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ONLINE INTERDISCIPLINARY LEARNING ENGLISH MODULE COURSE IN COOPERATION WITH SUBJECT SPECIALISTS

Abstract

Nowadays there is a growing demand of foreign language teachers to find the ways how to contribute to a successful realization of study courses at tertiary level. Studying theoretical literature and taking into account her experience in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to the students in different professional bachelor study programmes for nine years the author of the paper has realized that the study process is closely linked with the specific subjects and knowledge. That means that it takes place in the context of other disciplines. In order to take an initiative in introducing interdisciplinary activities in the classroom the author proposes to create a supplementary online English module course for tourism students in close cooperation with subject specialists and experts at small and medium tourism enterprises. Based on multidisciplinary approach, being directly addressed to students' and employers' needs and providing tools for self-study activities the created course will help to develop students' high level language competence along with thinking skills as well as skills like problem-solving, ability to evaluate the situation and make decision, responsibility, thus ensuring the growth of professional competence and increasing competitiveness.

Atslēgas vārdi: multidisciplināra pieeja, starpdisciplināra darbība, elektroniska mācīšanās, informācijas komunikāciju tehnoloģijas

Introduction

Due to the tense economic situation, growing impact of migration and mobility across the European Union (EU) there is an urgent need for professionals with operational level of English to be recruited in the companies. The existing situation reveals the fact that graduates' ability very often is not to successfully use the English language for professional purposes. For this reason they become less compatible in the European labour market.

As the economy in the EU member states has suffered recession, the governments are making steps to attract foreign investments and they are aiming at rationalization resources and cost-effectiveness in education sector as well. Public service institutions, businesses and education sectors are interested in providing and obtaining the language competence at the lowest possible costs. The number of face-to-face teaching hours is under threat of reduction, students work part-time and therefore there is a need for online or internet-based materials to be developed. Under those circumstances language teachers are interested in participating in innovative, creative and knowledge promoting activities.

Nowadays businesses and business people communicate beyond national or regional borders, they need to possess sufficient skills to succeed in their business activities. Independent or blended learning is the most appropriate way of learning that can be incorporated into busy agendas of learners. The blended course can provide an opportunity for

more efficient, flexible and more accessible language learning both for in-service and pre-experienced learners.

In order to ensure continuing flexibility and to add new perspectives to language learning the author proposes to design an online English module course in collaboration with language trainers and professionals at small and medium businesses, and with a strong focus on multidisciplinary approach to language learning. It will encourage all involved to develop links among the language and specific fields in ways that motivate both the teachers and the learners. It will involve the direct working together and will prepare students for more work-related and learning-to-learn English course. Based on multidisciplinary approach, being directly addressed to the students' and employers' needs and providing tools for self-study activities the course will contribute to learners' long- term employability.

The goal of the present paper is to analyze multidisciplinary as a key distinguishing feature of ESP and determine how the ESP practitioner can best serve for approaching subject-specific work.

Theoretical background

Nowadays there exist a widespread view that “ the scholarship underlying language teaching is *multidisciplinary* and it stands in marked contrast to earlier conceptions in which language teaching was founded entirely on the study of belles lettres or on linguistics alone” (Stern, 1983, p. 47). As stressed by H. G. Widdowson - applied linguistics is of its nature *interdisciplinary*. He claims that the more interdisciplinary applied linguistics is, the more capable it becomes of dealing with problems in the real world. For him *interdisciplinarity* sounds like something that is intellectually liberating, but also has its reductive side. Thus, “it is not simply a matter of coupling two disciplines together, with each retaining its own identity and integrity, but of one discipline assuming a dominant role and drawing from the other whatever can be conveniently accommodated within its scheme of things” (Widdowson, 2005, p. 18).

ESP has been divided into two main areas: English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). It is sub-divided according to the disciplines which it is concerned. ESP consists of English language teaching which is related in content to particular disciplines. A distinctive feature of EAP work is “ the increasing collaboration which takes place with subject specialists” (Flowerdew, Peacock, 2001, p. 11). In their definition T. Dudley-Evans and M. J. St. John stress that ESP teaching should reflect the underlying concepts and activities of the broad discipline. In other words it should always

reflect the methodology of the disciplines, and professions it serves (Dudley-Evans, St. John, 1998, p. 2).

In order to find out a framework for further improving ESP, T. Dudley-Evans and M. J. St. John analyse its *multidisciplinarity*. They consider that the openness to the insights of other disciplines is a key distinguishing feature of ESP. They believe that this openness of ESP to activities and research in other disciplines should ensure continuing flexibility and will add new perspectives to enrich its practises (Dudley-Evans, St. John, 1998, p.230). Referring to the multidisciplinarity of ESP they distinguish its two aspects: *need and willingness to engage with other disciplines through teaching*, and the need and willingness to draw on the insights of researchers in other disciplines. They argue for the importance of *subject-specific work* which is often *best approached through collaboration with subject specialists*.

T. Hutchinson and A. Waters stress that ESP teachers are required a positive attitude towards the ESP content and a knowledge of the fundamental principles of the subject area. They emphasize that *the ESP practitioner frequently has to work in close cooperation with subject specialists*. They also regard that most important of all is that such cooperation should be a two-way process (Hutchinson, Waters, 1987, p. 164).

Interdisciplinary learning has become a widely accepted tool for curriculum design. It is one of many ways to learn over the course of a curriculum. Moreover, this method can help bring students to a new awareness of the meaningful connections that exist among the disciplines. The notion *interdisciplinary* is interpreted as a “knowledge view and curriculum approach that consciously applies methodology and language from more than one discipline to examine a central theme, issue, problem, or work” (Online1).

Most curricula which are in the discipline fields have a three-part structure, consisting on equal measures of content, skills and assessments. A curricula that is interdisciplinary presents content, skills and thinking processes, and assessments through exploring connections among the disciplines. For an interdisciplinary unit to be effective, it must be designed properly. Introducing an interdisciplinary element into curriculum encourages all involved to develop meaningful links among the fields in ways that goes far beyond the evaluation and memorization of information related to the topic. As a design element, it can lead the learners toward more powerful thinking and the ability to make comparisons that bridge disciplines, and encourage the application of knowledge (Online1).

To sum up, the need and willingness to engage with other disciplines through teaching can be distinguished as one of the aspects of ESP multidisciplinarity and the ESP practitioner best approaches subject-specific work through collaboration with subject specialists. This paper describes an example of introducing interdisciplinary activities in the

classroom by proposing to design an online English module course for students in cooperation with subject specialists and experts at enterprises.

Methods

Acknowledging the importance of collaboration with subject specialists for approaching subject-specific work, the author of the paper has developed the idea of creating a supplementary online English module course for tourism students in cooperation with subject specialists and experts at enterprises, and with a strong focus on multidisciplinary approach to language learning. The course will be created on the bases of the EU's education and training programme http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/llp/funding/2010/call_ecet_2010_en.php which is aimed at promoting cooperation between education and enterprises. It focuses on "accelerated knowledge transfer between higher education institutions and enterprises, and vice versa to enhance the employability and career prospects of graduates" (Online2). It also implies that the development of entrepreneurial, management and innovation skills should become an integral part of graduate education.

The author has set out the following aims and objectives:

- reinforce the link between language studies and employment needs
- develop provisions for university, college students (part-time, correspondence), adult learners for self-study
- promote a multidisciplinary approach to language studies along with the new methods of teaching connected with the use of new technologies and blended learning
- create an interdisciplinary online module course for the development of English along with creative thinking as well as entrepreneurial, management skills.

Discussion

The online course will be created in collaboration with language educators, students and tourism specialists to identify their current needs and those best practices which to incorporate into the module course design. Taking into account the results of the needs analysis will ensure the creation of a practically applicable English course for students and adult learners. Newly developed online English modules will provide learners with supplementary self-study materials developing their learning to learn. Introducing a multidisciplinary approach into language acquisition along with Information Communication Technologies (ICT) will further learning thinking skills, application of knowledge and digital competences. Including interdisciplinary elements into online English module course will encourage learners' creativity as well as, the covered tourism-related topics on marketing, management and service will foster their entrepreneurial and management skills.

The online English module course will be developed for university and college students as well as working professionals and adult learners in close cooperation with experts at small and medium tourism enterprises. The underlying methodology of this course will be multidisciplinary approach to language learning and it will include interdisciplinary elements which present content, skills and thinking processes through connections among disciplines. The materials will be available for e-learning via specially created online modules and for work in the classroom. The course is meant for learners with current level of English-B2 and above. It will be designed as 6 month 6 module on-line course, featuring:

- tourism-related units developing the four major language skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing) and use of language (grammar and vocabulary), links to related websites;

- a glossary of terminology.

Before being offered to a wider audience, the online modules will be piloted with learners in close collaboration with experts in pedagogy and language learning. The feedback received will contribute to the improvement and modification of the course.

The finalized version of the online module course will include materials for self-study, for the classroom use and a guidebook of the course methodology for teachers. Teachers will also have a possibility to monitor their students' work and provide feedback online.

The curriculum of the course will be based on the results of the needs analysis carried out at the School of Business Administration Turība (BAT) and the monograph by I. Lūka (Lūka, 2008). To realize the current situation and to conclude experts' opinions on it focus groups for fast and rich diagnosis of the needs will be organized at BAT. The target group for online course piloting will be composed from students with B2 and higher language competence level. During the pilot course trainees will be provided access to online materials and special time will be provided for contacting with their language tutor and group-mates via internet. A feedback will be filled in.

The active involvement of small and medium tourism enterprises will be ensured by involving professionals in developing a syllabus for the online English course. They will take part in drawing up evaluation reports with suggestions for further improvement as well as in the process of testing the improved and the final version of the course. They will also consult the language teachers and supervise the creation of the course to be practically applicable, corresponding to the current needs of the labour market.

Conclusions

The proposed online interdisciplinary learning English module course will help to raise students' language awareness, develop their learning-to-learn, foster creativity and their personal development. Language teachers will become better, more informed and aware of how companies operate and what is going on in business. The methodology of this course will lead towards higher effectiveness and stimulation of thinking in the context of interdisciplinary language learning. The course proposes the methodology that with language skills pays special attention to imagination and creative abilities as well as to thinking skills, critical thinking, problem solving skills, ability to evaluate the situation and make decision, thus promoting the development of professional competence and the growth of entrepreneurial spirit. Attaining a high level of English competence and professional competence will enhance competitiveness and employability. Upgrading their competencies in the language of international business communication relevant to the workplace along with other skills and attitudes essential for succeeding in today's rapidly changing world will help the graduates to integrate in enterprises. Ensuring learners' autonomy the ICT-based course opens the way for the development of competencies that form the lifelong learning. The English course offers solutions for new methods of teaching adults, especially connected with multidisciplinary approach to language learning and the use of new technologies.

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