

Reflections on UNICERT® and new accreditation conditions at STU MTF Trnava

Gabriela Chmelíková a Ľudmila Hurajová

Introduction

Current situation in the field of English for Specific Purposes at tertiary institutions is not encouraging as many universities or other tertiary institutions – due to “financial reasons” – are closing their language centres or departments or decreased the load of English lessons despite the quality elaborated syllabus, remarkable experience of English language practitioners or excellent implementation of students with good study results and English language certificate – UNICert®.

In 2008/09 academic year a successful syllabus model of language teaching had to be adjusted to the new situation as the Faculty Management decided that English would be the only foreign language taught at STU MTF. That meant, all students who studied other languages (German, French, Russian) at their secondary schools had to start studying new language – English at the Faculty. Obviously, the step was quite unfriendly and represented a shock for them, for those German speaking in particular, as there are quite a lot successful German and French companies in the region. Not only was the decision unfriendly, it also brought a lot of extra work, e.g. the new PhD. students who studied German within their study programme had to start to study the English language at the doctoral study (some of them from the very beginning). It was a very unpleasant situation as many of them were good experts in their subject-specific field, however, their obligatory outcomes in English were not as good as they might be if they were allowed to prepare them in German.

However, the situation gradually calmed down and the certification system of UNICert® represented here a great help. The STU MTF graduates practically do not have any troubles to find a good job, we can even say that some of them who are technologically or IT excellent are headhunted. Still, the certification of their language competence increased the graduates' marketability. For six years we provided our students with the possibility to obtain a UNICert® certificate.

But in 2015/16 academic year the situation got even worse – within the new accreditation of Slovak universities the load of English language lessons was reduced by a half. This means that the total number of English lessons (within two semesters) decreased to 52, and therefore we are no more entitled to apply for the UNICert® accreditation as the essential requirement for being granted it is 120 of contact lessons in the target language.

1 Dealing with new situation

Language Department at STU MTF in Trnava is now facing difficult conditions: how to struggle with language competence improvement within two semesters and how to possibly bridge the gap between the obligatory English language study at bachelor degree (in second year) and doctoral degree (second and third year) as regarding the new accreditation the master study has no language courses which means there is a three year gap for those students who enter the job market or apply for PhD. study.

The EST concept taught at STU MTF was developed in the early 90s based on the thorough needs analysis of the Faculty students' needs, wants and lacks in English language knowledge on one hand, and the requirements from industrial practice on the other hand.

This concept is regularly updated regarding the ongoing discussions and feedback reflecting the current development and innovations, therefore, the language teaching goes here hand in hand with subject-specific teaching. Nevertheless, language is also a socio-cultural phenomenon, so focus on culture is an integral part of the EST course as well. STU MTF students regularly participate in mobility in foreign universities, where the awareness of cultural differences and tolerance are the prerequisites for mastering the university study abroad, and later on also for performance in the companies with different corporate cultures.

Soft skills such as self-motivation, time management and learner autonomy, flexibility, willingness to learn, self-organisation developed in the EST classes along with the language skills can be further enhanced via involving the undergraduate or postgraduate students into various projects and thus increase their chances in the global job market.

This means that the STU MTF English course not only covers the necessary terminology and topics according to the syllabi, the students also get familiar also with intercultural issues and are challenged to elaborate their own projects which can be then presented at the Faculty competition – Student Research Conference.

2 Possible solutions to the situation at STU MTF

How did we try to deal with the new situation? First, the language practitioners did they best to understand the subject matter related to the subject-specific departments and asked their fellow workers to show them round their workplaces and laboratories and describe as well as explain the functions of related equipment, basic operations and technology procedure. This visit was very useful for both sides and confirmed us that we can refer to real facts in teaching EST. Therefore, one of the possible solutions is to involve students, either under or postgraduates into real interdisciplinary projects, and/or enhance the English for

Science and Technology course by gamification and integrate more technology in learning.

2.1 Involving students in current projects

The new possibilities can be found in enhanced interdisciplinary cooperation with subject-specific departments. Such a cooperation can be represented by projects in which the representatives of language teachers and specialists are involved.

A good example can be seen in the APVV project titled *Student online conferences of STU MTF (Slovakia) and University of Niš, Faculty of Electrical Engineering (Serbia) for the purposes of specific English language and other skills development* which brought together English teachers, PhD. students and young researchers starting thus the perspective collaboration of the students majoring in the doctoral or master IT study programmes with similar syllabi, using English for Science and Technology (EST) as a means of communication. Regarding the situation in several Central European countries, such as Poland, Hungary, Germany, Croatia or Austria (personal experience due to Doctoral seminars organised by STU MTF) does not really allow spending much money on doctoral students' skills development whether they are language or ICT skills. The financial sources of educational institutions are often limited, and so the chances of the PhD students or young researchers to attend prestigious international scientific events are limited as well. In our current project we focus on providing them with an inexpensive platform to train communication and conferencing skills at minimum expenses.

Besides, within the project the doctoral students can exchange their professional knowledge and enrich their international experience before they start regular cooperation in person. As a benefit, the involved students will improve their language and communication skills using information technologies (computer with an in-built web cam, data projector), strengthen their presentation skills, social and specific technical skills. Such an experience could be also considered as a pre-experience for student mobility. During the project course the students improve their language and communication skills using ICT, strengthen their presentation skills as they also chair the individual on-line meetings, they will also enhance their social and specific technical skills which could be considered as a prerequisite for possible student mobility. It is also necessary to mention that within this project, the involved doctoral students had the real opportunity to present at a real ESP conference in Niš, Serbia. The other possibilities can be represented by the dissemination of good experience of these doctoral students involved in the project.

Our students are also involved in another KEGA project titled *Development of educational application for STU MTF students to enhance the competence of their technical English within managed/controlled self-study focused on Applied informatics and au-*

tomation in Industry study programme which is based on preparing the materials for self-access in English and is described below in paragraph 2.3.

The common cooperation with subject-specific departments is also represented by common output. It comprises:

- A. University textbooks: (e.g.: M. Marônek, E. Mironovová: Diploma project. Work with the English terminology in the field of welding),
- B. Assistance with translations (e.g. University textbook “Theory of Forming”, by Assoc. Professors R. Moravčík and M. Hazlinger),
- C. Translations of more than 30 scientific monographs translated by the EST teachers.

Discussing the subject-specific issues while writing or translating the textbooks or monographs the English practitioners get a deep insight into the specific terminology and content of the subject. This common discussions are then utilised in elaborating the common projects proposals (KEGA, APVV) or papers for related conferences.

2.2 *Looking for new approaches to English language study*

Finally, one of the possibility is also to try a new way – currently the Language Department is involved in ERASMUS+ project titled *Transnational Exchange of good CLIL practice among European Educational Institutions* in which five countries are involved. CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) method could be the way how to improve the status of the Language department at STU MTF in Trnava.

Situation on global labour market makes Higher Education Institutions internationalise education system at Universities, colleges. Foreign Languages, majorly English, are integrated into university courses. Some world-recognized universities provide even study branches in English. Providing international university education system is not only about the courses, the study branches taught in English, this naturally set international environment is done also by students – foreigners. Therefore, have a clear target what and how the English language could be integrated into individual study programmes is a must for the nearest few years at STU MTF as it seems to be “a vicious circle”, without the option to study at the university/faculty in English, there will not be any increase of foreign students. Implementing English into education at STU MTF is the priority also due to another reason: it allows the students as well as the researchers to express and present their ideas, proposals, designs and research results in an international environment.

Using the results of the aforementioned ERASMUS+ project, we are planning to map, identify the students’ needs and requirements and teachers’ preparedness

for content and language integrated learning (CLIL) at STU MTF. In other words, to define which and how many courses will be taught by implementing CLIL principles. Our ESP experts are preparing a manual for teachers how to apply CLIL into their courses and it will be spread via a web platform, which will be used as a self-learning environment for STU MTF teachers. 13 Our ESP experts and some subject-specific teachers within the dissemination activities of the mentioned ERASMUS+ project are working on a project proposal concerning cooperation with universities around Europe and other continents to work on enhancing University Teacher competences for teaching in foreign languages. Working in international teams on project issues always deploys ICT to process all project activities. In addition, this methodology could open new horizons for the tertiary education in the field of foreign language acquisition.

2.3 Other possibilities: game, self-learning and technology integrated learning

As aforementioned, the other possibility is represented by enhancing the EST teaching by gamification. It is known that PC games can scaffold learning while keeping the players involved in continued interest in the game for hours, weeks, and even years. At the same time, students/players train their skills and build their knowledge as long as they continue to play. Gamification is not based on entertainment, although it uses entertaining features, it simultaneously provides attractive learning environment and combine the concentration demanded by challenging activities and the enjoyment which can be called as “serious play” or “playful work”.

The English practitioners integrated gamification, self-learning, content and technology into one of the aforementioned projects while still applying a holistic approach. This project is oriented on designing and education application for STU MTF students so that their competence in professional English could be naturally enhanced. The idea came from three students majoring in Applied Informatics and Automation in Industry who delivered a project at the Students Research Conference – they decided to design an application for learning professional English. By the way, they were awarded the second place in the Faculty competition of Student Research Conference. Afterwards, an interdisciplinary team, consisting of teachers both ESP and Informatics teachers and students, was established to help and start sorting out the project issues. The team members aim at designing an application which will fully support students’ self-learning for enhancing professional English competence. The project team students are supposed to design the education application by themselves and the projects processes are meant to be an educational environment. They are supposed to program such an application which will integrate game features and language content in one whole while being supervised by the teachers. Within this extra-curricular learning the students learn to:

- a) identify English content for the application using Text Mining,
- b) design draft structure of the application,
- c) program the structure and its basic functions,
- d) distinguish entertaining game and game-based education,
- e) face and overcome obstacles.

At present, the students are learning the programming language so that they manage building the application with gaming features working in various devices. A fully operating application should be piloted in 2017 when the pilot version will be provided to selected STU MTF students, and the team members will get the feedback to the application and its functions so that the necessary adjustments or modifications could be applied before the application will be provided to all students.

3 Language course accreditation – meeting the requirements for quality assessment

The teachers at the Slovak universities focused on non-philological language study (e.g. engineering, medical, economic, etc.) are trying to harmonize, unify and standardize their language study syllabi within the European context and also in accordance with Common European Framework of reference for Languages so that they meet also the quality requirements stated by UNICert® LUCE (Language Accreditation Unit for Universities of Central and Eastern Europe). Currently, UNICert® is the only system of the kind reflecting the specific needs, objectives and methodology typical of students at individual academic institutions. It is the language programme and certification system considering higher educational conditions and the final document in the UNICert® system is a certificate that can only be issued by the universities which are members of the UNICert® Network while respecting its regulations. The advantage is represented by the fact that this system is open to the modifications stemming from national and/or individual differences among universities within countries. This also means that the accredited workplace providing second language teaching within the system is then assured by an international accreditation committee and the students can graduate from their language course with a credible certificate.

Our Faculty Department of Languages was successful in gaining the accreditation and afterwards also in reaccreditation for the UNICert® II and III levels in English for engineering and examined the first students in February 2010. Altogether, in six years approximately 100 students graduated either with UNICert® II or UNICert® III certificates. Unfortunately, in 2015 after the new accreditation when the load of English lessons was limited to just two semesters the Language Department is no more eligible to apply for new accreditation. For the students

interested in gaining a language certificate we will try to find a way how to obtain it, however, obviously this will be more expensive as for many certificates a preparatory course is required.

Conclusion

The ability to communicate in a foreign language is one of the essential competences necessary for living in EU countries and it is important not only for the mobility, but it enhances the employability of STU MTF graduates in labour market. To conclude, whether we admit it or not, the language education at the Slovak technical universities is changing; it is no more understood only as a mastery of one or two languages. Instead, the aim has become the development of such a language register, where all the language skills find their place and meaning (Kováčiková, 2010, p. 70).

References

- CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, M., & SCHNEIDER, B. (2000). *Becoming an adult: How teenagers prepare for the world of work*. New York: Basic Books.
- DAHESTANI, R., & STOJKOVIČ, N. (2015). The Use of Technology in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Instructions: A Literature Review. *The Journal of Teaching English for Specific and Academic Purposes*, Vol. 3, No. 3. <http://espeap.junis.ni.ac.rs/index.php/espeap/article/view/304/199>.
- HAMARI, J., SHERNOFF, D. J., ROWE, E., COLLER, B., ASBELL-CLARKE, J., & EDWARDS, T. (2016). Challenging games help students learn: An empirical study on engagement, flow and immersion in game-based learning. *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 54, 170–179.
- HURAJOVÁ, L. (2015). Content and Language – how to integrate them on tertiary level. *R&E source. Special issue 4*, 105–108. <http://journal.ph-noe.ac.at/index.php/resource/article/view/255/294>.
- HURAJOVÁ, L. (2015). Tertiary CLIL. In POKRIVČÁKOVÁ, S. ET AL *CLIL in Foreign Language Education: e-textbook for foreign language teachers*. Nitra.
- HURAJOVÁ L., & LUPRICHOVÁ, J. (2015). Being a CLIL teacher. In POKRIVČÁKOVÁ, S. ET AL *CLIL in Foreign Language Education: e-textbook for foreign language teachers*. Nitra.
- CHMELÍKOVÁ, G. (2015). Doctoral students and necessary academic skills. *R&E source. Special issue 4*, 28 to 31, <http://journal.ph-noe.ac.at/index.php/resource/article/view/241/280>.
- CHMELÍKOVÁ, G., & BOŽEK, P. (2013). Utilization of computer-aided teaching and learning of English and other subjects at STU MTF in Trnava. In *Proc. IAC-ETeL 2013 [electronic]: International Conference on Education, Teaching and E-learning*, CD-ROM. Prague, p. 4.
- KOVÁČIKOVÁ, E. (2012). CLIL methodology through project work within the environment of English for specific Purposes. In HORVÁTHOVÁ B. ET AL. *New directions in teaching foreign languages*. Brno: Masaryk University.
- MIŠTINA, J. (2012). English for academic purposes course design for natural science doctoral candidates. In HORVÁTHOVÁ ET AL. *New directions in teaching foreign languages*. Brno: Masaryk University.
- TAYLOR, K. (2001). International Collaborations: Barrier and Benefits. In *Proc. Co-Mat-Tech 2001*, pp. 630 to 635.
- VYGOTSKY, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Authors

Mgr. Gabriela Chmelíková, PhD., e-mail: gabriela.chmelikova@stuba.sk, Faculty of Materials Science and Technology, Slovak University of Technology, Trnava, Slovak Republic

Author is a senior assistant teaching English for Science and Technology, and the Head of the Department of Languages and Humanities at STU MTF. In cooperation with colleagues from other departments, she annually organizes Student Research Conference. She also cooperated on the accreditation file elaboration for UNICert® II and III levels in English for engineering study branches in the UNICert® examination system. Her professional interests include language skills, reading in particular, use of multimedia in teaching mainly for presentation techniques.

Mgr. Ludmila Hurajová, PhD., e-mail: ludmila.hurajova@stuba.sk, Faculty of Materials Science and Technology, Slovak University of Technology, Trnava, Slovak Republic

Author is a senior assistant teaching English for Science and Technology and Entrepreneurship at STU MTF. She participates in organizing Student Research Conference. She is a principal investigator and coordinator of the ERASMUS+ project *Transnational exchange of good CLIL practice among European Educational Institution's* (2015–2017) at STU MTF. She works on other projects as a member of the investigation team. She deals with CLIL methodology, its application on Tertiary level of education, integrated learning approaches, competence and personal development.