

THE IMPACT OF INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION ON TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCES AND SKILLS

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Abstract:

Internationalisation of higher education in Central Europe has resulted in the offering of university study programmes in foreign languages, most frequently in English. This new situation means a challenge for teachers, administrators and all other stakeholders. The paper focuses on the issues connected with teacher competences to master teaching in specialised courses to international students. Besides the linguistic competence, the authors see the pedagogic and intercultural skills as key factors in shaping the university teacher profile today. The paper also proposes a framework for an in-service teacher training course based on the experience of the authors as teacher trainers. It is meant to be a contribution to the discussion on the necessity to raise teacher competence to teach in an international university environment.

Keywords: internationalization of higher education, teacher training, pedagogic competence, intercultural competence

Introduction

The process of internationalisation of the European higher education system which started in 1999 by the Bologna declaration presents many challenges for both students and teachers. The common goal clearly defined in the Declaration was creating a European space for higher education in order to enhance the employability and mobility of citizens and to increase the international competitiveness of European higher education. The Slovak Republic was one of the first signatory countries to transfer and implement the main ideas of the Declaration into the conceptualisation of higher education orientation and to initiate a new law on higher education in 2002. Since 1999 many other European documents have been issued by the Council of Europe, the European Commission and the European Parliament documenting, for example, the language policy of the European Union in support of internationalisation. Programmes, such as Erasmus, Grundtvig and Socrates have been designed to support mobility.

After almost 15 years since the Declaration was called into life, Slovak universities can observe all the abrupt changes this document had initiated. They have become partners in the European efforts to eliminate the obstacles to free mobility of students, including trainees and graduates, and teachers, researchers, and higher education administrators. One of the impacts these documents had on the system was that the universities are becoming real actors, rather than objects, of this essential process of change. Universities are changing their curricula, co-operate in pedagogic and research fields and exchange students whose mobility study is financially supported by the European Union. Even if the internationalisation of higher education is often associated with attracting foreign revenue to make up for reduced

public sector funding, there are other important aspects that present a challenge and need consideration, such as pedagogic, curricular and intercultural issues. Teachers and administrators have to deal with some or other intercultural issues to manage international students. In this article we are looking at some challenges that this process presents for university teachers who as a result of these changes teach their courses in a foreign language.

Burning issues connected with the internationalisation of higher education in Central Europe

The internationalisation process of higher education space in Europe has resulted in the development of joint-degree programmes, and study programmes or simple courses offered in foreign languages. Foreign students coming to universities in Central Europe study in a foreign language (that in many cases is also a foreign language of the teacher teaching the course) and native students study in a foreign language at home universities (in courses taught by a native teacher in a foreign language). This is a completely new development which puts new demands on teachers in the sphere of pedagogy, teaching methods and approaches, and hence, and creates a need for a new range of competences. To be able to meet the requirements the in-service teachers who teach their subject-specific courses in a foreign language face a new reality they had not been professionally prepared for: they have to deal with culturally diverse groups of students both domestic and foreign, and use a foreign language, predominantly English, as a medium of instruction.

For colleagues from the USA, Great Britain or Australia where the internationalization of the curriculum has been a common place for some decades the problems raised in this article may seem obvious. We are raising questions which are intended for those who are new to this phenomenon in higher education in Central Europe because we think that the reflection on the development from the point of view of teacher competences has been yet scarcely discussed.

In foreign publications the problems of internationalisation of higher education are approached from different points of view with different perspectives. Cothran (2009) sees the problems of internationalization at US universities mainly connected with foreign languages and courses combining language and cultural learning in an interdisciplinary setting. It is difficult to grasp the meaning of an internationalised curriculum as it does not involve only the traditional distinction between home and international students, courses in a native language and courses offered in a foreign language. One of the main concepts within the internationalised curriculum are connected with inclusion, multiple perspective, and cross-cultural capability (Caruana, 2011, 3). Betty (as cited by Caruana, 2011) stresses the incorporation of an international and intercultural dimension in the context of the curriculum and the teaching and learning processes and support services of a program. As Caruana points out, in an international curriculum “nobody should be disadvantaged,... all students require some level of support in acquiring academic cultural capital and adjusting to higher education practices...it should include all students’ backgrounds and cultures.” (ibid.) This is a challenge for teachers as students in a foreign culture often struggle with new unknown administrative structures, teaching methodology, assessment requirements and a completely “strange” university environment. Dantas (2007) stresses teacher competence to deal with cultural diversity and explores a framework for situational learning within the context of intercultural and education-abroad activities. Other authors stress both the cultural and pedagogic competence “to effectively teach the growing wide range of diverse groups within US classrooms” (Banks et al., 2005). Stone (2006, 336) suggests a list of necessities to effectively internationalise student learning contexts. These include administration, curriculum and pedagogy. The challenges on the level of pedagogy and curriculum may involve:

- delivering courses and whole programmes in foreign languages (foreign-language knowledge and skills, language competence of all involved),
- developing appropriate learner-centred teaching methods that would cover the needs of students from different cultural backgrounds (pedagogic, didactic competence),
- developing communicative and social skills, facilitating positive social interaction and enduring professional relationships (interactive, social competence),
- providing opportunities for staff and students to develop „global citizenship“ competence,
- providing opportunities for exploring, understanding and promoting cultural diversity (cultural or intercultural competence) (adapted from Stone, 2006, 336).

We can see that the internationalization of higher education is a multi-faceted phenomenon which desires attention in the intercultural and pedagogic fields. Teachers who are the agents of the process of learning in an international environment should be prepared to deal with this problem effectively.

Developing pedagogic and intercultural competence for teaching in the international context of higher education: A case of a Slovak university

Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica is one of the many universities in Central and Eastern Europe that have done a lot for the development and innovation of its programmes and improvement of the quality of study so as to become competitive and attractive educational institutions for students from its own country as well as from abroad. A few years ago, this university introduced several programmes taught in English, or partly in French and German, and now it can be a suitable model to illustrate the pitfalls on the path to internationalisation. The focus of this paper is on teachers of these foreign language-medium programmes and the requirements that teaching in a foreign language puts on them.

A survey within a project funded by the European Social Fund among teachers in the English-medium programmes of this university has provided a more in-depth insight into the teaching in English-medium (or foreign language-medium) programmes. It revealed that the teachers have the language competences to successfully master the teaching though the level of individual teachers may vary. Most teachers mentioned a need for more practice in speaking skills, classroom language skills, writing skills, and intercultural competences.

Another broad area of the survey was in pedagogic and teaching skills of the teachers, where the needs have appeared to be more urgent and more demanding on the system, length, and quality of teacher training. The results of the survey pointed to a need to provide special training for in-service teachers to help them increase their confidence in teaching mastery and intercultural competence. Thus, a special teacher training course was designed to cover two areas of competences: the pedagogic and the intercultural. The added value was that English was used as a language of instruction.

Pedagogic competence

Teachers at non-pedagogic universities in Slovakia are not required to have pedagogic education or training, they must be, first of all, professionals in their subject-specific area, and if they teach in an English-medium programme, they should also have adequate language knowledge. Thus the pedagogic competence of teachers is a matter left to themselves, to their natural talent and intuition. But as some distinguished Slovak experts in educational theory suggest, e.g. Ivan Turek, it should be mandatory for all university teachers to develop the creative potential, critical thinking and learning skills of students without a theoretical background in pedagogy. Many university teachers realize and acknowledge this necessity and go through some formal or informal pedagogic training on their own. In this situation, they find courses or training for in-service university teachers very helpful and are glad to take the occasional courses offered to them.

The basic philosophy of the course was highlighting different approaches to teaching, learning more about individual teachers' own approaches to teaching and giving grounds to their approaches. In general, teachers at universities have to face all the changes that go hand in hand with the new programmes, innovations, and improvements. The first thing they deal with is choosing between their own approach to teaching – either to remain with the group of traditional teachers fostering traditional ideas, norms and methods, protected from the vulnerability posed by new challenges, or to join those teachers who take the new opportunities to push through new methods of teaching. The former approach – teacher-centred approach – makes the teacher a centre of all teaching and learning and students just passive recipients of information, as there is very little interaction between the teacher and students, and the latter – learner-centred approach – gives students a chance to get actively engaged in their own learning and create their own system of knowledge and thus be able to apply the knowledge in different contexts and situations. This new approach has a constructivist basis, though constructivism as a learning theory dates back almost a century (J. Piaget, L. Vygotsky, J. Dewey).

The framework of the training course was based on a case study presenting some pedagogic problems related to teaching subject-specific courses in English. The above-mentioned survey showed that teachers are aware of this method, but their approach to dealing with case studies is backed very little by learning theories. The course allowed the participants to get acquainted with this method and to be able to apply it in their teaching practice. With this method, the teacher should be open to students' ideas and opinions and take them through, step by step, applying their acquired knowledge and knowing that there is no right decision or conclusion of the case. The steps the teacher should take with students are: a) individual preparation of students to be able to answer the guiding questions, b) clarification of the basic information of the case in groups, c) discussion of the uncovered issues with other students in the group, and d) reflection and application in individual work. In this way, students learn to understand the material of the case, proceed from the specific to the general and be able to make their own deductions. The participants of the course acquired the pedagogic knowledge about the procedure, principles and hands-on teaching skills necessary to use this method effectively.

This case study provided space to develop such teaching skills as effective use of group and pair work, questioning and discussion strategies, stating learning outcomes, and assessment techniques. Group work should be an integral part of teaching and learning and can be done both during class and outside class for homework. It has a number of benefits for the teacher as well as for the involved students. The teacher can assign the group a task that would be difficult to manage during the semester for time and other reasons, though, on the other hand, it can bring more unpredictability and work for them. Group work, among other things, helps students understand and develop content area knowledge through clarification and discussion, reinforces students' personal accountability, and their communication and interpersonal skills.

Group work provides more space for developing questioning and discussion techniques. The mastery of the teacher is also in posing questions effectively. The aim should not be only to test students' knowledge and keep their attention, but to get them to develop and use their own thinking, to analyse and evaluate the knowledge, and to bring their own conclusions. It should not be omitted that students need some "wait time" – an adequate time to grasp the meaning of the question and produce some answer. The teacher should be able to get all students involved in class discussions, which might appear as a real problem. He/she should be aware of the factors that have an impact on the successful result of the discussion. This result depends to a high degree on the number of students in the discussion group – the rules are different when the group is the whole class and when the class is divided into smaller groups. In whole class discussion the role of a moderator (the teacher or a student) is crucial

and this kind of discussion requires better discipline and more attention from both the teacher and the students. In smaller group discussion individual participants have more space to present their views, or if necessary, to ask for explanations from other partners in the group. The teacher has a role of observer, controller, motivator and helper. In an international setting, the result can also be affected by the different cultures of individual participants. There are cultures in which non-verbal communication and silent pauses have a different meaning than in central European cultures. Due to their cultural background some students are reluctant to participate in the discussion and express their opinion, which does not necessarily mean that they do not have the knowledge or ignore the work in class.

Another important part of the case study dealt with the importance of learning outcomes. The results of education, study programmes and individual courses can be only measured if their goals are clearly stated. Most universities have now formulated their missions, which give a framework to the abstract ideals of the graduates knowledge and skills. These abstract ideals should be further translated into the outcomes of individual programmes and courses with special focus on a balance between the content and skills and different levels of cognitive functions. In the survey mentioned above, some teachers had only little or no information about the university mission and had never before thought that stating learning outcomes precisely is an inevitable part of pedagogic skills. In the final reflection on the course, the trainees confirmed the necessity to have clearly defined outcomes as a guide in the teaching/learning process.

Learning outcomes are important for recognition ... The principal question asked of the student or the graduate will therefore no longer be “what did you do to obtain your degree?” but rather “what can you do now that you have obtained your degree?” This approach is of relevance to the labour market and is certainly more flexible when taking into account issues of lifelong learning, non-traditional learning, and other forms of non-formal educational experiences. (Purser, Council of Europe, 2003 in Kennedy, D., Hyland, A., Ryan, N.)

Intercultural competence

The present higher education system is more often than ever before marked by frequent intercultural exchanges and exposures to different cultural issues. Hence, the intercultural competence should be an inevitable part of the teachers’ abilities in order to function successfully in a multinational education environment. So far, little has been done in the formal preparation of university teachers in this field. Kollárová (2011, 4-17) argues that the present system of formal teacher training lacks cultural education and suggests the profile of a culturally competent teacher consisting of three components: ethical culture (covering the understanding of the C-culture, i.e. literature, arts, music, etc.), linguistic culture and communication culture. This view can be equally applied to any teacher working in a multicultural academic environment.

Primarily, the development of intercultural competence has been incorporated in foreign language teaching and learning as studying a foreign language was connected with the study of the target culture (culture of the country where the language is spoken). Foreign language methodology has attempted to conceptualize the cultural direction of foreign language acquisition and stress the knowledge of culture as a prerequisite to effective communication. But we know that the intercultural approach to foreign language teaching and learning cannot be restricted only to the specific culture of the target language, as, for example, English has become a language of instruction for students from different cultural backgrounds. As a result the intercultural training should involve the ability to compare students’ native cultures with other cultures, to evaluate critically and interpret the results of such comparisons, and to apply this knowledge successfully in both verbal and non-verbal communication.

Teachers should be able to understand culture (in the most general term) as a phenomenon that influences communication and behaviour. Culture is a phenomenon that is present in daily communicative situations and as such also influences the educational environment, e. g. the interactions between teachers and students of different cultural backgrounds (Hoehn, 2011). It reflects the native and the “foreign” cultural values, beliefs, behaviours and body language, which students and teachers bring with them to the class.

Multicultural university education should be understood as a way of viewing the present world reality and a way to develop the intercultural dialogue, which should not stop at raised awareness of differences among various ethnic, racial, and cultural groups (often limited to presenting national cuisines, folklore, or funny stories from students’ or teachers’ visits abroad). Cultural diversity should be understood as the dynamics of development (evolution) – cultures need each other and each culture should be valued. Diversity should be understood as a means of enrichment rather than as a problem area. The American multicultural education principle of ‘diversity based on equality’ (Parkay – Stanford, 2009, 123) can be well applied in our context as part of the cultural understanding of the challenges of present society.

The framework for intercultural teacher training

The cultural component of teacher training should enable teachers to understand all aspects of cultural diversity, such as different cultural values, deep anchored beliefs, norms, attitudes and ways of thinking which determine the behaviour of members of different cultures. Teachers should be able to look at their own culture from a different perspective, to overcome stereotypical thinking and evaluate the contribution of all cultures to the global world dialogue of cultures. We believe that this knowledge and attitudes of openness, curiosity and a willingness to gain new cultural knowledge will lead to accepting other cultural identities and respecting them.

The intercultural competence may be seen in terms of a pedagogic triangle of cognitive, affective and behavioural domain which means that teachers should be equipped with a whole set of specific cultural knowledge, positive attitudes and intercultural skills.

Based on the experience of providing in-service training to university teachers as part of an educational project supported by the European Social Fund we propose a possible framework of a teacher-training course aimed at developing the intercultural competence.

Aims and objectives of the course

The overall aim of the course is to raise cultural awareness that can help teachers function successfully and effectively (Stone, 2006) in the multicultural educational environment. The objectives of the course are a) to familiarize teachers with basic concepts of culture, cultural values and cultural stereotypes; b) to allow teachers to look at their own culture from a different perspective; c) to give teachers the opportunity to experience the cultural difference and share their views and opinions; d) to shape teachers’ beliefs, views and attitudes to cultural differences and e) to sensitise their approach to dealing with culturally diverse students.

Content of the course

The content of the course includes cultural topics based on socio-cultural and anthropological theories of culture as a whole set of human activities and material products, beliefs, view of the world, ways of thinking, values, patterns of behaviour and knowledge shared in a human community. From the definition of a culture the training moves to a better understanding of cultural values that determine behaviour. This may be done by comparing

and contrasting, which leads the participants of the course to look – on the one hand – at their own individual and national values, norms and beliefs and – on the other hand – to acquire more sensitivity towards norms and values prevalent in cultures other than their own. The next step is dealing with critical cultural incidents (including examples from their own teaching practice) where the participants can analyse the situation, discuss possible approaches to solve the problems and apply the acquired knowledge of cultural values and differences. This step helps them also to acquire more sensitivity towards generalisations and stereotypical views of other cultures. To sum up, the proposed topics are:

1. Culture, characteristics and dimensions of cultures (based on Hofstede's and Trompenaars & Humpden-Turner's theories); individual, national and company/school/university culture.
2. Cultural values and their comparison.
3. Cultural diversity in the classroom and approaches to its management.
4. Body language and non-verbal communication across cultures.
5. Stereotypes and how to deal with them.

Training methodology

The training methods are based on interaction and learner-centred approach. No lectures on selected topics delivered by a trainer but active involvement of all participants in exploring, problem-solving, discussion and argumentation. The trainer serves as a provider of basic concepts and facilitator of the learning. Simulation is the best method to transfer the participants into somebody else's skin and experience the difference.

Small case studies enable exploring cultural issues and the analysis of critical incidents help shape sensitivity. Here the Kolb's learning cycle model may be applied (experiencing the situation or acquiring information; reflecting on the experience or information and building a general theory of what this information might mean; forming abstract concepts and generalizations; testing the implications of these concepts in new situations).⁷⁴ The DVD training material *Diverse Europe at Work* has proved to be a useful and effective tool to reach these objectives.

To conclude, all interactive methods were chosen with the aim to offer teachers some stimuli for thinking, shaping their views and attitudes and applying the gained knowledge and experiences in their everyday teaching (Zelenková, 2010).

The outcomes

At the end of the course the participants showed good understanding of culture as a dynamic construct that influences the educational environment and teacher-student interaction. Through active participation in exploring and problem solving of culture-specific problems they were also able to develop a set of actions to react to cultural differences, to accept and tolerate them, and even to capitalise on them in the teaching-learning process. The course helped teachers in discovering common human values in students, getting out of stereotypes in teaching and assessing students, and design a set of actions to negotiate the disruptions.

⁷⁴ *Diverse Europe at Work* – a DVD training course, scenarios and DEW Training Manual were published by DEW Partnership, 2010 as a result of a an international project within the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Union. ISBN 978-973-8401-28-0.

We hope that this process of building teacher intercultural competence that was designed to follow a spiral from cognition (what is culture) to emotion (understanding values and stereotypes) will be transformed into action in practical teaching practice.

Conclusion

Internationalisation of higher education brings a lot of challenges for teachers as well as students. Teachers are those who are the major driving force to move the development and innovation of study programmes forward at an international level. They have to be professionals in their subject-specific areas and have the potential to design new programmes and innovate the existing ones and to bring these programmes into life. These tasks put a lot of responsibility and new requirements on their competence to teach in a foreign language. In this situation, they can appreciate any opportunity to develop and improve their pedagogic skills. A good example of helping teachers teaching in English-medium programmes can be the teacher training course offered by a Slovak university which is described in this paper.

The course was intended to respond to the needs of these teachers in the area of pedagogy, cultural awareness and intercultural communication, and the English language. The results of the course and the reflection of the participants confirmed that teachers need to develop these competences and we believe that the acquired pedagogic knowledge and skills will make a contribution to the improvement of quality of study programmes in foreign languages.

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