

INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH OF TEACHING ENGLISH AT UNIVERSITY

Except for teaching English as a linguistic discipline in philological study programs at universities there is also teaching English for specific purposes. This subject is commonly applied in non-philological study programs; in social, natural, technical and other sciences. Having different aims this teaching requires different methodologies and thus different approaches. One of very important approaches is an interdisciplinary approach as “specific” in English teaching means its relation to a scientific discipline within which English is taught.

This methodological approach has become very effective also because of its appropriateness in non-philological study programs and its compliance with the change of a teaching paradigm at university focused on student centred teaching and learning and life-long learning.

In teaching English for specific purposes at universities content and language integrated learning (CLIL) is a very common methodological approach. Teachers try to use this method in order to meet the requirements specified in the profiles of different study programs.

CLIL teachers at universities usually work with students whose level in the language used for learning is lower than their individual cognitive levels. The recent research linked with CLIL has brought the evidence that gains may be activated even with relatively low levels of language competence. Moreover, other research findings, related to English proficiency of CLIL students, show overall superiority particularly in vocabulary knowledge mainly of items associated with the subject being studied.

CLIL is the planned pedagogical integration of contextualized content, cognition, communication and culture into teaching and learning practice. The teacher becomes a facilitator and his or her main aim is to provide students with language competences to be able to communicate in their professional life. “If communication in languages is identified as a key skill for lifelong learning, success in effective communication skills is no longer seen in terms of attaining near-native competence in a language but in developing different appropriate skills according to need.

CLIL methodology enables teachers to base on a remarkable diversity of curricula. When preparing a curriculum for teaching English in any non-philological study program at university it is necessary to do a needs’ analysis, that is one of typical features which distinguish an ESP curriculum from other approaches. Such a needs’ analysis, in order to be proper, naturally expects a reasonable cooperation between English teachers and mainstream content teachers.

However, the introduction of CLIL in higher education sector has been influenced by discussion over whether the ability to know and use a specific language is a basic competence or an additional competence. This in turn has

opened discussion on whether language teaching and language specialists have been viewed as “auxiliaries“ in some countries then teachers may have a lower position within hierarchies.

Working in an interdisciplinary way accomplishes a variety of goals:

1) Cooperation between mainstream and teachers facilitates the acquisition of language and content in the subject area for students. In addition, the dual acquisition of the English language and academic content places additional demands on students and can make academic success challenging.

2) Cooperation between mainstream and teachers creates a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the unique needs of students.

3) Cooperation promotes the growth of a community of students in a study program, constructs meaning and engages in inquiry based, constructivist learning that bridges differences celebrates diversity and enhances academic achievement and language acquisition for students.

While teaching English at universities an interdisciplinary approach is one of the priorities for a design of a language teaching process as it should be considered a part of the whole study program aimed at fulfilment of a graduate profile specification. That is why teachers should take into account specific needs of the students and thus base the content of their curricula on the content of main stream subjects within a study program. Such an approach naturally expects interdisciplinary relations between English teachers and the teachers of mainstream subjects. Normally, impulses come from the English teachers as other teachers are not very interested in teaching languages for specific purposes, they even do not consider language teachers to be equally important for a study program.

The effectiveness of the relationship between English and mainstream teachers depends greatly on how it is handled by both parties, but, since it is usually the English teachers who have enlisted the help of the subject specialists it is their main responsibility to ensure that potential problems are anticipated and avoided and that a harmonious working arrangement is created.

One of the most characteristic features of English for specific purposes in practice is a material design. Main reasons are the following:

1. A teacher or an institution may wish to provide teaching materials that will fit with the specific subject area of particular learners. Such materials are not available commercially.

2. Even when suitable materials are available it may not be possible to buy them because of different reasons.

3. The available materials are not suitable for teaching and learning and must be didactically adapted.

For designing a material for English teaching cooperation between specific study program teachers is really inevitable. The mainstream subjects may have an influence on the language content, nevertheless, the selection of language items – a suitable text, vocabulary and particular grammatical or structural forms – is in the competence of an English teacher.