

The Challenging New Role for Language Teachers

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Abstract

In the contribution the author deals with the new role of the teachers for English for Specific Purposes at the tertiary educational institutions, who at present times have to become not only the teachers and practitioners of language courses, but also the facilitators of interdisciplinary cooperation among the subject-specific departments at the Faculty as well as the supporters of the internationalisation of their institution. The author puts forward an insight into the situation of teaching English for Specific Purposes in Slovakia and at the Slovak Technical University, Faculty of Materials Science and Technology in Trnava.

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1 Introduction

Nowadays, since the English language has become the *lingua franca* of the international academic and scientific communication, nobody doubts the importance of the language competence as a significantly influencing factor of the university graduates' employability. This fact also justifies that the language training cannot be separated from the disciplinary teaching.

We as the English language teachers are well aware of the situation, and in addition to the language competence, we strive to complement the language courses with additional soft skills training (presentation skills, cooperation within small teams, small project elaboration, etc.), so that the students can get the "whole package", which very useful particularly if the students take part in the mobility or in an international academic event.

As far as the internationalisation is concerned, it is not a new issue, and it is of high attention in all European countries.

"Although the internationalisation could have different meaning to different people, there is one thing they have in common: it should be the reason to reshape and change the Higher Educational Institutions' (HEI) approach to education to meet the challenges of this century. There is no doubt, that this internationalising of HEIs will be a process in which it will be particularly the ESP teachers who will play one of the main roles in integrating the international as well as intercultural dimensions of teaching and thus prepare their students for international or global job market." (Chmelíková, Hurajová, 2019, in press).

The author would like to put forward the new role of the language teachers that has currently appeared, especially for those ones teaching the English language, who have to become not only the language practitioners, but also the facilitators of the interdisciplinary cooperation, e.g. in projects – as it is at our educational institution – and what is more, if they are willing enough, they have also become the supporters of the internationalisation as the Slovak University of Technology (all its faculties) has set it as its primary goal for

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the nearest decade, i.e. prepare study programmes fully offered in the English language so that they are attractive for foreign students.

2 Short insight into ESP situation in Slovakia and at STU MTF in Trnava

Before 1989, the English for Specific Purposes was more or less General English at many Higher Educational Institutions (HEI) and more languages were taught. The main focus was laid on the Russian language; the other foreign languages were a minority. Considering the informal talks to some older fellow English teachers, who taught English in Trnava or Banská Bystrica, the teaching was more or less limited – also due to the lack of available materials in English – to vocabulary, e.g. reading an article followed by exercises, and in some cases it was limited even to a translation method (reading an article and translating it).

Therefore, the start in the early 90s was very promising, since many natives came to Slovakia and there was also a huge support from agencies like the British Council or USIS. At this time we have already known that ESP is more than the specific vocabulary, and have started looking for intensive trainings in the field, so that the teaching at Higher Educational Institutions could be changed. They voluntarily and successfully passed courses in improving e.g. syllabus design, methodology, materials preparation, test design, assessment, and presentations skills development, etc. during the academic year or even in summer courses. These frequent meetings of English practitioners set the foundation of their network and cooperation, which, unfortunately, is now almost gone. It is worth to mention that within the 90s three international ESP conferences were organised (in Košice, Banská Bystrica, and in Trnava) and several successful project carried out.

The insight into the history of ESP teaching in Slovakia means that it has a solid background and tradition to be utilised. Nevertheless, the current situation is not very promising as despite the Bologna Process conclusions and CEFR intentions, the situation at Slovak HEIs in the field of English for Specific Purposes is not very encouraging. Some universities have closed their language departments or decreased the load of English lessons.

It is a fact, that currently, the universities (the technical ones in particular) suffer from lower interest from the public and the number of students is decreasing despite the efforts of teachers implementing the latest ICT, or utilising the communicative approach in teaching, constant developing of integrated language skills and soft skills, etc. On the other hand, there is still a lack of experienced ESP teachers.

Regarding the situation at STU MTF, in 2015/16 academic year, within the new accreditation of Slovak universities, the load of English language lessons was reduced by a half., and the English practitioners had to decide how to get the best of the ESP concept developed in the early 90s and based on the thorough needs analysis and to think how to adjust to the situation, how to change the role of an ESP teacher and not lose the position in previous years.

3 The new roles challenge

The university ESP teachers are challenged to master the new roles, not only as language teachers, but as interdisciplinary cooperation facilitators and at their HEIs internationalisation supporters.

3.1 Language practitioners

A good teacher of English for Specific Purposes has built their competence on four pillars: solid English language competence, adequate knowledge of the related HEI disciplines, awareness of specific needs of stakeholders in question (university, students, government, job market requirements, etc.) as well as experience with cultural issues of the current international environment.

“ESP teachers are professionals and they should also regard their students as professionals, and thus learn from each other”. (Dashestani and Stojković, 2015, p. 436).

Currently, there are just three English practitioners at the STU MTF, Centre of Languages, Humanities and Academic Sports, all experienced in the field and proud of being the part of STU MTF team. Since the 90s, and this belongs to particularly best Centre’s achievements, its members were always able to clearly articulate their

ideas as well as communicate them effectively to the Faculty management in numerous and demanding discussions, sometimes struggling with their misconceptions or prejudices. This process involved a lot of compromises, even disappointments or failures, nevertheless, it proved to be the only right way how to build the status of the Centre (Department at the time).

"Inviting the Faculty representatives of all levels to the Department events, keeping them informed about our activities, and organising regular impressive displays of our students' output, proved to be the most powerful and persuasive argumentation. We will probably have to cope with the fact, that the Faculty management will struggle for existence for a certain time and some conceptual solutions aimed at LSP training may seem unfavourable to them. Therefore it will have to be the Department staff itself who will negotiate, persuade and defend some progressive changes in attitudes towards modern European education, to be perceived not only as a purely linguistic department, but a specific one, offering broader language, professional, cultural and social competence inevitable for our graduates to survive in global job market and promote their Alma Mater and native Country". (Mironovová, Miština, Waleková, 2004, p. 28).

To meet the requirements of the Faculty management, we built up a strategy in professional development. Hand in hand with research activities, the teachers are developing their professional knowledge while utilising their teacher training experience, participating in various educational, training and research events home and abroad, carrying out professional discussion with home and foreign partners, but mainly continuing the professional discussion within the workplace itself. The vision was always to form a learning workplace that facilitates learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself into knowledge and experience pool – a bank of flexible, versatile and mobile teachers able to cope with new challenges beyond the borders of the Department, Faculty, University and country. Needless to add that all the ESP practitioners at the Department have received the British Council teacher trainer training either in Slovakia or abroad, or both.

Regarding the research activities, the English language practitioners started with institutional projects, although their later projects exceeded this framework, and there was a starting point of a qualitatively new investigation in the needs analysis of the Faculty graduates and undergraduates – the key project, which became an outcome for syllabus development and, consequently, qualitative change in teaching, learning and research. Since then, several institutional, national or international were solved by the Department staff, and this trend is likely to continue.

Just to mention some of them that we are proud of:

1) *English for Professional Communication – Spotlight on Interaction* is one of the outcomes of successful co-operation with STU FEI Language Department – our long-year reliable partner in research, teacher training and teaching activities. In 2002 the Project was awarded *the European Label for Innovative Initiatives in Language Education* by the European Commission for Education and Culture and the Ministry of Education of Slovak Republic as the very first and only project in Slovakia. It is a complementary interactive material to the textbook *English for Professional Communication*. It has been tailored to the needs of professionals preparing for a business trip abroad, an international conference, or expect a visitor from abroad.

2) *Purdue – MTF Model of International Student Collaboration* – a mutual project of international student collaboration using English developed at the Electrical Engineering Technology Department of Purdue University (EET PU) in Kokomo, Indiana, USA, and the STU MTF Language Department was presented on many professional forums and raised a lot of interest thanks to its deep professional and cultural impact, and financial availability. The Project was financially supported first by the Purdue University grant and later by KEGA grant provided by the Slovak Ministry of Education.

From the more recent history of the Centre we can mention:

3) Bilateral project with Serbia SK-SRB-2013-0034 titled *Student on-line conferences between STU MTF (Slovakia) and FEE, University of Niš (Serbia) for the purposes of specific English language and other skills development* enhancing and developing the skills of STU MTF doctoral students.

Or 4) ERASMUS+ Project 2015-1-SK01-KA201-008937 titled as *Transnational exchange of good CLIL practice among European Educational Institutions*, involving five EU countries. Within this project an online useful platform for CLIL materials was designed.

The latest international project of the Centre is the current running project:

5) Within the Visegrad+ Scheme titled as *CLIL – Higher Education Teacher* bringing together ESP and disciplinary teachers (DT) from Slovakia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Albania, and Serbia from the Western Balkan countries and preparing materials for disciplinary teachers.

All the aforementioned information proves that the English teachers are real professionals not only teaching but involved in research as well.

To conclude this part, it is necessary to add that the national as well as the international projects investigated were of interdisciplinary character, so this information overlaps partially with the following part – the role of interdisciplinary cooperation facilitators, yet it proves the qualities and horizons of the language practitioners at the same time as well as it justifies that they are able to master the demanding challenge to manage their new roles.

3.2 Interdisciplinary cooperation facilitators

Interdisciplinarity or interdisciplinary cooperation or is not a new issue. Julie Thompson Klein has already commented on the term in her contribution *Interdisciplinarity: History, Theory and Practice*. She also dealt with the connection of Interdisciplinarity and Higher Education Institutions:

“Exogenous interdisciplinarity originates in the continuous momentum provided by “real” problems of the community, enriching and interrogating endogenous university interdisciplinarity, which is based on the production of new knowledge with the aim, more or less explicit, of realizing unity of science.” (Thompson Klein, 1990, p. 38).

The English language practitioners could be the pioneers in the interdisciplinary cooperation at their HEIs, e.g. in the form of submitting projects on disciplinary cooperation. As aforementioned in the previous part, we have few examples of this successful and fruitful interdisciplinary cooperation in several projects both on national and international basis.

The English teachers could enhance the cooperation with subject-specific colleagues also in the field of extracurricular activities, the author can provide another example: ESP teachers cooperate with disciplinary teachers within the annually organised Student Research Conference, where the students are challenged to elaborate a project within their study programme in the English language and consult it with the teacher in the related study field.

Another possibility how involve students, both under or postgraduates, is to include them into real interdisciplinary projects by providing them to execute partial project tasks. Or a good interdisciplinary cooperation can be represented by a common output, e. g. STU MTF English teachers translated more than 30 scientific monographs, where the language practitioners have got a deep insight into the specific terminology and content of the subject as the translation needed a close cooperation of the translator and the author. This interdisciplinary approach to the language courses has already brought its fruit since the students involved smoothly enter international scientific and professional forums and are able to deliver their ideas via trained presentations and cultural awareness.

3.3 Internationalisation supporters

The term *Internationalisation of Higher Education* is not a new term. It has been used for several decades to describe the processes within Higher Education Institutions regarding the international cooperation, research, etc. The more the world has become globalized, the stronger pressure has been put on the HEIs to be a part of this process. The scholars dealing with Internationalisation of Higher Education usually distinguish between Internationalisation at home and Internationalisation abroad. Internationalisation at home refers to the process done locally within the HEIs, when the cultural diversity of the university and aims to develop global perspectives, cross-cultural communication skills, foreign language skills (mainly English), and intercultural competencies among all members of the university are taken into account. On the other hand, Internationalisation abroad is about all forms of education that go beyond the limits of political / geographical borders, for example studying abroad, joint and double degree programs, branch campuses, international research collaboration, and online learning courses. Obviously, in some cases, these two may overlap.

The language teachers could facilitate in internationalisation at their HEIs as many universities are currently preparing or even already providing study programmes offered fully in the English language. Here the language teachers can help not only with the language (English) itself, but also with supportive didactic materials and practical courses, where the disciplinary teachers could consult everything they find necessary.

"As far as the internationalisation process of HEIs is concerned, says that many HEIs already have higher education internationalisation strategies in place. However, these are often centred mainly on student mobility; international academic cooperation is often still fragmented, based on the initiative of individual academics or research teams, and not necessarily linked to an institutional or national strategy." (COM 499, 2013, p.3).

Regarding the internationalisation process at the Faculty, the English teachers submitted an institutional project investigating the preparedness of teachers for teaching in English (titled as INTER MTF I). We can mention at least one example from the questionnaire (209 teachers addressed/100 responded): 67.3% of disciplinary teachers are willing to start teaching their subject in the English language. Obviously, ESP teachers offered the support and facilitation in the near future. Currently, the submitted INTER MTF II Project is running, in which we are investigating the other side – the preparedness of students to be taught in English.

4 Conclusion

The ability to understand/speak a foreign language is one of the vital competences necessary for living in EU countries. It is important not only for the mobility, it can also enhance the competitiveness of university graduates in the global labour market. The globalised world requires global citizens. The fast and inevitable changes within the industries, technologies, etc. make the HEIs consider new forms of education, i.e. enhance the internationalisation process of their HEIs.

To conclude, whether we admit it or not, 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 *multilingualism*, which

"means the competence in more languages or coexistence of different languages in a particular society" (CEFR for Languages, 2004, p. 4-5),

however, we know the situation at HEIs is serious, not only due to still not sufficient language competence of university graduates, but also to the lack of experienced language practitioners. At the same time the university ESP teachers are challenged to master the new roles, not only as language teachers, but as interdisciplinary cooperation facilitators and at their HEIs internationalisation supporters.

The mastering of these new roles for language teachers at Higher Educational Institutions is not easy, yet, they could be the ones, who could bridge the gaps in the interdisciplinary cooperation, which was neglected in few past years as well as they can help and support or even lead the internationalisation process of their educational institutions.

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