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International Classrooms, Disciplinary Cultures and Communication Conventions: a Report on a Workshop for Content and Language Teachers

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International Classrooms, Disciplinary Cultures and Communication Conventions: a Report on a Workshop for Content and Language Teachers

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Introduction: *Internationalization of higher education often implies that the language of teaching changes in the institution because of the multilingual and multicultural student group. If this language is a second or foreign language for the students, teachers, and institution, its adoption also implies changes in learning skills, pedagogical approaches, and institutional policies and practices. While the ultimate aim of the degree programme remains the same in terms of field-specific expertise, there is often an explicit or implicit aim for the graduates to become competent users of the new language at the professional level required and in this way improve their qualifications and employability for the global labour market. How these two aims could be achieved was the topic of the workshop run for content and language teachers during the ASIGMA conference 2011 held at Transilvania University Braşov on 1–3 September, 2011. The theme of the conference was Internationalizing Higher Education: Strategies, Methods and Practices for Quality Assurance.*

Keywords: *multilingual and multicultural classroom, communication, teaching practices*

Surveys were done in the workshop in small groups on how various disciplines (e.g. science and engineering vs. business and humanities) differ in the kind of language and communication used in both teaching and learning the discipline, and what their impact is on teacher and learner competences. The purpose was to share expertise, raise awareness, and provide hands-on tools for working towards a quality degree programme both in its content and language learning outcomes, as one indicator of successful institutional internationalization.

In the following, some background is first given on the rationale of considering the dimensions and role of disciplinary cultures in the context of an international master's programme and a multilingual and multicultural class, starting with the general impacts of such a situation on teaching and learning. The outcomes of the workshop are then presented, and finally, some issues are suggested for further reflection in relation to how various kinds of content teaching styles and academic practices also promote disciplinary language and professional discourse learning in an international programme.

1. Teaching in a Multilingual and Multicultural Classroom

When a content teacher (i.e. discipline expert) faces a multilingual and multicultural group of students, it is clear that this group will be more heterogeneous than a group of domestic students in terms of previous knowledge, skills, and educational experience. The new students might be learning through a language that they do not fully master at the conceptual academic level required by the discipline. Perhaps the teacher also needs to change his/her language of instruction, as well as consider using new pedagogical approaches. More time might be needed for students to be able to follow the instruction, which means that not all content can be covered during the course but some refocusing will be needed. There are probably also intercultural issues that come to play a role in the teaching situation. The new group of students might not be familiar with the academic practices and with the often tacit and unwritten rules of the new academic context. All these issues need somehow be

managed by the content teachers of international Master's programmes. Thus, the new content teacher profile that emerges might be one where the teacher needs to be an expert in the subject matter in two languages, confident in the use of the language of instruction for communicative and educational purposes, able to assess what his/her discipline and teaching approach require from students in terms of their language proficiency, as well as able to identify and manage intercultural differences that occur during the teaching and learning process.

There is also a new profile for language teachers that emerges as a consequence of international programmes. As experts in language and language learning and teaching, their new profile now requires viewing language proficiency from the viewpoint of content learning, in other words, finding a balance between communication effectiveness and language accuracy, and providing appropriate support to students and learning. Perhaps their consultancy is also needed by the content teacher in cases where it is difficult to differentiate between fluent writing with minimum content and not so accurate writing with profound understanding of the content. It is easy to see that in these cases new criteria for assessment would be required and that, ideally, close co-operation between language and content teachers would act as valuable peer support for both, as well as probably produce a better and fairer solution for students.

In addition, and most importantly, both content and language teachers need to understand the role of language, communication, and interaction in knowledge construction and learning. This is because each language has its own way of structuring knowledge, and becoming an academic expert in any field requires that there is adequate access to the kind of language and discourse that is typical of the field and a prerequisite for joining its academic community as a full member (see eg. Cohen & Allison 2001). In other words, the students need to have a certain threshold level proficiency in the language of instruction – according to research, usually B2 in terms of the European Framework – and they also need to have opportunities for using the language and discourse conventions of the discipline in both speaking and writing situations, preferably with appropriate support from both content and language teachers. It is in this way that the quality of both content and language learning can be promoted and the learning outcomes of each made transparent and achievable.

2. Learning in a Multilingual and Multicultural Classroom

Learning disciplinary content through a second or foreign language in a culturally mixed classroom and usually also in a new country and academic context is also a situation which poses extra challenges to students. Not only are they required to transition from everyday language use to conceptually demanding academic language use but also to enter into a learning community characterized by demands for increased tolerance of uncertainty and intercultural communication skills. There are often completely new academic practices that need to be adjusted to and new competences (e.g. ICT skills, independent learning, project-based approaches, etc.) to be acquired. The instructions given by teachers may presuppose previous understanding of the practices and not appear as explicit as would be necessary. Perhaps there are courses involving group work that some members of the community do not perceive as proper teaching and learning, or the other way round. Without doubt, there will be new requirements in research skills and thesis writing. It is, in fact, academic writing that according to research and experience is the most crucial and most difficult part of a master's level programme taught and learnt through a second or foreign language. This is mainly because discipline-specific writing is the most demanding language-related task in terms of accuracy and discourse fluency for both the students' and the teachers' language proficiency. It also requires many kinds of academic study skills, from critical reading and evaluation of source materials to synthesizing and analyzing of information and presenting coherent and substantiated arguments and reports that follow the conventions of the field in question.

According to research in the field (see e.g. Braine 2002, Paltridge 2001, Räsänen & Klaassen 2006, Räsänen 2007), students in multilingual and multicultural classroom face at least the following

challenges, some of which of course relate to all master's level students regardless of the language of instruction:

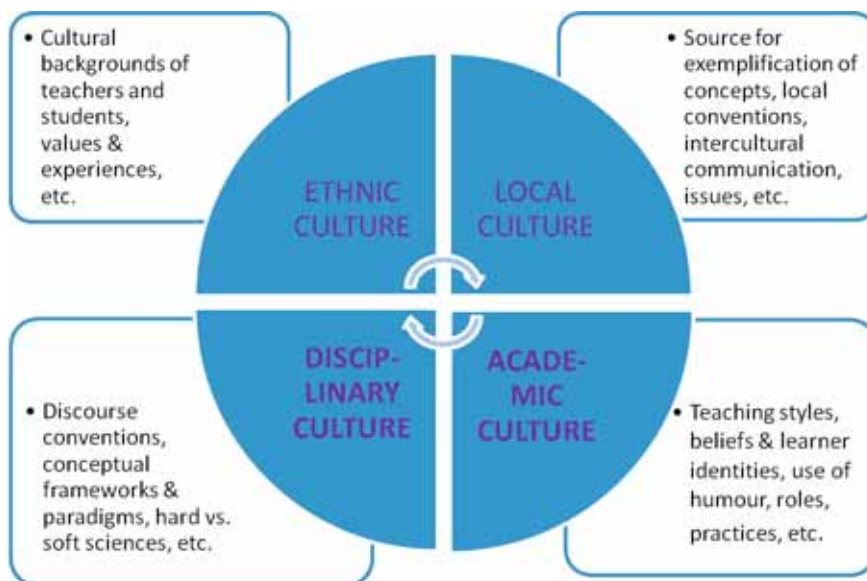
- Learning skills: e.g. information management, critical evaluation, ICT skills, avoidance of plagiarism, self-directiveness, time management (concerning e.g. written assignments and thesis);
- Language skills: oral and written communication and presentation at the required conceptual level and in appropriate rhetorical style, use of field-specific concepts, adapting for difference audiences;
- Research skills: understanding the research process and paradigms, focussing of research plan, methodology, analysis, synthesising and integration of source materials into a coherent whole;
- Intercultural skills: understanding academic practices and “unwritten” rules, and understanding teacher instructions, evaluation criteria, and the concept of the academic etiquette and plagiarism.

In order to meet the challenges (often referred to as “transferable academic skills”, as similar skills are needed for employability) listed above, more enhanced co-operation between teachers and students is needed, as well as enriched and open-minded approaches to both teaching and learning.

3. Dimensions of Culture in a Multilingual and Multicultural Classroom

Apart from global or general culture that surrounds all countries and institutions today there are also specific cultures that come to play a role in a multilingual and multicultural classroom. Flowerdew & Miller (1995) suggest that there are cultural differences at several levels which may affect student understanding in such a learning environment. They have identified four dimensions of culture that are present in class, as exemplified by Figure 1 below. Of these, our main focus of interest is on disciplinary culture and its relation to academic culture and academic practices.

Figure 1: Dimensions of culture affecting in a multilingual and multicultural class



Becoming an academic expert in some field also implies becoming a member of a specific disciplinary community of practice and learning to communicate in the same “language” in this specific social context. In other words, this means learning to follow the discourse conventions that are typical and recognizable as the conventions of that field and profession. According to some studies (e.g. Hyland 1999) the traditional distinction between “hard” sciences and “soft” (or “interdisciplinary”) sciences is quite clearly seen in the ways in which knowledge is structured in these sciences and in which way it is constructed within the social practices of their discourse communities. Thus, following e.g. Hyland (1999: 121), communicating as a physicist, engineer, or a social scientist and marketing professional means “being able to construct an argument that meets field-specific standards of these respective disciplines”, as well as reflects the kinds of social practices (e.g. academic writing in the first person singular vs. using the passive voice) that are part of these disciplinary cultures. It is for the same reason that there tend to be preferred academic practices and teaching styles in different disciplines, characterizing the basic differences in disciplinary knowledge construction of hierarchical and cumulative knowledge building (often with one correct answer, based on facts and hard evidence) vs. interpretative and negotiated knowledge building (with many answers, classifications, and paradigms). The former tends to prefer transmission-type lecturing followed by application, whereas the latter tends to prefer dialogical and interactive type of teaching. As such they both have certain implications for the language and communication proficiency requirements of both teachers and learners.

As knowledge construction is an essential element of student growth into academic expertise, it is important for teachers to be aware of the characteristics and preferences of their disciplines. This is particularly important in a multilingual and multicultural classroom where the backgrounds and previous experiences of students are heterogeneous and where a second or foreign language is used as the medium of instruction and learning. Teachers should, for example, be able to analyse how demanding the concepts in their field are cognitively, whether the terms are explicitly defined or vague and culturally loaded, and whether their discipline is in general linguistically complex and lexically extensive. In addition, they would need to consider what effect the new language might have on how one talks about the discipline and what expressions and conventions emerge from this language as opposed to some other language. Devoting some time on this reflection, sharing with colleagues in the same programme, as well as discussing these issues with the multilingual and multicultural class, will raise everybody’s awareness and understanding of what it means to teach and learn through a second or foreign language.

4. Workshop for Content and Language Teachers

Workshop Process and Tasks

The workshop for content and language teachers that was run in the ASIGMA 2011 conference started by dividing the participants into three teams on the basis of whether they perceived their discipline to represent “hard”, “soft”, or “interdisciplinary” sciences. The tasks for each team were as follows:

1. Consider the characteristics of your discipline and what academic practices tend to be preferred in its teaching (i.e. lecturing, interactive group work, lab work, reflective discussion, etc.)
2. Consider then what your discipline and its academic practices seem to require in terms of language and communication.
3. Make a list of both, please, and report during the debriefing session.

The groups had some 30 minutes to discuss the issues. The debriefing session lasted another 30 minutes. The outcomes are presented below in their original form.

Workshop Outcomes

1. Hard Sciences Team

Subjects:

- 1 Antennas and wave propagation (Applied Electromagnetics)
- 2 Electrical and Electronic measurements
- 3 Computer Science
- 4 Thermodynamics
- 5 Statistics and Financial Mathematics

Characteristics:

- Technical subjects
- Abstract thinking
- Logical approach
- Problem solving oriented
- Intensive use of mathematical tools

Academic Practices:

- Lecturing
- Lab work (individual and team work)
- Projects based learning
- Reflection and interpretation

Language and Communication:

- Standard notions/concepts without significant cultural loading
- Explicit concepts
- Extensive vs. limited vocabulary depending on the particular subject (e.g. mathematics is a language in itself)
- Conceptually demanding (more or less, depending on the subject).

2. Interdisciplinary Sciences Team

Methods in the Classroom

- Interaction (preferably), rarely lengthy lecturing, rather, theoretical input when needed
- Methods of interaction: Group work, Project work, Reflection/Reflective work, Lab work, Research-driven interaction
- Peer-involvement is very important for: Observation, Evaluation, Interpretation

Issues in Communication:

Frequently the subjects are culturally loaded involving/forcing towards a comparative approach between national context vs. international context;

- Conceptually demanding and linguistically complex as the interdisciplinary character of the subject involves inevitably terminology from a number of domains and equivalences are difficult to obtain sometimes;
- Textual and contextual conventions for oral and written communication must be considered. Such conventions will differ nationally even if we are working within the same domain;
- International classrooms are problematic, either if the teacher is a foreign guest with Romanian students enrolled in a foreign-language medium programme (the foreign teacher will not have as reference the Romanian context and will have to negotiate for meaning), or if the teacher is Romanian, the students Romanian and the language a foreign language (in this context student might not be getting the Romanian reference knowledge in the Romanian terminology), or if there are foreign students amongst Romanian students (in this case the cultural backgrounds of the students will create problems for the teacher who will try to cling to a context of reference for the students to be able to explain and exemplify).

Communication Methods Used: Negotiation, Argumentation, Listening, Register-related.

3. Soft Sciences Team

Preferred Practices

- Lecturing, interactive group work, problem-solving activities, simulations, case studies, interpretation, guided learning

Language and Communication

- Conceptually demanding definitions and classifications caused by cultural differences within the disciplines;
- Academic culture (strict internal organization, rules to follow, specific assessment methods of students) not always understood by foreign students;
- Terminologically difficult because of different accents, pronunciations, etc.;
- Linguistically complex (content, knowledge, language, educational backgrounds, etc.);
- Behavioural differences (lack of discipline).

Promoting Language Learning through Content Teaching

As was mentioned above in the introduction, international master's programme usually include either an explicit or implicit aim for the graduates to become competent and professional users of the language of instruction and in this way improve their qualifications and employability for the global labour market. Implicitness in this case refers to a very common situation where language is considered a mere tool for learning the disciplinary content, with little attention or support given to its development during the programme. However, it should be acknowledged that professionals use "tools" in a professional way, which is why a disciplinary expert also uses the language of the field in a way that is appropriate for the discourse community of that specific discipline. In this way content teachers provide models of communication for students and engage their students in active language learning through the pedagogical practices that they use during their teaching. The "language" to be learnt during academic studies can be the academic register of the mother tongue or that of a second or foreign language, in other words, becoming an academic expert always involves the learning of a new "language", one that makes it possible to become a full member of the academic community of the field in question. This learning is in higher education typically promoted by for example the following kinds of pedagogical approaches:

- LECTURING => listening strategies, note-taking, vocabulary and concept development, model discourse conventions;
- INTERACTIVE METHODS => question & answer strategies, classroom discussion strategies, classroom language, subject-specific language, model discipline-specific communication and discourse;
- READING ASSIGNMENTS => reading strategies, note-taking, management and evaluation of information, processing of information, ICT skills, vocabulary and concept development;
- GROUP WORK/PROJECT WORK/PROBLEM-BASED TASKS => integrated or focused skills, team working skills, reporting, presentation, ICT skills, etc. – depending on the task required;
- STUDENT PRESENTATIONS => reading, writing and presentation skills, pronunciation, ICT skills, co-operative skills, etc. – depending on the task;
- WRITING ASSIGNMENTS => integrated skills, disciplinary conventions in discourse, essays/reports/thesis, peer assessment skills;
- CO-OPERATIVE TASKS => development of social skills and intercultural communication skills.

While content teaching, thus, provides many opportunities for students to develop their discipline-specific, oral and written communication skills, research into second/foreign-language mediated instruction clearly shows that specifically tailored language support accelerates and enhances

both content learning and the learning of relevant communication skills. Therefore, awareness of the role of language in knowledge and expertise construction as well as integrated involvement of both content teachers and language teachers in programme design, versatile learning task design, and assessment are specific indicators of successful international master's programmes.

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