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### **Improving ESP Teaching through Collaboration: The Situation in Hungary**

#### **Abstract**

Several barriers exist to professional ESP teacher development, especially when seen from a background of the need to realign the teacher-teacher and teacher-student relationships presently evident in Hungarian higher education. This need is truly endemic across all disciplines in Hungarian higher education, and ESP teaching is no exception. The authors further argue that inaction would preclude the ability of Hungarian ESP to ready itself for the approaching challenges of CLIL and TTFL course expansion in future curricula.

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century is one in which higher education institutions must provide 21<sup>st</sup> Century-ready teachers for 21<sup>st</sup> Century students. As contrite as this statement may at first seem, this is indeed the one message that Hungarian higher education largely appears to not be getting. While many colleagues in our EU neighboring countries have moved into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century by developing and adopting new ideas on professional approaches, methods, materials and necessities, we see our disciplines being pushed back into the conditions seen in the 1980s. We need to fight back in a way that we can control, and that is in adjusting how we work together within our departments and also with our students. It is additionally our argument that change within our own teaching must come before we venture into CLIL and TTFL programs.

Ever since Savignon (1972) coined the term *communicative competence* and encouraged colleagues to move away from stressing rote learning and to focus on teaching learners to interact through L2 with each other, there have been numerous movements within ESL to devise the ideal classroom for *communicative language teaching* (CLT). Van Ek (1975) gave language teaching a roadmap for development which emphasized learner needs, and this was in turn specified by a perceived need for empowerment of the individual learner, by focusing teaching on *learner choice*. (Candlin 1978) What Savignon had proposed as the necessity to develop *coping strategies towards communicative competence* in the learner, came to be augmented by Canale and Swain (1980) to become a need to teach *strategic competence*, through which the learner might achieve a level of L2 knowledge, which would prepare him/her for active, proper and successful interaction with native speakers of L2, by further providing the learner with *grammatical competence*, *sociolinguistic competence* and finally *discourse competence*. (This final pillar is found in Canale 1983) Thus, we have enjoyed four distinct, yet dynamically interacting, pillars upon which to build sensible and right L2 programs for our students for some 30 years now.

Elsewhere, Wiwczaroski has published extensively on the trends, backwards and forwards, in ESL teaching in Hungary, and shared his opinions and experiences along the way. (See references section at end of article) The thrust of these comments over the past

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several years has been that, in developing our own programs for ESL and ESP courses, we must not become insular in mindset. In other words, we must attempt to keep an eye extended over the horizon as we would view it, because like it or not, all L2 teaching is simultaneously educational and political in nature. Our work in L2 teaching cannot be removed from the larger context of L2 policy, and we have, unfortunately, little opportunity to affect the shape such policies take. Unlike practically every other discipline on offer at colleges and universities, ours almost alone is shaped and misshaped by outsiders, who have little idea about or interest in our discipline and its needs, much less of the actual needs of our students. Thus, in selecting what we teach and how we teach it, in many cases, we are governed by the demands of non-L2 teacher administrators and bureaucrats. (Compare Wiwczarowski 2006)

ESP is presently under attack. Across the nation, from faculty to faculty, administration is dismantling ESP and thereby causing unprecedented damage to the abilities of our graduates to obtain proper and just L2 training towards successful employment. While the business community is clamoring for better ESP skilled graduates, our higher educational institutions are retreating into doing what is frankly the job of the elementary and secondary schools: to simply provide students with L2 classes towards the students obtaining an *intermediate level state accredited language certificate*. Comparing this motivation to what students are offered as learning goals across Europe (Compare Nikula 2005), one would think our universities had decided to become kindergartens. While we fully comprehend the predicament universities find themselves in - our students must obtain these certificates to receive diplomas - we would hope that our administrators would begin to put as much leverage on policy makers for elementary and secondary education to begin to meet their responsibilities in teaching and assuring the necessary L2 competency levels reflective of European schools (Laitinen 2001), as they do on us to become miracle workers. Instead of allowing the schools to continue to pass unprepared students on to universities, for many of whom it is simply too late to help, we need to demand that when students arrive to university with e.g., an *érettségi* in English, that their real knowledge reflect that awarded competency level.

We propose to discuss below a different route for us as L2 teachers in higher education, which should at least be possible for those of us left in ESP teaching. First, we wish to discuss what we see as underlying problems with teaching/learning, before outlining my specific proposals for change.

The role played by teachers has always undergone constant change. The teacher has become not merely a resource for knowledge, but minimally a kind of living, interactive unit for data retrieval, technology and education linkage and mentoring. The learner must interact with the teacher to some degree, in order to find his/her way forward in tackling a body of knowledge. Indeed, becoming a learner of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century involves the student assuming and meeting a variety of responsibilities. These are grounded in active preparation and participation, but unlike the 20<sup>th</sup> Century student, that of today must serve as a collaborator, i.e. a partner in their own learning. This move began in the

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scientific disciplines in Canada, some 20 years ago, with the introduction of problem-based learning courses. (Sweller 1988) As language teaching today is based on a notion of language as communication, students are meant to learn how to use language to make meaning in transmitting a message to a target communicative partner, either orally or in writing. Problem-based and inquiry-based courses, also known as minimal guidance courses, demand e.g. of students that they gather the knowledge necessary for fulfilling set communicative tasks in a target language, in classroom presentations. The idea in ESP courses taught using such *foci* is that students will confront 'real life' tasks, and thereby be better prepared for the job market. Towards this end, teachers may provide a range of written materials to set a context within which the students should work, but it is generally up to the student how to develop their work from there. In other words, *the student may well end up being left to develop linguistically on their own.*

Unfortunately, today's Hungarian students enter university with a severe lack of intellectual curiosity. What we mean by this is, the average student today does not use the library, does not read and does not show interest in subjects which he/she perceives as existing outside their 'worlds'. This situation means that the information the students should be gathering, filtering, interpreting and using is often either simply copied from the Internet or an overgeneralization of a citation from Wikipedia. In either case, when left to their own devices, any intellectual interrogation is lacking in most student work.

There are other dangers within such an approach, and published data from the field of educational psychology shows how the root of all evils related to low student performance and knowledge retention is grounded in a fundamental misconception in modern education of how learning works in the human brain. (Kirschner 1992) In classrooms and textbooks, students are confronted with interesting and entertaining tasks which force them to load their working memories. Working memory may be defined as the cognitive structure in which conscious processing occurs in the brain. In other words, individuals are only aware of the information currently being processed, and this information, unless it is processed further, will escape processing into the architecture of what is called long-term memory within 30 seconds. (Peterson & Peterson 1959) More telling for educators should be the finding that the capacity for loading one's working memory is extremely limited. We simply cannot process more than a few items at a time in our temporary memories, which is why we often have to ask for information to be repeated to us, if more than a small string of data are orally transmitted to us, even if the information was only just provided. Of the number of items the human brain receives for processing into long-term memory, perhaps only a single item will ever be processed for long-term storage. The interplay between both kinds of memory is crucial to learning, as it is the retrieval from long-term memory *back into* working memory which allows humans to actually use what they have learned. (Compare Sweller 1988) As the ability of long-term memory to provide the working memory to a mentally and physiologically healthy individual with information is practically limitless, as L2 educators, we need to ensure that what we are teaching our students gets stored into long-term memory. After all, the goal of education is to get students to store information into their long-term

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memories for use long after they have graduated. In L2, this necessity is even more crucial, as students must also learn strategies for maintaining their L2 knowledge and skills throughout their lifetimes. If we do not ensure proper learning and integration into long-term memory, the knowledge we are attempting to transfer to our students in our classrooms and homework assignments will be forgotten before the student leaves the classroom on the same day they are exposed to the new knowledge and seconds after completing their homework assignments.

This brings us to our suggestions for bringing our teaching – and therefore our students – into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:

1. Our students live in a world which is dominated by stimuli that almost exclusively acts on their working memories. Considering the fact that they live in a multimedia world, filled with fleeting images and sound bites, we need to develop an approach based on strong repetition of bits of knowledge, which may through reinforcement and interlinking of course contents, lead to storage of L2 knowledge in their long-term memories. This means teachers must begin to work in close cooperation in designing ESP courses, so that the material in e.g. a translation class is reworked from a different, yet reemphasizing angle, in an accompanying academic writing course. Without the repetition, there will be no further cognitive processing, and therefore no true learning. The questions we as ESP departments need to answer are: are we designing and teaching courses that are presented to our students with the student in mind, or are we simply screening the students upon enrollment and then teaching what we want? Are we really setting obtainable goals, the results of which are measurable and would show student improvement in L2 and ESP? (See and compare Hellekjaer and Westergaard 2003)
2. Writing, writing, writing. Students need to be approached in a new form of mentoring, to understand that written grammatical and essay assignments are in their interests. Without putting new English vocabulary and grammar forms to paper from the student's own head, any new knowledge from a textbook or lesson will be quickly lost. University studies are supposed to be geared, after all, to mastery of subject material. Writing is one integral step towards that goal. To avoid giving such assignment is to undercut the efficacy of a course and keeps the student on the road of only using working memory and losing new knowledge 30 seconds after exposure to it. (See Hellekjaer & Wilkinson 2003)
3. Stop plagiarism from the Internet. Do not simply give the student who appears in class with obviously plagiarized material a failing grade. This does not solve the problem. Enforce academic ethics through repetition of the assignment, and explain to the student the dangers of such activity in their later careers. But make the student do the assignment themselves.
4. Oral presentations must be reinforced by written reports which expand on the orally communicated material and demonstrate a command of the expected vocabulary and the requisite grammar to communicate the material content in a

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- proper manner. A clear thesis, the paper's structure, tone, style, use of transitional elements, spelling and of course a polished proofreading must be demanded. Students who lack these basic skills require a rigorous introduction to writing skills and must receive it. (See Wiwczaroski 2003a)
5. Conference meetings about students enrolled in e.g. communication and translation specialization programs. Share your thoughts and concerns about how a student is developing (or not) with colleagues in regular meetings with other colleagues who teach the same student. Develop a plan for improving all these students, and ensure follow-up.
  6. Conference with the students themselves; on a one-on-one basis. As Löscher and Schulze conclude, "in foreign language classroom discourse, the topical and the didactic aspects clearly dominate, the interpersonal aspect, however, is excluded to a large extent." (1988: 193) If this is true of your courses, then steps should be taken to rectify this problem. Students have a right be informed and teachers have a responsibility to inform students about exactly what is expected from them, that they might excel in a course. This however equally demands that the student be given a clear agenda for what they must do to be able to achieve learning goals, as well as guidance when they are falling short. Our experience tells us that, in most cases, whenever a student recognizes that a teacher is committed to their development and success, then that student is motivated more. There are no 'magic bullets' which would work to motivate all students, but every individual success is worth the extra effort. In short, what is needed is: More teacher availability to students, more mentoring and more dialogue.
  7. Conference meetings about teaching. Too often, teachers do not know their course assignments until the last minute before the semester begins. They often 'take over' assignments from a colleague, and are expected to continue teaching the next segment of a multi-semester course of study. Continuity and, as discussed previously, reinforcement are however keys to learning. Is your department ensuring an uninterrupted flow of learning for its students? When a class is 'handed-over' to a new teacher, is the 'hand-off' accompanied by a teacher-teacher meeting to discuss the class, its syllabus, materials and the students themselves and where they are and what they need to develop? If not, this needs to be addressed also. Too many students arrive at university L2 courses inadequately prepared. At faculties such as mine, which specialize in agriculture, it is too often the case that students come from rural area schools in which they have met a new English teacher every year of their studies, with a new course book and no continuity in their L2 education. This situation must be halted at university, and continuity and reinforcement of learning content and objectives assured. This is fundamental.

In light of the move in some faculties towards pushing for the creation of new CLIL and TTFL courses, it would be advisable to truly work for the integration of these seven points into the way our departments and staffs conduct their daily activities. Indeed, the management of foreign students coming to study in our universities would require no less

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from us: the true face of 21<sup>st</sup> Century teaching and learning is one of *learning management*, and just like companies, we have products and require the right relationship with our customers, the students, in order to provide our product with the best possible guarantee. Our own efforts will serve as our marketing mix, and the success of our students in meeting the goals we set for them – and especially in their being able to utilize the skills and competencies we wish them to learn to employ - will be our best advertisement. This change, unlike so much other seen today, is truly up to us.

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