LANGUAGE SUPPORT FOR L2 SPEAKERS OF DUTCH: EFFECT AND MOTIVATIONS

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Abstract

Research at Ghent University (UGent) has shown that non native speakers of Dutch (the main language of instruction at UGent) are less likely to achieve academic success than their L1 peers. Since advanced linguistic skills are key to all aspects of college life, substandard academic language skills can exclude students both socially and academically even though they may have the required talent and intellectual capacity. To help resolve this issue Ghent University launched a language policy unit in 2009. One of the purposes of this project is to eliminate language as a barrier to study success, for both L1 and L2 speakers of Dutch.

This paper will focus on one area of expertise of the language policy unit, i.e. the language support workshops for students with an L2 background (L2 workshops). These workshops have been implemented specifically for non-native speakers and are explicitly task-based. This paper will elaborate on the paths that have been tried and rejected (such as a placement test-based system and a social-constructivist inclusive approach) as well as on those that have been pursued.

Additionally, this paper will zoom in on the role of students of the Ghent University teacher training program in the L2 workshops. Participating in the workshops requires a future teacher to adopt a different mindset, since both the pedagogical approach and the students are different to what the interns are used to. In order to establish the effect of a non-conventional internship on the teaching beliefs of future teachers, the language policy unit conducted a number of focus groups in April-July 2011.

In this paper we will show how and why academic L2 project is conducive to both the linguistic skills of the participants and the teaching beliefs and pedagogic practices of the interns.

1   LANGUAGE POLICY

The main concern of the Ghent University (UGent) language policy is to minimize the effect of academic language skills as an impediment to academic success. Ideally, language should be a means by which students and staff are able to express themselves both in day-to-day communication as in academic research papers. It should not be what it to this day too often remains; a gatekeeper or the primary reason for academic failure. For, if language is a gatekeeper or a determinant of success, it is disproportionately disadvantageous for specific groups of students, i.e. non-native speakers of Dutch and native speakers from an underprivileged background.

In order to achieve its goal of removing the knowledge of academic Dutch as a gatekeeper, different measures have been taken over the previous years. Currently, the language policy recipe still contains the same ingredients it did at the outset, but the proportions have been reshuffled.

1.1   Language Testing

In 2009, the focal point of the UGent language policy was the language test, which had been constructed under the premise that a sound language test would demonstrate where and how students had a deficiency concerning their academic language skills.

Before launching the online test at the UGent it was piloted with a representative target group, i.e. 234 high school students during their last week before graduation. After the pilot, the test analysis yielded satisfactory results in terms of reliability (α = .924) and the test was launched. For face validity reasons, three different versions were available depending on the courses one took.

During no point in the administration did the test ever claim to have any conclusive predictive value. Since the test was mainly concerned with receptive skills, it was near impossible to make any claims

about a test taker's productive skills. In other words: students who do well on the test are not necessarily able to write an adequate research paper. The opposite also holds true, since students who fail may possess excellent presentation skills. This observation, together with Green and Weir's conclusion (2004) that "placement tests do not provide the necessary information, even at the level of syntax" [1], implies that any test results have to be handled with great caution, which they have always been.

In the earliest months of the language test, students who failed were invited to an interview. Consequently the test did not generate automatic results but students received a score analysis.

This included the mention that the test offered only a limited perspective on a student's academic language skills. Today the test is completely automated but it is no longer directly linked to language classes. It is now announced as an awareness-raising teaser rather than a reliable tool to measure one's academic language skills. The other use of such an online digital test is to reach the students so that they discover the possibility to get language support if needed during their study. At the moment, any student who experiences the need for language support is welcome to call on the services of the language policy unit.

1.2 Inclusive Approach

In 2009 the online language test was launched in three faculties (Humanities, Engineering and Law). After an intensive campaign announcing the existence of the test and the advantages of language support activities 43% of all first year students in those faculties took the test. Those students whose score belonged to the lowest quartile were invited for a feedback session after which they could subscribe for workshops Academic Language Skills. Still, all first year students who felt the need to, could sign up for the workshops, even if they didn't take the test [2].

Inspired by a social constructivist view on language teaching, all students attended the same language classes. Quite soon however, problems occurred. Those problems arose from the fact that the group was too heterogeneous for social constructivist practice to work. Students spoke different L1s, possessed varying skill levels and belonged to different faculties with different needs and conventions. Students from the Engineering faculty soon discovered that writing conventions for Literature or History students didn't always answer to their needs, since the logic of argumentation is much more important than a refined syntax [2].

More important than the participants' educational background was their L1. L2 speakers have very different linguistic issues and require a very different than native speakers. This led to nearly insurmountable problems of compatibility in the class room. After three months it was decided to reshape the workshops. Consultation with several stakeholders pointed out that different target groups should be approached differently. From then on the language test quit to be the central theme for the language support, the focus was now on the student's profile [2]. Different faculties were addressed in separate workshops in situ. All students were welcome to fix a meeting for individual language feedback. L2 speakers were welcome to attend workshops which catered to their specific needs.

1.3 Language Support per Faculty

Since every faculty at Ghent University adheres to different bibliographic and linguistic conventions, the language policy unit began organizing workshops which catered to their varying needs. During the second semester of 2009-2010 contacts were made with representative stakeholders of each faculty. This provided the input for the workshops to which 6 out of 11 faculties subscribed in the same year [2].

 Since many students only face productive tasks in the second or third year of their period of study, certain it is important not to organize workshops in faculties where the perceived need for them is low. Even though it could be argued that raising awareness for academic writing skills when they are called for is too late, experience has shown that students do not attend writing clinics and academic language skills workshops when the perceived need is low.

Table 1 [3] shows an overview of the various actions based on the specific needs of the faculties, with the approximate number of students reached compared to the total number of students from the target group, as defined by the faculty's student support service or the involved lecturers.

Faculty	Number reached[1]	Total number of target group[2]	Target group	Context
Humanities	± 500	4550 students	all students	2 extracurricular informative sessions
Psychology & Pedagogy	± 30	4500 students	all students	1 extracurricular informative session
Criminology	± 100	± 100	3rd bachelor	Compulsory workshops
Law	± 800	824 students	1st bachelor	During classes Writing Juridical Essays
Business & Economics	± 300	± 300	3rd bachelor	During Business Skills classes
Veterinary/Pharmacy	± 20	± 20	1st bachelor L2 speakers	1 extracurricular informative session for L2 students

The Humanities Faculty asked the language policy unit to inform all students from the faculty. Therefore 2 extracurricular informative sessions were organized in an aula with a capacity of 250 students. Thanks to an intensive communication campaign in the faculty bachelor and master students alike joined the sessions during which the aula was packed at full capacity.

In the Psychology & Pedagogy Faculty the students only received an e-mail informing them on the existence of an extracurricular informative session for Academic Writing. Mostly students working on their bachelor paper came to the session.

Through contacts with professors in the Law Faculty the language policy unit was invited on several occasions to give a lecture during the compulsory classes in 1st bachelor. Besides the department of Criminology, which is a part of the Law Faculty, wanted to give the opportunity for students in their 3rd bachelor year to choose a workshop helping them to write their bachelor paper. All students in 3rd bachelor chose to sign up for this workshop.

In the Economics and Business Faculty contacts were made with several professors. For the Business Skills subject students of this faculty have to write their first paper. Hence, the professor of this subject invited the language policy unit for a lecture just before the students received their first writing assignment.

In the Pharmacy Faculty and the Veterinary Faculty there was a specific need to inform L2 students explicitly on the expectations of the faculty and important information on working in a laboratory and security. All L2 students from these faculties came to the extracurricular informative session organized specifically for them.

1.4 Individual Language Support

Students, both L1 and L2, who face a concrete problem can make use of individual language support. In some cases, the problem can be resolved easily and a simple email suffices. In others students were invited for a maximum of three individual feedback sessions during which their problems were addressed. This individual support became especially popular with students writing final papers, so the number of requests for individual support goes up as the second semester draws to a conclusion. During peak periods, students of the same faculty are invited over for a group session. These writing

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[1] Numbers as collected by the language policy unit for the academic year 2010-2011
[2] Internal research for the academic year 2009-2010 from the Diversity & Gender Unit at Ghent University.

clinics have proven to be remarkably effective, since helping peers improve their writing also helps themselves to see solutions for their problems.

1.5 Language Support Workshops for Students with an L2 Background

Prospective students at a Belgian Dutch-speaking university[3] have to take a language test proving that they have at least a B2 language level, i.e. a language proficiency norm as established by the Common European Framework (CEFR). However, after successfully passing the B2 level L2 students still encounter linguistic problems during their period of study. Although 42 % of the 1st bachelor students pass for all credits they signed up for, L2 students are well below the average with only a 21% success rate.[4] The reason for their low success rate could be explained, among other reasons, by their language deficiency [4]. Even though this linguistic deficiency does not say much about a student's intellectual aptitude to study at a university, it unfortunately becomes a tool for exclusion.

Therefore it is important to give L2 students all possible tools to help them overcome language as a gatekeeper for academic achievement. To reach this goal the language policy unit at UGent has established workshops that answer to the specific needs of L2 students (L2 workshops). Although it means that this target group receives individual attention, the workshops are still inclusive as they bring together students of different mother tongues, different faculties and disciplines. The linguistic problems of L2 speakers surpass the specific problems of language norms in a particular faculty.

Since the beginning the language policy unit collaborates with the teacher training program at UGent. Students of the teacher training program have to perform 60 hours of teaching practice as interns in the Dutch speaking educational system. In this compulsory internship 20 hours can be done at one of the various projects at institutions of higher education in Ghent, such as the language support workshops for students with an L2 background organized by UGent's language policy unit. Hence, the project worked with interns for the production of new didactical material and creation of interactive workshops.

These workshops are set up in a class room consisting of several smaller groups (roughly 5 students per table), working within a common framework based on the same didactical material but tackling the issues according to the needs of the students in each separate group. Each intern gets the responsibility to manage one table, while the 2 collaborators of the language policy unit temporarily join each smaller group to guide the intern and to give the workshops a common.

1.6 Focus Groups and Effect of Workshops for Students with L2 Background

Deygers (2011) researched the effect of the L2 workshops on the interns' teaching beliefs [5]. Teaching beliefs refer to the teacher's didactical behavior and perceptions [6]. These beliefs are influenced by the teachers' experience as pupils and students and by the didactics they were taught during the teacher training program.

Due to the limited number of interns who participated to the project (n=10) focus groups, semi-constructed focus groups were considered the most appropriate research method. Before partaking in the focus groups the respondents were asked to voice their opinion concerning several statements. Their individual likert scale scores and opinions formed the basis for the following conversations in the three focus groups that were held. The first focus group consisted of interns who participated in 2009-2010 and who are now active as teachers in secondary schools. The second group consisted of interns who were involved in the workshops of the first semester 2010-2011. Finally there was a third group consisting of students who were at the time of the interview still active as interns for the L2 workshops [5].

Additionally, focus groups were organized with L2 students who participated in the L2 workshops so as to gain access to their judgment and perfection of the quality of the workshops.

The interns form the teaching training program at UGent have a lot of freedom to try out new teaching methods since each intern is guided in supporting a maximum number of 5 L2 speakers. Most of the interns report that trying out new teaching methods have influenced their didactic approach. They found that the experiences acquired through the internship at the UGent language policy unit had an

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[3] All universities in Belgium are either Dutch-speaking or French-speaking, never both. Besides their regular bachelor and master programs in the respective national language all universities organize some master programs in English too.
[4] Internal research for the academic year 2009-2010 from the Diversity & Gender Unit at Ghent University.

immediate effect on their other teaching practices. For the majority of the interns thought that their didactical insight enhanced thanks to the workshops they helped to create and implement. Moreover, they shared the belief that the workshop's flexible approach had a direct influence on their confidence in the classroom [5].

It is rather difficult to measure the effect of workshops aimed at students with an L2 background, since it was a conscious choice not to use a step-in/step-out test to measure progress. Using a test to measure the effectiveness would not necessarily have given a reliable indication of progress, but it would have influenced the atmosphere in which the workshops took place. From the focus groups, it can be conclude that all students with a L2 background who participated to the workshops thought that their oral skills in Dutch had improved highly thanks to the workshops. Half of the L2 students shared the opinion that their writing skills were better due to their participation in the workshops. Most remarkably, all L2 students declared that the workshops had given them more self confidence in their day-to-day use of Dutch. Additionally, they expressed their enthusiasm about the alternative didactical methods applied during the workshops [5].

2   CONCLUSION

Since it was launched in early 2009, the language policy unit at UGent has learned that an inclusive approach for student language support has its limits. The linguistic profile of students and the faculties' specific needs have to be taken into account when offering language support for students. This resulted in the developing of workshops specifically designed for the needs of students with an L2 background. Additionally the language policy unit has developed language sessions adapted to the specific needs of the faculty. Regardless of the students language background, all targeted students of those faculties were welcomed to participate.

Furthermore the paper also focused on the experience of interns who participated to the production of didactical material and the implementing of the L2 workshops. The specific linguistic character of L2 students meant that interns were pressed with an alternative didactical approach. This situation influenced positively their teaching beliefs and attitude towards the more conventional didactic methods. The L2 students who partook in the workshops proved enthusiastic about the alternative didactical methods applied and were convinced that the workshops influenced their written and oral language skills positively next to an enhanced linguistic self confidence.

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