ENGLISH COMMUNICATION COURSE ROLE WITHIN THE *TECHNOLOGIE DE TRADUCTION AUTOMATIQUE* FRENCH MASTER CONTEXT - AN INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *The study is focused on an analysis of the multiple roles of a Scientific and Technical Communication in English – STCE modular course, designed/tailored and delivered in the context of a TECHNOLOGIE DE TRADUCTION AUTOMATIQUE - TTA (Automated Translation Technology) Master program taught in French in the Bucharest Polytechnic, in partnership with Stendhal University Grenoble – France, from the perspective of interculturality. It is actually a case study of the author's concrete educational context, based on a CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) type of course. Conceived as a multiple-approach endeavour, the paper analyzes aspects such as raising the students' awareness of the major features of both professional oral and written communication in the English and the French cultures and developing their perception and sensitivity of the major similarities and differences between them. The didactic means and methods to implement these objectives are presented.*

Keywords: *Scientific and Technical Communication in English, Technologie de Traduction Automatique, interculturality*

Motto:

One language sets you in a corridor for life. Two languages open every door along the way.
Frank Smith, US psycholinguist

1. Why an English course in a francophone master? - Introduction

The present study aims to analyze the reasons why a *Content and Language Integrated Learning* (CLIL) type of English course with a focus on *Scientific and Technical Communication in English* (STCE) can successfully finds its place within a francophone Master level program devoted to *Automated Translation Technology* (*Technologie de Traduction Automatique* – TTA) offered by the Faculty of Engineering in Foreign Languages – Department of Communication in Modern Languages of the Bucharest Polytechnic.

The four-term innovative master program was designed (Coordinator: Associate Professor Roxana Anca Trofin) by a team of trainers in both foreign languages and Computer Science, as it has a strong interdisciplinary character.

It was conceived as a component of a long-term partnership with the Stendhal University of Grenoble - France, with exchanges at various levels of conception and instruction. The medium of tuition is French for all the courses except those that have English at their centre. The weighting of the latter is quite substantial – three one-term modules are given, totalling 42 weekly lectures & applications, as against five to seven courses per week in French over the same period of time.

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The *roles* of the English course are quite multiple in this context, encouraging, in the current European dynamics, an attitude of cultural awareness, openness to variety and understanding of diversity, in a landscape characterized by attempts to overcome obstacles while preserving identities. The key issues in designing and optimizing it against the presented background are dealt with in what follows.

Thus, the main *objectives* of the English course (which is designed with an explicit double focus: (i) the development of the trainees' English language proficiency at C2 level, and (ii) the teaching of the essential soft skills of Scientific and Technical Communication in English, viz. written and oral communication) were seen to be the following:

- equipping the students with both the communication and linguistic skills able to help them to perform as interdisciplinary linguists-engineers in our current society, more and more based on multiculturalism and plurilingualism, where both French and English are useful tools, with a well-defined place in the community of science, technology and/or business, without neglecting other aspects of the social-economic life;
- increasing the students' necessary awareness of the differences of culture, communication patterns and linguistic values between these two languages – and, in most cases, with the taking into consideration also of a third language, their mother tongue (which for most of the participants so far has been Romanian or Arabic);
- creating a coherent link between the students' specific background/profile and the general objectives of the TTA master program as a whole, with the necessary emphasis on the zones of similarities and/or differences in understanding and practising specialized communication in English as compared with French, by getting them to infer their essential features, and in this way build up a personal construct of the notion of professional communication in the 21st century, a most useful ability for researchers of the field of automated translation.

Among the *benefits* underlying the inclusion of the English course, in a non-prioritized order, we should mention the fact that the course not only ensures the students' capacity of accessing the huge amount of bibliographic resources in English, but it also helps the participants with getting comfortable access to the various online language translation services, machine translation engines and corpora, in order to carry out their own scientific investigations making use of their good knowledge of both French and English.

Not less important, by being exposed to a permanent comparison between the two languages, their cultural specificity and the differences resulting in their particular patterns and styles of communication, in writing or oral forms, between the two, our students have chances of developing their perception of - and sensitivity to - the major, or more subtle, (dis)similarities existing between French and English, and even learn *when* and *how* to adequately turn from one to the other, in function of contextual demands and priorities.

In this vein, the main *points of interest* of the proposed English course are: providing and analyzing good models of English communication, in both written and oral form, as compared to the French ones; getting the students to pass through the process of generating their own linguistic and communication products, with the observance of specific conventions; sensitizing the learners as regards the main common points in communicating in writing and/or orally in the domains of science and

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technology, as well as in business, via lectures and applications in which the main elements of differentiation are debated upon.

2. When cultures meet – necessary theoretical background

The current European and world context should be analyzed in order to understand the framework of principles that is required in order to design and include a CLIL course of English in a francophone master program in such a manner as to provide to the trainees the best options taking into consideration their short- but also long-term needs and interests.

We live on a continent whose forms of geo-political organization encourages cultural diversity, an open attitude of tolerance and understanding towards the national identities characterized by various language and cultural paradigms, moreover so if such principles are to underlie an educational context of the type described in this study.

The master program explores two fields of human knowledge, linguistics and computer science, interwoven in an interdisciplinary manner, which increases the need for a good command of at least two important languages of international circulation such as French and English.

Although each situation described in the investigated literature on the topic has certain very specific traits, there are some common broad lines which can give perspective to the choices we made in our own approach. They are worth being briefly presented here - not necessarily in an order of strict priorities, with a view to creating a more complex setting for our own final options.

English is currently seen as a language with a very high status in most parts of the world (Inju Tendoh, C., 2012) as the idiom of research and business, in spite of some purist views that might still be obstinate in rejecting this self-evident truth. Nobody therefore should impede young generations of students to get the tools that could make them "part of different social and cultural connections" and "have an international study and work life" in any part of the planet. As mentioned by the author quoted, francophone parents in countries such as Cameroon insist that their children should learn English, which is "considered as an important language on the international scene".

The position is confirmed at French university level (Sciences.po, 2011), which imposes a level C1 according to CEFR of English language proficiency as a master degree requirement. It is also confirmed (Universite d'Oran, 2008) in the world of scientific research in fields such as: linguistics, machine translation models, assisted translation and data processing lexicons, that focus on French, English and another language, generally that of the country of origin of the researcher(s).

Secondly, the interdisciplinary domain of machine translation requires sound knowledge of the two languages, with most research literature based on them (Granger, S., 2007). She exemplifies by analyzing the existing learner corpora which frequently contain data produced in English and French. The materials included in the corpora are at "higher intermediate to advanced" levels of language proficiency, irrespective of the different mother tongues of the source-learners having produced the input.

A special place in this brief exploration of the world panorama of openness to pluri- and/or multilingualism is occupied by Canada, where it has turned into state policy (Ministry of Education, 2009). Arguments in favour of this position range from an "enhanced student learning" capacity, to an emphasis on the attention given to developing the "social and academic language competence" of the students at all levels in order to facilitate their educational potential maximization.

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There are, as shown in the literature (Alberta Learning. Direction de l'éducation française, 2004), certain basic principles of language learning that can support the English language teacher in understanding the framework of principles required in a context where two languages are, sometimes simultaneously, under the focus of the participants in the instructional process – and later on, we can add, in the scientific research working environment. They are reviewed in their basic lines, as they have been useful in prompting insights for the design and teaching of our own course.

The main aspects to be considered are:

- *filtering* – this is a "process by which second language skills are filtered through the established first language skills of the learner". The phenomenon can be compared with a "trial and error process", and it should not be disregarded when English is taught to francophone learners;
- *positive transfer* – which means that, in order to carry out a task in English, the learners may resort to their repertory of skills in French, which is quite useful if we take into account the "high degree of correlation between the French and English languages". It is a useful approach, which has chances of reducing stress and oppose to time constraints, while enhancing motivation and even developing language learning/using strategies from a repertory to the other;
- *interference errors* – this is the risk of "overgeneralizing" the previous component, as it refers to the also numerous "points of incompatibility" between French and English. Students should be supported in understanding that the two idioms are "inherently different", particularly given the fact that they study them with a view to applying their knowledge to the field of machine translation;
- *reinvestment* – the process by means of which students "transfer their established knowledge of French to enhance English language learning", therefore the somewhat reverse of transfer. It seems useful that English language teaching should rely on the already "established French language skills" of the trainees.

We should perhaps mention at this point that in structuring and tailoring the STCE course modules, we tried to take into consideration the principles presented above, piloting them and adapting some main accents on various elements in function of the students' concrete profile, preserving however a basic skeleton from year to year, but by no means neglecting to adjust it to the specific issues characterizing each generation of students taking the master program so far.

3. English course components - presentation and rationale

The TTA master course comprises in its list of components, beside the three courses of English, as well as one three-term course of French language, a range of both linguistics and Computer Science oriented courses: linguistic theories in machine translation, linguistic modeling, semantic and lexicological models and paradigms, theory and practice of translation, text analysis in French, elaboration-structuring of corpora, fundamentals of automated treatment of the language, algo-programming, software for machine translation and advanced methods and models of machine translation.

Against the general master program, the place of the English CLIL type of course has been designed and included so as to match the principles and progression in terms of difficulty and scope of the three terms when it is given. It was based on the adaptation of the STCE course materials (lectures and applications) created by the author (Catelly, Y-M, 2009).

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In what follows, the three main modules of the course are sketchily presented, but a general remark is compulsory here, viz. for each generation of students a deeper initial *needs analysis* was carried out, with a view to selecting and adjusting the course input to the *trainees' profile* in terms of: linguistic background and education in general, English (and French) level of proficiency, previous exposure to academic study and/or work on the basis of two (foreign) languages and also a third one – their mother tongue and so on.

The first one-term module is called *Advanced Scientific and Technical Communication Competence in English*, which in fact aims to evaluate the initial level of the master students and then provide them with a corresponding comprehensive view of the grammar of English, particularly covering those selected elements which are specific to scientific and technical communication.

Within the three units (covering 14 weeks of study) of the module, that are generally targeted towards an increase of the linguistic support accuracy in scientific and technical communication, the following topics are included: word order, the English verb, main elements of morphology – nouns, adjectives, adverbs, numerals etc., syntax and punctuation.

For all of them, the treatment includes, both in the lectures delivered and in the applications and assignments, a special focus on avoiding frequent/common mistakes, by error correction tasks, quizzes and student-generated examples. The trainees are encouraged to debate on transfer possibilities, not only from/into English and French, but also with the taking into consideration of their mother tongue, as a means of increasing their awareness of the existing similarities and differences. These should matter for them, not only in terms of their own language proficiency, but also for them in their capacity as future researchers in an interdisciplinary domain such as TTA.

The second term is devoted to developing the students' competence of expressing themselves in written form in the fields of science and technology (*Written Scientific and Technical Communication in English*). The module is quite a dense one, in which the teaching of writing is seen as a process-and-product focused approach.

It comprises increase of the units, from paragraph to text type, also including elements of style and register, and it necessarily cannot neglect input on the cultural differences between the English and the French professional writing conventions.

The text types included are technical correspondence – e-mail messages, letters, memos, as well as reports, abstracts and scientific papers. Appropriate quotation and citation styles are approached, with special care given to avoiding plagiarism. The students are asked to produce their own texts, and the process is guided throughout its unfolding by the teacher.

Awareness tasks are included with a view to get the learners to understand the specific differences between the written expression of English versus the French type. Stylistic matters, as well as those connected with the level of formality, are studied, and for each of these important issues the students are encouraged to comment upon the differences they can identify between the manners of writing the same text type in the two languages.

The same comparative treatment is valid also for the third module (*Oral Scientific and Technical Communication in English*), which gets the students to pass from all the main oral communication instances specific to the professional scientific and technical activity, from presenting a paper in a conference, through participating in technical discussions/meetings, and up to making oral presentations of various kinds.

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Universally valid aspects are discussed, such as: non-verbal communication, dealing with fear or turning written content into a PowerPoint presentation, but for certain aspects as, for instance: expressing one's own views and ideas, communication strategies in use or ethical elements in an oral presentation, careful reference is made to the existing differences between the two cultures – those of English-speaking countries and of French-speaking ones, respectively.

In general, this manner of providing support to the students in order to clearly distinguish differences, while implementing positive transfer and develop an increased sensitivity to potential errors, linguistically and culturally, is a common feature of the course design.

As a principle, the students are permanently encouraged to detect instances of similarity and/or difference in the sources they have access to, with a view to turning this approach into a permanent feature they should internalize as a lifelong attitude in their study and work.

4. Open conclusions

It is difficult to derive final conclusions to this study, as by the very character of the approach, flexibility and redesigning of focuses is encouraged and consistently practiced within this type of pedagogy of interculturality, as it could be seen from the above.

We should therefore see these final lines only as interim conclusions, meant only to define an attitude and some options that have proved to be successful, as the feedback from the participants, their dissertations quality and the other involved teachers' opinions in various occasions have demonstrated. However, certain aspects are worth emphasizing.

Firstly, the introduction of the English course in the francophone master does show an open positive attitude of the university and of its coordinators, which encourages complementarities and excludes purist exaggerations which do no longer find their place in our globalized world, characterized by an ever higher study and work mobility.

In the second place, the students can benefit from this manner of encouraging openness to multiculturalism, to pluralism of views, with the preservation of the essential elements of identity specific to the two cultures and languages, French and English.

Similarly, the relationships with the students' (and quite often the teachers') mother tongue(s) is thus reevaluated from the same generous perspective, on condition that the trainees should be guided towards taking advantage of the positive transferable issues while bewaring of the potential errors caused by interference and similar phenomena conducive to confusions and to lack of appropriateness.

It is to be hoped that for the future practitioners of an interdisciplinary field of scientific research such as TTA, the attitudes they are encouraged to adopt have good chances of being internalized, allowing them to perform at a high level of competence worldwide.

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