LEARNING TO *'CUT THE BREAD EVENLY'* – TEACHING CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND NEGOTIATION STRATEGIES

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Abstract:
The paper focuses on an approach to the teaching of a soft skills category, viz. conflict management and negotiation strategies, covering a range of bridge-building abilities, by means of a CLIL instructional pattern, meant to help technical university graduates to successfully perform as engineers in the sphere of business/industry in the ever changing world context of our century. A presentation of the proposed module is provided, together with the pedagogic rationale underlying designing/teaching it. The piloting stage main conclusions are included, with a view to initiating further optimization.

Key-words:
Language education, soft skills, CLIL, conflict management, negotiation strategies.

Motto:
"You can't shake hands with a clenched fist."
Indira Gandhi

1. Paper focus

That research in education has an important role to play has become a well-known fact in the contemporary period, as we live in a challenging type of society, distinctly dissimilar from the point of view of cultural differences, dominated by globalization and a permanent effort of people from various spheres of life to cope with the stirring-to-action phenomena, among which those in instructional processes at all levels do ask for prompt response and reshaping for the future.

The focus on learning and the learner in education has been directed mainly on the development of an individual able to easily identify employment and perform successfully upon graduation from higher education.

Therefore, it is, we maintain, the foreign language teacher's role to contribute to endowing the generations to come with the repertory of relevant skills in the new work contexts, as well as to discover new innovative manners of doing so.

Against such a background, the aim of this study is to plead for the possibility of English language teachers at university level to pass from the already consecrated General English and/or ESP courses towards an approach of the CLIL

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(Content and Language Integrated Learning) type, that should combine the linguistic input they can bring to the students with the content, more specifically by designing/teaching soft skills oriented materials.

It is, in our opinion, prompted by our recent experience as practitioners, a quite feasible option in dealing with the demands of the present/future, particularly as regards the majority of the soft skills young engineers - if we refer to the author's educational context - need, as these abilities are linked with aspects specific to the sphere of humanistic disciplines, having communication, as well as psychological and social features at the fore.

Certainly, for such an enterprise to be successful, a network of professionals sharing experience and advancing new ideas in an arena of debate leading to optimization is mandatory. Consequently, this study should be seen as a proposal to use the CLIL approach to the teaching of soft skills and a voice advocating for an enlargement of the professional area of expertise of language teachers in the academe.

2. Essential theoretical framework

Such an activity should rely on a survey of the literature, which has added numerous titles lately, on: the weighting of soft skills in general for engineering graduates, the ways in which they are taught, particularly by means of CLIL type courses, to finish with the approaches to teaching two soft skills components of significance, viz. conflict management and negotiation abilities.

Thus, an attempt to define soft skills, in very broad lines, seen as those abilities which are different from, and at the same time complementary to, we should add, the directly technical/hard ones, would see them as being of equal status in ensuring a young graduate's success in getting employment, maintaining it and performing successfully and efficiently at the workplace.

The relationship between these two categories of abilities puts together the IQ (Intelligence Quotient) and the EQ (Emotional Intelligence Quotient) of the young adult, in their effort to integrate in an organization, be it technical or a business oriented one. Prevalence tends to go towards the soft ones, but, as most companies cannot afford investing in the enhancement of the soft skills repertoire of their employees, it results that the role of developing them goes to higher education, which is actually expected to provide the graduates' qualitative standards able to meet the expectations/needs/requirements of the work market of today.

Moreover, as shown by some authors (Sharatkumar, 2009), soft skills themselves have developed, integrating newer forms, alongside with the more traditional ones, such as communication, team work, problem-solving a.s.o. He lists *'knowledge of interacting with trans-national cultures, business etiquette,*

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expected and acceptable behavior in new geographies' as some of the new abilities to be expected from the young graduates of the technical universities.

There are numerous lists or even data bases, available from various sources, of the soft skills of interest for our undergraduates. For instance, one can find, on the site of a specialized organization in preparing software engineers for the new society (SECC, 2007), a number of musts included in the topics for the training of engineers: *'project management, negotiation skills, communication skills'* etc. In fact, any comprehensive list of soft skills will place negotiation and conflict management among the main components (Prodcons Group, 2009 – as just one example).

They also appear in the list of the so-called *'critical employability skills'* (Hansen and Hansen, 2010), who include the *'ability to… mitigate conflict with co-workers'* among first-rank priorities, which actually shows that their importance is considered major in the range of soft skills that are of primary significance for the professionals of engineering and/or business.

An aspect that should not be neglected in the teaching of such soft skills, as shown by the literature (Rao, 2010) is that the focus with them tends to be placed on *'attitude and behaviour'*. Hence, a special attention is given to conflict management and negotiation skills.

As today our globalized society is characterized by a high level of workforce mobility, it is necessary to include intercultural elements in designing appropriate soft skills oriented courses, as emphasized by the literature (Longatan, 2009), who refers to the manner in which the employee should take into account and harmonize the diverse cultural backgrounds and personal approaches to the cultural dimension.

One manner of dealing with the teaching of soft skills that we envisage is via CLIL type courses, which have a double focus, linguistic and of content taught. The creator of the notion emphasizes the fact that it refers to an activity in which *'a foreign language is used as a tool in the learning of a non-language subject'* (Marsh, 2002), which is confirmed by other authors (Md Yassin, 2009), who synthetically refers to CLIL as a *'dual-focused educational approach'*. It is an *'innovative form of language-enhanced education'* (Frigols, 2007), and there are several good reasons in its favour (Content and Language Integrated Learning, 2006), i.e. it is taught in a language that is not the L1 of the learners, but a foreign one, most probably the one to be used at the workplace and/or internationally. It economically covers a twofold aim: to increase the soft skills repertory of the undergraduate and to develop their linguistic proficiency, thus demonstrating to the students what level of expectations the university and, later, the real society - we should add - have from them.

As regards the issue of conflict management, seen as *'the process of limiting the negative aspects of conflict while increasing the positive aspects of*

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conflict' (Rahim, 2002, p. 208), according to the same author, the aim of teaching it is to *'enhance learning and group outcomes'*, thus attaining effectiveness in organizational settings. An authoritative voice in the field, Rahim (op. cit.) makes certain important statements that may be useful in understanding the topic, that we briefly list in a non prioritized order:

- we cannot speak of one *'best approach'* to conflict managing;
- a positive approach to understanding the phenomenon in order to teach it appropriately would be to incorporate in *a 'meta-model'* the already existing models, that should cover good practices from a range of models in terms of conflict styles and treatment;
- the focus goes therefore on five so-called *'management approaches: integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and compromising'*, each of them being analyzed in terms of the human action components involved. We will remark that such items of the specialized literature on conflict management can be, and indeed they are, used within the proposed soft skills course in English as valuable input reading meant to introduce specific content to the trainees.

It is equally important to sensitize the students as to the contents of the main concepts discussed in the module, more specifically when conflict resolution is taught, it should be seen as a phenomenon of reducing conflict and tension; accordingly, terms such as negotiation, mediation or arbitration will necessarily occur in association with the former.

The literature on conflict management is quite vast, but there are certain recurrent themes that are of interest for our purpose here. Thus, five main steps are identified and described in the action of managing conflicts (Maccoby and Studder, 2011, p.50): anticipating, preventing, idnetifying, managing and resolving – their meanings are quite clear, and within the course there are various ways of getting the learners aware of them.

Other authors (Borisoff and Victor, 1989), who devoted a book to the matter, emphasize the idea that there are communication strategies – which they discuss – that promote *'productive'*, in the positive sense, conflict management. Their multi-step approach to managing conflicts translates the stages in communication that participants should pass through: *'assessing'* the sources of conflict and the context, *'acknowledging'* their mutual perspectives, *'assuming'* a positive attitude of cooperation in mitigating the conflict. Participants *'take action'*, with a verbal and/or nonverbal character, with a significant role in the development of the conflict, while *'analysis'* should be present at all stages of the conflict management process.

Similarly, the cultural differences as potential sources of conflict, therefore with impact in conflict management, are discussed (op. cit.).

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If one investigates to what extent conflict management as a soft skill is present in the curricula in (higher) education all over the world, one can see that, although it should unavoidably be a must as it is a prerequisite to success in performing one's job within an organization, it is not covered enough, as recent literature puts it (Lang, 2009, pp.240-245).

Referring to our own educational context, we should perhaps add one more remark on the fact that in our country the cultural specificity in understanding the role and position of negotiation and conflict management might be different from that of other peoples/cultures. Moreover, it is necessary to note that such differences, which actually exist at the level of national cultures, not only influence the behaviour of the participants in the conflict managing activity, but they also lie underneath the negotiators' attitudes and fundamental values brought by them in the communication process and externalized by their (non)verbal options. Such elements should also be taken into account in designing/teaching a soft skills focused course.

As far as the issue of negotiation is concerned, the literature (Hut, 2011) points out that it is also a multi-step activity, comprising an observance of the following stages: (i) an effort to separate the problem from the people maintaining it; (ii) placing the focus on identifying the interests/needs of each party; (iii) fighting for the *'reconciliation of everyone's needs'*; (iv) generating solutions *'for mutual gain'*; (v) application of criteria that are considered *'fair/unbiased'* by all stakeholders.

To conclude at this point, we will try to sum up the main aspects that should be incorporated in the module envisaged, showing that such views can represent at the same time useful input sources for the course reading/listening activities themselves, as well. Thus, the focal points to be included (Regenesys, 2013) in such a programme should help the students to *'distinguish between position and interest in the negotiation process'*. It should have a *'highly interactive'* character, as communication is at the core of it – and our course is based on the communicative model mainly and therefore it should provide the learners with an awareness of the array of strategies and stages involved in a successful conflict management and negotiation process.

The module we propose, which is of the CLIL type, with a focus in both English language communication competence development and on soft skills based content, is also conceived so as to result in broadly the following learning outcomes: an understanding of the phenomenon taught, a capacity of recognizing the symptoms of it, adopting in a flexible suitable manner various (appropriate to each case and situation) strategies/styles of managing it, practising the skills/language functions required for implementing those strategies in negotiation, adding an adequate non verbal communication apparatus a.s.o.

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3. The proposed approach – presentation and rationale

The module that was designed and taught at the piloting stage to several groups of engineering students is meant to be one of the sections of a *Soft Skills for Engineering Students* course, in preparation for printing. It was sized in order to cover the input presented in the lectures and applications in approximately three two-hour slots. It broadly observes the pattern of the entire course book, viz. a slide-based essential course input, available on electronic support, accompanied by chains of activities of the communicative/eclectic type, also on electronic format.

Being created as a CLIL type of course, the course input (topic-based) and the corresponding seminar applications cover both the language development for each topic, as well as the content on the soft skill under focus, which in this particular case is conflict management and negotiation.

In what follows, a brief presentation is made of the course objectives, essential topics and applications format and content, with the rationale underlying each option.

The course objectives refer to the sub-skills that the learners will be able to use upon completing the course. These start from (i) the ability to understand and analyze the phenomena and the principles by means of which they operate, then they pass through (ii) becoming familiar with the approaches, methods, strategies, styles etc. which can be applied in order to be successful and efficient in conflict management and negotiation in various social contexts/situations, to finally get to (iii) acquiring a critical ability of selecting/applying such skills in a well-justified psychologically, socially and culturally manner, on the basis of the adequate linguistic choices, by linking the theoretical input and the practical examples in a creative flexible personalized manner.

In the same vein, the range of topics, limited to the essential ones that we consider are most probable for engineers to come across in their professional life, has been conceived so as to cover the essential input on conflict management and negotiation, while providing support to the students in order to develop autonomous learning skills which they could apply independently as well, after the course is over and they have been employed. The topics will therefore include input on defining/clarifying the terminology used, examples, techniques, psychological aspects, strategies of politeness/conflict escalation, but to a similar extent the language/wording that is appropriate in implementing such skills, organized by functions of speech, levels of formality, registers involved a.s.o.

We provide below a longer list of topics than we envisage we could actually cover within our time-limited context, but it should be seen as a wider array to choose from, with the priorities selected depending on the parameters of each educational situation: conflict resolution and negotiation approaches/models, recognizing dangerous/difficult situation from the point of view of ethics, racism,

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sexism and other biases, strategies of (pre)negotiation of various kinds, handling breakdowns, individual and/or group levels and the differences occurring in negotiation, social implications, various types of disputes/different contexts, e.g. at work and in the community, with collaborators and clients, conflict/negotiation handling within multicultural environments, qualities of a good negotiator and, last but certainly not least, the language of conflict management and negotiation – the latter organized according to the multiple situations that can occur in real life in industry and/or business, as mini-dialogues, but also as groups of phrases/sentences organized per various purposes, such as, for instance, softening one's language, persuading etc.

As far as the applications are concerned, these are designed in order to go along with the course input, but certainly with a higher interactive character. The four essential language skills will be thus chosen, integrated and practised so as to closely and logically match the natural flow of the process in real life.

In what follows, a sketchy presentation of a suggested applications format is given. The warmer/lead-in can start from a Czech proverb: *'He who cannot cut the bread evenly cannot get on well with people'*, eliciting interpretation from the students, with special emphasis in the discussions on important values such as objectiveness, calm, tact, impartiality.

The reading task that opens up the section, based on authentic input texts, processed to a small extent only – for reasons of appropriateness to the timeframe of the class, mainly – should provide information to the trainees on the topic under discussion, but also to include language development necessary for understanding it. Such a useful text is, for instance, the one on conflict resolution (available at http://www.crnhq.org/pages.php?pID=77), which can be processed so as to get a matching of skill descriptions and their corresponding names **(***Win/win Approach, Creative Response, Empathy, Assertiveness, Cooperative Power, Managing Emotions, Willingness to Resolve, Mapping, Designing Options, Negotiation, Mediation and Broadening Perspectives*). A good manner of passing from reading skills practice towards producing ideas (focus on speaking skills development), that can demonstrate whether the input has been well comprehended by the learners, could be a task starting from a list of famous quotes connected with the topic – the students can be asked to discuss, compare, prioritize them in terms of personal preferences, providing arguments for their options. Such quotes can be found plenty online; we have extracted several examples, which are listed below:

- *'Use soft words and hard arguments.' — English Proverb;*
- *'Conflict is inevitable, but combat is optional.' — Max Lucade;*
- *'The pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity. The optimist sees opportunity in every difficulty.' — Winston Churchill;*

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- *'Conflict involves incompatible behaviors rather than competitive goals' — Dean Tjosvold;*
- *'One of the best ways to persuade others is with your ears — by listening to them.' — Dean Rusk;*
- *'By failing to prepare you are preparing to fail.' — Benjamin Franklin.*

Other tasks can include: individual/pair/group presentations on a given topic, individual solving of quizzes (an expression specific to a certain situation is given and there is a multiple-choice exercise with four items to select from the ONE most appropriate one in point of message, style, register etc.).

Instead of the traditional listening input tasks, we prefer to replace them by watching mini films/demos of conflict management and negotiation situations, from sources such as YouTube (from very long ones - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smriTbYGzt0, to average size - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yo47sjThtgU and short ones, such as the one on body language in a negotiation focused course - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPpVe6bDlIE). The rationale of this option is the fact that the visual impact is intrinsically much more powerful, particularly when non verbal communication needed for successful conflict management and negotiation is exemplified.

The linguistic component of the applications will consist in tasks asking the students to analyze various examples of phrases/sentences/mini contexts, pointing to the collocations specific to these lexical areas, modality in support of a convincing manner of dealing with conflict situations – there are multiple possibilities and points of focus, but again, the course designer/teacher should be selective in establishing priorities, based on criteria such as group level, broad course objectives, time constraints a.s.o.

In the final part of the applications, in which the trainees are invited to actually produce and display their level of internalizing and/or adapting the course input to a variety of proposed situations, role plays or simulations can be organized, also meant to enhance the students' awareness of the importance of intercultural differences and to foster their empathic capacity, alongside with providing them with speaking practice opportunities.

Writing follow-ups resulting from such chains of activities can include the specific text types that naturally occur in reality at the post conflict resolution/negotiation stage, for example meeting minutes, concluding letters/e-mail messages, contract clauses and the like.

As one of the course aims is that of helping the students to develop sound learning strategies for their autonomous study at the post-course phase, they can be invited to have a learning diary, where they should jot down the insights on their own learning process throughout the course. This can be used for both the teacher, as it represents valuable ongoing feedback, but to an equal extent for the trainees themselves, as the diary can be an excellent means of reflection, as well as a written communication development instrument.

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The assessment of the students' learning will cover both continuous forms – personal portfolio of homework and projects, as well as an achievement form of evaluation, which can be either oral – participating in a simulation, or written – expressing one's views in an assignment based on course input and further readings, on a choice of given topics.

4. Post-piloting preliminary conclusions

The first conclusions, after the piloting of the course stage, have pointed out to the fact that the students find the course challenging and interesting for them, although only about 35% of them already have jobs, which makes this category perceive more clearly the usefulness of the proposed approach as valuable support for their working place success.

The combination a CLIL type of course provides, of both language and content input, is considered an efficient solution against the constraints of the context, particularly in terms of time available.

The trainees declare that the topics chosen are: *'appealing', 'challenging', 'of use in the job'*, while the linguistic input was *'necessary'*, particularly in terms of style and register.

Therefore, opting for a CLIL type of course seems to be a well justified approach – particularly if the course objectives coincide with the students' long-term needs.

Courses focused on various soft skills are well received, even if the context allows only for a sketchy selective presentation of the vast input amount available, especially if the students are prompted various further learning strategies to apply in their autonomous study after graduation.

It has been demonstrated once again, as in the case of previous CLIL type of courses we proposed, designed and taught, that English teachers do have the potential to embark upon creating such soft skills oriented courses, and also that this can be a factor positively influencing the professional and personal development of foreign language teachers.

This study is an invitation to debate in an open arena for fellow teachers who may develop an interest in the same line of action and research.

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