

INNOVATIONS IN LSP / LAP COURSES IN POSTGRADUATE PROGRAMMES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PARDUBICE

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to present some innovative approaches to course design and methods in teaching Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) and Languages for Academic Purposes (LAP) in postgraduate programmes. The approaches are in line with priorities accentuated in the current foreign language teaching methodology, ranging from beliefs connected with the so-called postmethod concept to the necessity of rethinking English Language Teaching (ELT) goals and methods in connection with the role of English as a lingua franca. The core of the paper lies in examples illustrating innovative approaches to language learning and teaching carried out at the Language Centre of the University of Pardubice, Czech Republic. They include designing new courses, modules, or methods of testing in the area of LSP and LAP. These are based on the research and experience of the local staff as well as the expertise of their partners from other universities throughout the country and abroad.

1 Introduction

Innovation has recently become a buzzword in numerous contexts, including that of education. We believe that educational professionals, and foreign language teachers among them, have always done their best for this term to bear a concrete and specific meaning rather than serve as an expression purposefully but emptily used in materials related to curriculum design or in application headlines within “project-speak”. This paper aims to be an illustration of such efforts, concentrating on examples of changes in course content and methodology driven by genuine interest in the improvement of learners’ communicative competence in foreign languages and an increase in their motivation in harmony with the latest theoretical findings.

1.1 Course design in FLT

One of the key concepts in the methodology of Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) is course design or, in more general terms, curriculum design. The process of curriculum design can be viewed from several different perspectives depending on the authors’ theoretical grounds and personal beliefs. The traditional viewpoints include the one that is based on positivist approaches and perceives curriculum as a product of a process consisting of a linear series of steps: diagnosis of needs, formulation of objectives, selection of content, organization of content, selection of learning experiences, organization of learning experiences, determination of what to evaluate and of the ways and means of doing it [1]. This seems to be a prevailing approach that is largely recommended in instructive literature on curriculum design, also referred to as course or syllabus design. Contrastingly, it can be rather the process of development itself than the final result that emphasis is placed on in curriculum design. This approach relies on the interaction of learners, teachers and knowledge during the preparation of a programme or a course [2]. A parallel to this model is represented by the concept of curriculum design as a type of flow-chart, applicable specifically to FLT, stressing the non-linearity of the process and giving the course designer the freedom to start at any point of the process once it suits the teacher’s objectives and beliefs and it is in harmony with the specifics of the teaching context [3]. The most recent approaches to course design in FLT reflect what is often described as a phase of a post-communicative approach – in reaction to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) accentuated in the two preceding decades – with reference to innovative trends such as cooperative learning, CALL, CLIL, an emphasis on learner autonomy, the use of benefits of corpus linguistics for FLT, and respect to the role of English as a lingua franca. We agree with authors like Prabhu, for example, pointing out that “there is no one best method, and no one method that is best for a particular context...there is a factor more basic than the choice between methods,

INVESTICE DO ROZVOJE VZDĚLÁVÁNÍ

namely, teachers' subjective understanding of the teaching they do" (Prabhu in [4]). This viewpoint has been further developed by other authors who use the term postmethod stage when referring to the current approaches to language teaching methodology [5]. In harmony with these recent approaches, language teachers are encouraged to choose any traditional or modern methods once they consider them appropriate to their own teaching context, useful and efficient.

1.2 English as a lingua franca and ESP

Taking into consideration the role of English as a modern lingua franca as mentioned above, such appropriate pedagogy "is in keeping with the political motto, 'Think globally, act locally', which might be translated as 'global thinking, local teaching' [4]. There are many reasons for the need of English as the language that is called a lingua franca, an international language or a global language [6]. They are all related to the demands that life in the contemporary society makes on humans, and those are unparalleled from the point of view of the history of mankind. They are a consequence of the rapid development of modern technologies, primarily information and communication, the increasing pace of globalisation tendencies, and unprecedented migration and travel worldwide for work or other reasons. Using English in communicative situations resulting from these demands encompasses communication within and across different cultures and communities. Although particular issues of intercultural communication are outside the focus and scope of this paper, it is absolutely obvious that they form an integral part of ELT and ESP content and must be reflected in course design. In fact, we tend to agree with McKay [4] when she argues that "it is the use of English for specific purposes that has the greatest potential for developing truly international communities" even if the use of English as an international language does not equal ESP.

The role of English as a lingua franca has many more implications for ELT, including the concept of what is understood as communicative competence that, as Widdowson points out, needs to be reviewed [7]. Even though deeper theoretical considerations related to them would be desirable, they are not the purpose and aim of this paper, therefore the following sections will deal with examples of how we have tried to reflect them in our work as LSP practitioners at the Language Centre (LC) of the University of Pardubice (UPce).

2 Examples of innovative approaches in LSP/LAP practice

The approaches in the latest ELT methodology that are mentioned above give teachers lots of freedom and flexibility. On the other hand, they presuppose a high level of teacher autonomy and confidence. We believe that all of these can be supported by sharing expertise and experience with partners from abroad – teachers and students – making intercultural competence, among others, not only a required but also a very natural component of the course syllabus.

2.1 New course modules

The LC strives for innovations in LSP and LAP courses for postgraduate and PhD students. Among other things, new modules of Intercultural Communication, Academic Writing, Argumentative Writing and Scientific Writing have been prepared in collaboration with colleagues from other Czech universities, the University of Leipzig, Germany and the University of Oulu, Finland. One of the biggest advantages of these new modules – for the students as well as for the LC staff – is that they are taught by teachers outside UPce, who bring their own expertise and experience and are ready to share them. Apart from the generally known fact that collaboration with colleagues from other institutions is always enriching for all parties, an important benefit of these special courses is increased motivation among the students to participate in them namely due to the fact that they are given by different teachers from other universities. Moreover, in the case of the lecturers from abroad, there is an important intercultural aspect. The students can use the knowledge and skills acquired in these course modules mainly when working on their academic and scientific journal papers and conference presentations, but also when preparing for their examination in English that has a form of a simulated scientific conference and is explained below.



INVESTICE DO ROZVOJE VZDĚLÁVÁNÍ

2.2 Simulated academic events

The innovative ELT approaches that are presented below are focused primarily on the development of EAP skills and concern students in postgraduate and PhD programmes.

2.2.1 Student conferences

There are several types of conferences that the LC organizes for students. One of them is the presentation of technical and research projects of ESP students in postgraduate programmes. It is titled *Sharing Knowledge, Developing Skills* and it takes place annually at the end of the first semester of the student's Master studies. The speakers that are invited to take part in the conference are the authors of the presentations that have been voted the best in the previous rounds held in regular classes. The voting is done as peer assessment, during which fellow students give their colleagues points based on the previously determined criteria that include requirements on academic presentations, the skills for which are trained within a specific course module. The minimum required CEFR level of the course is B1. The students are asked to present the theme of their Bachelor thesis and plans for their Master projects. The simulated conference is aimed at giving the presenters an opportunity to practise public speaking in English. At the same time, all participants, including the audience, have a chance to discuss the technical and scientific issues of their study and research with colleagues from different programmes or similar courses at different faculties. Each presenter gets a certificate and a copy of the audio-visual recording of his/her presentation, which they can use for their personal portfolio, and a small conference bag. We have observed that participation in this simulated conference is an issue of high motivation and also prestige for the postgraduates compared to the motivation of the students in undergraduate programmes for whom a similar event is organized in the first or second year of their studies, focusing on business and professional presentations.

A specific example of student conferences are simulated scientific conferences organised for PhD students at individual faculties. In addition to the aims of the Master conference, the primary purpose of this conference is the assessment of the students' academic English skills as the conference is simultaneously the examination in English on the minimum B2 level. The students are required to pass it in their PhD study programme, i.e. participation in the conference is obligatory. Before the conference, the presenters submit written papers on the theme of their dissertation. At the conference they present the goal of their research, the methodology they are using or going to use, partial results and plans for future investigations. The presentation is followed by a discussion during which the presenters answer questions from members of the examination board as well as their supervisors and fellow students. The examination board consists of professors from their faculties and a teacher from the LC. The assessment is based on the criteria for EAP and academic presentations that are known to all the members of the board and the presenters. When passing this exam, the students are ready to present the results of their academic work and research in English to international audiences, both in writing and orally.

2.2.2 Poster Sessions

Instead of presenting results of their research in the form of a written paper or an oral presentation, postgraduate and PhD students in some courses are asked to prepare posters displaying their research projects. The official completion of their English course is then done in the form of a *Poster Session*, during which they explain their technical and academic projects to their colleagues, LC teachers and lecturers or professors from their own faculties. As for the knowledge and skills the students need to be able to participate in the *Poster Session*, these are acquired and trained during a module that is focused exclusively on the preparation of a scientific poster and incorporated in their regular ESP/EAP course, the minimum level of which is B1. The purpose of the *Poster Session* is to provide the students with an opportunity to use the specific knowledge and language skills they acquired in the progress of their English course in a simulated situation in an academic and scientific context.

The simulated events described above can serve as preparation for the target communicative situations in which many of the students are likely to find themselves in the future. Apart from increasing the students' motivation for studying technical, scientific and academic English, supporting interdisciplinary approach and promoting collaboration among students and teachers from different departments, faculties, universities or, potentially, even different countries, their organisation is in harmony with the course design principles



INVESTICE DO ROZVOJE VZDĚLÁVÁNÍ

corresponding to the latest trends in ESP methodology, namely the requirement on the learners' own participation in course design and innovations, cf. e.g. [4] or [7]. To promote internationalisation and the development of intercultural competence, possibilities of participation in these events of students and teachers from the partner universities in the Czech Republic and abroad are now being discussed.

3 Conclusion

The schemes, activities and events described in this paper illustrate the LC's strive for innovative approaches to education in the area of LSP in higher education, which includes LAP. They reflect the authors' beliefs in curriculum design as a process in which the learners should be actively involved, and in the postmethod concept as explained in the introductory section, respecting the FLT implications resulting from the role of English as a lingua franca. It needs to be pointed out that the innovations mentioned in the examples above would not be possible without financial support from resources outside UPce. Most of the events organized by the LC that are described in this paper as well as many other LC activities are financed from the ESF-funded project UNICOM – Innovative and Integrated Concept of Language Training towards Quality Assurance, Excellence and Internationalisation, which has been running since January 2012 and will be completed by the end of 2014.

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