

TEACHING COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN COLLABORATIVE ENVIRONMENTS

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Abstract. *The acquisition of soft skills, such as interpersonal relationships and collaborative communication in a foreign language, are key aspects which should be taken into consideration in any career guidance project. English for Specific Purposes within the Life Sciences (in this case, English for Agricultural Engineers, English for Horticultural Engineers, English for Biotechnology / Genetic Engineering and English for Food Engineering) requires consistent interdisciplinary partnership seeking knowledge transfer and the creation of professional networks across various socio-humanistic disciplines. Therefore, our transdisciplinary cooperation ranges on an institutional level within the ULS "King Mihai I" from Timisoara, including the contribution of members from the languages and teacher training/counselling department for the purpose of enhancing higher quality educational practices and learning attitudes. The major aim of our on-going interdisciplinary project promotes opportunities for students in natural science engineering and related areas, where communication remains an important issue. For this purpose, the specific aims which are targeted in the educational and English courses consist in the design of a set of didactic strategies informed by shared practices and the development of communicational learning materials. The course English for Life Sciences employs content-based resources from specialty disciplines, providing accessibility to recent research in English. Insights on teaching strategies and textbook development have been shared by colleagues from the teacher training department within our university. We also wish to bring a contribution to the mission put forth by our university, i.e. investing in human capital at all levels, enabling students to achieve applied entrepreneurial training for all areas of life and natural sciences (agriculture and farm management, horticulture, silviculture, genetic engineering, biology, food science, etc.), which would be conducive to a greater relevance of our educational programs for the community at large. Finally, from a joint perspective, the English courses, along with the pedagogical module provided for our undergraduates, highlight the quality of training students how to think and learn on a lifelong basis.*

Keywords: *communication, foreign languages, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), communication, interdisciplinary, collaborative learning.*

INTRODUCTION

The undergraduate students at our university may opt for courses in foreign languages and pedagogical training, both of which focus on learning how to learn and on optimizing communicative abilities. Researchers generally regard Language for Specific Purposes as a pedagogical concern, which entails different choice of teaching materials rather than special teaching methods (WHYTE & SARRÉ, 2017:2). Having this framework in view, our course of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) takes into consideration both didactics and pedagogy, while focusing on the pedagogical dimension, which is more practice-oriented, according to Whyte & Sarré (*ibid.*:3). From the point of view of didactics, teaching is knowledge-oriented, while being more practice-oriented from a pedagogical point of view, which also covers a wider scope – actors, content, curricula, objectives, and, essentially, the context or environment of learning.

Thus, pedagogy implies more practical and applied processes, whereas didactics lays out a more theorizing process, with the aim of analyzing how teaching is conducive to learning (*ibid.*:4). Beyond teaching formal content, we are committed to enabling students to manage their own learning by negotiating with others in a strategic manner, which requires acquisition of transversal skills, communicative learning strategies and soft-skills, turn-taking,

collaboration on project work and various “mind-changing” class activities (REȘCEANU & TILEA, 2020; REȘCEANU, 2020; TILEA, REȘCEANU, & REȘCEANU, 2021). These are aimed at systematically providing new ways of thinking about relevant topics which consistently focus on ecological and sustainable communication issues (*cf.* Bogușławska-Tafelska, 2013). Finally, understanding sustainability on a conceptual level across fields in the Life and natural sciences is considered an essential requirement (DRAGOESCU URLICA, 2019:753).

The collaborative dimension also applies to our collegial participatory community, as we are working together on synchronizing our curricula and methodologies to evolve more coherence on a general level and to lower degrees of entropy in learning and teaching approaches and styles. This paper examines ways in which teaching languages and social sciences both rely on approaches which represent principles, framings, and perspectives targeted at finding optimal solutions on a larger scale within the community.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The ecolinguistic approach remains the preferred method employed in our research and collaborative endeavours, which is devised as a contribution to the development of holistic models of communication (BOGUSŁAWSKA-TAFELSKA, 2016). One of our main shared objectives is enabling students to achieve notions related to sustainable / ecological communication and understand its real importance in the public and social life of any community and organization, within and beyond the academic settings.

For this purpose, we propose the following thematic subprojects which are coherently interrelated on our common agendas: developing language use, communicative and pedagogical competence, as well as extending intercultural exchange abilities. Courses at our university often include Erasmus students from all over the world, who are organically integrated in various common projects, helping us reinforce the multicultural dimension of communication. Learners from a wide range of cultural backgrounds are not only the recipients, but also participants in relevant, content-based instruction, according to the specificities of the students’ main fields of study (agriculture and farm management, horticulture, silviculture, genetic engineering, biology, biotechnology, food science, etc.) within the ULST “King Mihai I”.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. Integrative teaching and the objectives of ESP

The study raises several questions with regards to English for Specific Purposes and Content-based learning, which is correlated with the importance of communicating in a foreign language, in a context-specific and appropriate manner. Language for Specific Purposes essentially integrates content-based learning, given that educators tend to the specific needs of learners in their basic area of interest, which makes ESP “more cost-effective than General English” (JOHNS & PRICE-MACHADO, 2001:43-44). Among the issues we are taking into consideration is the importance of balancing content and language aspects, as well as teaching learning strategies in the process. Also, we aim at coordinating our efforts so as to integrate all relevant aspects: linguistic, cognitive, didactic, pedagogical, and affective factors in context. From the standpoint of ecological communication, our target groups of ESP students are encouraged to engage in communicative and interactive activities, which involve role taking, free exchange of opinions between participants, and finding partners in dynamic learning environments. The study raises questions of relevance for the area of ESP teaching and learning so as to harmonize content and language aspects and to establish a natural classroom ecology for language practice.

This discussion provides follow-up on our research and analysis, based on the experimental observation conducted during the first semester of the academic year 2018-2019, as shown in our previous research (DRAGOESCU URLICA, COROAMA DORNEANU & KAMBERI, 2018; KAMBERI & all., 2021). Our observations have focused on target groups of undergraduates enrolled in the education and teacher training programmes and foreign language courses from the Faculties of Agriculture, Horticulture, and Food Engineering Faculties, among others. We established training groups focusing on soft skills relevant to each of these target groups in particular and aimed to reproduce actual working communities within the learners' respective interests. These may be considered simulations of work culture, which students become familiar with, in addition to linguistic subject matter. While acquiring a foreign language, students also become aware of the "work culture" element of any field or company, which is essentially conveyed through communication and organizational culture (IOSIM & POPESCU, 2015:95).

The soft skills we constantly highlight cover especially the following areas: communication skills; creative and critical thinking; cognitive orientation and problem-solving skills; sociability, etiquette, and (inter)cultural awareness; interpersonal, teamwork and negotiation skills; metacognitive and self-management skills, etc. Some authors also add metalinguistic awareness, context understanding and "strategic competence in context" (GENESE, 2002:547; MOORE, 2006:125). In language class environments, we have seen that it is not enough to possess the "hard" skill of knowing the correct or incorrect usage of a linguistic unit if we lack the "soft" skills of knowing when and how to use specific language (Waggoner in Reale, 2013:73). In order to improve the effectiveness of our teaching styles, we have considered each of these aspects in an integrated manner and we are constantly adapting our strategies and didactic methods to build holistic learning environments (DRAGOESCU URLICA & STEFANOVIĆ, 2018; BOACA & SAVESCU, 2018). After adopting the strategies described previously, we noticed an increased interest in the collaborative type of training provided by our pilot modules and decreased levels of entropy in general communicative processes. Therefore, we seek to cohere pedagogical and language modules further so as to facilitate collaborative education and become effective as tools in building a more sustainable future community. As regards the constructivist approach to teaching we espoused earlier, we encourage self-directed learning. Despite being very much acclaimed, it has also received its share of criticism for lacking empirical effectiveness and it is considered improper to use instructional practices whose effectiveness is not supported empirically (MATTHEWS, 2003).

2. An application of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning)

Beyond strictly constructivist didactic practices and language systematics, we look at Content and Language Integrated Learning (known as CLIL) as a larger aim to be included in our practical courses. This educational approach introduced by Marsh (2012) takes the specificities of content-based learning to the next level as "content and language integrated instruction" in the following ways: ESP courses are "dual-focused" and language becomes a vehicle for learning genuine subject matter (MARSH & FRIGOLS MARTIN, 2011). In consequence, learning programmes and materials are designed to integrate relevant topics, connected to the students' interest, thus being learner-centered. Thus, the latter are enabled to contribute their "expertise" knowledge on the topic, which allows trainers to learn along with students. All these aspects considered, CLIL effects "potential synergies" towards more effective learning (COYLE, HOOD & MARSH, 2010:28).

Having this approach in view, the materials we employ include audio-visual introductions to content-based video presentations and documentary fragments, linguistic

elements from a wide range of authentic (preferably scientific) texts, group discussions and collaborative exercises meant to establish a common “language” and also to activate emotional intelligence. Additionally, we work on error correction in a non-threatening manner by using stimulating exercises like “Find the mistake!” or “Odd one out”, where students have to play detective and spot inconsistencies. Framing error correction activities in a low anxiety environment helps in teaching learners to avoid emotional barriers. This can be carried out by not correcting inconsistencies immediately, but rather at the end, with the whole group collaboratively correcting what adds up on the Error correction drawn during communicative activities. Thus, the authors of particular mistakes are not singled out and we avoid triggering a demoralizing or resistant attitude; instead, we focus on aiding each other and learning from our mistakes in a playful manner with the group. Additionally, we use concept maps, schematic flowcharts and tables which are available at hand to help students understand the organization behind language patterns and how communicational structures are formed.

The pilot classes we taught in the first semester of the academic year 2018-2019 were exposed to several critical aspects, including content-based learning, emotional, affective, and meta-cognitive strategies which guide students in the process of learning how to learn (BOGHIAN, 2016:55). The learning techniques we employed are designed from the perspective of education for sustainability and aimed at developing linguistic, communicative, and cognitive tools which can be employed in any other areas of interest. It has been conjectured that there are ostensibly substantial similarities between the nature of learning a foreign language and learning any other (un)related subjects. For instance, it has been proposed that metalinguistic awareness of how we may conduct and optimize language learning enables us to reflect on structural and functional aspects of the messages we wish to get across to others and to make cognizant choices about how to communicate information (MACGREGOR & PRICE, 1999:449). The research carried out by MacGregor & Price is also an example of transdisciplinary collaboration between academics and teachers of languages looking at how language proficiency may impact learning for other purposes, by focusing on structure analysis and functionality, which are intrinsic to ESP learning and teaching. For this reason, the experience of language learning is conducive to better strategic manipulation of communication tools and a variety of learning strategies adaptable to any other types of experiences in which the students may require them.

One of the most feasible methods which target experiential learning successfully involves case competition or problem-solving situations. Students organize themselves into working groups and they are given an environmental issue to address; they come up with a list of recommendations, e.g. finding ways of recycling to reduce waste in your home and city; listing organic farming methods to reduce soil and water contamination; etc.). We also established multicultural teams which included our Erasmus students from countries like Jordan, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Italy, Greece, etc.) and encouraged students to work in cross-national teams to find solutions to global ecological challenges, such as the carbon footprint of our ways of living and addictive consumer patterns, clean farming and healthy food. Students become more aware that these are universal problems on a planetary scale, we all function as interdependent individuals embedded within interdependent communities, and we learn to work out solutions by cooperating as extensively as possible. Hopefully, the English language and teacher training classes within the ULST University have managed to create micro-setting for this collaborative outlook on the world by means of the strategies we presented above.

CONCLUSIONS

Given According to our working experience and interdisciplinary re-elaboration of our teaching methodologies, the academic groups we have targeted would benefit from: an enlarged awareness about constructing a positive learning and working environment; a familiarization with basic humanistic fundamentals which are useful on a general community level; increased modalities of learning which are indicative of an optimum achievable quality in didactics and foreign language learning. By virtue of the didactic proposals advanced in this paper, we should be able to overcome some of the obstacles learners face in their learning styles and help conceptualize more effective learning strategies, according to the students' needs and highest potential. Our application of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) is an illustration of interdisciplinary convergence applied with this essential aim in mind. We are looking forward to exchanging views and feedback with colleagues who consider implementing similar educational approach from an ecolinguistic or holistic perspective.

On a personal level, we target the acquisition of an increased set of linguistic and communication competencies, especially transferable ones, which would be conducive to improved degrees of employability and larger career prospects. Also, we are keen on investing in human capital at all levels, helping students achieve applied entrepreneurial training for all areas of life sciences (farming, horticulture, legume culture, etc.) to contribute to the greater societal relevance of our university's educational programmes. Ultimately, our joint perspective of the educational and foreign language programmes provided for our undergraduates highlight education on a life-long basis, enabling students to learn how to learn. This discussion will hopefully instigate further debate on finding ways to apply our vision to shifting the students' core values as citizens of the macro-community of our planet, not merely simulating formal class practices.

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