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Raising the competitiveness of university language departments

ABSTRACT

Modern ESP teaching in higher education requires departments to make changes that will enable them to adapt to new responsibilities: i.e., new requirements and challenges arise from the call to offer courses in life long learning programs or the need to satisfy employers seeking students with marketable foreign language communication skills, and who also demand proficient level technical and professional writing competencies from new graduates, as well as intercultural and professional social skills. This paper discusses several practical steps ESP teachers might take to modify their approach to teaching, in order to assist their students to graduate with more competitive ESP knowledge and professional behavioral skills.

In Hungary, post-secondary language departments are facing new challenges to their survival: either they integrate into the academic community by becoming academic departments, which means that their present colleagues earn PhDs, or these departments will vanish, together with all their experience. Should the latter occur, then higher education would appear to be moving towards leaving ESP teaching to the private language school market, about which no data is available on such issues as course quality. In the best case scenario, the disappearance of these language departments might lead to the formation of new teaching staffs, to be filled with young, inexperienced holders of PhD, who do not always possess the necessary experience, methodological skills, and technical language competencies required to hold quality ESP courses.

Since 2000, we have been closely monitoring and publishing on the situation of language departments in higher education, and at that time, we chose several research tasks. (Wiwczaroski 2002, 2003a-d) The thrust of this research is, as we described in a recent publication, that "the onus is on us and our colleagues nationwide to quickly work towards integration of our course offerings into the greater curricula." (Wiwczaroski, Silye and Tar 2005) In this paper, we want to add certain viewpoints to these tasks and suggest some new ones. We also wish to highlight (without the need for being complete) the required changes in student (and teacher) behavior in the process of becoming more successful in their future carriers. Behavior here means not only

language competency skills (learning or teaching) but also a healthy attitude from both students and teachers in their individual working activities but in their mutual interactions as well.

The first focus in how we want to change our department's research focus involves, as Wiwczaroski writes, "the identification and elaboration of methodologies that will enhance *student success*". (Wiwczaroski 2005) The students enrolled in our *Professional Language Communication Minor* have four semesters to progress from shyly forming little more than a few unrelated sentences, towards becoming young professionals who can properly and competently use a foreign language as a tool for communication in their careers everyday. Our courses work to create a sense of work ethic and personal responsibility in the student, i.e., each one must develop a new mentality as to how he/she should act in an adult setting. Of course, any such intellectual shift requires an approach which is gradual in nature. Tools we employ include the teaching of proper metacommunicative methods, instruction on professional appearance and demeanor, exercises in careful lexicographical selection and sentence structure based on proper grammar - with due attention given to error correction and consciousness raising - to ensure the successful communication of a selected message to a target audience, discussions on diplomatically handling conflicts across cultural lines, as well as the importance of meeting deadlines (late or improperly done assignments are not graded) and the development of a 'feel for the weight of responsibility'. All these are target areas, integrated across each of the semesters of the program. In other words, our classes promote not only ESP skills, but through an individual confrontation with the multi-layered intercultural world of business, seek to engender mature thinking, socialization skills, proper motivation and writing and speaking excellence in our students. These activities further denote some of the key research issues we are exploring in our quest to graduate more successful carrier starters with marketable linguistic and communicative skills.

Mature thinking. We can distinguish three basic thinking patterns: young, mature and old. (Yarbro 1983) The first, the so-called young thinking pattern, is characterized by a strong sense of right and wrong. The right/wrong patterns are taken on directly from the family, school or religion, and they are usually not modified at all. Those having this thinking pattern have a sense of righteousness about their opinions and actions, without thinking them through.

The second, the so-called mature thinking pattern, which we find ultimately important for our students to acquire, can be characterized by a definite sense of self responsibility: *if something goes wrong, I need to find the causes in myself and not in the world around myself.* "Taking responsibility for one's own learning can lead to empowerment and improvement, for both teachers and students" (Webster 2003). It also conveys that all people are basically the same, meaning that another person can think the way I do. This has a strong feeling of joining and togetherness, relationships are rich and they are filled with empathy and understanding. Mature thinkers, instead of accepting what is right/wrong, try to find these values for themselves: what is right/wrong for ME? The development of mature thinking is significant in high quality technical language teaching, because this change in attitude directly leads to **critical thinking**, which is the solid basis for any creative mental work. Mature and critical thinkers do not accept their teachers as the sole sources of information or as authorities. They ask, argue and criticize. Unfortunately, Hungarian secondary education, as a result of 40 years of autocratic traditions, still lags behind in recognizing the importance of critical thinking. Critical thinking is the combination of various interdependent cognitive skills and firm attitudes that enable a person to use a wide range of information and methods to make logical and objective decisions. The ability to think critically helps students extend the boundaries of their knowledge, identify and develop mature values, to be able to decide what is significant and what is insignificant and shape an outlook on the whole world around them. The science of psychology has even developed a model for the better understanding of the process of critical thinking: retention (remembering information), comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. These steps are to be discussed in a different paper.

Critical thinking also presupposes a certain kind of attitude from students which we teachers can (and should) positively influence: courage to ask and debate, careful planning to achieve what one wants, to take errors as valuable feedbacks to learn from and tolerance to accept others' different, sometimes opposing views. Moreover, as learning is a life-long process, critical thinkers learn not only from their teachers, but amplify their knowledge on their own later in their lives.

Socialization skills

Brophy and Jere reports that teachers can have direct actions toward minimizing classroom conflicts by socializing students into a classroom environment conducive to learning. Key elements of successful student socialization include modeling and instruction of prosocial behavior; communicating positive expectations, attributes and social labels; reinforcing desired behavior (Dix, 1993; Good & Brophy, 1994, 1995). Successful socialization further depends on a teacher's ability to adopt an authoritative (and not authoritarian) teaching style for classroom management and to employ effective counseling skills when trying to develop positive relationships with students.

Modeling prosocial behaviour means that teachers should practice what they preach: they should model a certain kind of desired positive behavior. It also conveys the thinking and decision taking involved in the action for the common good. In certain cases, modeling can be supplemented with instruction (including practice exercises) in desirable social skills and coping strategies.

Projecting positive expectations: Students should be constantly treated as well-intended individuals who respect each other and the teacher and who are capable of achieving any kind of reasonably set goals. Teachers should reinforce positive qualities and behaviors, and should never mock or ironically tease students for their occasional errors.

Authoritative teaching means that the teacher is the authority figure in the classroom, rather than being authoritarian or laissez-faire. Good teachers are responsible for controlling their groups and exercise leadership, and they should also be supportive and understanding with students, focusing on desired behavior. Power fights should be avoided as students are not equal "fighters" in maturity and life experience. In a group where classroom atmosphere is good, a kind of self-regulation works, lending itself to effective group control.

Counseling skills include developing personal relationships with problem students and reassuring them of our continued concern about their development, their position in the group and about their feelings, even if they exhaust teachers with their provocative behavior.

Studying the *attributes of successful teachers*, Good and Brophy (1995) have identified some general attributes of teachers that contribute to their success in socializing students. These attributes include: social attractiveness based on a cheerful disposition, friendliness, emotional maturity, sincerity and other qualities that indicate good mental health and personal adjustment, such as self-confidence, realistic perceptions of students and life, enjoyment of teaching and students, patience, flexibility and the capability for liberalizing students as they grow more mature and responsible in class.

The significance of *student motivation* in the learning process is unquestionable: it sustains interest, helps to cope with occasional difficulties and gives a kind of inner strength to reach one's set goal.

Brophy (1987) identified the following elements of research on strategies for motivating students to learn: supportive environment (such as meaningful learning objectives, good classroom atmosphere, where students can make mistakes and learn from them without fear of being punished and shamed), motivating by maintaining success expectations (e.g. help students to recognize linkages between effort and outcome), motivating by supplying extrinsic incentives (e.g.

rewards), motivating by capitalizing on students' intrinsic motivation (e.g. interesting tasks, immediate feedback, opportunities for performance), stimulating student motivation to learn (e.g. minimizing performance anxiety in learning, inducing curiosity).

I should also add that life-like tasks, such as the translation and linguistic analysis of a legal contract in a legal language classroom gives the students the firm belief that they practice for life, they recognize the importance of legal language in the world of work and also the fact that they acquire some very special knowledge in a foreign language. This results in positive motivation and motivated students cooperate in compiling the curriculum of the course, they suggest and bring “interesting” contracts, agreements and other types of legal texts into the language classroom for discussion.

Confrontation with another culture

Participating in a *new education system* means that students are, essentially, participating in a *new culture*. This means that students can expect to experience a type of *culture shock*. Culture shock refers to those feelings of *confusion* and *unease* that students may experience when they are trying to participate in a different culture. It is perfectly normal for students to experience these feelings when they first participate in a class where the teacher is a native speaker or when they study abroad.

Storti (2001) claims that most cultural misunderstanding arises when other people do not behave the way we *expect* them to behave. The way we communicate with each other varies from one culture to another. Most importantly, the way we *interpret* different ways of communicating varies from one culture to another. Much misunderstanding occurs when people from different cultures do not understand each other's ways of communicating. Unfortunately, for many people, the first realization that there are different ways of communicating in different cultures is when they ‘break’ one of the ‘cultural rules’. This misunderstanding is further complicated when a different language is spoken. Helping students to overcome the above mentioned difficulties is mainly the native speaker teacher's task, but if non-native teachers are aware of these difficulties, it can provide a lot of assistance for their students. How can they assist? I definitely think that their personal experience, i.e. how they themselves could cope with these difficulties is the best example that they can transfer to their students. If they share these memories, students can gain strength as they realize that they are not alone in this situation. *Sharing concerns is one of the best ways of eliminating individual fear.*

Wiwczaroski (2003d) notes the need to develop students' "writing and speaking excellence". I should like to add to this part the so-called **student behavior excellence**, which is closely correlated with teacher behavior. Brophy studied teacher behavior and student achievement and stated that the expectations of teachers concerning their students should be generally accurate and based on valid information. In his view most of the individualized treatment should be appropriate and based on differential student behavior. If students receive *differential attention* (i.e. effective help to correct weaknesses in various fields such as examination anxiety, presentation anxiety, socialization problems), they slowly master the skills that are necessary to “sell themselves in the world of labour”. Student behavioral excellence also means that teachers should seek to shape their students to become optimistic, positive personalities and in this way, successful people both in their private and business lives. The chief means for this are modeling (teachers as model figures, mentioned above) and positive expectations towards their students. Brophy mentions that teachers should keep expectations for individual students current by monitoring their progress and stressing present performance over past history. He also thinks that teachers should stress continuous progress relative to previous levels of mastery rather than normative comparisons or comparisons between individuals. Teachers should diagnose students' learning difficulties and re-teach the material in a different way, rather than repeating the same instruction or giving up in frustration. Teachers should think in terms of stretching the students' minds and encourage them to achieve as much as they can, rather than worrying about protecting them from future failure. By

these means students believe that they are “capable” of achieving any set goals and they can become self-confident and optimistic personalities, which positively influences their classroom and life performance as well.

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