FOCUS ON IDENTITY IN DESIGNING AND TEACHING AN ENGLISH FOR ENGINEERING ACADEMIC STUDY *COURSE IN A MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENT*

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Abstract: *In today's higher education institutions one can quite often identify educational settings characterized by a multicultural component. Therefore, special attention should be given to the multitude of issues to be taken into account by the foreign language teacher who takes on the hat of a course designer in such challenging sensitive contexts. Among the foci of both the course creation of and its implementation in a multicultural class, identity connected aspects are worth receiving special attention at all stages, as, if they are disregarded, there are serious risks of potential misinterpretation of the input, conducive to a decrease in the course efficiency. The paper aims to discuss the manner in which identity has been taken into consideration in designing and teaching a CLIL type course named ENGLISH FOR ENGINEERING ACADEMIC STUDY (EEAS) to foreign and Romanian students of the Faculty of Engineering in Foreign Languages - FILS of the Bucharest Polytechnic having English as the medium of instruction.*

Keywords: *multiculturalism, identity, CLIL course design.*

Motto:

We live in a world where identity matters. It matters both as a concept, theoretically, and as a contested fact of contemporary political life. The word itself has acquired a huge contemporary resonance, inside and outside the academic world.
Paul Gilroy

1. Paper aim and necessary theoretical synopsis

This study aims to present various modalities of including relevant fundamental notions such as *identity awareness* in a multicultural group into the content of a course meant for engineering students in higher education focused on developing academic study skills at the beginning of the bachelor level.

The setting is characterized by a strong multicultural component, which requires the foreign language teacher's effort directed towards both course design and further teaching and class management.

The complexity and somehow fuzziness of the described context call for clarifications and a type of teacher attitude facilitating development of respect to the multicultural learners' identity while establishing functional operating paradigms based on contextual and general parameters.

Identity should be seen, we maintain, as the crossway of the actors' identity paradigms – teacher and students, comprising and differentiating among their personal and professional ones, finely tuned and molded so as to enable reaching productive consensus, based on valid personal and mutual representations.

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This demand has become more acute particularly over the last decade or so, with a large number of universities offering tuition in a foreign language, chiefly English, to multicultural groups of sometimes multilingual students (Lestinen et al., 6).

Nuances of the way this is being understood and implemented at present vary; what is stable, though, refers to the general objective all such organizations include on their fundamental agenda of activity, viz. contributing to reaching "intercultural understanding in society" (Lestinen et al., op. cit., 6).

Moreover, the status of English has been changing lately very much towards the multifaceted meanings of a *lingua franca* (Crawford, para.1), with non natives using it for study or work in a huge number of settings all over the world.

This raises questions as to what elements should be included in a typically communicative language teaching course in terms of development not only of the linguistic competence, but also of the sociocultural one, that should be both useful and valid in such a globalized world as ours.

Such implications should be seriously taken into account in designing both English language teaching materials and also, we should add, CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) type courses, as the one discussed here. The focus moves today from a "norm bound approach" towards "mutual comprehensibility and cultural identity" (Sifakis, 237-250).

A possible answer to such questioning instances could be, we agree, what has been labelled as "critical multiculturalism" (Zhao, 55-60), an attitudinal pattern ensuring an approach of both trainers and trainees conducive to the possibility "to create, maintain and transform language uses, hence ... identities and social realities".

2. The EEAS course – a brief presentation

In what follows, the *ENGLISH FOR ENGINEERING ACADEMIC STUDY* course is outlined, in point of the course design background, context profile, needs analysis, syllabus and rationale for writing and teaching it to bachelor FILS students of the Bucharest Polytechnic.

Thus, the context comprises the following features to be taken into account upon course design and teaching:

- the *students* are a mix of Romanian (around 30 - 40% in each group) and foreign ones, who come from various countries and cultures, for instance African, Arabic, Asian and European and who have equally dissimilar cultural and educational backgrounds. Linguistically, with none of them a native speaker of English and substantial differences in terms of their entry test results, their bachelor level first year is not really an easy one, as adjustment to the new context is, according to their feedback, quite challenging at times. Moreover, the degree of difficulty of the academic study skills level expected/required from them from the very beginning is substantially enhanced, for the majority, by the fact that they are in a foreign country, Romania, where English is only the medium of tuition, and where around them Romanian is spoken as L1, including by most of their teachers of technical disciplines;
- *group structure variability* should be taken into consideration, as well; however, it should not, we believe, significantly change the weighting and type of materials focused on identity awareness raising tasks, such as: reflection followed by discussions, comparing learners' responses/opinions to certain sensitive issues,

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encouraging students from different backgrounds to present aspects specific to their own culture and/or critical incidents they experienced and so on;

- the *teacher* – a non native speaker of English, a Romanian, assuming beyond the foreign language teaching task, that of CLIL course designer, as EEAS is a blend of academic study skills specific to engineering higher education organizations and English language, respectively. The teacher's concern goes toward embedding in the course the kind of content that should encourage in the students the development of both a position and a mentality of awareness of their own cultures, as well as tolerance to those of their colleagues', attempting to turn them into a lifelong attitude.

Hence, the role of the EEAS course proposed to them, firstly as an optional one - but in which they enroll massively, namely to include, besides the expected content resulting from a detailed *needs analysis* that was carried out initially (questionnaires and interviews to teachers of the FILS and to freshmen), elements specific to the "sociopolitics of English in academic uses" (JEAP, Home).

The EEAS course, existing on electronic support as course slides, as well as its applications and assignments, has been (re)designed and taught with the first pilot-series twice so far. It comprises seven modules, meant for two 14-week terms. Here they are, with the mention that, for each module, only a selection of sub-topics examples is given in brackets, viz. those ones where the focus on multiculturalism sensitive issues is major. However, this does not mean that similar overt or hidden agenda points are not to be found elsewhere in the course.

Module 1 - *Introduction to the engineering academic study in English* **(**raising learners' awareness of the need to improve individual study potential and to assume responsibility for their own learning process; intercultural differences and developing an attitude of tolerance towards diversity within the academic study context).

Module 2 - *Creating the necessary linguistic support with a view to forming adequate competences for the engineering academic study in English* (study of linguistic models and structures typically used in scientific and technical texts that the learners will encounter).

Module 3 - *Developing reading/accessing the scientific/technical texts for academic study* (specific types and structures of texts for the engineering academic study context; modes of understanding and accessing texts on electronic support).

Module 4 - *Developing writing skills and increasing students' awareness of the problems connected with writing in an engineering academic context* (types and templates for texts specific to the scientific and technical field; matters of style, register, cohesion and coherence of the written text; writing homework and laboratory reports for academic courses, with a focus on paraphrasing, synthesizing, critically analyzing, quoting sources adequately; avoiding plagiarism and observance of international norms).

Module 5 - *Developing listening skills* (raising capacity of understanding course presentation and argumentation; getting used to various accents in English).

Module 6 - *Developing oral communication skills necessary to the students in order to efficiently and actively participating in seminars and to make oral presentations* (developing skills connected to the effective participation in a range of specific situations for the engineering academic context in English; improving scientific reasoning and data presentation in accordance with the envisaged academic format)

Module 7 - *Creating autonomous study skills, within the engineering academic study skills program* (providing support to the students in developing their independent

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study skills within the academic context, by creating their reflective attitude, open to optimization, and by acquiring modes of transferring already existing skills).

The manner in which such multiculturalism connected sensitive topics were embedded in the EEAS can be described as ranging, on a continuum, from explicit to implicit modalities, as will be seen in Section 3, where a selection of examples is provided, in order to illustrate the approach we propose.

3. Selective exemplification

Given the space constraint, as well as the main aim of this study, i.e. to suggest ways of embedding multiculturalism focused issues in the academic study skills course in English and to support the students in developing an awareness of this multifaceted field, we have grouped the examples into three types of categories, which we labelled:

1 – *REFLECT & DISCUSS* - activities in which the common element is the fact that the learners are invited to reflect on a certain topic, sometimes compare personal experiences, and then discuss about them with peers/whole class, the rationale obviously being that, during this process, there are good chances that the students could become more aware of the cultural differences among them and of the right approach to handling them in their study, as well as in their work community after graduation.

2 – *AWARENESS RAISING ELEMENTS & TIPS* - in general these are represented by the course input, either as course slides presented by the teacher or as applications. They might seem less interactive than type 1 above - initially, but the input treatment is aimed to inviting the learners to try to find their own answers, even if this occurs at the post-course stage. Similarly, the choice of TIPS frequently includes guiding information covering aspects that apparently have a general character, but in fact, they may be interpreted quite differently by the trainees - if we remember that their backgrounds at this stage in their education are still the initial ones, therefore little marked by the new context they will study in. A good example could be *nonverbal cues in making oral presentations*.

3 – *PROBLEM SOLVING* – these are the cases where the course input is the rough material out of which the students are asked to extract rules and meanings; in the process, there are good chances that they refine their understanding of phenomena discussed.

Almost no need to mention that it is neither useful nor recommendable, we believe, to classify the selected examples as belonging totally to one category only; combinations are possible, with many cases where the borderline is difficult to establish. However, what matters for our purpose here is to try to generate and/or collect, as a sort of database for further use in other educational settings - should they require it, a number of solutions envisaged against the constraints and features of our above described context.

For each category, a range of examples are given, including a minimal input and/or activity description, the procedure in class and its rationale.

Thus, for category 1 - *REFLECT & DISCUSS* – the first assignment in Module 1 invites the students to reflect on their previous experience as learners, having English as the language of tuition, the follow-up being to list DOs and DON'Ts about the right approach, habits, behaviour, strategies etc. related to the topic, as tips for their colleagues. With this type, *sharing* with peers is quite important, either by having the students present their assignments in class, or, alternatively, by asking them to prepare the tips in pairs/groups, the activity can thus provide useful mental stimulus. Moreover,

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as this assignment is placed at the very beginning of the course in Module 1, its role is crucial in students' *attitude* formation.

A form of course input inviting interactivity is to have the students answer, after individual reflection (and again, depending on each group structure, any such sequence can be implemented in pairs/groups), posing questions such as: *How can you set about achieving that? How will you react to the university challenge? Is studying at university the same as the type of work you have done before?* etc. What matters is to allow the students time enough to reflect, and then to have them share their thoughts and opinions, if necessary, especially on debut of the course, when one can assume that a certain amount of resistance and/or reluctance to the new context in which they have been trying to integrate can be manifested.

An excerpt from another reflection inviting application asks the students to: *Identify the academic YOU.* This should be done by *making a quick inventory of the skills* the students have, as well as by identifying their *strengths and areas for improvement*.

Quite a similar type of input as above, this time a more prospective one though, as it comprises questions of the type: *Ok, you know who you are...now, but what about in five or ten years' time? What sort of career you want?*, if well placed later in the course, as in our case, may be conducive to the students expanding their (newly) formed, appropriate in a multicultural society, attitudes and/or mentalities, thus preparing them for the moment when they reach the international labour market.

Case studies of various types are introduced in the course input, with certain critical situations being presented. An example taken from the EEAS course input depicts the confusion caused by a mismatch between the cultural assumptions of the learner – a Chinese student facing a situation in which mention is made of a term specific to Britain's insurance system. The example is provided within the *Unpacking Noun Phrases* topic in the course – we should remark that the choice of examples and amount of teacher explanation and class discussion about them should, of course, depend on the multicultural group structure in each case.

A course input item explicitly oriented towards group discussion is *Identifying Reasons for Reluctance to Participate in Discussions, Identified from Research into Cultural Attitudes.* The students work in groups of three, which in general means at least two different nationalities sharing personal culture-specific views, to rank and justify the potential reasons for reluctance, providing examples and arguments in support of their options. An interesting element is that a fourth student plays the role of an Observer of the former ones' discussion, making notes in a *Group Behaviour Observation Sheet*. This activity component not only adds objectiveness, making it possible for the teacher to cope with a large number of students working together in class, but it also helps the learners to see themselves from a peer's perspective, which generally helps them by shedding light on their own reflection & discussion process.

The product of the activity, i.e. the prioritized list of reasons negotiated upon in each group, is generally a good indicator of the kind of problems and/or differences that exist at individual and group levels. Among the first reasons regularly occurring in many groups we should mention: fearfulness that one's own values and/or identity are challenged, unwritten rules and conventions existing in English-speaking countries/cultures the trainees are unaware of, different perceptions of silence and so on.

For the second category – *AWARENESS RAISING ELEMENTS & TIPS*, there are various ways of embedding awareness raising input in the course, selecting the kind of information that is most relevant for each skill envisaged in that particular course

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material. Here is a list of examples; for each one, we present the course topic, and the excerpts from the course content input meant to raise the students' awareness, respectively:

- *Meetings - Identifying problems*: Cultural differences; Shyness - can be individual and/or culture specific.
- *Style in delivering oral presentations*: Nonverbal clues – culture specific; They can vary with audience and context.
- *Speaking to a multicultural audience*: Audience structure comprises individuals from different countries/cultures; You need to understand how people from different cultures interpret your message and the way you deliver it; Visual aids – you should consider symbols meanings in various cultures, in order to avoid being misunderstood; Understanding the main features of your listeners' ethnic profile.
- *Most important items for oral presentations*: Body language – a significant role in conveying meaning without the risk of misunderstandings; It should fit in with the audience's culture(s).
- *Listening and note-taking problems*: Students come from various educational contexts, therefore there can be a mismatch between the students' and the lecturers' purposes; In some educational settings, students could have been required to learn some specified readings/materials, therefore they may not understand the importance of attending lectures and taking good notes as active listeners; Understanding lecturer's jokes and other cultural references, whose aim is to reduce power distance, but this can be misinterpreted by students with different culturally established hierarchical relationships.
- *Technical vocabulary – problems that can occur*: Lexis may be assumed as known from previous knowledge - and in fact it is not; Terms that are difficult to translate across cultural boundaries – see examples; An example of ignorance of a semi-technical term meaning: PLANT= 1. a living organism; 2. an industrial site. (Our remark: this example combines features of this category with those of the *REFLECT & DISCUSS* one).
- *Critical thinking development*: Never accept blindly what you are told in class; Ask questions if necessary, compare and discuss information; University learning should help you to form your own opinions on the basis of a genuine understanding of issues. (Our remark: such examples definitely have an *attitude* developing component).
- *End-of-course tips*: Keep an open mind; No need to make final choices at this stage, as your priorities will surely change in time. (Our remark: by that moment, we can assume that the students would have developed, at least to a certain extent, an awareness of multiculturalism issues, as well as a better capacity to perform their role in the study community - and also outside it).

Category 3 - *PROBLEM SOLVING* – covers examples ranging from input of the linguistic type, with examples of sentences given to the students, who are asked to analyze a word with more than one meaning, such as "instrument" and establish by deduction its different meanings, in an attempt to develop an inquisitive attitude in them, even at this apparently low level.

Similarly, with not highly lexical words that may have received pejorative and/or out-dated connotations, students also work on given examples in sentences to deduce nuances. This should be also conducive to eliminating their dependence on bilingual

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dictionaries and their tendency to see vocabulary knowledge by a one-to-one correspondence with a word in their mother tongue.

Feedback from the students, including Student End-of-term Course Evaluation, Student Questionnaires, Student Diaries regularly filled in and kept in their Portfolios of Assignments, seems to confirm that the EEAS course envisaged objective of developing a better understanding of multiculturalism connected issues, while becoming aware of their own identity in the community, has been fulfilled at least partially.

The learning outcomes of the students who took EEAS were consistently higher than those of the other students in their groups. There were no drop-outs between the first and the second term in any of the years. What is more, enrollments increased for the second term in both years.

4. Open conclusions

At this post-piloting stage, there are several important ideas playing the role of interim conclusions.

Firstly, when such a course is designed, it is of utmost importance, in our opinion, to take into account, in a flexible and well-justified pedagogically manner, the most relevant features of the context in order to decide upon the main focuses and choice of input and classroom treatment.

Then, from our experience, we have come to the conclusion that eliciting the students' ideas, opinions and beliefs and encouraging them to get involved in discussions, as well as providing "food for thought" on each possible occasion, for them to reflect and derive attitude setting conclusions, is an appropriate manner of trying to develop further student openness and sensitiveness to identity and cultural differences issues.

Finally, we should emphasize the importance - for the teacher/course designer/researcher, in amending the course quality and efficiency, attached to feedback permanently received from the learners, under any form possible: diaries, course evaluation sheets, their grades, (semi)formal interviews and focus groups.

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