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Challenges and Possibilities in Syllabus Design for Swedish Teaching in the Faculties of Medicine and Law

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Abstract

This paper discusses the need in Finland for the second national language, Swedish, in working life, and syllabus design in higher education based on evidence-based knowledge of holistic communication skills. Our paper discusses Finnish-speaking medical students' and lawyers' experience of using Swedish based on a needs analysis conducted at the Faculty of Medicine and amongst practicing lawyers in the bilingual area of Turku, south-western Finland.

Introduction

The national languages of Finland are Finnish and Swedish (Constitution of Finland 731/1999). This means that according to the constitution, everyone has the right to use Finnish or Swedish in their dealings with state authorities, bilingual municipalities and in health care (Language Act 423/2003). As stipulated in the Act on Knowledge of Languages Required of Personnel in Public Bodies (424/2003) civil servants who are required to have an academic degree, must have a satisfactory ability to speak and write the minor language in bilingual authorities. Both national languages are therefore compulsory subjects at all school levels, including universities. Universities arrange language teaching in order to fulfil this specific language proficiency requirement. The aim of these language courses is that students attain communication skills in a specific field (e.g. , law or medicine). (Government Decree on University Degrees 794/2004). Lawyers and doctors are good examples of professions in Finland where an exact knowledge in both national languages is essential in working life (Kuosa 2012, Sahlstein 2013).

The level of proficiency in Swedish of Finnish-speaking Finns is declining, and this might endanger the maintenance of constitutional language rights. To ensure a sufficient level of Swedish skills,

national proposals for improving the methods and contents of teaching and learning have been put forward at all school levels.

Language and communication skills are already widely seen as part of generic skills in syllabus design. At the University of Turku generic skills are emphasised in the concrete design of contents and methods of single study courses. Nevertheless, university students do not necessarily see language courses as an integral part of their studies but see rather them as a separate, and sometimes even unnecessary part of their studies. A more holistic approach to language teaching and learning in higher education focused on working life might, therefore, contribute to an improvement in learning outcomes and motivation.

Theoretical background

Our approach is a phenomenological hermeneutic one and this paper is an example of action research. We combine theory and practice to improve the effectiveness of our teaching. We use mixed methods by combining quantitative and qualitative methods to describe and understand the working life communication in Swedish of Finnish-speaking doctors and lawyers. We have conducted content-based qualitative and quantitative data analyses. (Dörnyei 2007.)

Our discussion of Swedish- language teaching and learning at universities includes LSP (Languages for Special Purposes), VOLL (Vocationally Oriented Language Learning) and LCPP (Language and Communication for Professional Purposes) as opposed to the field of LGP (Languages for General Purposes). However, the terms LSP, VOLL and LCPP cannot be fully separated from each since they overlap. Our aim is “to meet the needs of learners and other stakeholders to communicate for work or study purposes in specific disciplines” (Vogt & Kantelinen 2012, 3). Features such as “communication in the foreign language, which involves the learner as a whole person” (Vogt & Kantelinen 2012, 5) and “holistic communication situations” (Huhta et al. 2013, 40) are emphasised. For convenience, we use the term LSP to cover a range of approaches in this paper (see also Huhta et al. 2013, 36), however, we stress the importance of everyday professional communication in professional community contexts (Huhta et al. 2013, 36).

LSP teachers often plan language courses at universities based on intuition and their own teaching and language learning experiences. Very few LSP teachers have working experience of, or have studies in the field they teach in, e.g. , law and medicine. To respond better to the needs of students, course material design needs to be evidence-based and a needs analysis is a relevant tool for this purpose. (Huhta et al. 2013, 36; Brown 2009, 269.) Needs analysis can be seen as identifying the students’ needs in their language learning process (Brown 2006, 107) but it can also mean gathering information about “what experienced professionals view as typical contexts, texts, communication situations, etc. in a particular professional field” (Huhta et al. 2013, 14). The students’ perception of their own language skills, the concrete abilities required in working life as stipulated in the law, and the motivation to learn and use the language can all be regarded as the starting point for syllabus design for Swedish teaching at universities (Kuosa 2012, Sahlstein 2013).

Findings

In this paper we discuss the results of two different needs analyses and create a theoretical framework for designing concrete learning goals and contents for Swedish teaching in the faculties of Law and Medicine at the University of Turku.

Medical students

Swedish is taught in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Turku as an integrated course (written and oral skills, 3 ECTS), and includes both a knowledge of medical Swedish and an introduction to the culture of Swedish-speaking Finns. This Swedish course is placed in the curriculum of the Faculty of Medicine so that its content goes hand in hand with the other studies in medicine. Since the doctor-patient relationship is a central part of the course, an interview with a Swedish-speaking pensioner in the Archipelago of Turku, a mainly Swedish-speaking area, is an essential part of the course.

Before the course had begun the students were asked in a questionnaire what they thought about using Swedish in working life. The questionnaire was conducted between 2010 and 2013 and each year about 120 Finnish-speaking students participated. 70% of the students see Swedish as an important or very important skill to them as doctors, and about 30% expressed doubts about both the need for a Swedish course at the university level and the need for Swedish later in their working lives as doctors. The most common reason for this negative attitude was that they feel uncomfortable and insecure about using Swedish outside the classroom and with a native-speaker. The second common reason was that they believe that doctors have no real need for Swedish communication skills in Finland because everybody in Finland can speak Finnish or they can always change to English when a Swedish-speaking patient does not know Finnish well enough. These findings show, firstly, that the students would prefer to avoid situations where they feel uncertain, and secondly, that they do not have a clear picture of the real needs for Swedish they are required as doctors before the course. The answers to the questionnaire after the course and the interview with a Swedish-speaking pensioner clearly showed that the students' negative attitudes to the need for Swedish in working life had changed remarkably and were now positive. They underlined the change that had taken place in their way of seeing the role of the second national language in their working lives as doctors. Almost all students commented that both the course and the face – to – face contact with a native speaker had been very useful and also that their motivation to learn and practice Swedish during the later studies had increased.

Practising Lawyers

The data of this present paper consist of a questionnaire given to Finnish-speaking practicing lawyers in the bilingual area of Turku in Finland in May 2013. The aim of the questionnaire is, firstly, to clarify the need for Swedish in the concrete work-place communication situations of Finnish-speaking lawyers and, secondly, to understand how Finnish-speaking lawyers experience communication in Swedish as part of their communication skills in working life.

Firstly, the analysis of the questionnaire (N= 38) shows that there is a clear need for Swedish communication skills (including receptive and productive skills) in the working life of Finnish-speaking practicing lawyers in the bilingual region of Turku. Almost 90 % of the respondents use Swedish in their work, and almost 80 % find skills in the second national language important also in the future. The attitude towards Swedish as a part of working life skills is positive. Approximately 80 % of the lawyers who responded see Swedish communication skills as an important part of their working life skills, and over 60 % emphasise the communication skills in Swedish as an important factor in advancing in their career.

Secondly, Finnish-speaking lawyers seem to be confident with their own Swedish communication skills. The majority of the respondents have the courage to use Swedish in concrete work-place communication. The Finnish-speaking lawyers use Swedish even if it is not always easy. Almost 50 % of the respondents find working with Swedish texts demanding, mainly due to difficult vocabulary. The respondents were asked to describe positive and negative experiences in using Swedish in work-life contexts. Even the negative experiences turned out to be rather positive. The respondents were able to perform the tasks in Swedish even if they sometimes regarded their concrete language skills as insufficient.

Discussion

Our aim is to design an evidence-based syllabus for teaching Swedish language in the faculties of Medicine and Law at the University of Turku, Finland. In this paper we have discussed the first results of needs analyses at both faculties. We have not focused on the actual level of language proficiency rather we have looked at medical students' and lawyers' perceptions of their own skills and have focused on learners and language users as whole persons.

As we have seen, motivation is high and communication skills in Swedish are seen as a part of working life skills both by medical students and practicing lawyers. The learning outcomes can be improved by increasing an awareness of concrete needs in working life and courage to use a language where the skills are not necessary on a native like level.

The findings of this paper form a solid foundation for our further research, the reformulating of the results as objectives for teaching Swedish to Finnish-speaking medical and law students at the University of Turku. It is important that courses for language and communication skills at universities are designed in co-operation with the students, the faculties and those engaged in working life.

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