What is expertise in language teaching? Balancing between LAP and LSP

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Abstract: The wish to turn university education into meaningful preparation for a successful professional career has given rise to teaching foreign languages for specific purposes (LSPs). While in the 1980s there were just a few main branches of LSPs, like Business English or English for Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM), today, in the efforts to provide tailor-made courses for a specific sector of prospective employees, they have increased to an extensive range of courses taught for narrow specializations, such as English for Sports Managers, which I taught at a college in the past. Dealing with unknown discipline-related elements of an LSP, however, are sources of anxiety for many language teachers at the start of their career. I suggest that this unpleasant situation be dealt with by shifting the attention to practising academic and soft skills, as well as functional language (all belonging to the area of LAP – languages for academic purposes), which would serve as a template for the very discipline-related language that our students need. The eternal "what" and "how" of LSP teaching can be additionally handled by giving the students enough autonomy to help us generate classroom content. The results of a survey conducted on bachelor's and master's students from the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, taught at B1 and B2 levels, seem to prove that point, as does my experience after teaching these two levels for the last ten years.

Key words: LAP, LSP, academic skills, soft skills, transferable skills, functional language, student autonomy, student-generated content, interdisciplinarity

Introduction

The key issues appearing in the strategic plans of many universities all over the world these days are employability and internationalization. Hence, also in the language learning area there have been many attempts to find out what needs to be done to facilitate the education process on a worldwide scale and how to best prepare a university student to become a successful candidate on the job market, both at home and abroad. Various studies have been carried out in academic and professional environments to find out what the students' needs and the requirements of certain professional groups are, as far as language is concerned. These analyses, however, give different results, depending on the group surveyed (Guertler & Koenig, 2019; Dlabolová & Suchomelová, 2019), which makes it impossible to draw one conclusion as to what constitutes ideal language teaching and learning on the tertiary level. The difficulty of arriving at a uniform answer is emphasized by Hyland (2006, 73), who explains that "*needs is actually an umbrella term that embraces many aspects, incorporating learners' goals and backgrounds, their language proficiencies, […] and the situations they will need to communicate in*." Needs

also entail changes in external factors, one of them, probably best observable these days, being the shift from classroom to distant teaching due to the Covid 19 pandemic, and changes in the methodologies used so far. Another difficulty might be connected with the way our career as language teachers develops. I would argue that the professional path of a university language teacher, especially one working for a language centre, is more prone to change directions than that of other academics. Teaching English for biology or pedagogy students is not treated as serious a specialization as teaching, for example, Plasma Physics or Behavioural Economics. Consequently, throughout one's language teaching career, the taught language level and/or its communication purpose might change. Hence, we language teachers need to embrace this *panta rhei* philosophy and adopt approaches and methodologies allowing for manoeuvring between LAP and LSP, as need be.

In this paper, I will try to find answers to these questions: 1) What, as far as language teaching, constitutes the competences that university students value, regardless their study discipline? 2) Is there any similar trend or tendency among students from various fields, allowing us, language teachers, to apply a common approach or methodology to all our students, regardless of their specialization? If so, 3) What methodologies and approaches might be employed to attain this purpose?

In the first part of this paper, I will describe a study I conducted in June 2020 among students of B1 and B2 levels (both bachelor's and master's) from two faculties of Masaryk University (MU), Brno, Czech Republic, where I teach. The second part shows my experience with the means and ways of reaching sustainability in my language teaching career.

Needs analysis – survey

The last years have been prolific in promoting needs analysis as a successful tool for deciding about language teaching content and methodologies (Long, 2005; West, 2008; Benesch, 1996). In 2018, when I was teaching at the Faculty of Science Language Centre, we ran a survey among our alumni, which showed that skills were what the former students thought made most sense to concentrate on (Suchomelová-Połomska and Dlabolová, 2019). Similar results were obtained by my colleagues from the Faculty of Arts in their survey at that time. Thereupon, it seemed relevant to check whether there is any correlation between those results and what our current students think, whether they agree or whether there is a divergence between the survey results from different faculties and the current student views.

To find it out, a survey was conducted among the students of the two faculties I have taught at: the Faculty of Science (FS) and the Faculty of Arts (FA), MU.

Around 400 students from each faculty were addressed, both bachelor's and master's students, attending English courses at B1 and B2 levels, according to CEFR. I received 47 responses from the FA students and 84 from those at FS. Their responses are represented as percentages in Fig. 2 and Fig. 3.

In the survey, the students were asked to decide which areas an expert foreign language teacher should focus on most at university (Fig. 1).

What are the qualities of an expert language teacher at university level (choose as many answers as you wish)

1. Concentrates on teaching grammar
2. Concentrates on academic skills (writing essays, abstracts, argumentation, etc.)
3. Concentrates on soft skills (CV, cover letter, presenting, being persuasive, etc.)
4. Helps students develop critical thinking and have their stance
5. Exposes students to academic vocabulary and genres
6. Exposes students to discipline-specific vocabulary and genres
7. Exposes students to general English (a broad variety of topics, both formal and informal language)
8. Encourages students to run their learning reflection diaries
9. Emphasises the importance of self-study
10. Systematically gives obligatory homework tasks
11. Leaves the assessment until the final examination / end-of-term credit test
12. Evaluates students by obligatory homework tasks and end-of-term credit test / examination
13. Any idea of yours?

Fig. 1: *Questions of a survey asking about the students' opinions on the qualities of an expert language teacher at the university level. Source: own elaboration*

The results showed certain similarities and differences in the reactions of students of both faculties (Fig. 2 and 3).

When discussing the differences, the biggest contrast can be seen in assessment. The last position on the graph in Fig. 2 clearly illustrates that FS shows a 40% drop compared to FA when asked about assessment through regular homework followed by a final exam or credit test. This shows that FS students more often have a negative attitude towards this kind of assessment.

The next biggest difference (33%) can be seen in learning general English and keeping reflection diaries, with the FS students again being more sceptical. This might be explained by the fact that FS students are usually engaged in applied research run at the university already during their bachelor's studies; they attend conferences and are involved in cooperation with industry. As a result, their idea as to what kind of (specialized) language they need in practice is crystallised earlier.

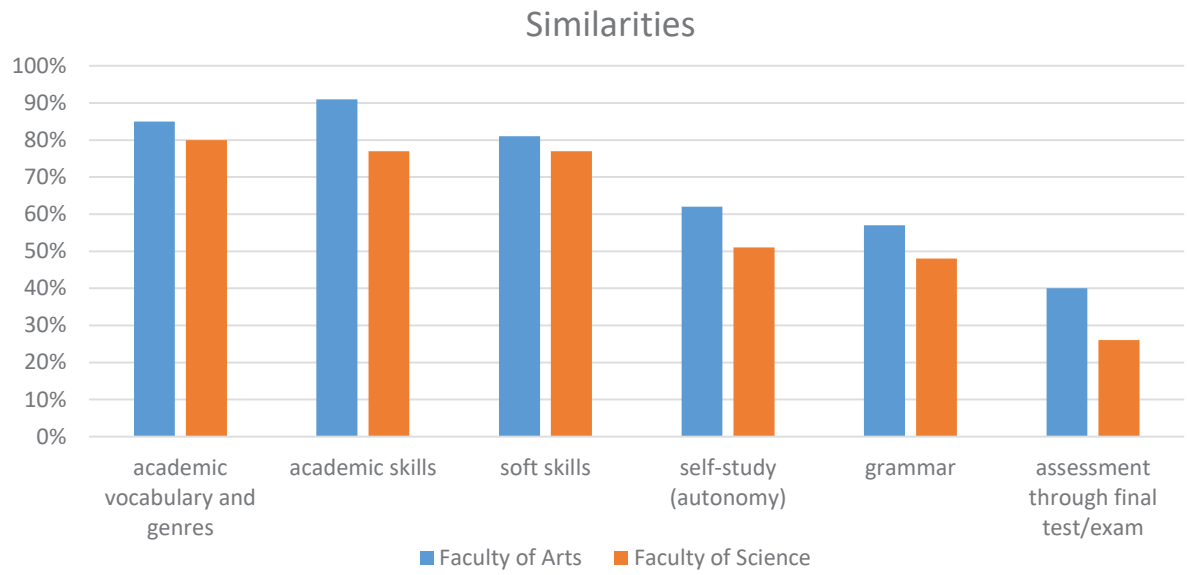

Fig. 2: *Areas of language teaching bringing similar responses. Source: own elaboration*

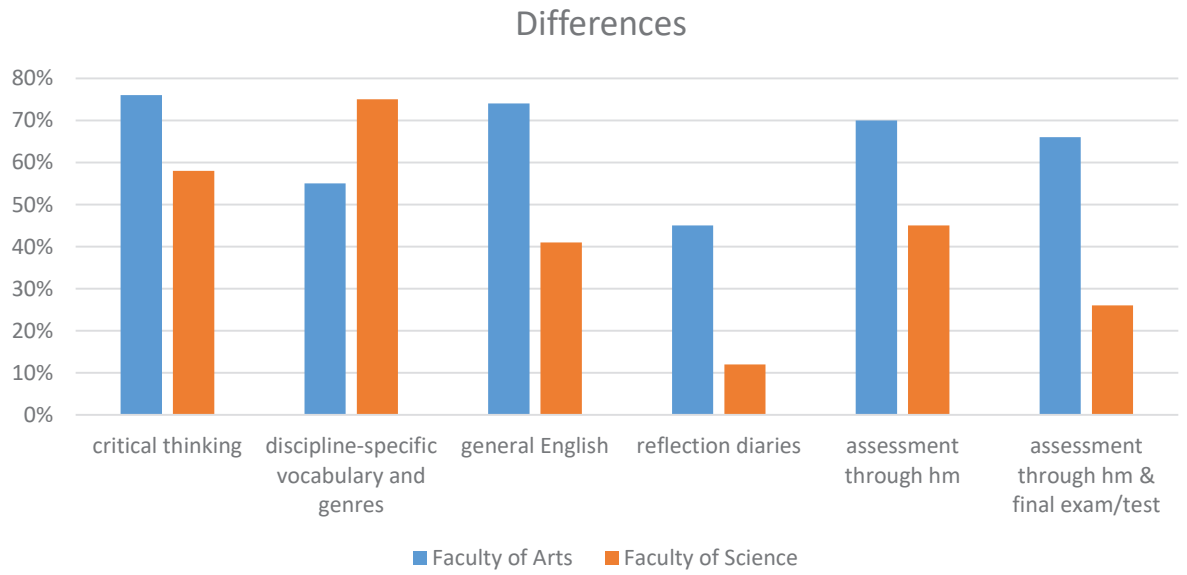

Fig. 3: *Areas of language teaching bringing different responses. Source: own elaboration*

Thirdly, there is a contrast in students attitudes towards assessment in the area of regular homework given throughout a course (25%), followed by differing opinions on discipline-specific vocabulary and genres, and critical thinking. In the last two points, however, over 50% of respondents from both faculties chose these options as areas that needed to be developed when teaching/learning a foreign language at university, which should not be overlooked.

In terms of similarities, both groups perceive academic vocabulary and genres (80% and over), as well as academic and soft skills practise (77% of FS students and 91% of FA students) as important. Both groups also have a similar number of supporters and opponents (circa 50%) when asked about self-study and grammar. Likewise, both groups disagree with being assessed through a final test or exam only (Fig. 3).

In summary, the data shows that practising skills, as well as introducing the students to academic vocabulary and genres are acceptable forms of developing language proficiency across disciplines. These results coincide with my own observations after teaching English to various groups of students: preparing materials aimed at practising academic or soft skills have so far met with acceptance across disciplines.

Having found a common focal point, we need to find a means of manoeuvring across disciplines and purposes, so that the focus of attention is on LAP. This would make it manageable for us, teachers, while at the same time leaving plenty of room to develop various LSPs, addressing the needs of our students. According to my observations, the way to attain this kind of balance between LAP and LSP lies in creating easily adaptable materials and reinforcing students' autonomy. Two points that closely relate to this are: interdisciplinarity and student-generated content.

Approaches helping to attain balance between LAP and LSP

Interdisciplinarity

Reading texts

An interdisciplinary text could be used not only to practise transferable skills, but also to show how functional language works. My intention is to illustrate that it does not have to be a text that deals explicitly with the disciplines that our students study. It is sufficient to use a text building a bridge or creating an association to a global challenge, or a real-life problem that could be discussed from the perspectives of various disciplines.

Fig. 4 shows a text that at first glance seems most likely to be of interest to biology or possibly sports students. It was originally taught to my B1 biology students in a unit called Malnutrition. Despite its clear target audience, I have decided to use it with my B1 FA students. Among the arguments for using it within such a different discipline were the facts that it serves as an excellent example of how cause-effect language works (the phrases highlighted yellow) and it provides many examples of negative prefixes (words in green).

Many diseases may result if a person is not fed an adequate diet. Protein deficiency diseases such as *kwashiorkor* are particularly damaging: they lead to mental retardation particularly when they occur in young children. Vitamin and mineral deficiencies can lead to weak bones, loss of teeth, blindness, or failure of any of a number of vital organs. Children who do not receive either sufficient protein or calories develop characteristic bloated bellies, thin arms and legs, wide eyes and shriveled skin. Perhaps even more sinister is the fact that severe malnutrition in young people leads to early and irreversible brain damage. This results in a negative feedback cycle, for if undernourished and retarded children do survive to become adults, they have decreased learning ability. Therefore, when they grow up, they will be likely to have a hard time finding work, and if work is found it is often of the kind that pays the least money. When these impoverished adults in turn have children, their young are likely to be undernourished as well, thereby perpetuating the tragic cycle.

Other diseases caused by nutritional deficiency are common throughout the world. By one estimate, a quarter of a million children become permanently blind every year because their diets are deficient in Vitamin A. Another 200,000 people per year become deaf owing to a lack of iodine. An additional uncounted number of individuals die of infectious disease because their bodies and immune systems have been weakened by hunger and lack of proper nutrients. All told, some 15 million people starve to death or die indirectly from malnutrition every year.

Fig. 4: *An example of a text that could be used across disciplines; source: Turk, J. and Turk, A., (1984) Environmental Science, CBS College Publishing, New York*

The text in question was also used with my FS biology students as a starting point to follow up with practising modals, conditionals, other lexis connected with cause-effect language, affixes and infixes, and freer skills like panel discussion and argumentation. These kinds of activities can be practised by almost any field of study or specialization. Thanks to the focus of these areas being on academic language, the lesson required minimum adapting. The only parts that were changed, in fact, were the title of the text and name of the class unit from 'Malnutrition' to 'Global Challenges'.

The text gave rise to fruitful discussions about the global challenges that my FA students found relevant in their studies. They mentioned problems like: dyslexia, dysgraphia or ADHD in children (pedagogy students), the increasing number of adults suffering from depression or ADHD (psychology students), computer assisted translation vs. human translation (philology/linguistics students), and digital libraries/galleries/museums vs. traditional institutions of this kind (students of librarianship, art history and aesthetics). These could further be used as topics for broader projects in which the students would deepen their disciplinary knowledge and discover discipline-related vocabulary, at the same time practising the academic or general language used to discuss collecting data, comparing research, analysing statistics and presenting conclusions.

Presentations

Another interdisciplinary task where we can combine student-determined discipline-specific content with more universal language skills and structures is the skill of academic presentation delivery, undoubtedly fundamental these days. In order

to practise it, my B2 (bachelor's) FA students are asked to work in an interdisciplinary pair and prepare a presentation on a topic that overlaps both fields (Fig. 5).

Fields of study	Presentations' titles
Linguistics & Ethnology	Does our language shape our thoughts? Sapir-Whorf hypothesis
English & History	Socio-historical reasons for English becoming a lingua franca
Aesthetics & Psychology	What kind of people we find attractive and why? On mechanisms governing our tastes and preferences
Theatre Studies & Psychology	Psychodrama and drama therapy in mental disorders treatment

Fig. 5: *Examples of interdisciplinary presentations; fall semester 2019*

They were all strong academic presentations, which included research background and valid scientific evidence. Thus, the students definitely developed their own disciplinary knowledge and learned how to talk about it in English. Additionally, because they had to work with someone from outside of their specialization, they developed sensitivity to speaking about issues that they sometimes take for granted in a way that was comprehensible to those of other disciplines. On the other hand, I was able to show them my expertise when practising and developing their skills of argumentation, persuasion, referencing, critical thinking, describing images and/or sign-posting.

I would claim that activities allowing for student-generated content, like project work or preparing an academic presentation set in the conditions described above are a useful opportunity to establish a partnership between us teachers and our students, and to share the responsibility for the expertise: us becoming experts in LAP and our students in discipline-related vocabulary, as well as disciplinary cultures and practices. This kind of approach dissipates pressure from us and enormously motivates our students when they realize that we, the teachers, are willing to learn something from them. Our classes are further enriched by the choices our students make and the content they bring to the given task.

Student-generated content

The profound benefits of tasks or classes based on student-generated content have often been discussed in recent years (Snowball J. D. and S. McKenna, 2017). Activities in which students at least partly generate content are of great value, because they teach students to become independent learners. They motivate them,

because if the students define the details of their own tasks, they become more relevant to them. Finally, such activities or tasks create opportunity to develop discipline-specific skills and vocabulary on individual bases, which is very helpful when teaching heterogeneous groups of students of diverse disciplines. This turns out to be the case often, as even in seemingly homogeneous groups, like biologists, there are students of genetics, molecular biology, anthropology, zoology, botany and others, who do not share the same knowledge and interests.

Project work

"Applying for a Job" was a half-term long project done with my master's students of physics and biology, from finding a job advertisement to a final mock job interview. The students searched through authentic sources to find positions that related to their field of study and interests, working with them as a context for their own CVs, cover letters, and interview questions for their classmates. Each student took the role of interviewee and interviewer, developing the questions on the basis of the classmates' CVs and cover letters.

In the initial stage of such a project there appear two questions: should the teacher provide the students with the initial context (job offers), or should the students be given the freedom to choose on their own, searching through authentic (mostly professional) sources without the teacher's assistance?

My experience shows that it pays off to put your trust in your students' abilities. It appears that even if their foreign language proficiency is below the level required to deal with authentic, specialized texts, they do have one advantage over us – their disciplinary knowledge. Thus, even if they see a given position's name, for example, for the first time in English, or they stumble over some grammar here and there, after they read the description, they can usually easily make a parallel to what it is in their own language.

Apart from greater awareness and a better understanding of the range of positions that they could apply for, the students were also, contrary to me, acquainted with other skills and practices that they involved; for example, what programming languages you should know, whether the position required contact with the corporate sphere, whether it was laboratory based, and many other points that were not stated explicitly in the add. They took advantage of this when preparing interview questions or deciding upon the winning candidate of the interview round.

In the final stage of the project, the mock interview, the students ensured that the interviewee had all the discipline-related skills and knowledge needed, for instance, to be a wetland delineator or mask preparation engineer. Meanwhile, I made sure we employed the skills, grammar and lexis listed below:

Academic/soft skills:	Grammar and lexis:
• CV/cover letter writing • Attending an interview • Self-presentation • Asking for clarification • Giving feedback • Giving advice • Polite disagreeing • Argumentation	• Direct/indirect questions • Conditionals • Inversion • Unreal past • Adjectives-nouns (word formation, prefixes, suffixes)

These are skills, grammar and lexis important for all students, if not professionals, regardless of the field. As such they are the main concern for the language teacher. The discipline-specific language and disciplinary cultures that the students bring become added value here. The students also become acquainted with current genres of texts connected with a life skill like applying for a position: job search websites, CV and cover letter templates, and maybe even social networks for building a professional profile, like LinkedIn. What is more, they are granted an opportunity to research their future professional options and realize their potential.

Written assignments

Written assignments are the last presented example of an activity in which one can combine LAP with LSP. This can be achieved via granting the students the autonomy to specify the topic of their task, based on information as to the purpose of the text (functional language) provided by the teacher.

Here's an example of one of the tasks given to my B2 Arts students: *"Choose an issue / theory / hypothesis connected to your field of study and describe how it developed through the course of time (word limit: 250–300 words)"*. I required them to use process description markers (sequencing or method), past forms (past tenses, hypothesising about the past: modals in the past and third conditional) and connectors. The details of the topic were to be decided upon by the students themselves.

Fig. 6 shows two examples. The first one is an excerpt of a text written by a psychology student; the other, by a history student. The latter does not fully comply with the requirement in that it does not describe a development. Nevertheless, the student describes a process in the past, thus practising language that was assigned.

1. The Development of Neuroimaging Methods

(…) **The first** pioneer who did the fundamental step to neuroimaging was the Italian neuroscientist Angelo Mosso. In 19. century he invented the „human circulation balance", which could measure the redistribution of blood during emotional and intellectual activity. **Then, in** 1895, physicist Wilhelm Conrad Rőntgen demonstrated the use of X-rays in medicine. **Later, during the years** 1918 and 1919, neurosurgeon Walter Dandy introduced ventriculography and pneumoencephalography (PEG), which was the milestone for neuroimaging, because thanks to this device we could visualise blood vessels in the brain with great accuracy. **After this, in** 1927 Egas Moniz performed his first brain angiography. (…)

2. How did knights dress for battles in the 14th century

(…)**Following this** the knight would put on a mail shirt called haubergeon. This shirt was made of hundreds of small iron rings and it provided protection for the parts of the knight's body not covered by plates.

The haubergeon was **followed by** a breastplate **held in place by** straps. **Immediately after** came the arm pieces, again comprised of three parts. Lower canon protected the forearm, couter protected the elbow and upper canon protected the upper arm. The arm pieces were held in place **by** straps and were tied to the arming doublet as well. Some knights preferred to also add spaulders **to** protect their shoulders.

Finally came the helmet, worn over a padded arming cap. There were many type of helmets, some of them with additional mail to protect the wearer's neck. (…)

Fig. 6: *Examples of a written assignment; fall term, 2019*

The parts in bold show process description markers, which are similar in both texts and which can appear in many other texts describing a process. The discipline-specific language, however, shown in red, demonstrates markedly different specialized vocabulary. To conclude, it would be incredibly difficult for a teacher to gain such expertise in discipline-specific vocabulary as to satisfy each individual student in a diverse class. Accordingly, I believe that creating opportunity for the students to develop this kind of vocabulary individually in the framework of academic and general language discussed in class, offers a viable solution.

Conclusion

Reaching a balance between LAP and LSP, or resolving the problem of teacher self-esteem in the face of teaching specialized English classes, when the very specialization is beyond our qualifications or even interest, is a difficulty for many language teachers. Establishing the main focus on LAP with an opportunity given to the students to develop their LSPs individually and autonomously seems to provide a solution.

One of the ways of achieving the aforementioned results might be through broadly specified topics (interdisciplinarity) that allow for the use of materials across various disciplines. The other method could be shifting the focus to the functional language and (transferable) skills, giving the students autonomy to apply them

to their own diverse contexts (hence different disciplines). The benefits of employing these elements in the language classroom include the high adaptability of teaching materials and transformation of students into the co-authors of the learning content, which helps develop their responsibility for the learning process. Thus, teachers can apply their methodological expertise to *"organizing the teaching material by situations which students will need to operate in"* (Harmer, 2001: 298) through specifying *"the situation, the likely participants, and communicative goals."* (ibid).

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