Foreign language learning in higher education: The example of English Language Teaching in the Department of Mediterranean Studies

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Abstract

This paper deals with issues related to the teaching of English as a foreign language in higher education by focusing on the teaching of English in the Department of Mediterranean Studies at the University of the Aegean. More specifically, this paper outlines how the English language is taught in the department and examines the results of a study which compared student time investment with teaching/learning effectiveness. Finally, based on these findings, it proposes suggestions for English language learning in higher education. These suggestions include the following: (a) English should not be viewed as a foreign language, (b) academic aspects of language proficiency should be stressed, (c) language learning in higher education should be based on transformative and constructive/progressive pedagogical orientations, and (d) ICT should be utilized to the maximum.

Keywords: English language learning in higher education, transformative pedagogy, academic language learning, Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

1. Introduction

Foreign language learning has always been an important part of higher education in western cultures. Throughout history, being 'educated' implied knowledge of languages which varied according to (a) which languages were taught
and (b) how they were taught. With reference to (a), which languages are taught is related to the value attributed to these languages. Foreign language learning means an investment in time and effort, thus the languages learned must give some promise of future use. With regard to usefulness, a language can be viewed from various perspectives which include regarding it as a problem, a right or a resource (Baker 2001). In order for a language to be learned intentionally, as is the case with a foreign language, it must be viewed as a resource. Languages viewed as resources are usually international and/or valuable in international trade (Baker 2001). In Greece, foreign language learning seems to be centered on three languages – English, French and German – as these are the foreign languages taught in state schools. More specifically, English is introduced in the third grade of primary school, and students can opt for a second foreign language – French or German – in the secondary school. These same three languages continue into higher education. However, today there is an increased interest in other languages. For example, in the Department of Mediterranean Studies, which is the focus of this paper, the languages taught are: Hebrew, Arabic, Turkish, French, Italian, Spanish and English.

With reference to (b), how languages are taught is dictated by the purpose for which languages are to be used. During the twentieth century, English foreign language learning underwent tremendous change. Each change mirrored the importance given to specific skills in foreign language learning. For example, the Grammar Translation Method mirrored the importance given to the learning of Latin and Greek in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries and focused on rote memorization and the translation of literary texts. In contrast, the Communicative Method, beginning in the 1970’s, gave little attention to texts and focused on communicative competency (Stern 1991, Nunan 1989). The Communicative Method went beyond mechanical exercise types to more interesting activities which engaged learners in practice; however, it has undergone much criticism (Swan 1985a, 1985b). As far as the teaching of English in higher education is concerned, the Communicative Method does not seem to be entirely suitable as it is less text based and more orientated towards communicative tasks. A text-based approach seems to be appropriate in order to bring students in contact with academic discourse which lies at the core of their studies. Today, how foreign languages are taught is influenced by a variety of factors such as: (a) the purposes for which a foreign language needs to be learned; (b) new methods and approaches; (c) the learning/teaching material available, e.g. textbooks, and d) Information and Communication Technology (ICT).
This paper deals with the teaching of English in higher education and cites the example of the Department of Mediterranean Studies at the University of the Aegean. This department has three foci: (a) linguistics, (b) international relations, and (c) archaeology; therefore, the teaching of foreign languages holds a very important position in the curriculum as students must use English to gain access to information, in general, and to academic discourse, in particular, and at the same time, they must study the languages of Mediterranean countries in order to gain access to their civilizations and culture. In this paper, we will focus on the teaching of English and (a) outline how the English language is taught in the department, (b) outline the results of a study which compared student time of investment for study with relative effectiveness, and (c) propose suggestions for English language learning in higher education.

2. How English is taught in the Department of Mediterranean Studies

English is an obligatory language for the students of the Department of Mediterranean Studies. The approach to language learning is dictated to a large degree by the coursebooks used. The availability of appropriate material is limited, as there are no coursebooks in the Greek market especially written for the teaching of English in higher education. The coursebooks used in the department are those designed to prepare students for standardized language assessment such as Cambridge FCE. Information and Computer Technology (ICT) is not used in the teaching of English, as there are time and equipment constraints.

There are three levels of English with two hours of teaching at each level per week. The first level is for students with elementary knowledge of English. The second one is for students who are at the intermediate level and the third level is for students who are considered to be advanced learners (although their level is approximately at the level of the First Certificate in English). Students who have the First Certificate in English (FCE) are allowed to attend the level of their choice. Most choose to attend the third level; however, students who feel that they need further practice in English choose lower levels (usually the second one). Students who have not received the FCE must either attend the first level or take a placement test. Most of these students choose to attend the first level and do not take the placement test. This test is constructed by the instructor and its format is similar to that of the FCE exam paper, yet at a lower level.

At the first level, emphasis is placed on basic grammatical/syntactic structures in the form of grammar exercises; at this level there is a focus on grammar use and its application in texts. Also, texts on general topics at an intermediate
level are used and basic vocabulary deemed useful for discussion in social and academic contexts is taught. At the second level, basic grammatical/syntactic forms are once again taught and practice of these structures is in the form of exercises such as those in Use of English papers selected from coursebooks designed for the first year of preparation for FCE examinations. Also, texts on general topics at FCE level are used. These texts are geared towards increasing vocabulary which is useful for discussion in social and academic contexts. At the third and final level, each semester exploits different activities. In the first semester, university students are given exercises such as Cambridge Use of English papers and texts at the level of Advanced (CAE) and Proficiency English (CPE) are used. The subject matter of the texts is selected so that it relates to the courses that are taught in the department. The texts may, for example, deal with language issues, topics of archaeological interest or social and political issues. The second semester is dedicated to the comprehension (reading skills) as well as the production (writing skills) of academic texts. Assessment is in the form of written work and oral presentations on topics related to the courses that are taught in the department.

3. The study

The results of a study carried out in 2002 in another department of the University of the Aegean, the Department of Preschool Education and Educational Design, showed that a large percentage of the students claimed that they did not know English well enough to participate in academic tasks at university level, despite their investment in many years of study (Kourtis-Kazoullis and Georgalidou 2002). That study was an incentive for a more detailed research to be carried out in the Department of Mediterranean Studies in January 2003 at the end of the Fall semester. The research would highlight the mismatch of student investment of time in studying English with learning effectiveness. This information was drawn from two sources: (a) student questionnaires, and (b) end-of-semester examination results. The student questionnaires aimed to provide data about: (i) years of learning English in state school, (ii) years of learning English in private language schools (i.e. frontisteria or private tutoring), (iii) hours of learning English per week, (iv) student self-assessment, and (v) English language use (i.e. how often and in which contexts English is used).

3.1 Student questionnaires

A questionnaire was given to all students (216) who enrolled in the English courses for the 2002-2003 academic year in the Department of Mediterranean
Studies. Of the 216 students, 130 were at level three (advanced), 32 at level two (intermediate) and 54 at level one (lower intermediate). At the first level, 51 students (out of 54) were first-year students. The other 3 were second-year students. At the second level, 25 students (out of 32) were second-year students. The other seven were third-year students. At the third level, 60 students out of 130 were first-year students, 30 were second-year students, 36 were third-year students and 4 were fourth-year students. In general, half of the first students who attended English at all levels were first-year students. The other half included mostly second and third year students.

The results of the questionnaire included the following:

- **Years of English study at school**

  The majority of students at all three levels had spent between 6 and 10 years learning English at school prior to university. This included 49 out of the 54 students at level one, 27 out of the 32 at level two and 106 out of the 130 at level three (see figures 1, 2 and 3).

![Graph showing years at school](image)

*Figure 1. Years at school (level 1)*
- **Years of English study at private language schools (frontistiria)**

The majority of students at all three levels had also spent between 6 and 10 years of English study in private language schools. This included 42 out of the 54 students at level one, 24 out of the 32 at level two and 103 out of the 130 at level three (see figures 4, 5 and 6).
Figure 4. Years at frontistiria (level 1)

Figure 5. Years at frontistiria (level 2)

Figure 6. Years at frontistiria (level 3)
• **Hours per week**

During these years, the students spent an average of 5 to 10 hours per week at English lessons (both at school and at frontistiria). This included 44 out of the 54 students at level one, 26 out of the 32 at level two and 110 out of the 130 at level three (see figures 7, 8 and 9).
• **Student self-assessment**

Students were asked to assess their level of English with reference to how well they could use English for academic purposes, within the following range: excellent, very good, quite good, not so good and inadequate. It was stressed that we were referring to their ability to use English in their academic careers and not just in their English course. At level one, 47% of the students stated that their level of English was not so good and 38% assessed their knowledge of English as quite good (see figure 10). At level two 55% of the students answered not so good and 29% answered quite good (see figure 11). At level three 33% answered not so good and 45% answered quite good (see figure 12).
In spite of the years and hours of investment, the students at all three levels were aware of the fact that their English was not satisfactory enough for academic purposes. It would be expected that the lower level would have lower self-assessment. However, this was not the case, as the lower and higher levels had similar self-assessment results. For example, 47% of the students at level one stated that their English was not so good whereas 38% stated that their English was quite good (see figure 10). Similarly, at level three, 45% of the students stated that their English was quite good, 33% of the students stated that their English was not so good and 6% inadequate. At level two, a total of 55% of the students stated that their English was not so good, 13% that it is inadequate and 29% stated that their English was quite good (see figure 11). The conclusion that can be drawn is that the students at the second level were able to assess
their abilities more accurately. The students at the higher level were also aware of the fact that their English was not adequate for academic purposes; however, the students at the lower level did not seem to be aware of this fact. The reason for this may be the fact that almost all of the students at this level were first-year students (at the end of the first semester) and did not have adequate experience of using English as a medium in their academic studies.

- **English language use**

  All the students stated that they used English in some way. This included both leisure and academic activities. In their leisure time, the students used English in a wide variety of contexts including conversations, listening to songs, watching movies, etc. They also used English academically; however, this use was limited. English was used mostly to gather information from the Internet by visiting sites and less for the actual reading and study of academic texts. For example, of the 212 students, 159 used English to look for information relevant to their studies on the Internet whereas 57 read academic texts in journals or books. Of these 57 students, 45 were students at the advanced level. Although the students had the ability to perform well on reading comprehension tasks, they could not transfer this ability to using English as a language of study (see 3.2).

3.2 *End of the year examination results*

The students were assessed through Reading Comprehension and Use of English exercises (i.e. the exams used at the end of term). At all levels the students had high scores in Reading Comprehension whereas they had lower scores in Use of English. At the advanced level 58 out of 130 students failed Use of English. At the lower intermediate level 40 out of 54 students failed, whereas at the intermediate level 26 out of the 32 students failed. The students had developed comprehension skills but did not have an adequate knowledge of grammar. These results indicated that although students had developed comprehension skills through the years they had spent studying English, they had not developed those skills required for the production of grammatically correct discourse.

3.3 *Analysis of results*

The results above indicated that university students, regardless of the number of years invested in studying a foreign language, demonstrate the following characteristics:
(a) They do not believe that they have the ability to engage in tasks at an academic level in the foreign language (see results of their self-assessment). (b) They actually do not have the ability to engage in cognitively demanding tasks in higher education such as comprehension, critical analysis and the production of academic discourse (as seen from the test results).

Up to this level, foreign language learning had focused on three aspects of language, but at a very superficial level: (a) grammatical structures, (b) meaning, i.e. text comprehension, and (c) language use, i.e. production of oral and written texts (Cummins 2000a). This may have been sufficient before university level; however, at university this was not the case. At university level, the students had to engage in both the comprehension and production of academic language, which was much more cognitively demanding. In spite of this, the way in which foreign languages are taught in higher education does not seem to differ very much from the way they are taught before then. However, the increase in demands at the academic level is likely to create a number of problems. The two hours of teaching per week are not sufficient and do not allow students to reach higher levels of achievement as they do not receive enough target language input. New technologies are not used and language laboratories are nonexistent. The EFL textbooks used in higher education in Greece are in many cases the same books used in state secondary schools or in private language schools. A large percentage of these textbooks are either based on the Communicative Method or are geared towards language proficiency tests such as Cambridge First Certificate or Proficiency. This poses a problem for students at the level of higher education as the textbooks at this level should be geared towards academic English, giving more emphasis to written texts rather than oral-based exercises.

4. Suggestions for English language learning in higher education

Current trends in modern languages at the level of higher education have been outlined in various texts (Coleman et al. 2001, Klapper 2001, Head et al. 2003). However, even at the level of higher education, students’ and teachers’ needs may vary. Teachers must have the tools necessary to view existing approaches, methods and techniques critically as well as be in the position to develop their own syllabuses (Nunan 1989). The teacher must begin with certain basic guidelines, including assumptions about the learner’s purpose in taking a language course and identification of learning goals (Nunan 1989). In order to contribute to the improvement of language learning in the Department of Mediterranean Studies, this paper outlines the following guidelines, which reflect the needs and goals of the students in the Department of Mediterranean Studies.
4.1 English is not necessarily a foreign language

According to Warschauer (1998), the nature of language teaching is affected by economic, technological, and social changes. He describes features such as the rise of an information economy and society, the emergence of global English, and the development of new language and literacy practices which affect the way English is taught and goes on to describe English as a second (third or fourth) language rather than a foreign language. These factors should be kept in mind when designing an English course in higher education, as students at this level must use English as a medium for learning other things.

4.2 Academic aspects of language proficiency should be stressed

In higher education there should be a differentiation made between English used in everyday conversational contexts and English used in more cognitively demanding or academic contexts. This differentiation has been made by many theorists. Cummins (2000b) refers to Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) and later distinguishes between Conversational and Academic aspects of Language Proficiency. The framework does not distinguish between oral and written language, as oral language may be as cognitively demanding as written language in certain contexts (Σχούρης 1995). Similar distinctions have been made by many other theorists. Students at this level should be able to engage in the process of comprehending and producing academic texts. They should also develop critical awareness of different text types in various contexts (Cummins 2000a).

4.3 Language learning in higher education should be based on transformative and constructive/progressive pedagogical orientations

The pedagogical orientation in higher education should go beyond traditional or progressive and reach transformative levels of pedagogy (Cope and Kalantzis 2000, Cummins 2000b). Transformative pedagogy focuses on social realities relevant to students' experiences and incorporates collaborative critical inquiry in order to relate curriculum content to students' individual and collective experiences. Broader social issues, relevant to students' lives, are analyzed and students are encouraged to discuss ways in which social realities might be changed through social action and democratic participation (Cummins and Sayers 1995, Κουρτή-Κατζούλλης 2001). Prior to university, students have already been exposed to many years of teacher-centered learning environments. This may be the reason why they cannot make the transition
from learning about English to using English to engage in cognitively demanding tasks that involve critical literacy. Learning in traditional pedagogy stresses memorization while learning in progressive pedagogy involves knowledge which is constructed collaboratively between teachers and peers. Within this pedagogy, the teacher encourages students to use language actively and the language classroom is a community of learning. Transformative pedagogy includes the critical analysis of broader social implications (Cummins 1999) that are particularly important in a department dealing with international relations, language and civilization.

4.4 An academic approach to language learning should be adopted

In higher education an academic approach to language learning should be adopted. Cummins outlines three elements in his framework of instruction for language learning and academic achievement (Cummins 2000b). His framework is based on three basic orientations: (a) focus on meaning, (b) focus on language and (c) focus on use. With reference to focus on meaning, sufficient comprehensible input in the target language is considered a necessary condition for language acquisition; however, the comprehensible input should go beyond literal comprehension to critical literacy. This focus is especially important in English language learning in higher education, as students have to use English texts to gain access to information on specific subject matter but must also be able to process this information in critical ways. For example, 80% of the books in the library at this university are in English. Furthermore, in most courses, lecturers and professors use references from books and journals written in English and assign written tasks that are based on these references. Students must be able not only to comprehend these texts but also to critically examine, compare and analyze the content. Focus on language includes teaching forms and functions of the target language but also critical language awareness. Finally, focus on use is based on the belief that L2 acquisition will remain abstract unless students are given the opportunity to actually use the language (Cummins 2000b); however the language should be used in critical and creative ways. Whereas foreign language learning is based on a promise for future use (Σκουρτου 1997), at university a domain for language use is already present (Fishman 1971). Students at this level must actually use English mainly in order to comprehend written texts and access relevant material and to a lesser extent in order to produce texts in English. Therefore, focus on use plays a central role at this level.
4.5 Information and Communication Technology (ICT) should be utilized

The powerful medium of ICT should be utilized to the maximum in higher education. ICT can facilitate a shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered approaches to learning. As English is the predominant language of the Internet, ICT can be used to provide target language input and actual language use through communication. However, if the potential of ICT is to be used to the maximum, use should not be restricted to traditional pedagogical orientations which reinforce the learning of content or vocabulary and grammatical knowledge (Cummins 2000b); ICT can be used with constructivist orientations that involve higher-order thinking skills and cognitive challenge. However, the challenge is to use ICT with a transformative orientation. This means going beyond constructivist orientations with respect to social assumptions and enabling students to engage in collaborative critical inquiry (Cummins 2000b) through the formation of sister class networks (Κούρτης-Καζούλη 2001, Cummins and Sayers 1995). In higher education, this is a challenge as students can use English to engage in collaborative critical inquiry in the form of joint research with students in other universities across the globe, which is especially important in a department whose aim is the study of so many languages and cultures in the Mediterranean. Students in the department have also attended seminars at Eastern universities where English was the language used as a means of communication. ICT can be used to extend such cooperation and to begin where the seminars leave off.

Also, ICT can incorporate aids to language learning such as automatic translation, electronic dictionaries, language learning software, etc. The use of these means allows students to learn independently and thus compensates for the inadequacy of two hours’ instruction per week.

5. Conclusion

This paper outlines a number of suggestions on how English language learning can be improved at the level of higher education, drawing upon the problems highlighted by a study carried out at the Department of Mediterranean Studies. English language teaching has a long history, mirrored by tremendous change. Today, there is a wide variety of material to choose from and a number of approaches, methods, and techniques to consider. However, no one approach, method or technique is wholly appropriate. The actual syllabus that the teacher devises must constantly be adjusted to the changing needs of the students and must always answer the question, “what does the target language need to be
used for?” In higher education, these needs are directly related to academic language learning. This paper makes suggestions which concern the particular department studied; however, the suggestions can suit the needs of other university departments in Greece. We propose that: (a) English should not be viewed as a foreign language, (b) academic aspects of language proficiency should be stressed, (c) language learning in higher education should be based on transformative and constructivist or progressive pedagogical orientations, and (d) ICT should be utilized to the maximum.

References


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