



The Role of LSP Education in the Context of Employability

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed and interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Croatian higher education institutions have witnessed considerable changes since the Bologna process was introduced in 2005. One of the most important tasks of LSP in HE is to help students succeed in job applications. The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the current situation of LSP teaching and to see to what extent it has been adapted to student-centered approach. A survey was conducted at nine life science HE institutions and data for the survey were derived from a questionnaire that was administered in order to identify the position of LSP within the overall curricula, syllabus design, teaching methodology, assessment criteria, learning outcomes that develop desired competences, and students' participation in the EU exchange programmes. The final part of the paper is concerned with the attitudes of LSP teachers toward obstacles and challenges in LSP teaching. The paper concludes that there is lack of harmonisation with respect to learning outcomes, ECTS number as well as poor cooperation with subject specialists in course design. Therefore, in order to develop mobility and employability capacity of Croatian life science graduates, LSP syllabuses should be better adapted to learners' needs, labour market needs and general content of life science curricula.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In today's world of economic crisis and increased unemployment on the global labour market, employers' main concern are employability skills of their potential employees. It may be of use to research what types of skills are needed to have better employment opportunities and how Croatian government and higher education system cooperate in order to adapt to the constantly changing environment of the world of work. Based on information gathered from articles, journals, papers and reports, it is clear that employers define foreign language skills as one of the key factors of employability and expect that their potential graduate employees have good command not only of the language for general purposes, but also of the language for specific purposes. The objective of this paper is to provide a comprehensive view of the current situation of foreign language teaching with special reference to the Life Science higher education (HE) institutions in Croatia and also to reflect upon the role and value of these languages within the general life science education system. Based on research results, a proposal of possible measures to improve foreign-language teaching in the Life Sciences, and hence improve employability and mobility chances of respective graduates is made in concluding part of the paper.

2. BACKGROUND LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

2.1 The Role of LSP Today

The role of languages for specific purposes (LSP) is very important for the development of mobile and employable graduates in life science institutions. With the rise of the knowledge economy institutions of higher education are faced with the challenge to offer courses and design syllabi which will adequately train and prepare the students for the world of work. Employers today look not only for academic qualifications, but also for other knowledge and skills important for the workplace. The three most agreed necessary skills are communication skills, problem solving and interpersonal skills [1]. To prepare the graduates to be competitive in the world of work and to develop their employability skills, institutions of higher education must develop and offer appropriate courses, which again requires proper planning and preparation.

One way of strengthening students' employability skills is to enable them to go through practical training where they could apply their knowledge effectively.

Globalisation is one of the most often mentioned phenomena at the turn of the millennia. It affects the whole economy and society, labour market and the tasks of the education system. Institutions of Higher Education have to prepare an efficient and successful employee for the labour market, whereas successful employability of today's (HE) graduates depends on how well they are prepared linguistically and interculturality to enter the labour market.

The first decade of the new millennium brought considerable changes in the European higher education. There is a shift from teaching to learning, i.e. from a focus on course input - "what do we want to teach" to course output - "what have the students learned" and "what competences are needed in the world of work".

2.2 The Concept of LSP Today

In his paper on ESP, Brunton [2] states that "English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or English for Special Purposes arose as a term in the 1960's because general English courses frequently did not meet learner or employers wants." LSP is therefore an umbrella term encapsulating a range of subdivisions such as Language for Academic Purposes (LAP), Language for Business Purposes (LBP), Language for Occupational Purposes (LOP) and Language for Professional Purposes (LPP). Dudley-Evans and St. John [3] applied a series of characteristics to resolve arguments about what ESP is, dividing them into 3 absolute and 5 variable characteristics. Absolute characteristics focus on LSP being defined to meet specific needs of the learners, making use of underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves and being centered on the language appropriate to these activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, study skills, discourse and genre. When it comes to variable characteristics, they define LSP more closely and state that it may be related to or designed for specific disciplines, that it may use a different methodology and that is likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation. It could, however, be for learners at secondary school level.

Regarding the background knowledge of students, LSP is designed for intermediate or advanced students and most LSP courses assume some basic knowledge of the language systems. Further aspects that distinguish LSP from general language courses is the fact that ESP courses prepare students for clearly defined communicative and working environments, they focus more on language in context than on grammar and language structures and they refer to work related settings. LSP teaching also requires different methodologies which are best suited for course design and goals and outcomes of the courses [2]. The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* [4] provides a basis for the design of syllabuses, exams, textbooks and curriculum guides that can be applied to any European language. It also defines different levels of the knowledge and command of the language.

Taking into consideration learning objectives and students needs, LSP courses should be learner centered, whereas teaching materials play a significant role in LSP teaching. Course material and teaching methodology should be based on the specific professional or academic needs of learners and teaching materials should be authentic, up-to-date and relevant for the students' specializations. When designing a LSP course, it is important that students are to some extent able to immediately use what they learned in order to perform their jobs more effectively. Needs analysis is and always will be an important and fundamental part of ESP [5,6].

3. EMPLOYABILITY AND MOBILITY OF INDUSTRY-READY GRADUATES

The high rate of unemployment among public university graduates and the competitive marketplace call for high quality industry-ready graduates. Most graduate students find that employability upon graduation is a major priority. Excellent academic degrees are no longer adequate, if a graduate does not have competences and capabilities in generic or the so called employability skills that should help them to practice their knowledge and technical skills effectively.

Employability and employability skills are the two terms often encountered in professional papers in the field of higher education. Koo [7] views employability in terms of graduates finding jobs and maintaining them through the learning of

new skills necessary for different functions in the company. Hillage and Pollard [8] define employability as "having the capacity to gain initial employment and obtain new employment if required." Harvey [9] states that "the employability of a graduate is the propensity of the graduate to exhibit attributes that employers anticipate will be necessary for the future effective functioning of their organisation". Lie et al. [10] furthermore define employability as "a contested discourse involving many stakeholders and actors. They are to do with global actors and local governments, employers, industry, students and academic associations, professional governing bodies, and quality assurance and accreditation agencies." This leads to conclusion that higher education institutions, national education agencies, employment agencies and chambers of commerce should work closely together in order to define employability factors required by potential employees in line with the current situation on the labour market.

3.1 LSP in the Context of Employability Skills

Employability skills emerged as a term in the 1980 and are often referred to as generic capabilities, transferable skills, basic skills, essential skills, soft skills, core skills, core competencies, enabling skills or key skills [1]. Many countries developed national frameworks on employability skills which serve as a kind of guide for graduates and their potential employees, but dynamic environment in the world of work demands these frameworks to be updated frequently. In order to be successful on the labour market, one needs to have the desired employability skills. These skills play an important role for a graduate in getting employed and doing well in the workplace [11]. Robinson defined employability skills as "those basic skills necessary for getting, keeping and doing well on a job." [12] When determining the essential skills needed for doing well at work, one must take into consideration expectations and perceptions from potential employers, which vary from country to country. For example, in an English speaking country employers will not find foreign language knowledge of utmost importance since the majority of the world's business communication is conducted in English. On the other hand, SME owners from non-English speaking country such as Croatia or Slovenia will find foreign language skills of their employees very beneficial since it will facilitate cooperation with countries all over

the world. LSP knowledge is also a necessity when consulting professional papers and articles, written mostly in English or German, and when doing business and communicating with clients. Skills that are generally required by employers include language skills, general and current knowledge, ability to give presentation to clients, basic knowledge in ICT and preferably some work exposure/experience. In conceptual framework of employability in terms of pluriliteracy there are 8 literacies closely related to employability. These are linguistic proficiency, communicative literacy, culture awareness, content literacy, sustainable citizenship, attitudes and mindset, vocational literacy and critical literacy [10]. According to Kubler and Forbes [13], language proficiency in foreign languages is one of the important attributes for student's employability. It refers to abilities and skills in the use of particular languages, the ability to apply these in appropriate contexts and the ability to present sustained and persuasive written and oral arguments cogently and coherently. Research data indicate that foreign language skills expected by employers include high level of general language proficiency, high level of vocational language knowledge, combination of general and vocational language, good negotiating skills, intercultural communication competency and confidence and initiative in using a foreign language. Results of the empirical research indicate that intermediate level of LSP knowledge is the most common requirement of employers. Besides LSP knowledge, it is communicative literacy that is often singled out as a key factor which influences employability. It involves face-to-face communication, Internet, iPod and mobile phone, multimodal and multimedia literacy and communication literacy. It can be stated that communicative competences and active language skills are essential tools for mobility and Europe-wide employability.

3.2 Fostering Mobility of Students through EU Programmes and National Regulations

The European Commission stimulates cooperation through well-funded programs in order to promote the mobility of students and scholars within Europe, to advance the study of European languages and to foster university-industry links. In the past two decades, tertiary education in Croatia has undergone a period of remarkable change and growth, which has

enabled HE institutions to encourage and stimulate mobility and attract incoming exchange students. Increased opportunities of mobility within the EU programmes faced Croatian system of higher education with the necessity to improve Croatian students' international communication skills in order to increase their possibilities of becoming known internationally. Croatian government has set the following objectives concerning mobility at all levels of education: 1800 university and polytechnic students will study part of their degrees abroad each year by the end of the present decade. LSP knowledge of Croatian students is one of key factors for successful achievement of these objectives: it provides access to information necessary to carry out work, to study and to communicate with teachers, fellow students and potential employees.

4. METHODOLOGY

Research on current state, position and function of LSP was conducted on 9 Croatian life science HE institutions (universities, polytechnics and colleges delivering agriculture and forestry courses) as follows: Faculty of Forestry, University of Zagreb; Faculty of Agriculture, University of Osijek; Faculty of Food Technology, University of Osijek; Department of Agriculture, University of Dubrovnik, Polytechnic Marko Marulić in Knin; Polytechnic in Požega; Polytechnic in Rijeka; Polytechnic in Slavonki Brod; Križevci College of Agriculture. Data for the survey were derived from a questionnaire that consisted of 72 multiple choice and open questions covering basic information about teaching staff, position of LSP within the overall curricula, syllabus design and materials, teaching methodology, assessment criteria, learning outcomes that develop desired competences, students' participation in the EU programmes and teachers' attitudes toward LSP.

5. KEY FINDINGS

5.1 LSP Courses in General

Data for the research was elicited from the questionnaire completed by 11 LSP teachers from the above listed HE institutions. The majority of LSP teachers are female with only one male LSP teacher. Average age is 44 and work experience in LSP teaching ranges from 5 to 32 years. The majority of teachers teach English, some teach German and some both English and German. Five teachers are lecturers, five are

senior lecturers and one teacher is assistant. When it comes to university degrees, six teachers hold a BA degree, four have a MA degree and two teachers are doctoral students. Regarding the foreign language courses offered at HE institutions taking part in this research, all of them offer courses in English and German, whereas two institutions offer additional courses: Italian, French and Spanish. The number of LSP contact lessons varies from 90 to 240, which indicates huge discrepancy among institutions. Discordance is also present in the number of ECTS credits which varies from 0 to 6. English is a dominant language at all HE institutions with 2454 students learning English and 614 students taking German courses. Number of students in a group varies from 20 to 50, and groups are formed based on the study course and language background knowledge. Colloquia take place once or twice in a semester, but not all HE institutions require from their students to pass the LSP exam in order to enroll next semester. Most LSP teachers expect the knowledge of their students to meet the criteria for B2 level (CEFRL). Eight teachers state that LSP syllabus is made on the students needs analysis and all teachers agree that LSP syllabus should be made in cooperation with subject specialists. Regarding teaching methodology, research results indicate that traditional "staff-centered" and "knowledge-oriented" approach is slowly giving way to student-centered approach, whereas case studies are still a relatively rare method in LSP teaching. All institutions participate in EU international programmes (Erasmus, Tempus).

5.2 Teachers' Attitudes toward LSP

All teachers agree that basic objectives of LSP courses in the Life Sciences should focus on mastering basic professional vocabulary, communication in professional environment, independent use of scientific papers and other materials, development of presentation skills, mastering writing of abstracts and scientific papers and developing speaking skills related to specific professional area. LSP teachers are of the opinion that LSP should be taught in all 6 semesters and that current total number of contact lessons inadequate to achieve the objectives of the LSP course. Teachers find that LSP courses in duration of two or three semesters are not adequate to prepare the students for the world of work. They also believe too many students in the group make it impossible for the teacher to approach each

student individually, and yet, it is the individual approach that is of vital importance when learning a foreign language.

Furthermore, teachers believe that all 4 language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) are equally important and that the optimum number of students in a group should range from 10 to 20. Groups should be formed according to the background language knowledge, whereas the starting level of LSP course needs to be (at least close to) B2 for English and B1 for the other languages. Heterogeneity of student population regarding the level of their background knowledge is one of the most difficult obstacles in teaching LSPs on life science HE institutions. Students with low level of foreign language competence tend to be very demotivated by the large number of new words and phrases coming up in LSP texts. These circumstances affect the teacher as well. On one side, there are clearly defined learning outcomes for a certain LSP course, whereas on the other side, insufficient background knowledge of the students makes it impossible to achieve them.

When it comes to teaching materials, LSP teachers find that both adapted and authentic texts should be used within an LSP course. Majority of teachers find their students' receptive and productive vocabularies generally inadequate, stating that academic listening presents students with fewer difficulties than writing, speaking and reading. According to the teachers, the best parts of LSP courses involve mastering new skills, learning professional vocabulary, gaining new competences and developing and improving the existing competences. The majority of teachers also agree that insufficient background knowledge, large number of students in the group, low motivation of students and heterogeneous groups based on the previous knowledge should be singled out as factors that negatively affect learning outcomes.

Most teachers agree that LSP education should be harmonized among HE institutions regarding the number of contact lessons, number of ECTS credits and learning outcomes. When it comes to the possibility of offering students to learn two languages, all teachers agree that it is not realistic to expect that a second LSP course will be offered to their students in the near future. Teachers disagree whether the LSP course adequately prepares students for EU programmes and some say their students have

not yet participated in such programmes. Most of the teachers are not satisfied with the level and intensity of international cooperation.

6. CONCLUSION

It is evident that employability skills, with LSP knowledge being one of them, have much impact on capability of graduates to get a job. In order to harmonize LSP education on life science HE institutions including universities, polytechnics and colleges delivering agriculture and forestry courses, it is necessary to define a unique language policy for the education in Life Sciences. It is an important role of HE to further develop the language knowledge and competences which students gained during their studies in public education. Language programmes should develop LSP courses on the basis of students' linguistic needs and integrate language learning and subject matters. i.e. LSP courses need to be skill-oriented and learner-centered.

Students need to become aware of the possibility and usefulness of individual language learning during their studies and after graduation. The grades awarded for language knowledge need to be standardized and life science graduates should possess high levels of communicative competence in at least one or two foreign languages, intercultural competences and ability to learn languages in an autonomous way.

Keeping in mind key competences influencing students employability and mobility, it is recommendable that all Life Science institutions offer/require all of their students to study a foreign language. This requirement should be a condition for the receipt of public funds for education. It may also be worthwhile exploring a move toward negotiated or process orientated syllabi with students' actively involved with their courses with continued focus on individual learning, learner centeredness, and learner autonomy. LSP courses on Life science HE institutions should focus on target situation analysis and needs analysis, and following the course delivery a more objective approach to evaluation and assessment of the course [6]. This means that LSP teachers should move away from LSP course books towards a more eclectic approach to materials, with an emphasis on careful selection of materials to meet both learners' and potential employers' needs.

Taking into consideration that good LSP skills are one of the conditions to successfully apply for

student exchange programmes, that working in life sciences often implies working for foreign companies, participating at international meetings, one sees that being an excellent expert in a certain field of life sciences is not enough. Not knowing at least one LSP sets a serious limitation to employability, career development and life-long learning process. Therefore, it is the task and responsibility of life science HE institutions to develop and offer such LSP courses that will best prepare the students not only for student mobility programmes within their undergraduate and graduate courses, but also for the challenges awaiting them in the world of work.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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