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To integrate successfully: Language and subject studies in ESP teaching

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Abstract

We look at the problem connected with the phenomenon of English becoming a medium of teaching other subjects in universities all over the world. We show that the foreign language can result in significant difficulties if a student has a low level of English, which is often the case in many non-English speaking countries. The purpose of the present work was to set up the basic principles of successful preparation of students to their further studies in English and design an ESP course for science students aimed at helping them to integrate into the international academic community. The task required target situation and curriculum analyses, detailed description of students' needs, materials selection and a syllabus design. The methodology applied is based on an adjunct Content and Language Integrated (CLIL) model where language teaching runs parallel to the content so that to develop the ability to achieve higher-order thinking. The work resulted in an ESP course for mathematicians with a special emphasis on calculus. We share practical examples of assignments and demonstrate how the approach increases efficiency in learning English and helps develop and improve student academic skills. The experience, however, can be easily extended to students of any specialization.

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1. Introduction

Internationalisation and competitiveness of higher education, rapid increase of academic mobility, attempts of creating a bilingual environment, raising number of foreign students and global competition among higher education

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institutions led to the fact that English is becoming a medium of instruction in many universities all over the world. It means we are now living through the era of global shift from English being taught as a foreign language along with many other subjects, as one of them, to English becoming a priority language for teaching academic courses. The phenomenon is growing so rapidly that it requires a change in creating and developing professional development programmes for university teachers and lecturers as well as English courses aimed at helping students to adapt to the new situation.

1.1. What is EMI?

What is the working definition of English medium instruction (EMI)? The British Council defines it as “the use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English”. A study of the phenomenon was conducted in 2013-2014 and information on 55 countries was obtained (Dearden, 2014). The main findings of the study are that the general trend is towards a rapid expansion of EMI, that the attitude of the local population to the phenomenon is very controversial and that this trend may limit in some sense access to higher education for lower socio-economic groups or the first language or national identity will be undermined. In the present paper we are not going to discuss positive or negative aspects of the phenomenon, we just take it as a real fact we face with. In this sense we have to admit that the most difficult thing about it is, on the one hand, a shortage of linguistically qualified teachers and little or no EMI content in initial teacher education (teacher preparation) programmes and in-service courses. On the other hand, teaching subject in a foreign language can become a serious handicap for students, if they have a low level of English, which is often a case in many non-speaking English countries including Russia. In some countries (for example, Turkey) there is an intermediate year of English (between secondary and tertiary education) aimed at preparing students to learn their academic subjects through EMI. The question is how effective this year in preparing students and how to make English programmes effective in enhancing student performance in EMI content learning. Nevertheless, it is one of the possible solutions and measures are being undertaken. In other countries (for example, Russia) there are no preparatory classes for students and this creates significant difficulties for the students with low level of English since they are not able to perceive the information, make notes and/or respond in English even though they reveal strong knowledge of the subject in their native language. In such cases all what we can do is to provide the students intensive support and adopt the programmes so to help our students feel comfortable and avoid stress while overcoming difficulties with the foreign language.

1.2. Benefits of CLIL

In its turn it means we are crying for a new teaching technology, implementation of which would guaranty the success. Here we come to CLIL. CLIL stands for Content and Language Integrated Learning where curriculum subject is taught in non-native language, often English, with the emphasis depending on a situation (Coyle et al., 2010). CLIL requires the teacher not let the language teaching take over, but to use effective teaching practice together with introduction of key language items at relevant moments. It emerged from curriculum innovations in Finland in the mid-1990s and it has been adopted in many countries mostly in secondary school education.

However, teaching in this way is challenging (in terms of planning and preparation, class monitoring, etc.) and requires highly professional staff. It becomes even more complicated if we deal with tertiary education in non-speaking English countries especially in such fields as physics or mathematics or any other branch of science. At the same time the advantages of CLIL implementation in a classroom are obvious: integration of learning and thinking skills gives learners absolutely different experience in comparison with traditional ways of teaching English.

1.3. Constructing an ESP course

Taking all of the aforesaid into account we developed a course of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) for mathematicians “English Journey to the World of Maths. Calculus” (Vavelyuk, 2015). We based on elements of an adjunct CLIL model (Coyle et al., 2010) where language teaching runs parallel to content teaching with a specific focus on developing knowledge and skills to use the language so as to achieve higher-order thinking. Our model,

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