

REMEDIAL COURSES IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION: RESULTS AND LESSONS OF A PROJECT

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Received: 31.07.2012; Accepted: 30.08.2013; Published online: 07.07.2014

Between 2010 and 2012 a four-semester long project was carried out at the University of Miskolc financed by Social Renewal Operational Program (TÁMOP 4.1.1.A-10/A-10/1/KONV). Within the frames of this project the Foreign Language Teaching Centre offered elective courses for students who have problems with language learning, who have suffered serious setbacks due to their failures in language learning. Here I present the aims, implementation and the achievements of this project. In the last chapter of my paper I summarise the experience gained during the implementation of the project and give some ideas for further research and innovation, and for further improvement of the effectiveness of foreign language teaching.

Keywords: remedial courses, language education, higher education

Recent changes in higher education raise a lot of questions and problems regarding the quality of the education. New expectations have appeared both in the society and from the sides of all participants of the education process. The expansion of higher education means new challenges: to preserve the high standards of teaching, provide the economy with a highly-qualified workforce and at the same time become the driving force in innovation, science and technology (Drabancz, 2009). However, the motivation of the students, their background knowledge and academic achievements show significant differences from those of previous years. As we have witnessed higher access rate in tertiary education the concerns and fears about the deterioration of education quality have become more alarming. Lower academic standards coupled with budget constraints seriously threaten the institutional system and fulfilment of the main functions of higher education.

According to some recent statistics, 80% of the applicants are admitted to higher educational institutions, which means nearly 60% of the youth of a given year (www.felvi.hu). It is quite obvious that such a huge mass of people cannot be homogenous; there is a significant proportion of these students who cannot meet the requirements and fail to meet the academic standards. The concerns about the deterioration of academic standards and quality of education seem to be justified. To reveal the reasons behind this phenomenon is far beyond the scope of this paper. This time I will concentrate on language education, and the possible reasons why there is a need for remedial courses.

My paper is divided into four main parts. In the first introductory paragraphs I give a short outline of the changes in higher education. In connection with these changes some new expectations have appeared both in the society and in all participants of the education process, which explain the main reasons for the necessity of introducing remedial courses. Then, I shortly introduce the professional work that has been going on in the Foreign Language Teaching Centre of the University of Miskolc with special focus on the activities where students who are lagging behind are concerned.

The necessity of introducing remedial courses

There are more and more students whose skills and abilities do not allow them to meet the expectations and who need some help. Remedial courses are an umbrella term for courses which aim at revising and summarising students' knowledge. During these courses students are supposed to make up for the deficiencies they have. The fields of instruction are various, such as reading comprehension, spelling, academic writing, basic mathematical notions and correlations, foreign language skills, and so on. These students lag behind the others due to different reasons. The most common ones are an unfavourable social background, general learning disorders, and/or disorder of a particular skill (e.g. dyslexia). Some of them need help in nearly all subjects, while some of them lack the necessary knowledge only in particular subjects (e.g. foreign languages). As for the reasons underlying failures in language learning, we should mention several aspects.

Compulsory education, especially secondary schools, is considered to be responsible for language education to the intermediate (B2) level. More and more universities and colleges expect their students to have at least one language certificate at entrance. Based on that knowledge, ideally language education in higher educational institutions can focus on teaching Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) related to the students' degree programs. So, if we want to understand foreign language problems of our students, we should have a look at the general practice of schools in secondary education. More and more of our students come from secondary technical schools, where foreign language education is not of primary importance. The market of foreign language coursebooks is full of good publications and the publishers try to convince language teachers to choose their materials and books. Abundance in itself wouldn't be a problem, but it can also hinder consistence and continuity. It often happens that a topic reoccurs several times, thus becomes boring and demotivating, but in an extreme case a student might never deal with some other topics, just repeat familiar ones. The situation is made even worse by the fluctuation of teachers. Foreign language teachers abandon their teaching profession more often than teachers of other subjects. Whenever a new language teacher starts working with a group of learners he/she starts introducing his/her own concepts and ideas (new course material).

Finally, the reason I consider the most worrying is that there is a contradiction between the long-term aim of the language learning process (usable, marketable language knowledge and the ability to become an independent language learner) and the short-term aim of obtaining a language certificate. Even if students manage to meet the requirements of the complex intermediate (B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) level language exam (where the pass level is 60%), they rarely go on with their studies to improve their language skills. There is no capacity in schools and no motivation on the side of the learners.

They are satisfied with the extra points they are granted for the certificate in the higher education admissions process and are not interested in making further efforts to study the language or start learning a new one. Most of the time during the language lessons is spent on completing tests and drills in order to practice for the language exams. There is no or little emphasis put on enjoyable, lifelike, communicative activities and acquiring learning strategies that make the learners self-confident, independent language users, who are able to go on improving their language knowledge on their own. In short, students study (if they do at all) for gaining the certificate and not for being able to speak a language.

It is a general expectation towards teachers of any subject that they should continuously educate themselves, get to know new methods and teaching aids, and also participate in forums, where ideas can be compared and exchanged. Using information and -communication technologies is also a must. We must admit that not all of us are willing to keep pace with the latest ideas and innovations.

Another problem is the length of learning time. Due to the characteristics of the Hungarian education system, most students study their first language for eight or even twelve years. What has been learnt in primary schools is usually ignored by the teachers in secondary school and they find it better to start teaching the language from the very beginnings again. It is not only an unacceptable waste of time but also deteriorates motivation and makes the learning process a boring, endless flow, instead of making it a challenging and enjoyable adventure. The introduction and (success) of so-called zero years in some secondary grammar schools - focusing on intensive foreign language teaching - was based on recognition of this weakness.

Learning foreign languages is a must these days. This commonplace is evident for us, adults, but for a teenager it does not sound as motivating as we think. Even among the university students there is an opinion according to which professional subjects are much more important than foreign languages. The latter ones are considered only obstacles to overcome in order to get a degree, since every degree course requires at least one intermediate language certificate to meet graduation requirements.

Most language learners accumulate failures and frustration during their learning processes. Whether we like it or not, it is undeniable that people have different aptitudes and skills when it comes to learning a foreign language. I would even dare to say that learning a foreign language is similar to PE, drawing or singing. The skills we need in all these fields can be improved by good methods and enthusiastic teachers. But the reality is not ideal at all. Frustration and failure often make students give up learning languages. Disadvantages might appear not only in the amount of skills but also in students' social background and equality of chances. These factors influence language learning exponentially, as there is a significant role of extra-curricular opportunities in language learning: travelling abroad, hiring a private tutor, buying the latest coursebooks and dictionaries, etc.

Students who have problems with reading comprehension in their mother tongue will inevitably have difficulties with acquiring a foreign language. Academic overload, fast pace and negligence of age characteristics will result in losing their chances of catching up with the others. Learning effectively and successfully must be taught. Another issue arises in higher education, where students have more freedom to choose their classes. Most students think that they do not need to attend the language lessons. They can learn the material from the book by themselves. However, the fact is that a living foreign language cannot be acquired without interaction, listening to speakers of the language, performing speech acts. These conditions are not

provided in the case of individual learning, not to mention the role of the teacher, who gives feedback, helps, checks and controls the whole process. Another false common belief is that it is enough to spend some weeks on intensive learning before the exam. For better or worse, regular practice, hard work and devotion cannot be escaped.

Some experts often blame the lack of an authentic language environment, but I think these days, when everyone has access to internet and satellite TV channels, it cannot be a serious problem. I do agree that undubbed films and TV programs would considerably increase the level of language knowledge of the Hungarian population, as suggested by Jenő Bárdos (Bárdos, 2004), among others.

The list of the reasons could be continued, but I hope I have managed to summarize the most important factors that have negative effects on successful language learning. In the following parts I would like to summarise what has been done in order to overcome these difficulties at the University of Miskolc between 2010-12. Several faculties of the University of Miskolc and also the Foreign Language Teaching Centre were involved in a project financed by TÁMOP 4.1.1.A-10/A-10/1/KONV „KEY” to the *Development of Student and Institutional Services at the University of Miskolc*, under Section 3.5, Development of Learning Methodologies and Remedial Courses. This project aimed at improving the quality of services provided for the students. Also it gave the opportunity to start remedial courses for students in different subjects.

Aims of remedial courses in language education

The primary aim of the course was to focus more attention on the problem and raise awareness of students and teachers. All participants of the project agreed that we have to deal with the problem of students lagging behind on all-university level. We hoped that by identifying the problem and working out some ways of help we could prevent more students from dropping out. There are no available statistics on that respect, yet, but from preliminary test results we can conclude that remedial courses have helped students meet university requirements in several subjects.

Another target set by the project management leaned more towards a task of psychology and pedagogy. Students needed help in overcoming their frustrations and disappointments, which considerably hindered their performance and ruined their self-esteem. They were given encouragement and a sense of achievement, besides being taught how to learn effectively. As for language learning, there was also a special objective of getting closer to passing the desired language exam.

What has been done in the project

The Language Teaching Centre took part in this project by compiling a methodology booklet on successful language learning and running courses for students who needed help in their studies. We offered a 30-hour long remedial course in English each semester, which had double objectives. First of all we wanted to show the students who joined the course how they could improve their language skills by acquiring some useful and effective learning strategies. On the other hand we tried to focus their attention on those fields that are the most important on the way to success, such as building up self-confidence, feeling a sense of achievement and being aware of how much they already know and how much progress they have made.

Realisation of the project was preceded by some research in good practices of other universities and educational institutions (Márkusné & Snóbliné, 2005), and also studying the professional literature. Teachers involved in the projects took part in a training that made them more competent to deal with such a sensitive issue. We had to decide on the methodology we wanted to apply (Bárdos, 2005), and also agreed on the key competences we wanted to improve (Kézikönyv..., 2007). Based on this knowledge and experience we could assess how to revise some of our already existing course materials to meet the needs of students with lower academic achievements. This revision includes both restructuring, incorporating IT-based tasks and making the content and the format more student-friendly and interesting (Kurtán, 2001). We asked the first-year students to take placement tests to help form homogenous learning groups as much as it was possible. Participants of remedial courses also wrote diagnostic tests in order to highlight the problematic areas of language that pose difficulties to most learners. Participation in the course was voluntary and completion was acknowledged by a signature registered in the Nepun system. Students were given no credits. The course description in Figure 1 might give some idea of what happened during the courses.

Figure 1. Course description, Remedial English (translated from Hungarian)

GENERAL AND SPECIFIC AIMS OF THE COURSE
The main objective of the course is to provide methodological help for students who failed to meet the prescribed academic requirements in English and/or have learning difficulties and failures. The course is to pass on certain language knowledge and teach effective strategies on how to improve skills (in oral and written communication, reading comprehension, listening comprehension) and this way lay the foundation for further language studies.
TOPICS
1. Introduction, forming groups, introduction to the content and methodology of the course. Need analysis.
2. How to learn new words effectively
3. Ways of expanding vocabulary
4. Improving listening skills. Practical exercises.
5. What and how to listen to?
6. Understanding texts: how to find out the unknown meaning?
7. Translation, mediation, using dictionaries
8. Everyone must communicate in writing: e-mails, blogs, comments, letters, applications in English
9. Developing writing skills
10. Grammar is to serve successful communication
11. Filling in grammar knowledge gaps
12. "Speaking is (not) difficult..." Tips and tricks to improve speaking skills
13. Let's use what we have learnt: communication in everyday situations
14. Course evaluation, individual evaluations
METHODOLOGY
Individually-tailored tasks that improve users' self confidence and thus lays the foundation for further successful language learning. Introducing learning strategies, tips and tricks that can make learning an enjoyable activity. Graded tasks and exercises available on-line making individual and group work possible. Tutoring.
COURSE MATERIAL
A methodological and self-study leaflet compiled specifically for this course + on-line practise tasks on demand
REQUIREMENTS
Regular attendance, active participation, entrepreneurial spirit and motivation

The project started with a need analysis of students who took up the remedial course in English. They were also asked to write a placement test to discover the most problematic fields that posed difficulties for most of the students.

It would have been unrealistic to think that we could teach students everything they had not been able to learn for 10-12 years, the time most of them had already spent learning a foreign language. What we could do was develop those skills and competences that make them able to learn independently. At the same time we had to bear in mind that gaining the language certificate is one of the graduation requirements, so the students expected us to show them the way to prepare for the exam. Table 1 shows the results of the self-assessment survey to find out the areas where students need most help.

Table 1. Percentage of students who assessed themselves as weak in skill areas (n=228)

	Listening	Speaking	Reading Compr.	Writing	Grammar	Pronunciation	Self-learning
Faculty of Mechanical Engineering	40%	55.6%	15.7%	17.1%	61.4%	30%	8.5%
Faculty of Arts	21.4%	42.8%	28.5%	0%	57.1%	7%	0%
Faculty of Economics	60%	60%	24%	28%	68%	24%	8%
Faculty of Law	35.4%	62%	21.3%	15.4%	62.2%	15%	7.8%

Conclusion

Here I intend to summarise the lessons of this project and outline some follow-up ideas that can contribute to the success of teaching. Remedial education should be incorporated into the curricula so that more students can join these courses, even those ones who could not take up these courses because of conflicting lessons. Furthermore, a successfully completed course should be rewarded by credits. Both students and teachers were surveyed by a questionnaire at the end of the project and it turned out that these courses are considered to be useful and necessary by both parties. A positive attitude of teachers towards students who are academically less able should be further encouraged alongside with the introduction and spread of new and more effective teaching methods.

No one likes being stigmatised so a nicer sounding Hungarian term should be found and used instead of “felzárkóztatás”, which has quite negative connotations in Hungarian. If we want to make language learning more effective we should consider applying new forms of learning and teaching such as relying more on info-communicational tools and the Internet, benefiting from the advantages of e-learning forms. The course materials should be revised and updated in order to be more skill- and competence-based and modular. The traditional repertoire of testing and evaluating performance should be expanded by using alternative ways of assessment, such as compiling portfolios, *I can...* lists, or completing projects.

All these innovations should be based on thorough and well-planned surveys of students needs, abilities and knowledge. In addition, the expectations of the labour market should also be taken into account if we want to equip our students with a marketable, transferable, up-to-date language knowledge (Halász & Lannert, 2007). In conclusion, if we want to achieve the EU targets of lowering the drop-out rate under 10% and increase the percentage of the population with higher education degrees to 30% in a given age group, if we want to build a knowledge-based society and assure the required professional quality in higher education, we definitely have to deal with the students that are lagging behind and having problems with (language) learning (Csermely et al., 2009).

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