected positive responses: 3 *strongly agree* and 1 *agree* for the first three statements and even 4 *strongly agree* for the fourth and last one.

To complete the question, they had the opportunity to explain why their performance was not satisfactory. Four of the students had nothing to comment, while the fifth one, the student who chose the option *disagree* in the previous items, a Spanish 22-year-old woman, believed that she had not been able to “take advantage of the methodology due to the way I have to study and understand both the classes and their study.”

FCM Strong and weak points

The last items are open questions about the strengths and weaknesses of the Flipped Classroom Methodology and the subject. The same respondent, a Spanish 22-year-old woman, thinks the strongest point is the permanent availability of the explanatory videos, which allow one to consult them whenever necessary. However, in line with her previous answers, “the fact of not offering the contents in class affects my study.”

According to the Chilean 43-year-old man, “taking notes on my own from the videos and assimilating the information gives me more autonomy in my learning. The teacher’s support helped me to detect my recurring mistakes and to clarify what I did not understand the first time.” With a view to the weak points, he considers preliminary exercises prior to watching the videos as necessary and useful, being a warming-up and preparation for the content.

In the opinion of the Spanish 20-year-old woman, “since these are old languages and one needs time to assimilate the information, being able to study them before class gave me the time I needed to process the information and reinforce it in class with the teacher.” She did not perceive any weaknesses.

The French 36-year-old woman considers that this methodology “has allowed me to progress at my own pace, spending more time on more complex points or quickly review simpler ones, which is not possible during a face-to-face class.” Besides, since Spanish is not her mother tongue, the permanent availability of the videos improved her understanding and made it easier for her to take notes and avoid mistakes. She did not indicate any weak points.

For the last respondent, a Spanish 18-year-old woman diagnosed with dyslexia, FCM offered her the opportunity “to organise my study time in a better way and

to watch the videos again in order to solve doubts.” She regards the dependence of the Flipped Classroom on the technology as a weakness, because the availability of the material lies in the proper function of the internet and the electronic devices.

As it can be seen from the answers of the respondents, we can summarize the strongest points of the Flipped Classroom methodology in the permanent online availability of the materials before class time. This allows students to manage their own time and pace and to gain autonomy in their learning, which is reinforced by the face-to-face classes. Other strengths mentioned refer to the work of the teacher, who has contributed to solving errors and to the complete understanding of the content, or to the usefulness of the exercises of verbal forms in increasing the fluency. However, the weakness is the dependence on access to internet and electronic devices to work on the materials.

Final conclusions

To sum up, the Flipped Classroom Methodology is appropriate for the teaching of Syriac language as a Corpus Language for various reasons. First, it is an active student-centred methodology which promotes autonomous, significant, and permanent learning, as we have already explained, in accordance with the European Higher Education Area guidelines.

Besides, it is fit for our students who show various profiles with distinctive features such as age, nationality, learning difficulties or labour and family situations. The continuous online availability and downloading of materials and resources allow them to manage their own learning time and pace according to their personal circumstances.

Finally, the use of active methodologies for the teaching of corpus languages, historically taught through traditional methods based on the learning of grammar and translation, represents an innovative change. The most favourable results of the experience we have carried out show that it is viable to explore innovations in the teaching-learning process of these kinds of languages.

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