

THE ROLE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN INTERNATIONALISING UNIVERSITY CURRICULA IN RUSSIA AND BEYOND

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Abstract

Universities around the world seek to broaden students' intercultural perspectives. Curricula are becoming more internationalised, and thereby teaching and learning. The terms "foreign language proficiency" and "intercultural competence" are being embedded in higher education provision. The paper explores current change in the role of foreign language proficiency of both students and faculty in fostering internationalisation of curriculum. It analyses introduction and promotion of new teaching approaches, such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL); as well as elaboration and delivery of courses aimed at developing intercultural competence of students and faculty. The authors argue that merely developing students' foreign language competence is not sufficient for successful curricula internationalisation. It is also necessary to integrate international and intercultural dimension into professional competences formation, which includes intercultural competence.

The authors have done a comparative analysis of the efforts made by the universities in Russia and beyond, namely in the European Union (hereinafter EU) countries. The findings indicate that the key challenges faced by Russian and EU universities are low entry level of English among students, as well as insufficient awareness of lecturers on the efficient ways to internationalise curricula. The paper also identifies specific features of foreign language training in Russia, including the development of a vocationally oriented foreign language communicative competence of students and the increasing amount of Russian language courses for foreign students coming mainly from the CIS countries. Internationalisation and studying foreign languages are interconnected and mutually influential. Hence, universities in Russia and EU countries develop strategies to enhance the quality of both processes.

Keywords: Communicative Competence, Internationalization, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL)

1. INTRODUCTION

The current goal of higher education provision in Russia and in the EU countries to equip all students with the competences giving them the opportunity to successfully live and work in a multilingual and multicultural environment is being achieved through curriculum internationalisation. Internationalisation of curriculum is defined as 'incorporation of international, intercultural and global dimensions into the content of the curriculum as well as the learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods and support services of a program of study' (Leask 2009, p.209). Hence, internationalised curriculum is aimed at developing 'students' global perspectives and cross-cultural capability in order to be able to perform professionally and socially in a multicultural environment' (Clifford and Joseph, 2005).

Though there is no single, uniform way to internationalise curriculum the major activities include incorporating intercultural competence into the curriculum and integrating international elements in subject-specific competences (Biryukova N.A., Krasilnikova N.V., 2014). The methods of teaching and assessment of student learning outcomes are chosen in such a way as to involve students in intercultural polylogue. Thus, faculty members diversify their methods with international case studies and problem-based tasks. Though international mobility is not an essential component of curriculum internationalisation, it is highly promoted by study programmes resulting in the necessity to provide sufficient support to students in order to ensure their efficient participation in mobility programmes. One of the essential conditions for successful implementation of internationally-oriented courses is high level of foreign language proficiency of both students and professors. Thus, researchers and university educators elaborate on the methods and ways contributing to the development and enhancement of a foreign language competence of students and faculty members (Kolesova T.V., 2013). Moreover, universities in Russia and the EU are encouraged to adhere to global and national policies on foreign language acquisition. For example, since 2002 the European Commission monitors the implementation of the M+2 policy implying that any European citizen should know a mother tongue plus two foreign languages. Russian universities also strive to enhance the quality of foreign language teaching through developing and monitoring the policy of creating a multilingual university environment.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The purpose of our research has been to do a comparative analysis of the activities done by Russian and EU universities to support curriculum internationalisation through rethinking the role of foreign language instruction.

There is currently a wide scope of theoretical and empirical research into the developments in delivering foreign language courses in Russian and EU universities in order to support curriculum internationalisation. The key activities include implementation of new teaching approaches, encompassing Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL); as well as elaboration and delivery of courses aimed at developing intercultural competence of students and faculty members. Having analysed the use of the abovementioned initiatives in Russian and EU universities we have identified the factors stimulating and hindering their implementation, as well as a few specific national features.

3. RESULTS

Apart from being a desired learning outcome, foreign language proficiency of students becomes a means of developing students' subject-specific learning outcomes. At the beginning of the XXI century foreign language lecturers further develop and implement CLIL which was introduced in 1994 by D. Marsh. Later, CLIL was suggested to be "a general 'umbrella' term to refer to diverse methodologies which encompass both subject-specific training and language instruction" (Kovács, 2014, p. 48-49). Implementation of CLIL received a great support in EU universities especially within English language instruction in Northern Europe, Spain, Italy and France. The beneficial effect of using CLIL is felt on global communicative competence, on receptive skills, speaking, vocabulary, writing, creativity, risk-taking, and emotive/affective outcomes (learner motivation) (Pérez-Cañado, 2012). It allows educators to meet the needs of students in global perspectives and contributes to a more efficient transition of students to studying at double degree programmes which are usually delivered in English being a foreign language for many EU students. Research indicates that there is still a number of factors hindering efficient implementation of CLIL in EU universities. The barriers include insufficient collaboration among subject and language educators and lack of their relevant competences (Fortanet-Gómez, 2013).

Whereas CLIL has been widely implemented in European universities, its use in Russian universities is still sporadic and non systemic. Although universities shift from developing a foreign language communicative competence to a vocationally oriented foreign language communicative competence the main approach used by foreign language units is still teaching a second language for specific purposes. There are a few universities which are taking great efforts to foster CLIL implementation. Kazan Federal University has been implementing CLIL in teaching mathematics and the English language. Besides, the University has a research laboratory which studies the outcomes of its implementation. The studies into the factors hindering CLIL implementation in Russia reveal that the key barriers include low entry level of English among students, as well as insufficient level of relevant competences of lecturers.

The methodology which received a wide application in the foreign language instruction both in Russia and the EU universities is Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). The majority of Russian universities deliver blended language courses held through the learning management system Moodle. The virtual learning environment provides foreign language educators with the opportunity to use the activities allowing for a better development of a vocationally oriented foreign language communicative competence and intercultural competence as well.

Foreign language competence contributes to efficient curriculum internationalisation allowing students to deal with subject-specific literature, participate in intercultural virtual and face-to-face communication with foreign students, researchers and experts in their field of study, as well as international research projects, but merely developing students' foreign language competence is not sufficient for successful curricula internationalisation. Efficient international polylogue requires a high level of intercultural competence of its participants. Thus, at the beginning of the XXI century universities in EU countries start to introduce the courses aimed at developing intercultural competence of students and faculty. Intercultural competence has been identified as one of the top 10 skills alongside skills such as critical thinking, decision making, the ability to work in a team, adapt to and act in a new situation, that employers expect university graduates to possess (Erasmus Impact Study, 2014.)

Intercultural competence courses are either embedded in the curriculum or delivered separately. The aim of the courses is to raise intercultural awareness that helps to act appropriately in culturally sensitive situations. Thus, upon successful completion of the courses students and faculty members are ready to effectively participate in intercultural educational and research projects within university cooperation and beyond it. Though there are a few Russian universities successfully delivering intercultural competence courses they are not a wide-spread practice.

Growing incoming mobility of students in Russian universities, predominantly from the CIS countries, encourages universities to deliver more Russian language courses. The universities also provide international Russian language summer courses where participants either study General Russian and Russian culture or Russian for specific purposes and even deliver tailored courses for various national groups of students, for example Russian language for Chinese students. T.R. Rakhimov argues that Russian language instruction of foreign students leads to a better integration not absorption of the Russian higher education system in the global higher education area, it also contributes to a better preparation of students for entering Russian universities and their further efficient adaptation (T.R. Rakhimov, 2010).

4. CONCLUSION

Internationalisation of university curricula in Russia and EU countries encourages universities to rethink the role of foreign language instruction. International and national policies are being developed and implemented in order to improve the quality of foreign language teaching and learning. Universities aspiring to equip all students with global perspectives and cross-cultural capability introduce new approaches and methods to teaching foreign languages, such as CLIL and CALL, as well as intercultural competence courses. These initiatives lead to a more efficient development of global perspectives of both students and faculty members. Sufficient level of foreign language competences of educators allows them to introduce intercultural and international elements into materials as well as methods of teaching and assessing students' learning outcomes, which results in a more efficient development of students' Intercultural competence and international subject-specific competences. The main factors which still hamper the progress of curriculum internationalisation via foreign language instruction are low initial level of foreign language proficiency of students (particularly, the English level one) as well as lack of motivation and relevant competences of educators.

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