

HEPCLIL (Higher Education Perspectives on Content and Language Integrated Learning). Vic, 2014.

CLILing at university: Insights from the lecturer training programme at the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya

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Abstract:

The Institute of Education Sciences of the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya – Barcelona Tech (UPC) started a training programme in 2008 addressed at university lecturers wishing to prepare themselves in order to offer their content subjects in English. This training programme was an assignment from the vice rector for international relations and it was aimed at fulfilling the objectives of the Internationalisation Plan that the university approved for 2008-2015. In this paper, we wish to show the experience from three perspectives: the parameters of the institutional assignment and how the Institute of Education Sciences gave an answer to it, the methodological adaptations carried out all along the programme (this will be done by exemplifying them in one sample training course), and some of the lessons learned from the lecturer training programme that has been implemented for six years now.

1. The institutional assignment

The story starts in 2008 when the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya – Barcelona Tech (UPC) approved the Internationalisation Plan for 2008-2015. With such an initiative, the university wished to more deeply involve the whole university community and all its academic activities in the internationalisation of the institution. One of the aims was to increase the opportunities for students to be immersed in international activities and in the

use of a third language (Catalan and Spanish being the first and the second) while at the university.

At the same period of time when the Internationalisation Plan was passed, Catalan and Spanish universities, as well as European ones, were immersed in revising their study programmes in order to adapt to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) requirements. In this context, the UPC decided to guarantee, for all of its degrees, that the graduates would reach a certain command of 7 transversal skills by the end of their studies, one of them being the command of a third language, preferably English.

So, both the Internationalisation Plan and the inclusion of the third language skill in all degrees were the levers that were at the origin of the assignment made to the Institute of Education Sciences (ICE), who is the academic unit in charge, within the university, of the professional development of lecturers by means of training opportunities, among other developmental activities.

1.1 Some decisions taken

At this stage, the ICE had to take some decisions regarding the new training programme to be put in place, and how it would be embedded in the already existing lecturer training programme. The following are the foundational elements that have permitted the programme to operate since 2008.

- a) The programme is part of the lecturer programme for teaching, one more part of it, and does not have a specific treatment, strategic or other. And as such, it is free of charge for all attendants.
- b) The general aim of the programme is to facilitate English-medium instruction at top quality standards.

- c) A Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach was to be developed, but other approaches, such as increasing the level of the command of English were not to be put aside.
- d) The programme had to include as many opportunities for microteaching and direct linguistic coaching as possible, with small groups to facilitate an interactive approach.
- e) A certain level of English would be required from trainees (B2), but no placement tests would be run. The levelling was to be the responsibility of the trainees themselves.
- f) The programme would be structured into short training courses in English (6 to 18 hours).
- g) Trainees would not be forced to attend. On the contrary, an implication of the School/Faculty boards was sought, in order to facilitate agreements within the Schools/Faculties. Furthermore, trainees were free to repeat activities.
- h) A constant contact with the Schools and Faculties was established in order to fine-tune training needs at any moment, and to guarantee a close follow-up both by the ICE and the School or Faculty.

All in all, the keyword was flexibility, facilitating that anyone (Schools and Faculties, and lecturers) could take their own decisions regarding instruction through English. The Institute would act as a facilitator to support all actors by means of training activities.

1.2 Trainers

To start and implement the programme, many contacts were established, with a great number of trainers from different backgrounds. The ICE worked with specialists with

previous experience developed at the UPC, other universities, English language teaching providers, and at the Catalan Ministry of Education, seeking the involvement of experienced senior trainers. This wide opening to several profiles of trainers permitted the programme to respond to a great diversity of demands from the Schools and Faculties, and from the lecturers themselves. The capacity to adapt to an academic setting and the previous experience in working with university lecturers turned to be a must for contributing to the training programme, and two of the qualities most required from the trainers.

1.3 General data

The main figures of the programme after six years of activity can be seen in Table 1. The size of the data, in the context of all lecturer training programmes at the university, shows the dimension of the programme, which has reached almost 20% of all academic staff of the university up to date.

Main characteristics of the programme	
Duration of the programme (2008-2014), in years	6
Total amount of activities developed: mainly courses (average 17h) and some workshops or seminars (average 4h)	85
Participation	
Number of certificates issued (after successful conclusion of the activities)	729
High average of participation (successful conclusion over inscription)	76%
Number of individuals that have successfully concluded the activities (19,41% of UPC teaching and research staff members)	472
UPC teaching and research staff members	2431

Trainees' feedback: Average all years (Maximum mark is 5)	
Academic value of the activities	4,41
The trainers	4,74
Organisation of the activities	4,21

Table 1. UPC lecturer training programme in English-medium instruction– Main figures

2. Sample training course: “Skills and Strategies for Teaching Content Subjects through English at University”

We wish now to show the most relevant methodological adaptations that have been required of our trainers. We will do so by analysing a training activity that includes all the core elements of the programme.

The “Skills and Strategies for Teaching Content Subjects through English at University” (from now on “Skills and strategies”) is an 18-hour module in the lecturer training programme of the UPC, offered together with modules in English for Academic Purposes, Instrumental English and Linguistic Coaching. It was designed to provide UPC lecturers, who are generally non-native speakers of English, with hands-on strategies and tools for an effective delivery of academic content in English to an equally non-native English speaker audience.

In the vein of CLIL models in primary and secondary education, the course has a double objective, namely to offer lecturers linguistic and methodological scaffolding for the preparation and implementation of their teaching programmes, at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. In what follows we wish to outline the process of syllabus design and the syllabus itself.

2.1 Syllabus Design

2.1.1 Needs Analysis

An initial needs analysis was carried out among the lecturers enrolled in the course. We wanted to find out what the lecturers' expectations were in relation to teaching their areas of expertise in a foreign language. Given that "Skills and strategies" was a needs-based course, we were interested to know which aspects of English-medium instruction lecturers expected to be easy and which difficulties they anticipated. Moreover, we wanted to find out what learning outcomes they wanted to achieve and whether these outcomes were content-related only or content and language-related. The needs analysis was systematically carried out during the first session of all the editions of the course (6 editions to date) and the syllabus of the course was adjusted accordingly.

Overall, the results of the needs analysis showed that expectations depended on the amount of previous experience lecturers had had teaching through English at university. While the majority of lecturers agreed that English would facilitate access to specialism vocabulary and bibliography, often available mostly in English, lecturers with no experience were mainly concerned about their proficiency in the target language and how to preserve the structure and content of their Catalan/Spanish teaching programmes while delivering them by means of a different instruction language. For this group of lecturers, English-medium instruction felt like an individual challenge, the success of which hinged upon high proficiency in the target language. The learning objectives were content-related.

Lecturers who had already taught their subjects through English did not identify the lecturer's proficiency in the target language as the main difficulty for English-medium instruction, mainly because most of them had spent time doing research and/or teaching in English-speaking countries and had experience doing conference presentations in English. What seemed to be more problematic were aspects related to student participation during

the lecture, unplanned communication (e.g. questions from the students, unexpected requests for explanation or communicative breakdowns, etc.) and teacher idiosyncrasy, i.e. their specific rhetorical traits when lecturing such as jokes, spontaneous remarks, use of voice and intonation, etc. Experienced lecturers expressed their concern at “not being themselves” while lecturing in English. As for the learning outcomes, many of the experienced lecturers had both content and language-related objectives. They pointed out that, in their English-taught lectures, students did not feel the obligation to use English in class and often formulated questions or did pair/group work in their mother tongue. Lecturers wanted students to not only grasp the content but also use English for classroom communication, both with the lecturer and with their peers.

The needs analysis also revealed that a common desire among all lecturers, regardless of their previous experience, was to create a motivating learning environment for their students and a non-face-threatening experience for the lecturer. In other words, lecturers were looking for ways to turn the English-taught lecture into a “safe place” for all those involved.

Therefore, it seemed important to us to design a syllabus which would provide lecturers with the linguistic scaffolding for improving their English oral skills for lecture delivery and classroom management, and with the methodological scaffolding for creating class activities that facilitate the learning of content through a foreign language and foster communication in the language of instruction. The course syllabus will be presented in 2.2.

2.1.2 Assumptions in syllabus design

The syllabus for “Skills and strategies” has four assumptions or statements at its core. They respond to certain preconceived ideas that university lecturers tend to have about English-medium instruction. These assumptions are: (1) university lecturers are experts in

their subject matter, not in English; (2) when English is a foreign language, the language is a filter for content and communication which means that we teach *through* English; (3) English affects all the dimensions of the lecture, not just the class materials; (4) a lecture in English is not a conference presentation. We want the participants to be aware that English-medium instruction in a context such as Catalonia, where exposure to English outside the classroom is scarce, differs from instruction in contexts where exposure to English is readily available beyond class time.

2.2 Course Syllabus

The syllabus of the course covers three main areas, namely an introduction to the rationale and principles of English-medium instruction, a section on linguistic scaffolding and a section on methodological strategies for successful implementation of English-medium instruction in a foreign language context.

In the introduction section, we address some of the opportunities and challenges of teaching through English at university and the rationale of this type of instruction in a context such as Catalonia, with a focus on some of the learning and linguistic benefits of English-medium programmes. We also draw lecturers' attention to the communicative competence needed to deliver this type of programmes and some self-access tools available for language level detection.

The linguistic module of the course provides practice on language aspects relevant for instruction at university level. We deal with academic language functions (e.g. defining, classifying, describing processes, referring to visuals, cause-effect relations, hedging, etc.), signposting and other cohesive devices in lecture delivery, some pronunciation issues such as word stress and intonation, and classroom management language. This

module is meant to increase lecturers' awareness of those linguistic aspects which are necessary for a clear delivery of the subject-specific content.

The methodological module of the course is the most extended of the three, reflecting our belief that communicative and teaching strategies can make up for unavoidable linguistic deficiencies in English-medium instruction in a foreign language context. Lecturers receive practice on how to design cognitively and linguistically accessible tasks while integrating the four language skills, *i.e.* written expression and comprehension, oral expression and comprehension. We insist on the importance of diversifying the channels through which students receive information so as to maximize the learning opportunities. We also show lecturers ways in which they can incorporate authentic (oral and written) materials into their classes, bearing in mind that such materials should always be adapted. Additionally, the module comprises strategies to minimize the use of the mother-tongue in classroom interaction and to increase student production in English (e.g. oral presentations, written assignments, etc.).

Lecturers do volunteer micro-teaching sessions followed by peer and instructor feedback. For many of them, this micro-teaching is their first contact with English-medium instruction and serves as a confidence booster.

The 6 editions of "Skills and Strategies" have strengthened our belief that English-medium instruction at university can be safely placed under the umbrella of CLIL in that it can (and should) lead to an integrative learning of content and an additional language. The difficulty is often to convince university lecturers that this integrative learning will not take place simply because the students are immersed in the target language, but that the change of language should go hand-in-hand with a deep renovation of the whole teaching approach. Effective English-medium instruction involves dealing with many aspects that go beyond

the language proficiency of the lecturer. The lecturer needs to be aware that the class takes place in a multilingual environment in which English is a foreign language. The course syllabus should have the learner at its core, not the content – the content can find its way to the learner outside the class time, through readings. Finally, the lecturer needs to provide both cognitive and linguistic scaffolding for learning to be effective and affective.

2.3. Some lessons learned as regards to the lecturers' language needs

There was an extremely positive attitude shown by the UPC lecturers. Participants came from a wide variety of different academic areas, from architects to mathematicians or physicists. They found the functional and practical aspects of the language input valuable in helping them give lectures. They were also keen to practise, perfect and internalize such language in the practical sessions in order to be able to make the transfer of the skills learnt to the lecture theatre.

Every lecturer who enrolls on a course - due to present or future teaching roles - has usually achieved the required level of linguistic competence in order to benefit from the programme. Fluency will vary a little within the groups but this is not a detrimental factor. Overall, the levels tend to be homogeneous and extremely high.

Public speaking in a foreign language typically requires work on diction and intonation. For example, the ability to effectively emphasise key words within a lecture is an important element which aids understanding. Although the lecturers are able to express themselves clearly and elegantly in English, this aspect will usually require regular practice and fine-tuning. However, as motivation is high, this improves constantly throughout the course. Pronunciation of individual academic vocabulary also needs a special focus. Lecturers are extremely keen to improve this aspect of their language skills and are receptive to any help given.

In general, a lecturer is able to express him or herself very clearly, and any slight mistakes made do not impede student understanding. The level of grammatical accuracy is never an issue. Any particular correction given in individual feedback by the trainer is always noted and every effort is made not to repeat the mistake. Specific lexical knowledge for within the classroom may appear to be a weaker aspect at the beginning of a course. However, each session includes varied input on vocabulary and expressions used in academic situations, and so this gap is easily filled. Lecturers are always extremely keen to extend and revise this language in class. Motivation and a perceived need to take full advantage of the courses by each lecturer are a key factor in their success.

3. Conclusions and recommendations

Since the beginning of the training programme, more than 400 members of the university have attended at least one of the training activities offered within the programme and more than 30 trainers have contributed to the implementation of the training activities. During this time, the structure and content of the programme have undergone continual change in order to adapt to the needs of the UPC schools and faculties. Yet, interest in the core of the programme remains alive among UPC lecturers and it is still one of the most sought after training programmes, with some of the highest results in terms of satisfaction and attendance.

Both schools and trainers have been asked throughout the programme to be flexible and to adapt to the real needs of the lecturers when teaching their subjects through English as a foreign language. To us, this flexibility is at the heart of the success of the programme, a fact also well recognised among the community.

In general terms, participants in the programme value the dynamism of the classes, the quality of the trainers and the personalised feedback that they provide. Participants give

value to the fact that the courses are run in small groups and that they are structured in such a way to provide strategies, vocabulary, language skills, and clear and easy-to-apply techniques for English-medium instruction.

The lecturer training programme at the UPC has also shown us that more work is needed to increase lecturers' awareness of the methodological shift involved in English-medium instruction. The mix between experienced/non-experienced English-medium instruction lecturers in the same module is enriching and helps illustrate certain methodological issues with first-hand experience from the lecturers' background. Participants in the programme do not enjoy theoretical classes – they want hands-on practice and tailored strategies that they can implement in their own teaching context. It is important that trainers take the time to explain why English-medium instruction is necessary in a foreign language context like Catalonia. Understanding the rationale of such programmes, not only their institutional parameters but also the learning and language learning benefits they bring, is absolutely necessary in getting university lecturers to believe in English-medium instruction.