

## The Art and Science of Teaching through the Medium of English

Nadezhda Tsoneva, Ivelina Makrieva

**Abstract:** *Teaching in general comprises a wide range of skills, not only language skills, but also those which are related to classroom management, lesson organization and decision making during the teaching process. Teaching specific subjects through the medium of English makes it a complex phenomenon. As lecturers in English at the TU – Varna, we are convinced in the necessity of a type of course developing these skills especially in the cases when English is used as the medium of instruction. Furthermore, our colleagues appreciate its usefulness and practicality and find it relevant to their needs. The theoretical background and the analysis of their work resulted in the design of a tailor-made course presented in the paper.*

**Key words:** *EAP, English-medium science education, language courses, tertiary level.*

"At no time in history has it been more important to invest in higher education as a major force in building an inclusive and diverse knowledge society and to advance research, innovation and creativity."<sup>[2]</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

Teaching in general comprises a wide range of skills, not only language skills, but also those which are related to classroom management, lesson organization and decision making during the teaching process. Teaching specific subjects through the medium of English makes it a complex phenomenon. This requires from the teacher to be competent not only in the subject s/he teaches but also in English, as well as in Foreign Language Teaching methodology to some extent.

The policy to change the medium of instruction in higher education institutions with the purpose of attracting more and more foreign students has recently become an important innovation which affects all lecturers at the Technical University specifically. It poses special challenges not only for lecturers who have been trained to deliver their subject matter in Bulgarian but also for us, trained in English as our professional expertise.

### MAIN BODY

For the last few years, hundreds of foreign students (mainly from Turkey) have joined the Technical University of Varna where English is the medium through which they are instructed in all subjects. Having attended a one-academic-year preparatory course, the foreign students continue their training as full-time students during the second year with the presumption that they have already achieved an intermediate, even upper-intermediate level in English. What is more, in the course of their study, being taught all the time in English, they quickly improve their accuracy and fluency which, in turn, makes very high demands on the lecturers. This changing situation has made the lecturers' language competence in English an indispensable part of their professional qualification.

In order to meet this need we have been carrying out English language courses for our colleagues. They consist of two main parts: General English and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). These courses have been designed in response to the language needs of both the foreign students and the lecturers at the university. This is a niche in ELT methodology, since expertise in English-medium science education at tertiary level in Bulgaria is scarce or missing at all.

The first part varies in duration depending on the entry level of the participants. Their language competence is assessed using a standardized pre-course written test. The General English course ranges in length from 60, 120 to 300 academic hours. The language input is different for the different levels. The focus of the longer courses is on the English tense system, correct pronunciation, spoken language accuracy and written work.

The short course is highly intensive. It includes a brief review of the English tenses, focuses on complex and more problematic structures such as modality, conditional sentences, passive voice and emphasizes different speech registers. With varying predominance, the four skills are integrated in the course.

The second part of all courses irrespective of their duration, is a sixty-academic-hour EAP course. As a rule, EAP courses are intended for overseas students to facilitate their adaptation to a new cultural and educational environment and to develop their skills for understanding lectures, listening and note-taking, writing assignments and research papers, communicating with both lecturers, administrative staff at the university and other students. What makes the EAP module unique is that it is specially designed for university lecturers facing the task of teaching through the medium of English.

The EAP module covers the four language skills, speaking skills development being in focus to the highest degree. The course is not subject-specific. We have developed a course programme integrating academic content into language instruction. As an approach we have chosen the Content-Centered instruction, because in it English is used as the vehicle for teaching and acquiring subject-specific knowledge. Krashen's theory [1] of second language acquisition has influenced the development of integrated instruction at all levels. Krashen suggests that a second language is most successfully acquired when the conditions are similar to those present in first language acquisition:

- when the focus of instruction is on meaning rather than on form;
- when the language input is at or just above the proficiency of the learner;
- when there is sufficient opportunity to engage the students in meaningful use of that language input in a relatively anxiety-free environment.

This suggests that the focus of the second language classroom should be on something meaningful, such as academic content, and that modification of the target language facilitates language acquisition and makes academic content accessible to second language learners.

When our colleagues are more actively involved in the learning process as students, they develop their learning skills more quickly. We shouldn't forget that good teachers are good learners too; they feel more confident and better motivated. Hopefully, they will find teaching in a foreign language challenging but not so exhausting. The aim is to make the teachers aware of the role of the classroom language. They are expected to apply the skills and knowledge they have acquired on the course to their subject areas. On the one hand, they are unable to use the language relevant to the academic context ('regular education students' instead of 'full-time students', 'taxes' instead of '(tuition) fees'), on the other word-stress and pronunciation appear to be one of the most serious and common problems we have to deal with at the lecturer training course. In fact, a great number of the trainees' pronunciation mistakes cannot be corrected within the course due to the lack of self-correcting practice and due to an already established model of wrong pronunciation acquired before their joining the course. The course focuses on the effective use of the language in the classroom; it should form an important part of the language training of any lecturer, especially in our case, where English as the medium of instruction appears to be a second language to both lecturers and students. Since the lecturer and the students do not share a common mother tongue, the classroom situation is more complicated.

Our aim as language specialists is not to influence our colleagues' intentions and aims, we rather help them as fellow-educators to evaluate the relationship between intentions and their realization in discourse. Teachers of science through English, for example, see it from the viewpoint of science education. We, as English language teachers, introduce science content into our language lessons from the viewpoint of second language development. Teaching subjects through a second language, however,

requires a specific methodology which supports learners in developing both subject-matter knowledge and the language skills which are the vehicle for acquiring that knowledge. This course aims to define an appropriate pedagogy for English-medium science and how it should be reflected in teaching, materials design and teacher-education. Not being specialists in the various subject areas, we do not intervene in what should be taught and how. Our aim is to make lecturers aware that having the appropriate knowledge is just one thing; communicating it through a foreign language is another. The focus is on the language used by the lecturers. We lay the emphasis on spoken language rather than on written.

There are several reasons for this. Firstly, in their work in class lecturers spend more time speaking rather than writing. Not surprisingly, as it is for any learner of English, speaking appears to be most challenging for the lecturers although they have some experience gained at international conferences. Owing to their professional experience they do not lack confidence in speaking in public. Some frustration appears when, after the first speaking tasks on the course, we begin correcting their mistakes. In the beginning, when delivering a short talk prepared in advance some lecturers tend to use ready-made sentences taken from their written papers. Our task is to make them aware of the peculiarities of the academic spoken language, e.g. brevity and simplicity of the sentences, standard vocabulary and pronunciation. Our aim is to develop their ability to 'juggle' with language, i.e. to be able to judge by the reaction of their students whether they understand the message and to paraphrase it as many times as necessary to make it comprehensible. We encourage them to participate in different communicative activities, such as role plays in academic context, discussions, diagram descriptions related to their subject area, five-minute unprepared speech on an unknown topic (off-hand presentation), and as a final activity – a fifteen-minute mini-lecture.

Secondly, most of them lack the experience in communicating in English in real-life situation and in academic context in particular. In this part of the course, emphasis is placed only on those aspects of English which are more relevant to the professional discourse. A variety of strategies and techniques are used in Content-Centered second language instruction – cooperative learning, task-based or experiential learning, whole language strategies, and graphic organizers – that increase attention to academic language learning, contribute to content learning, and encourage development of thinking and study skills. Through the Content-Centered approach lecturers are made aware of the sentence patterns they could use when defining, classifying, exemplifying, hypothesizing, etc, i.e. the variety of functions they deal with in real-life classes. During the role-plays, being in the position of learners themselves, they readily take the role of the "student" and ask questions, thus setting the "lecturer" in the real situation of dealing with questions. All these activities are particularly appreciated by the trainees as they develop and improve their speaking and by the end of this tailor-made course they have put the final touch to their confidence.

Thirdly, they have more experience with written academic discourse and they have highly developed reading skills in English. Before facing the challenge of delivering their subject in a foreign language, they have read mostly other colleagues' works without paying attention to pronunciation which makes it difficult to overcome the wrong one, and have written papers for international conferences themselves or with the help of a translator. During the course, we develop their writing skills as well since in most of the cases the lecturers have to prepare their own presentations and put some written text on the slides, and sometimes they have to write on the board.

On the other hand, they should bear in mind that their students are not specially trained in EAP, listening and note-taking, and academic writing in particular. Besides, in their greatest number the foreign students at the TU-Varna lack autonomy, they are used to teacher-centred methods of teaching and expect to be 'spoon-fed'. The lecturers face

the task of delivering the material in the form of a Power Point presentation and preparing handouts.

Difficulties which lecturers encounter in their work in class are predominantly connected with classroom management. They are as follows:

- always being under the need and the pressure to do something;
- handling students' questions and replies;
- communicating with all types of students (reluctant, motivated but lacking confidence, highly motivated ones);
- communicating with students, lacking confidence in English;
- preparing sets of instructions for fulfilling;
- motivating the students.

These difficulties show again the importance of teacher training. Teachers need to be prepared to design learning environment and be able to choose the most appropriate tools and methods for a particular learning situation. It is worth mentioning that most of the participants in the course make significant progress in their communicative competence. At the beginning they are usually afraid of speaking in English, and most of them, being accuracy-oriented, are very cautious about making mistakes. Further, the more practice they have, the more communication-oriented they become overcoming some of the most common individual and "universal" mistakes in grammar and pronunciation. Being in the position of learners themselves, they readily take the role of the "student" using a variety of language structures to ask for clarification and communicate effectively. Thus they become aware of different ways to better help their foreign students learn through the medium of English. They develop their language skills to the level they need to deliver their subject matter in the language. In addition, they activate their English language proficiency in order to use information on the respective subjects available in English. Furthermore, they translate into English all their teaching materials, design handouts, different visual aids, tests and examination papers in English.

### CONCLUSION

As lecturers in English we are convinced in the necessity of the EAP courses for lecturers, especially in the cases when English is used as the medium of instruction. Furthermore, our colleagues appreciate their usefulness and practicality and find them relevant to their needs. The courses help them consolidate their competence. They are more confident in using appropriate language, in pronunciation, in giving instructions and in interacting with students. The theoretical background and the analysis of their work resulted in better performance in the classroom. We do not stop revising the contents of the course, adjusting it to the specific needs of each group and constantly making improvements. We do not stop evaluating the effectiveness of the course, reconsidering the timing of the integrated instruction, the use of various instructional strategies and different texts and specifying assessment measures. These courses should be on-going. Now when the lecturers have had some experience with foreign students, their needs could have changed, so further needs analysis should be carried out and new and unique courses could be tailored.

### REFERENCES

- [1] Krashen, S. D. *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Prentice Hall International, 1987.
- [2] UNESCO (2009) WCHE (World Conference on Higher Education: The New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research for Societal Change and Development) Paris, 5-8 July 2009, <http://www.unesco.org/en/wche2009> - final communiqué.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Senior Lecturer Nadezhda Varbanova Tsoneva, Department of Mathematics and Foreign Languages, Technical University – Varna, tel.:052 383 688 e-mail: [tsonevanadya@yahoo.com](mailto:tsonevanadya@yahoo.com)

Senior Lecturer Ivelina Nedelcheva Makrieva, Department of Mathematics and Foreign Languages, Technical University – Varna, tel.: 052 383 688 e-mail: [nedelchevaivelina@yahoo.com](mailto:nedelchevaivelina@yahoo.com)

**The paper is reviewed.**