

COLLABORATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE IN CONTEXT

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Abstract. *Globalization and the role of English as a lingua franca dictate the development of university English language courses which focus on developing graduates who could progress not only in their academic work but also later on in their professional lives. The article aims to present that ESP and globalization are intertwined: on one hand ESP has become the perfect medium of the globalization phenomenon and on the other hand globalization has boosted the use of ESP. It also discusses the trends in teaching ESP in two universities in Bulgaria and Algeria and provides some ideas about successful management of the ESP departments. The paper encourages international collaboration which widens the teachers' horizons, motivates teachers to reconsider the assumptions, beliefs and values of their academic environment and brings up positive change at higher institutions.*

Key words: *English for specific purposes, globalization, language departments, skills and competences*

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is power. It can not only provide information and engage you in a social interaction but also shape beliefs and identities, negotiate ideas, and persuade. A foreign language is superpower. It can change the world.

Most sources report that about 1,500 million people speak English, of whom only 400 million are native-speakers. A lot of diverse factors have contributed to the wide spread of the English language through the centuries - British colonialism, the USA political and military power, the 20th-21st century technological advances, the relatively uncomplicated grammar, etc. Some scholars condemn the continuing dominance of English and assert that its advance is at the expense of other languages: Dr. Ann Pakir, a linguist from Singapore, calls it a “killer language” and Dr. Robert Phillipson from the Copenhagen Business School believes that it creates a culture of “linguistic imperialism”. On the other hand, Professor David Crystal explains that English has a special role that is recognized in every country and it has achieved its “genuinely global status.... by repeatedly finding itself at the right place at the right time”. Currently we cannot but ask ourselves if Brexit will cast doubts upon the authority of the English language and will tarnish its prestige. Irrespective of whether it is deplored by some or embraced by others, it is beyond dispute that English is ubiquitous nowadays. It is the lingua franca not only between people who

have one and the same field of interest or passion but also between scientists of various nationalities who share their knowledge, expertise and research work. Scientists who would like to publish influential, globally recognized articles are unlikely to do this in a language other than English. "Research Trends" states that about 80% of all the journals indexed in SCOPUS are published in English. English is also the language of military in international missions, doctors without borders, businessmen in world trade, pilots and air-traffic controllers, multinational crews at sea, tourism, recreation and sport managers, internet users, etc.

2. GLOBALIZATION AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Recently the world has become more interconnected economically, socially, politically and culturally. Nowadays there is a dynamic movement of workers, products and knowledge across borders. A lot of human activities have become globally oriented and integrated. Mobility of people and the competitiveness among them are two of the components of globalization. Geographical mobility of labour boosts industry or agriculture and increases both employment and income when unemployed personnel move from one country to another. Rapid technological innovations make distances irrelevant and create immense transformations in the way companies work.

Although there are debates about the benefits and drawbacks of globalization, no doubt high competence in languages is a priority for professionals all over the world because intercultural encounters occur between individuals from different lingua-cultural backgrounds. Effective teamwork cannot be achieved without effective language communication. The Council of the European Union states that foreign language skills are "a prerequisite for a mobile workforce and contribute to the competitiveness of the EU economy." English has ceased to be only the survival language; it has turned into a mighty tool for cross-cultural collaboration.

In an international environment lack of fluency in English could be a significant hindrance to quality performance of work-related duties and can be a source of anxiety in the workplace. For instance, outsourcing is one of the fastest growing and dynamic industries in Bulgaria. Numerous call centres and helpdesks were established providing services in sales, customer care, technical support, and back office and assisting English speaking customers from around the world. Some of the directors, however, claim that poor communication skills in English have negatively affected their plans to expand even further internationally while a lot of employees quit their job due to foreign language related stress and negative emotions. The outsourced helpdesk service in Bulgaria considers excellent English language communication skills to be a truly strategic requirement, a priority for business success. The hydrocarbon industry sector in Algeria, which constitutes about 35% of its Gross Domestic Product, starts grasping the idea that low proficiency in English affects negatively the country's competitiveness on the world market and hinders international investments. Although Algeria has huge reserves of natural gas and oil there are few international companies functioning on its territory. Furthermore, due to the low English proficiency of the local workers these companies prefer to hire employees from abroad and the unemployment rate of the Algerian youth is still very high. Actually English language is the saviour language for a lot of companies and professionals all over the world.

Language barriers can directly lead to work productivity barriers. Annually 15% of Bulgarian textile and clothing companies suffer financial losses because of inefficient negotiations in English. On the other hand, enhanced English language skills improve profits and market share. Human resources personnel for a lot of private and governmental companies look for applicants with either B1 or B2 level of English according to the Common European Framework and later invest in language training for their key employees.

Language barriers lead to professional mistakes. In some special cases language barriers can even result in serious injury or death. According to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), between 1976 and 2000, more than 1,100 passengers and crew died due to accidents where language issues played a contributory role. For example in 1999 an Italian pilot of UN World Food Programme couldn't understand a computer generated warning and it was one of the reasons for the planecrash into a mountain near Pristina, Kosovo and the death of all 24 people on board. Inadequate language proficiency, lack of awareness of the threats inherent in cross-cultural communications, language misunderstandings can be crucial factors for the quality and safety in health care, too. In this train of thought we could cite the statement of an expert of the General Medical Council in Great Britain: 'Our health service would grind to a halt without overseas nurses. But they desperately need to learn the sort of medical English that is constantly spoken in hospitals, on top of the English they learn at ordinary language schools.'

Globalization and the role of English as a lingua franca dictate the development of university English language courses which focus on developing graduates who could progress not only in their academic work but also later on in their professional lives. University language departments realize that the labour market requires employees with specific English language skills aimed at a particular field of expertise. Each vocational field has specific characteristics which professionals must control. There are lexical, semantic, syntactic characteristics of language peculiar to any field and they allow specialists to communicate more precisely and accurately about aspects of the field that outsiders sometimes find impenetrable. In addition to this, the advances of science and technology and the fast changes in society has led to a global demand for specialists who could adapt to new fields of expertise and upgrade their language skills. As a result of this university language departments try to equip students with life-long learning skills, critical thinking, and accountability for their own learning. They also aim to build graduates who are mobile and competitive. The free movement across national borders encourages fair competition among tertiary level institutions and promotes mutual understanding. The collective efforts of universities together with quality assurance agencies and international organizations such as the European Commission led to the Bologna Declaration, signed in 1999, and the Bologna Process which supports the modernisation of education in order to ensure that it responds to the needs of a changing labour market. One of the aims of the Bologna Process has been to make academic standards compatible throughout Europe. In addition, the Bologna Process has put pressure on higher education institutions to "implement a coherent language policy clarifying its role in promoting language learning and linguistic diversity, both amongst its learning community and in the wider locality" (Communication 2003: 8). Europe has been undergoing an educational change – the aim is to ensure mobility of students and recognition of the qualification of the university graduates within the EU. To meet the new challenges universities have had to overhaul old methods of teaching and assessing foreign languages, and have begun to play a more active role in promoting foreign language learning for specific purposes. The goal of an ESP course is twofold: on

one hand to provide linguistic knowledge and on the other hand to raise skills and competences which support the future specialist. In ESP courses language is viewed as a means to achieving professional goals, not an end in itself.

Language teaching, English language teaching at university level in particular, will become more effective if it is consistent with globalization and faces the educational needs of society, the labour market and business environment. We can also say that English language has brought new international and intercultural understanding, efficient academic and work-place employments, and has paved the way for successful business negotiations. There is no country which was actually forced to accept English as a native language or second language at schools. There is only a natural necessity of people to communicate and trade, to benefit from the achievements of other nations, to live together in harmony and prosperity. Education should yield to this necessity. We, teachers in the language departments, should get out of our comfort zone and follow the direction the world is moving in. The challenge now is to refocus skills education. We should complement our teaching of pure language skills with teaching soft skills in order to compete in the new jobs market. Single skillset jobs are on decline. Contemporary employees should successfully combine key professional skills with foreign language skills and interpersonal skills. These are the graduates who will find many rewarding and lucrative opportunities in the knowledge-based economies of the future and we are responsible for their language education.

We could claim that ESP and globalization are intertwined: on one hand ESP has become the perfect medium of the globalization phenomenon and on the other hand globalization has boosted the use of ESP. Furthermore, globalization has given rise to a burst of national self-consciousness which has led to an increase in protecting national values, local languages and culture and that is just the opposite of “linguistic imperialism.”

3. TRENDS IN TEACHING ESP IN TWO UNIVERSITIES IN BULGARIA AND ALGERIA

This paper is a confluence of diverse experiences. It's a result of professional collaboration between an ESP teacher from the “Leadership and Foreign Languages” department, Aviation Faculty, the National Military University, Bulgaria and a Linguistics professor and researcher at the Language department, Tlemcen University, Algeria. We are representatives of different continents, countries, religions, educational systems. We have found out that language teachers in our respective universities have different beliefs, techniques and methods. However, diversity makes our world beautiful. Diversity has brought power to our classrooms because we get out-of-the-box thinking, mutual understanding and respect. We have also reached the conclusion that both our universities recognize the need for language courses which provide students with professional language skills and abilities; both universities are aiming at developing their ESP courses in order to prepare their graduates for work positions in a globalized world.

It is worthwhile to briefly look at the distribution of English in our countries. Due to the geopolitical situation of Bulgaria and the European integration processes, to the development of new technologies and wide-spread use of Internet, the English language has become a priority in Bulgaria. Nowadays, in Bulgaria, English is considered a highly prestigious language which could influence job offers and improve life chances. It is the language of present day modernity and future opportunities. In Bulgaria, an East European country, in the post-communist era English has turned into the most common foreign

language studied at primary, secondary and tertiary level of education. Unfortunately, despite the large number of students studying English as a foreign language, Eurostat reveals that the English language skills of Bulgarians still lag behind compared to other EU countries: Bulgarians are second before the last one in the graphic of knowing a foreign language – only 37% of the population speak English well.

Algeria has had an eventful and turbulent history. It had strong political, economical, technological and cultural relations with France for many years. The dominant presence of France gave the French language educational and linguistic prerogatives in Algeria. For years on end practically everybody in Algeria has been bilingual, speaking Arabic and French. These two languages have helped people communicate with most foreigners and cope with most academic, business and trade situations. Due to this fact and to the government's difficulty to liberalize and open up the economy of the country, English is not very wide-spread nowadays. However, recently the Algerian authorities have been trying to start reinforcing multilingual language policy.

1989 was a turning point in the history and education for both our countries. The new political and social conditions in Algeria and Bulgaria led to a reform in the educational systems. The governments made, and they need to continue making, great efforts to guarantee sustainable development of the respective education systems, to provide valuable and competitive knowledge and skills for its people.

The common language for NATO and its partners is English. The accession of Bulgaria to NATO was in 2004 and to the European Union in 2007. The country contributes to the crisis management missions and defence operations of the Alliance, plays part in environmental, economic and other EU projects, hosts high-level international political and diplomatic forums, etc. One of the main aims of the Bulgarian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is to improve the English language proficiency of the military in order to prepare them for involvement in peacekeeping operations, security initiatives, humanitarian/disaster relief activities and some other areas of cooperation. Nowadays commissioned and non-commissioned officers are often deployed in hazardous areas beyond their own national borders and their role is to define problems and create solutions that benefit many people. They carry out their tasks in a multinational environment and the language of their collaboration is English. The overall goal is to reach full operational capability of the military personnel in order to ensure success in all collaborative missions.

In relation to this, there is a national English Language Teaching and Testing STRATEGY supported by the Bulgarian Ministry of Defense. It is a solid and rigorous ESP training and assessment system. Since its introduction in 2000 it has been developing further and it has proved to be a valid, reliable and useful system. As a result of this the number of military speakers who are proficient in English is steadily increasing in Bulgaria. Due to our valuable experience in the teaching and testing of English for general military purposes, we are already able to share good practice with colleagues from other universities.

At university level in Algeria teaching English has recently become a target and it is supposed to develop highly educated professionals, opened to a permanent specialization and to a high social and professional integration. It is an undisputed fact that any ESP course should have an 'emphasis on practical outcomes' and therefore "needs analysis is and always will be an important and fundamental part of ESP." (Dudley-Evan & St. John) Teaching English in the various university departments at the Tlemcen University is based on job-analysis and is goal oriented. Unfortunately, there is still little coordination between content teachers and English language teachers. In general the university needs to focus on elaborating its ESP strategy.

Anyway, both Algeria and Bulgaria belong to the “expanding circle” in Kachru’s three circle model - English is spoken as a foreign language and follows the standards of the countries with native English speaking population. In both universities there are various ESP modules: English for military, English for engineering, and English for pilots and air traffic controllers at the Aviation Faculty, NMU, Bulgaria; English for engineering, English for medicine, English for biology, etc. at Tlemcen University, Algeria. Both universities have implemented ESP modules which are separate subjects during the BA studies. They are compulsory, taught independently, and use special for the purpose and for the subject materials. All four skills are developed – reading, listening, speaking and writing.

Moreover, in Bulgaria there is a national curriculum in English for the military and it is one and the same for all branches of service. The syllabi are needs-driven and designed with the particular military branch in mind. The number of classroom hours per bachelor course of study is sufficient – 700 hours - so that all graduates can reach high level of proficiency. This level is measured by a compulsory for all graduates final proficiency test administered by a National Examination Board. It is a multi-level test which consists of 4 parts: Reading Comprehension Test, Listening Comprehension Test, Writing Skills and Listening Skills Test. The test score is recognized in all NATO countries.

4. MANAGEMENT OF ESP DEPARTMENTS

The management of the university ESP departments is another issue of concern. Both in Bulgaria and Algeria there is a lack of systematic studies on the effects of globalization on the management of these departments. It might be a good idea to justify and establish strategic management model influenced by conditions of globalization and the changing competitive environment.

Tertiary education is a system which consists of: university authorities who are responsible for the strategic planning of the university development at all levels - local, national, international; professors who share knowledge; students who are the recipients of this knowledge; and last but not least the employers and stakeholders of this intellectual service who are affected by the process of education. We strongly believe that university managers matter and they should ensure outstanding quality of the work of professors, motivate, develop and retain students and help them acquire future-proof skills, build bridges with stakeholders and thus enhance the competitiveness of their departments. Nowadays we should open language departments which move away from outdated, stagnant educational traditions and search for appropriate approaches which give graduate students specific language knowledge, competencies and skills that will distinguish them wherever their career takes them. With the new type of ESP departments we don’t aim at language knowledge for its own sake but we aim at relevance in teaching and research tied into contribution to employability. Up to 60% of the jobs our young students will perform don’t even exist yet; up to 40% of the activities people do today could be automated using current technology. This won’t mean fewer jobs; it will mean new job-positions requiring different skills. New skills become in demand as fast as others become extinct and ESP department managers should be sensitive to all changes in the world around them. Employability in the future will be less about what you know, what you learned at the university and more about your capacity to learn. To sum it up, harmonizing ESP competencies with fast-changing labour market needs gradually turn into the key to planning programs in higher education.

Based on the experience in our respective universities we believe we need to develop entrepreneurial type of ESP departments with strategic management. It is beneficial if the head of an ESP department possesses entrepreneurial mindset - a set of personal skills and professional behaviour such as creative problem solving, fast decision making, networking, initiative taking, opportunity identification, and strategic thinking. A head of an ESP department must define goals for the development of the department, focus on these goals and follow them wisely. He/she should encourage both learners and professors to work diligently and at the same time help them map out new pathways that correspond to the 21st century realities. ESP managers could provoke entrepreneur type of education rather than employee oriented education. Thus he will support, not suppress, the student and teachers' dedication to work, passion, and inquisitive minds.

An efficient strategic management consists of three basic characteristics – innovation, flexibility and outpacing in terms of the changes in the global world. Innovation could be viewed both in terms of introducing new organization in the department and in introducing new classroom ideas, new technology, and new methods of teaching. Flexibility is of great importance for the ESP departments because they need to adapt to the global world which undergoes constant changes. It's also a good trend not to be afraid to engage employers and other stakeholders in the processes of curriculum design. In the 21st century the qualitative changes in the world around us occur on daily basis, so outpacing regarding these changes is of crucial importance.

Skillful planning is essential for the dynamics of a process which develops innovative, flexible and go-ahead language departments. It ensures good conditions for competitiveness in the global environment. Strategic management is a system which plans, manages and controls strategically and transparently the department work. It combines tasks preparing our ESP department graduates for their future successful realization in the dynamic professional world. Optimizing the process provides the best connection between the university ESP department and the global environment in accordance with its dynamics.

5. CONCLUSION

"E pluribus unum" – this is the way for all of us: universities and stakeholders, teachers and students, subject specialists and ESP teachers, teachers from language departments in various universities. The overall aim of this paper is to encourage the collaboration and support among university departments from different universities.

International collaboration widens the teachers' horizons and strengthens the opportunities for the best practices and methods to enter the ESP departments in a more critical way. It motivates teachers to reconsider the assumptions, beliefs and values of their academic environment. In addition to this, collective work is more likely to influence university decision-makers and to bring up positive change at higher institutions.

ESP collaboration is not a goal in itself. It is just a way to provide language training in the most efficient way possible and as a consequence work-related effectiveness in the long run. Finally, it is a tool to ensure the quality of our ESP education by sharing best practices. In our age of globalization the ability to communicate and collaborate efficiently is decisive. Language is power. Foreign language is superpower – let's help our ESP students use it.

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