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Czech ERASMUS students and their EAP needs

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Abstract

This article examines the specific language difficulties and needs met by Czech ERASMUS students at the Faculty of Informatics and Management of the University of Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic in the course of going and studying abroad. The author thus questions the what to teach in EAP courses so that students can achieve their study objectives. She also addresses the issue of learning styles so that relevant teaching strategies for the teaching of EAP skills could be set.

Keywords: English for Academic Purposes; students’ needs; language skills; strategies
Introduction

Every year thousands of university students leave for their university study within the ERASMUS programme (EuRopean Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students). ERASMUS Project is a European Union (EU) student exchange programme established in 1987. Currently, there are more than 4,000 higher institutions participating in ERASMUS across the 33 countries involved in the ERASMUS programme and over 2.2 million students have already participated.

At the Faculty of Informatics and Management (FIM) only the students with the best results in their studies can participate in the ERASMUS programme. Each year about 60 (2.5%) students out of 2,400 students leave for their studies abroad. Neither the living nor the studies are easy at the beginning for the Czech students, particularly if it is their first stay abroad. Moreover, academic culture might and in most cases is dramatically different from that at home university.

1. Findings and results

In the January of 2013 65 FIM students who participated in the ERASMUS programme in the year of 2011 and 2012 were given a questionnaire in order to discover their difficulties in a foreign study environment and on its basis draw appropriate conclusions. Out of 65 students, 12 students submitted the questionnaires. 9 (75%) of them were females and 3 (25%) were males. Their age range was between 21-25. An average age was 23. Their fields of study included: Financial Management (1 student / 8%), Information Management (4 students / 34%) and Management of Tourism (7 students / 58%).

The key questions students were asked were as follows:
1. What language difficulties did you have during your study stay abroad and which do you consider important to master or increase
   a) in the area of listening (e.g. listening to a lecture, news, announcements ….)?
   b) in the area of reading comprehension (e.g. the reading of professional literature, instructions necessary for the completion of a seminar paper/essay, news ….)?
   c) in the area of spoken communication (e.g. communication with teachers, everyday’s communication ….)?
   d) in the area of written communication (e.g. the writing of seminar papers/essays, formal letters/reports, informal e-mails ….)?
2. Did you have any difficulties communicating in a foreign language due to cultural differences (e.g. when citing sources, how and when to ask questions ….). If yes, please explain.
3. What was your main problem while using a foreign language abroad?
4. What are your learning preferences while learning a foreign language? Please tick one option only.
   • visual (seeing);
   • auditory (hearing);
   • kinaesthetic (moving); and
   • tactile (touching).

Ad 1a) As for listening, students’ greatest difficulties were in the understanding of foreign language accents (4 students/ 33%) and professional vocabulary (4 students / 33%), 1 student (8%) had a problem with listening to everyday English and 1 student (8%) due to his/her bad pronunciation. On the contrary, 4 students (33%) had no difficulties with listening at all. See Fig. 1.
Ad 1b) On the one hand, as Fig. 2 shows, the majority of students (7/58%) were facing difficulties while they were reading professional texts since they lacked the desired level of professional vocabulary. On the other hand, 5 students (42%) had no problems reading professional literature. In addition, 4 students (33%) stated that they had used Cambridge Online Dictionary which was a great help to them.

Ad 1c) In the oral speech students encountered different difficulties. However, probably the greatest deficiency was a lack of vocabulary, particularly idioms and phrases (4 students / 33%). Then 3 students (25%) struggled with the everyday conversation, 1 student (8%) complained about the problem with different accents which made the conversion slightly difficult, 1 student (8%) lacked a confidence and feared to speak in the presence of native speakers and 1 student (8%) would like to improve the use of tenses common in formal and informal communication. 3 students (25%) did not have any problems while speaking with native speakers. See Fig. 3 below. Moreover, some students admitted being able to communicate better with other foreign ERASMUS students since their level of English, accent and school grammar were similar to theirs.
Ad 1d) Writing skills seem to be the most difficult skills for students to acquire and improve since 10 students (83%) claimed that they had had problems with it, particularly, when they had to write seminar papers/essays (Fig. 4). They explained that they had had difficulties looking for the correct and standard expressions in a foreign language and relevant grammar structures. Only 2 students (17%) did not have any difficulties writing.

Ad 2. As far as the intercultural differences are concerned, students did not indicate any problem except for one student who indicated difficulties with finding the appropriate expressions in the writing of formal papers.

Ad 3. There was a mixture of responses and different reasons based on student’s personal experience and experiences. 3 students (35%) faced problems while communicating in English outside the academic environment in the country whose first language was not English, such was the case of Spain where the level of people’s English was relatively low. 2 students (17%) had difficulties with active communication, 2 students (17%) with listening. Then there were other individual reasons, such as a lack of writing practice; a lack of
professional vocabulary; a lack of grammar structures (i.e. articles and tenses); bad pronunciation and a lack of confidence to speak in the presence of native speakers.

Ad 4. As far as the learning preferences are concerned, in most cases students preferred the *kinaesthetic learning style* (8/67%), 2 students (17%) favour tactile learning style, 1 student (8%) visual and 1 student (8%) auditory.

2. Discussion of the results

On the basis of findings, one can see that the attention in the teaching of EAP and particularly, in the teaching of non-native students participating in the ERASMUS programme, should be paid to the following issues:

- development of formal writing skills;
- development of listening to native speakers;
- enhancement of the vocabulary based on student’s subject disciplines; and
- development of everyday conversation with respect to the acquisition of the most common idioms and phrases used in spoken English.

One can find similarities with Jordan (1997), who describes large-scale research conducted at Cambridge University in 1983 into the language difficulties of oversees students, both undergraduates and postgraduates, during their first terms. The biggest problem for them besides participating in seminars was also writing.

Therefore, the greatest attention should be paid to the development of writing skills. As students pointed out in the questionnaires, they did not have much practice even with writing in their native language, i.e. Czech. Moreover, in the Czech cultural environment knowledge and skills of writing are still neglected because writing is perceived as a linguistic skill which is taught mainly at elementary schools and achieved through the mastering of grammatical and spelling rules (cf. Cmejrkova et al., 1999).

As far as the intercultural differences are concerned, students did not state any problems except for the writing conventions. The reason for such answers might be the fact that students undertook their EAP studies mainly outside the English speaking countries where English, such as France, Portugal, Spain, is also used as L2.

Most students prefer the kinaesthetic learning style, which means that students best learn when they are involved in an activity. Therefore, EAP approaches, such task-based language learning and cooperative and collaborative learning should suit these students and thus motivate them in their studies.

3. Conclusion and recommendations

In conclusion, to help FIM ERASMUS students in the facilitation of their academic studies abroad, EAP teachers should concentrate on the development of their writing skills and professional vocabulary found in the text of their core subject disciplines, which seem to be the crucial skills needed for their careers. To develop these skills, EAP teachers should employ the following EAP approaches:

- using authentic texts in their classes which would be prepared in cooperation with subject specialist and through team-teaching activities;
- exploiting corpus linguistics in order to reveal patterns of authentic language use through analyses of actual usage;
- using blended learning in order to offer students further materials for their self-study, assignments and also prompter feedback;

In addition, EAP teachers might use consciousness raising technique. For example, Hyland (2006) suggests to compare spoken and written modes, such as a lecture and textbook, to raise awareness of the ways in which these differ in response to audiences and purposes; list the ways that reading and listening to monologue are similar and different; or investigate variability in academic writing by conducting mini-analyses of a feature in a text in their own discipline and then comparing the results with those of students from other fields.
Moreover, another useful technique, which is generally used in all areas of ELT, is scaffolding or teacher-supported learning. Thus, for example, in writing the teacher’s support moves from closely controlled activities to the autonomous, free writing.

Although it seems that EAP approaches, such as task-based language learning or cooperative and collaborative learning are suitable for EAP students, since they might fit their learning preferences, this argument would need further research.

References