

PRELIM 2

Occupied Palestinian Territories: PATEFL (Palestinian Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language) with Hilderstone College

August 2022

Project background

Partnership overview		
Course overview	ETA partner	Palestinian Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (PATEFL)
	UKI partner	Hilderstone College
	Course length	12 weeks
	Number of groups/cohorts	10
Participant profile	Total number of CPs	130 enrolled
	Language level(s)	B1+ / C1
	CPs' teaching context	Primary and secondary, government and private school
Mode of delivery	Synchronous platforms used	Zoom
	Synchronous session length	90 minutes
	Synchronous session frequency	Weekly
	Asynchronous workload	1-2 hours per week
Course content	Language development focus	Topic-based
	Methodology focus	Small group discussion
	Technology focus	N/A

Description of the partners

PATEFL is a non-profit association that strives to promote professional excellence among English language teachers in all possible ways, by engaging them in active professional learning communities where they meet, share, and collaborate through various activities like CPD courses, conferences and research. Diversity and inclusion are among the core values of PATEFL. It acknowledges the potential of all members without regard to years of experience, age, educational background or gender.

Teachers whom PATEFL targets in all its activities differ in terms of language fluency, years of experience, expertise and needs. There are some very fluent teachers and others who strive to develop their language skills. Teachers' language level range from approximately A2 to C2 with the majority in the middle. PATEFL has over 500 members. PATEFL was involved in PRELIM 1 in 2021.

Hilderstone College is a not-for-profit institution with over 50 years experience of teaching English to foreign students. Originally it was a state-funded institution but was incorporated in 1993 to its current charitable status. All bar one of the PRELIM 2 trainers were TEFL-Q.

Key features of the context

Palestine is a vulnerable and complicatedly unstable area, which is subject to repeated conflict. The blockade on Gaza and the restrictions on movements in the West Banks are among the main issues that affect all aspects of life in the Occupied Palestinian territories.

UNRWA provides education to Palestinian refugees in Gaza and the West Bank. The Ministry of Education runs the governmental schools, while the private sector only runs a limited number of schools.

The Palestinian curriculum is based on communicative language teaching, in the heart of which is genuine communication, but the challenge lies in the way teachers create opportunities for genuine language use.

In Palestine, English is taught as a foreign language from grade one. Three classes a week are allocated for teaching English to grades 1-4 and five classes for grades 5-12. The assessment system focuses on writing and grammar, so most teachers tend to teach for the exams and pay less attention to teaching communicative skills.

Almost all teachers' professional development programs focus on pedagogy and there is little attention given to building on teachers' own fluency and confidence in speaking. This affects the way the teachers teach their own students, as they tend to avoid speaking activities.

Outline of the course and rationale

The course was an online synchronous course with a topic-based approach. The classes met once a week for 90 minutes and, in the main, the groups had the same trainer throughout. The primary aim of the course was to improve the CPs' fluency and confidence on everyday topics - topics that naturally find their way into a standard state school coursebook, but also topics that had a relevance to daily life. Given that there are external restrictions placed on the participants, certain topics were avoided that might have caused distress (e.g. the family) or that would have been beyond the reality of the CPs' experiences (e.g. foreign travel).

Within each lesson, there would often be initial vocabulary and idiom exercises so that there was some acquisition of new language. This would then be followed by extensive fluency and discussion exercises and questions. Topics covered included: culture, education, the arts, the future, relationships, science and technology, the environment, and social lives and society.

In addition, within the programme, there was room for the CPs to develop debating skills, conversation gambits, and presentation language and practice. This final area of practice was devised so that the CPs could give short presentations on a topic of personal importance in the final session.

Project findings

Working in partnership

From PATEFL: We are very lucky working with Hilderstone College this year. After the preliminary meetings with college staff, we agreed on the recruitment steps. A promotional video was shared on PATEFL page, and the course was announced on the PATEFL page with a registration link for the teachers who are interested. PATEFL staff double checked the commitments of those who registered, then a Facebook page was created for them. After the groups were formed, sessions ran smoothly and feedback from the participants was great. PATEFL tried to check in with those who dropped out and encourage them to benefit from the valuable opportunity. There was ongoing communication throughout the course through emails and WhatsApp. At the end of the course, meetings with Hilderstone were organized for the closing of the project and to arrange the final ceremony.

From Hilderstone: Like PATEFL, we felt lucky to have been paired with such an enthusiastic ETA. We quickly established contact and had our first Zoom meeting within a week of finding out who our partner would be. Communication was very good between both parties and it was good to be able to work with an ETA who knew how they wanted to build on PRELIM 1. PATEFL informed us of cultural elements which would likely impact the course (Thursday evening is not the best time for a course in Palestine!) and together we were able to very quickly move through the initial course design stages and into recruitment. PATEFL did an exceptional job at recruiting participants who would be committed to the course. They also helped share links and information to the participants in the initial testing and grouping phase.

Once the course began, there were very few issues to deal with and so communication died down a little. It was expressed in our end-of-course meeting that a little more communication and more updates would have been helpful, this is certainly something we will take on board on future projects.

Towards the end of the course, we met to arrange the final stages and held an official closing ceremony on Wednesday 6th April.

Throughout this experience, Hilderstone has been very grateful for the input and shared knowledge from our ETA partners. PATEFL helped us shape a course which would benefit all; they taught us to be more open-minded in our approach to 'traditional' language courses and to how to adapt to Palestinian culture and daily life. We hope to maintain a bright working relationship with them in the future.

Working within the CoP

The CoP was a diverse and well-experienced group who always volunteered advice, suggestions and help when needed. There were plenty of ideas shared and the channels on Slack helped streamline discussions. With that diversity, there were times when some of the discussions, and subsequent suggestions, did not feel applicable to our project but nonetheless it was reassuring to work within such a supportive group. At times it was a struggle to keep up with all the discussions and to actively contribute while managing the project and working on a full-time schedule – a feeling also shared by others within the CoP. Nevertheless, there were many fruitful discussions, and plenty of ideas were shared which could be helpful in future projects.

Working with the CPs

The participants were motivated, sharp and energetic. Taking part in the course they faced a number of challenges, including regular power-cuts of up to eight hours per day, intermittent internet connections, as well as the daily pressures of their geo-political situation. A synchronous course with Palestine involved a two-hour time difference with the UK and lessons took place at 18.00 local Palestinian time.

The teaching context was diverse and the CPs were, at first, not so prepared for the communicative approach of a typical UK language school. However, a lot of satisfaction came from witnessing the CPs enjoy the space to speak and have the opportunity to express themselves and say things that go beyond the limits of their coursebooks and lessons. Through the common bond of teaching, the relationship between the CPs and the Hilderstone teachers grew, and the final lessons produced emotions on both sides.

Part of the course involved an online social programme that could involve students from the wider college. This culminated in a Q&A session with International Baccalaureate students from a local school - a session that the local school has registered as being a highlight of their term.

In terms of communicating with our participants, we felt it would have been good to prepare instruction videos ahead of time for them to fully understand what was required of them in the initial testing/setting up phase. As an institution we have learnt that effective communication can look different in different parts of the world and this project has shown us multiple ways to share and communicate information.

Designing/delivering the course

From the outset, it was established that there would be a separate group for school principals as the ETA did not want participants to be uncomfortable speaking English alongside their superiors. In order to group the participants, they were asked to complete a pre-arrival test on Google Forms and/or attend a speaking assessment on Zoom, both of which they were invited to by email.

In hindsight, we felt we could have communicated this better to participants. Corresponding by email seemed to cause problems with access to the Google Doc sign-up. A video posted to the Facebook page, with instructions and links available, would have been a simpler approach.

Once participants had been tested, we were able to arrange them into ten groups (with one for school management). This meant the five teachers for the project would deliver two sessions per week, but would be able to use the same material for each session. At the beginning, we had intended to rotate teachers, but by week four we decided it would be best to keep teachers with their initial groups.

Our partners PATEFL were very keen to make the most of the time available and opted for a 12-week course as they felt CPs would benefit from a longer programme. To that end, we settled on a topic-based approach. Each week, teachers would deliver their own content on the same topic. We found this to be the easiest way to avoid clashes of topic or material. Week 12 was reserved for participant presentations, as it was decided by PATEFL and Hilderstone College that this would be one of the core components to pass the course.

Hilderstone College has a strong connection with the local community. This was evidenced on this project by being able to have a Q&A session between the CPs and students from a local secondary school. This was part of our weekly social programme in which we held online café sessions for speaking practice and the occasional game of online Countdown.

Course outcomes

The responses from our end-of-course questionnaire were really positive: 95.5% of CP's rated their lessons as 'Very good – Good', 91.1% rated the course content and materials as 'Very good – Good', and 91.1% rated the social programme as 'Very good – Good'.

By the end of the course, the CPs had been given the opportunity to develop their fluency and confidence in speaking about everyday topics. One CP quoted: *'The lessons were fruitful and I have learnt different new topics, perspectives and concepts. In every session, we learnt new expressions and words and how to employ them appropriately in our speech and writing. Besides, the content is interesting as I never wanted a session to end.'*

By having a social programme for the group, there were more opportunities for free, unstructured dialogue and conversation. At times, this involved students from outside the PRELIM cohort, and on one occasion, a local school and their International Baccalaureate cohort. This meant that those who involved themselves in the programme gained insights into a range of different cultures. One CP noted in their feedback that *'meeting new people and engaging with them was wonderful'*.

As a by-product, CPs also now have access to materials that they may wish to adapt for their own teaching. However, the greatest outcome has been the sense of achievement gained from interacting with professional colleagues from the UK - sharing stories, opinions and experiences as equals. Our trainer Jo commented: *"I was struck by their optimism in the face of difficult circumstances and their enthusiasm for both the English language and for being the best teachers they could for their students."* She added: *"it truly was one of the highlights of my teaching career to date."*

Hilderstone's approach was to create a PRELIM 2 course that emphasised the individual and gave them the space to express themselves, and we feel a sense of pride in having achieved this. One student admitted that the thought of giving a presentation to a proficient or native English teacher at the beginning of the course terrified her. However, the same student not only completed the presentation positively, but said that the challenge of overcoming her fears was highly motivating. These individual stories of satisfaction and personal development mean a lot, not only to individual course participants but also to Hilderstone College staff. The overall sense from the feedback was that CPs ended the course feeling much more confident than when they began, with 95.6% reporting being 'Very satisfied' with their PRELIM 2 course.