

English Syllabus Design in Consistence of Skills Needed for a Knowledge Society in Language Centre, South East European University

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Abstract

Many researchers have shown that including emotional intelligence (EI) skills in the process of teaching and learning can increase academic achievement in language learning. At the same time it increases the quality of teaching and learning because by helping students show personal responsibility they will learn effectively and complete their tasks efficiently. It will lead towards the achievement of their personal, academic and career excellence. Chuan-Ta (2003) concluded that students with higher foreign language anxiety tend to have less EI skills, while those with lower foreign language anxiety have better EI skills. He states that strong emotions can either facilitate or block cognitive and learning processes.

This study aims to answer these research questions:

1. What is the relationship between EI and language learning anxiety?
2. Which are the teaching techniques that increase EI skills in the classroom?
3. Which language tasks increase the language anxiety?
4. Which skills of EI can be used in the classroom in order to decrease students' anxiety?

The study explores the perceptions of the Language Centre teachers regarding the implications of the EI skills in language teaching during the academic year 2011/2012.

In order to increase academic success negative feelings and anxiety should be eliminated from the teaching and learning process. This study uses phenomenological approach by using interviews as data collection with seven LC lectors in order to gather specific and detailed information regarding the use of EI in language teaching. The essence of phenomenology focuses on the meaning of individual experiences, at this point the experience of using EI in teaching language skills.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to highlight the importance of designing a language

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syllabus which will follow the trends and the needs of the knowledge society. The term knowledge society refers to a learning society. It is responsible for processing information and knowledge in a way which increases learning and develops the capacity to cope with the change. This also includes the process of accessing and processing information.

Teaching for the knowledge society emphasizes emotional and cognitive learning and it cultivates a cosmopolitan identity. The knowledge society does not only aim to access information, it also aims to process information. At this point, the role of the teachers who are teaching accordingly towards the needs of the knowledge society involve continuous professional development, the ability to cope with the change and at the same time commitment towards the achievement of the university goals.

A knowledge society is one where development, growth and innovation are driven by optimal use of information and techniques to acquire that information. Being a teacher in the knowledge society requires many skills like using new approaches for accessing knowledge and teaching knowledge for lifelong learning.

Considering that high quality teaching has a significant impact on student learning and achievement, compiling a well constructed syllabus will lead toward the achievement of the teaching and learning goals and objectives. The concept of knowledge has changed from earlier static and transmitted to the one which is renewable and often constructed jointly together with the learners. The learning, teaching and assessment principles are all clearly defined in the syllabi, so that they provide guidance for teaching, learning and assessment approaches that place students firmly at the centre of the educational process. This means that students acquire the understanding and attributes needed to achieve their individual potential and establish commitment to lifelong learning.

The teachers must prepare their students to become a part of the knowledge-economy, where creativity, cooperation and flexibility will be key factors for creating the collective intelligence. Teachers should not only deliver, but at the same time they should develop the learning process of their students. In the new era of knowledge society, teachers have to be aware of different learning styles; to guide students to master different learning strategies; and to create non-threatening learning environments that help lower the anxiety level and encourage students to take positive and calculated risks. Teachers need to prepare their students to face the changes which occur in education especially because those changes need to be aligned with the necessities of the knowledge society.

European society is moving from an industrial society toward a knowledge-based society. In a knowledge-based society, the sustainable development of a nation-state is highly associated with the development of knowledge and innovations (P. Scott, 1998). Van Damme (2002) stated that in a knowledge-based society the expectations and demands of universities will increase, recognizing them as knowledge centres. Arimoto (2005) also acknowledges that universities are expected to function as influential institutions to produce, disseminate, apply, and manage knowledge.

One very important part of the syllabus design is lesson planning, which enables teachers to measure the learning input and output during the process of teaching and learning.

The Language Centre at the South East European University (SEEU) mostly uses the communicative language teaching methods and emphasizes the role of learning to communicate in contrast with learning through a set of rules and in that way we measure the learning input and output during the process of teaching and learning.

Basic Skills English class often consists of learners with mixed abilities and different levels of language proficiencies. The problem deepens if the different learning levels are raised in different language skills. In the new era of knowledge society foreign language teachers have to be aware of different learning styles; to guide students to master different learning strategies; and to create non-threatening learning environments that help lower the anxiety level and encourage students to take positive and calculated risks. Teachers need to prepare their students to face the changes which occur in education especially because those changes need to be aligned with the necessities of the knowledge society.

Syllabus Components and Accountability

Several syllabus design considerations are mentioned in the research. From this literature, nine components were developed for the syllabus in this study. These nine components are course information, instructor information, learning outcomes, textbooks/materials, time management, assessment, professionalism, policies, and tips for success.

Course information. For this component, research suggests inclusion of prerequisites for the course; the course number and title; the course description as it appears in the course catalogue (Chemeketa Community College, 2005); the course meeting dates and times; the course meeting place; and a rationale for the course (Garavalia et al., 1999; Matejka & Kurke, 1994).

Instructor information. In this component, the literature suggests inclusion of information on how to contact the instructor (Bers et al., 2000; Chemeketa Community College, 2005; Parks & Harris, 2002). For instance, the instructor's office hours and location, phone number, and e-mail address should be included in a syllabus (Chemeketa Community College, 2005). Research also suggests including the learning philosophy of the instructor (Chemeketa Community College, 2005; Garavalia et al., 1999; Matejka & Kurke, 1994).

Learning outcomes. For this component, research suggests that course objectives should be included (Bers et al., 2000; Chemeketa Community College, 2005; Garavalia et al., 1999; Matejka & Kurke, 1994). A topic outline is also suggested to increase student understanding (Bers et al.; Chemeketa Community College, 2005; Matejka & Kurke; Parks & Harris, 2002). Further, the literature suggests including how to achieve these objectives (Matejka & Kurke, 1994), and that each course topic should have separate objectives (Garavalia et al.1999).

Textbooks/materials. Here, research suggests that required materials should be included, such as textbooks, newspapers, and assignment packs. Also, optional materials and resources are suggested, if applicable, to differentiate instruction. This differentiated instruction assists struggling learners and accelerates advanced learners (Chemeketa Community College, 2005; Garavalia et al., 1999; Parks & Harris, 2002).

Time management. For this component, the literature suggests that information important to the student's ability to manage time effectively must be included in the syllabus. For example, schedules or calendars (Bers et al., 2000; Chemeketa Community

College, 2005; Garavalia et al., 1999; Parks & Harris, 2002), critical dates (Bers.), and time commitments help students plan how they can be successful in a class (Chemeketa Community College, 2005; Garavalia et al.).

Assessment. For this component, research suggests that assessment procedures should be linked to outcomes. Also, the literature suggests that grading scales should be provided for students to determine the weight of assignments to regulate progress. Further, assessment types such as portfolios, projects, papers, reports, quizzes, and exams should be explained for content and procedures (Bers, 2000; Chemeketa Community College, 2005; Garavalia et al., 1999; Matejka & Kurke, 1994; Parks & Harris, 2002). Research also suggests the length of assignments should be included for reading and writing commitments, and out-of-class commitments such as clinical hours should be integrated (Bers et al.; Chemeketa Community College, 2005; Garavalia et al.). Finally, the literature suggests that participation and attendance expectations should be explained (Bers et al.2001).

Professionalism. For professionalism, three areas are mentioned in the literature. The first area is behaviour expectations. Research suggests that any student behaviour that could adversely affect grades should be included. The second area is work habits. A syllabus must include instructor expectations for quality of work and timely completion. The third area is ethics. In this area, academic honesty (Chemeketa Community College, 2005; Parks & Harris, 2002) and permitted freedoms should be clearly delineated (Parks & Harris, 2002).

Policies. For this component, the literature suggests that classroom and institutional policies should be included in a syllabus (ChemeketaCommunity College, 2005; Garavalia et al., 1999; Parks & Harris, 2002). Also these policies should be explained and the reasons for them should be provided. In addition, policies for withdrawal (Garavalia et al.1999) and disclaimer information should be included if needed (Parks & Harris, 2002). Further, the rights and responsibilities of disabled students must be incorporated, and ways the instructor provides accommodations for them should be explained (Garavalia et al.; Parks & Harris).

Tips for success. For this component, research suggests including tips for success to relieve student anxiety and raise student success. For instance, including learning strategies to achieve objectives is important information in a syllabus to help students know how to achieve objectives (Chemeketa Community College, 2005; Matejka & Kurke, 1994; Parks & Harris, 2002). The instructor should explain how and what to study. In addition, information of what successful students do should be included to help provide role modelling (Bandura, 1997b; Parks & Harris; Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006). For example, sample assignments can clear up confusion for students (Parks & Harris, 2002). Finally, information of where to get academic tutoring, counselling (Parks & Harris, 2002), and technology help should also be included to promote student success and autonomous learning (Chemeketa Community College, 2005).

Another design consideration that stood out in the literature is making learners

accountable for syllabus information. When considering learner accountability for syllabus content, an activity that engages learners can provide mastery experience. Also, learner attention differs with the amount of educational experience, and the type of learner differs with attention to various syllabus features. Syllabi designers need to utilize strategies to promote attention to all critical components of the syllabus to assist learners to succeed.

Baker (2001) suggested there should be a follow-up quiz about a syllabus in a course to demonstrate to students the importance of syllabus content by holding students accountable for it. Coffman (2003) suggested that students need to read the syllabus and then write a short essay about their expectations for the course. He explained that it is important for both the instructor and students to take responsibility.

Raymark and Connor-Greene (2002) investigated how to get students to use and utilize the syllabus. The researchers developed a syllabus quiz from two sources. The first source was a preliminary list of items from a language syllabus. The second source was an instructor survey on items included in the syllabus for which students were required to respond. The instructor survey was compared with the initial list, and the survey questions required students to assume the role of the instructor to develop student perceptions of procedural justice and fairness. Those students who completed the syllabus quiz scored higher on the second syllabus quiz. The researchers concluded that instructional designers should consider a syllabus quiz that holds learners responsible for correct information.

To summarize, accountability for syllabus content is an important component for students to build self-perception of capability to accomplish the tasks required in an online and onsite class. Building mastery experiences early in a course increases self-efficacy by persuading learners to see their capability and to enable them to persist and increase their performance. Therefore, the syllabus as a first impression coupled with the accountability of a syllabus activity to compel learners to be responsible for syllabus content, provides a powerful tool to improve retention and performance of learning in courses.

The foundation of this paper

The main objectives of this study were:

1. To address problems which occur during the process of syllabus design for Basic Skills English courses in the Language Centre.
2. Analyze the theoretical and practical aspects of syllabus design including the skills needed in the knowledge society.
3. To offer recommendations for improving the current BSE syllabus used in the Language Centre.

In this study I did not use the grounded theory as I had no intention to develop any theory in learning. Neither did I adopt the phenomenology approach as I did not intend to describe the learners' perceptions from a philosopher's view or to sketch shared phenomenon (as many phenomenological researchers have done). Instead, I tried to provide a detailed description and analysis of the qualitatively different views of aspects of our students' and teachers' learning and teaching experiences. Researchers found that the same students adopt and use different conceptions according to perceived differences in the context. It is not so much focused on conceptions of learning but merely on how those conceptions that are evoked by the students are reflected in terms of experience of their unique learning situation, that are likely to be most strongly related to the students'

approaches to learning and gaining knowledge.

Research instruments

By using questionnaires and interviews as research tools the research findings and conclusions are achieved. Questionnaires as one of the most common forms of data collections tools can be easily assessed in terms of reliability. The written survey questionnaire used in this study was designed for BSE students at the Language Centre, it included twenty four questions and it was given to 66 students who were attending intermediate level of English.

Also, the participants were free to speak their minds and add any relevant information. Similarly, they were ensured that they had all rights not to answer any question that they felt uncomfortable with. As Hoyle and Judd (2002, p. 144) state: “interviews should motivate the respondent to give full and precise replies, while avoiding biases stemming from social desirability, conformity or other constructs of disinterest”. I used structured interviews with all teachers, because while using a common format it was much easier to analyze code and compare the data.

Results

The results from the student’s questionnaire imply that the use of a syllabus is a very helpful tool to which students claim deepens their knowledge about the course. Students use the syllabus primarily for educational and functional purposes. It provides extensive opportunities to accomplish students’ familiarity with the subject, assignments, presentation and helps them to be involved in the process of teaching and learning. The use of the syllabus motivates students, advances their critical thinking and enhances students’ autonomy. The English skills courses should put emphasis on referring to syllabus as part of their teaching tool.

The majority of teachers stated that we need to adjust the aims according to students needs. Considering that we teach groups of students with mixed abilities of language proficiency, re-modifying the aims and at the same time the objectives is more than necessary. Most of them also think that more activities with practical language should be involved. They believe that if we give students different task related with real life situations they would acquire and use the target language more effectively.

The majority of teachers (88%) think that the items that are being emphasized and which are mostly included in testing cover a little portion in the syllabus itself. Six out of seven teachers think that the teachers should be actively involved in syllabus design. They also suggest a realistic review of teacher training programs as well as being involved in formulating educational policies. They think that two factors which impact the procedure of syllabus design are its design and its implementation and those are directly linked to passing and failing the course and at the same time they influence the learners’ performance in English. Another suggestion of the teachers is the BSE syllabus should enable students to:

- Reach the standards according to the “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages”
- Develop their personal, social and cultural skills
- Make real communication the focus of learning

Conclusion and Recommendation

One of the main principles of the Europe 2020 strategy is that it should mainly focus on developing an economy which is based on knowledge and innovation. This is very important because better educational levels will provide more opportunities for employability which at the same time will lead towards the improvement of competitiveness and fostering job creation.

According to Fink (2003) the process of syllabus design engages two very important activities. The first one includes opportunities for providing teacher-student and student-student activities such as lecturing, discussion, and advising. The second one includes the process of selecting and gathering materials for designing the course.

In order to provide a successful course and syllabus the teachers of the Language Centre should be aware of several factors which influence the syllabus compilation:

- Situational factors (how many students are enrolled in the course, information about students' prior knowledge);
- Learning goals (what kind of thinking abilities should the students develop);
- Feedback and assessment (what should the teachers do in order to check whether the learning goals are achieved);
- Incorporate active learning into the course;
- Make sure that all these components support and are in alignment with each other.

At this point, the LC teachers should give more attention to the process of formulating learning goals. The language teacher must know exactly what facts or terms are important for students to understand and remember in the future. Also the key ideas important for the course should be precisely highlighted. This is considered as foundational knowledge (Fink, 2003).

As far as the thinking process of the Language Centre's students is concerned the teachers must be careful to involve skills which analyze and evaluate (critical thinking); imagine and create (creative thinking); solve problems and make decisions (practical thinking). According to Fink (2003) these are considered as application goals.

At the part of the integration goals all connections among the course itself, its relation to other courses and among their social life are included.

The next component of language goal defining is consisted of human dimension, where the empathy, understanding and interacting with others are involved. These are followed with the caring goals where the teacher values what kind of values or feelings the students will adopt.

All these will help students to become self directed learners.

Basic Skills English is a learning-centred course, where the teachers use the continuous way of students' assessment. Teachers during the whole semester require from their students to be involved and participate in different assignments which are closely connected to real life situation.

From this point of view, students can interact and contribute by using their own experiences for problem solving or decision making.

During the process of assessment the teacher needs to give daily or weekly feedback as soon as possible and also s/he needs to clearly point out the difference between poor and exceptional work.

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