

Should We Teach English for Work Purposes to Undergraduates at Polish Higher Schools?

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the advantages and disadvantages of teaching English for work purposes to undergraduate students at higher schools in Poland, and is the result of the authors' experience as teachers of English at AGH University of Science and Technology in Cracow, Poland. It is argued that building special work-related syllabuses for students is necessary in view of their futures but it poses a serious challenge.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to discuss the need to teach English for work purposes to undergraduates at Polish higher educational institutions

Motivation for Study

The motivation for this work is Ireland and Great Britain's current "open door" policies towards Polish workers. Citizens of Poland have the same right to be employed in these countries as Irish and British nationals.¹ Therefore, it is now more important than ever for Polish students to learn English.

The theoretical framework for this article is supplied by the general notion of the school as an organization and social institution

Introduction

Foreign languages have been part of the Polish school curriculum for some time. Starting in the late 1940's, the Russian language was adopted as the primary foreign language to be instructed to all students from the age of 11 and upwards, regardless of the kind of institution (Janowski, 1992, 43). A "West European language" was offered as a "second foreign language" only to pupils attending full secondary school, in other words, institutions leading to a school leaving certificate (Janowski, 1992, 43). From the 1989-90 academic years onward the learning of Russian ceased to be compulsory, and, at about the same time, the Polish government began to encourage the widespread teaching of West European languages in schools (Janowski, 1992, 50).

Fifty-five new teacher training colleges have been opened throughout Poland in support of the government's policy (Janowski, 1992, 51) and by 1992 two foreign organizations had endorsed this new training initiative by sending volunteers to Poland: 1) Solidarity Eastern Europe, a Canadian company and 2) the American Peace Corps.

Consequently, on entering university, students in Poland have usually studied English at school for at least three years, doing General English courses. They mainly concentrated on acquiring basic grammatical structures and general English vocabulary covering frequently taught topics such as family, food, sports and hobbies. Their theoretical knowledge of grammar is usually good, still they mostly lack the ability to apply the rules they have learnt when they speak and write spontaneously. When it comes to vocabulary, its range is limited

and the choice of topic covered may hinder their performance in social and work related situations they are most likely to encounter.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Teaching English for Work Purposes

The question we would like to raise is whether we should teach students more advanced grammar assuming that the material covered in secondary education is the material absorbed, or we should try to transform their theoretical understanding of language structures into practice, slowly working towards their conscious usage of language styles in everyday situations. As for vocabulary, should we recycle and expand the vocabulary they learnt at school or rather bring in new topics that they will find useful in their professional life in the future.

There is a popular opinion that students are too young and inexperienced for such an approach towards language learning. Having no past professional experience or professional knowledge they can draw on, they find the topics not stimulating enough to get fully involved in the class. What is more, as they have never functioned in any work environment they lack the ability to differentiate between different degrees of formality and sometimes question the purpose of studying things which they cannot apply immediately. Consequently, teaching a work-related syllabus poses a great challenge for a teacher who has to be truly convinced and enthusiastic to be able to involve the students in the course.

On the basis of our personal experience, we can say that the argument about students' inability to understand and digest such topics seems to be unfounded. Firstly, students do not live in the vacuum – they watch television, read the press, and browse the Net. Therefore, they, even subconsciously, acquire the basic understanding of the world around them reading about and listening to political, economical and social news. Secondly, often without realizing that, they perform different social roles such as a customer, a client, an applicant, a tenant, a target purchaser, a caller, etc. So, what we attempt to teach them is not only how to function in a foreign language environment but, in fact, in their native language environment as well.

Finally, how to define what the right moment for teaching work-related topics is. If not now, then when? In two or three years' time students will have left university and start their professional life. If we agree that now is a bit too early, we must understand that we will let students go without even basic linguistic preparation to function in the world they will enter. We do not want to limit their language awareness and deprive them of a chance to realize that using English is something more than a simple storytelling.

Concluding Remarks

Unfortunately, our observation is that not much is done to address the issue. Universities' Foreign Language Departments have little or no choice of adequate course books and related materials targeted at students and young adults in general who have no previous in-company experience. Most of the work-related course books assume and make use of students' experience and expertise. Consequently, if we wish to use them, teachers must spend a lot of time introducing and explaining to students the concepts and modify exercises to suit student needs. For that reason, almost each and every course must be tailor-made for a particular group of students which requires a lot of additional preparation on part of the teachers and

proves to be a serious logistic problem, especially for big universities with thousands of course students.

Regardless the obstacles and difficulties mentioned above, we do believe that such syllabuses should be implemented for the benefit of the students. In the light of the feedback we have received from young professionals who have just started their career in big multinationals, we are convinced that teaching English for work purposes will help students make first steps on the career ladder. Thus, at the same time we hope that leading publishers will realize the need for new course books on English for work purposes designed for students and facilitate our work supplying us with more student and teacher-friendly materials.

Note

1. According to the Irish Examiner, thirty three thousand Polish workers have arrived in Ireland since Poland's accession to the EU in May, 2004.
2. Special thanks to **Dr. Kimberly Grantham Griffith** and **Dr. William Allan Kritsonis** for the editorial expertise and assistance.

References

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2. Janowski A. (1992), Polish Education: Changes and Prospects. Oxford Studies in Comparative Education 2 (1), 41-55.
3. To review previous works dealing with the Polish system of education, please see: www.nationalforum.com