

The Multilingual and Multicultural Classroom

Background

As a result of the internationalization of Higher Education in Europe, many HEIs are today facing challenges that were formerly unknown to them: The student population is much more heterogeneous than ever before with students speaking a wide spectrum of languages and representing a wide spectrum of cultural backgrounds. The same applies to the faculties as many HEIs have recruited academics for permanent faculty positions from abroad. This development is indeed a major step towards a truly international educational environment; however, it also presents challenges that the HEIs have not previously had to address to the same degree as it is now the case.

In principle, we see two megatrends that could, but should not necessarily be said to contradict each other:

- ✚ A renewed interest in learning foreign languages.
- ✚ An English-only environment where English has become the foreign language of choice, and where HEIs offer their degree programmes in English.

While this development may seem contradictory, this is not necessarily so. The English-only environment reflects the fact that English is the one shared language of students and faculty, but students as well as their teachers make up a heterogeneous multilingual and multicultural group. Especially in the Northern part of Europe, the shared language is English, but in other parts of Europe, other major languages are the shared language of choice – as a case in point one might mention that Spanish and/or Portuguese is the shared major language in the South Western part of Europe, which gravitates much more towards Latin America in its internationalization efforts.

Students are clearly a part of this picture, but at the same time HEIs also see a (renewed) interest in the learning other foreign languages because the students are aware of the fact that they will have to be proficient in more than their first language plus English (or another major language) if they are to avail themselves of the mobility opportunities on the European or, indeed, international job market, to work in international businesses or organizations, or to otherwise cross linguistic and cultural borders for professional or private reasons.

This project deals with the first of the two megatrends, HE programmes taught in a major language (often English) as the one shared language of a multilingual and multicultural group of teachers and students.

Recent research as well as experience on the ground tells us that the development described above presents challenges that go beyond the learning of a foreign language and developing a sufficiently high proficiency in the foreign language in question. There are other factors involved, most pertinently the

cultural backgrounds of students as well as teachers and the educational cultures – pedagogical and didactic tradition and norms – in which they have been brought up, so to speak. In other words, in an internationalized HEI, students as well as their teachers must learn to navigate in the “Bermuda Triangle” the corners of which represent language, culture and educational norms and traditions – of the country and culture in which the HEI is situated, and of the students and teachers in the international classroom.

Project aims

The ultimate aim of the project will be to identify quality criteria and reference points which will allow HEIs to establish a certification for teachers teaching in the international classroom. Such a certification should be seen as a valuable contribution to the quality of HE teaching in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) as we move towards the Bologna Process 2020 goals.

The immediate aims of this project are therefore

- ✚ to identify in more concrete details the linguistic, cultural and educational (pedagogical and didactic) challenges that teachers and students need to address;
- ✚ to identify possible ways to meet these challenges;
- ✚ on the basis of the above, to develop generic course material for in-service training of teachers in order for them to be better equipped to meet the challenges of the HE multilingual and multicultural classroom and thereby improve the quality of their teaching;
- ✚ to develop generic course material to prepare students' participation in international programmes as full-degree students.

The project thus follows the Europe 2020 Strategy to enhance the performance of ‘Youth on the Move’ as well as the Bologna Process towards 2020 and aims at supporting HEIs and their teachers in their efforts to enhance the quality of their teaching and prepare students for a career in a constantly changing labour market. In today's globalised world, the HEI must empower their students and graduates to study and work across national, linguistic and cultural borders.

Special Interest Group

The *European Language Council / Conseil Européen pour les Langues* has established a *Special Interest Group (SIG)* on the *Multilingual and Multicultural Classroom* with a view to addressing the issues described above. Currently HEIs in some 10 different European countries are represented in the group. In the autumn of 2010, the members of the SIG in collaboration with the European Language Council Board will write up a concrete proposal in the hope that they will be able to attract European funding for a project addressing the above-mentioned challenges under the Lifelong Learning Programme in 2011.

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