

# FOSTERING STUDENTS' ENGLISH COMPETENCE VIA UNIVERSITY TEACHERS' COOPERATION

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## Abstract

The last twenty-five years were quite significant for the foreign language teaching at the Slovak universities. At some universities, the language teachers are allotted to subject-specific departments, and at some others the foreign language teaching is provided via outsourced language practitioners. To be more specific, at the Slovak University of Technology, Faculty of Materials Science and Technology (the largest STU faculty with approx. 3,000 students), only the English language has been taught for more than eight years, and the number of English language practitioners has been decreased to three people. In this contribution authors try to comment on possible solutions to the situation which might be seen in closer interdisciplinary cooperation with subject-specific departments, particularly in projects. The other possibility how to integrate more foreign language teaching into higher education is represented by CLIL method. The authors look at the issue from the point of view of their own teaching experience and also regarding the experience done within the international ERASMUS+ project titled Transnational exchange of good CLIL practice among European Educational Institutions. They would also like to focus on how CLIL can be implemented into teaching in Higher Education Institutions and present their research ideas leading to enhancing internationalization process of higher education and at the same time to fostering English competence of students and disciplinary teachers via teachers' cooperation.

## Keywords:

ESP teachers

Disciplinary teachers

Teachers' interdisciplinary cooperation

Students' English development

Internationalization

Higher Education Institutions

## 1 Introduction

The situation in the field of teaching the English of Specific Purposes is not very encouraging, and this relates not only to the situation in the Slovak Republic but to almost all East-European countries in general. Regarding the authors' long-term experience and discussion with other English practitioners, many universities have closed their departments or centres of languages, mainly as a result of "financial reasons". In those tertiary institutions where the English language courses have remained, the load of lessons has been often significantly decreased despite excellent results or active involvement of teachers in various project schemes. This is the view from the point of language teachers, and not only the English ones. If we look at the situation from the standpoint of students, those ones with an excellent language competence have almost no difficulties when looking for a job. On the contrary, regarding the technological or other specific expertise, these graduates are sometimes headhunted and find a perspective job even before they have accomplished their studies.

There is no doubt that the English language has become *lingua franca* of the international scientific communication, making thus the competence a prerequisite to succeed in the field of science and technology (Jordan, 1997). To acquire a good language competence, which is accomplished at many Slovak and Czech tertiary institutions by a diploma within a certification UNICert® system (founded in Germany in 1992), it is not

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sufficient for the students just to pass the language courses. The deeper insight into the studied subject matter is essential. The joined efforts of the English language practitioners and subject-specific teachers might be the clue and the way out of the difficult situation in the field of foreign language teaching which might be seen not only in Slovakia.

## 2 ESP teachers at Higher Education Institutions

It has been much spoken about the ability to communicate in a foreign language as one of the competences crucial for living in the European Union. Therefore, the language education at the Slovak universities is changing; "it is no more understood only as a mastery of one or two languages. Instead, the aim has become the development of such a language register, where all the language skills find their place and meaning" (Kováčiková, 2012, p. 70). The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, mentions two terms *multilingualism*, which "means the competence in more languages or coexistence of different languages in a particular society" (CEFR for Languages, 2004, p. 4-5).

### 2.1 ESP in Slovakia

When speaking about ESP in the Slovak Republic, we should start with the development of ESP in Czechoslovakia. At the time of its beginning it was happy to have a massive support of two institutions – British Council and United States Information Agency (USIA). British Council has been working in our country since 1946, however, due to political situation it was closed and in 1950 and reopened in 1992. The support of both institutions started in the early 90s, when BC tried to improve the awareness of English teachers and the content of English language teaching has shifted dramatically from workshops on classroom techniques and teaching ideas to developing courses and building a network of secondary and tertiary departments or centres. Thanks to this new network as well as due to the support of British Council also the idea of bringing ESP teachers via conferences was born. The first ESP Conference was organized as early as in 1994 in Banská Bystrica *Making ESP Work*, the next one took place in Košice in 1996 and was titled *ESP – Working together* and the last one *ESP Challenges!* was organised by the Department of Languages from the Slovak University of Technology, Faculty of Materials Science and Technology in Trnava.

### 2.2 ESP at Slovak University of Technology

The syllabus model of language teaching was successfully introduced and implemented in 2008/09 academic year as well as it was adjusted to the new situation – the Faculty Management decided that English would be the only foreign language taught at STU MTF, in other words students who studied other languages (German, French, Russian) at their secondary schools had to start studying new language for them – English, sometimes from the very beginning. Not only was the decision unfriendly, it also brought a lot of extra work both for students and teachers. "It was a very unpleasant situation as many of them were good experts in their subject-specific field, however, their obligatory outcomes in English were not as good as they might be if they were allowed to prepare them in German" (Chmelíková, 2016).

But in 2015/16 academic year within the new accreditation of Slovak universities the load of English language lessons was reduced again, now by a half. This meant the total number of English lessons (within two semesters) decreased to 52, and the Department of Languages was not entitled to apply for the UNICert® accreditation as the essential requirement for being granted was 120 of contact lessons in the target language.

## 3 Disciplinary teachers and teaching in English

The disciplinary teachers as well as the English practitioners are now facing a difficult situation what to do. First, it will be very useful if they really are able to cooperate and work out a plan of how to manage subject specific teaching in English without devolving the subject-specific courses or ruining and neglecting the acquired language skills.

The other possible solutions were to look for new approaches to the English language study and/or involve students, either under or postgraduates into real interdisciplinary projects, and/or enhance the English for Science and Technology course by gamification and integrate more technology in learning.

### 3.1 Disciplinary teachers and the situation at the Faculty of Materials Science and Technology

The English practitioners at STU MTF in Trnava decided to do their best to understand the subject matter related to the subject-specific departments and asked their colleagues to show them round their workplaces and explain the functions of related equipment, basic operations and technology procedure. "This visit was very useful for both sides and confirmed us that we can refer to real facts in teaching ESP" (Mironovová, 2015). So far, the common cooperation resulted in: university textbooks, assistance with translations – papers, website, study information, annual reports, and translations of more than 30 scientific monographs. "Discussing the subject-specific issues while writing or translating the textbooks or monographs the English practitioners get a deep insight into the specific terminology and content of the subject. These common discussions are then utilised in elaborating the common projects proposals (KEGA, APVV) or papers for related conferences" (Mironovová, 2015).

As it has been described the situation in students' development of English at universities is not ideal and at the same time the requirements in terms of delivering outcomes in English are high we face a great challenge how to sort it out to assist our students to be ready for their both scientific and professional career. The disciplinary teachers at our faculty (MTF STU) were asked if there are willing to start teaching their subjects in English and how they perceived their readiness for this form of teaching. The data collected within this institutional research project are being processed now. All disciplinary teachers at the faculty were addressed (n=209), however just 100 of them responded and became a part of the research. Almost 60% of teachers/respondents do not have any experience with teaching in English, however, 67,3% of the cohort are willing to teach their subjects in English.

This first draft research data allows us to think about potential solution how to foster students' English skills despite the fact that the situation is not ideal from ESP teachers' perspective.

### 3.2 Dual teaching

To enhance students to improve their English skills via being taught in English is quite a demanding task all teachers and university management face to particularly in those countries where studying programmes are mainly provided in mother tongues as almost both all students and all teachers use and speak that language. English is a foreign language for all of them even for ESP teachers. To establish English learning – teaching environment is not as natural as it is seen at universities in English speaking countries or its former colonies.

The problem can also occur in such countries where their mother tongue is worldwide accepted and they were able to attract a lot of foreign students willing to study in their official language. Good example is France and the case of setting EMI at University of Bordeaux. In 2014 there was a programme called *Défi International* established to provide language and pedagogical training for disciplinary teachers with the aim to support them teaching their subjects in English. The Programme was designed by ESP teachers from the *Département Langues at Cultures*. Those ESP teachers were also involved in CLIL courses. As Lasagabaster and Pagéze (2017) state "the programme was developed after a wide review of the literature on EMI and CLIL in university settings and a benchmarking visit to the University of Jyväskylä, Finland". 184 lectures of various subjects were trained and a self-evaluation questionnaires were used before and after training programme. "The findings here indicate that having access to a more clearly defined "technology" for EMI teaching, being able to share experience with colleagues from other discipline and receive continued support within the programme are a first step towards developing EMI classroom practice and more accessible community of practice with which teachers can identify."

Lasagabaster and Pagéze (2017).

This case shows us that active cooperation among both ESP – disciplinary teachers and disciplinary-disciplinary teachers might lead to a successful shift towards higher level of internationalization process in university environment.

Certainly, there are many factors we should take into account in terms of setting effective EMI/CLIL environment at universities, however, our data collected within the aforementioned institutional research project indicate that the essential things is to be aware of dual principle of teaching when CLIL/EMI is applied at universities where students use English as a foreign language and their English skills vary. Disciplinary teachers are not experts in foreign language didactics and they need support which should be done by ESP teachers. Mutual cooperation allows disciplinary teachers to develop their pedagogical, didactics skills and English skills, at the same time ESP teachers can improve their specific register in wide professional portfolio. Finally, this cooperation might provide environment for students' English development.

#### 4 CLIL as a gate to higher internationalization in tertiary sector

Current pressure on university management to shift universities into international institutions causes, in some cases, top-down decisions to implement EMI courses into study programmes or even more to open and provide a complete study programmes taught in English to attract more foreign students and teachers. The current report how the Bologna process is implemented in Higher education across Europe deals with internationalization process as well. As it stated, Slovakia is one of the countries that have not designed their national strategies of internationalising higher education yet. Several reasons are mentioned within the documents why the students' incoming mobility in some countries reaches cca 5% which is quite a low number. Credit portability and insufficient financial grant support are mentioned. There is no notice about insufficient number of courses provided in English. However, the reality illustrates that missing courses taught in English belong to the reasons why for example our faculty struggles with low number of incoming mobility students.

When we consider to attract foreign students to study in our universities, firstly we should consider the students who study the programmes in Slovak language. The process of setting natural international environment in higher education should be gradual and consistent at acceptable pace for domestic students and lead by well-prepared disciplinary teachers.

CLIL – content and language integrated learning can be the approach which meets the requirements of the gradual and consistent process of internationalization. This approach allows institutions to start teaching just chosen subjects in English partially which provides more time for disciplinary teachers to develop their skills in their new role and accelerate their confidence in teaching in English.

#### 5 Conclusion

Therefore, the solution to the difficult situation at the universities, which currently suffer from lowering the load of English lessons could be in close cooperation with subject-specific departments at the faculty or university in various interdisciplinary projects. "The other possibility could be looking for new approaches in teaching – e.g. CLIL" (Hurajová, 2015). This methodology could open new horizons for the tertiary education in the field of foreign language acquisition.

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