CHANGING UNIVERSITY LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Summary

Introduction

The article looks into a foreign language teacher situation with the focus on teachers' attitude in the IT classroom.

Aim of the Study

Related to the EU Structural Funds project "Developing Lifelong Learning Access: Innovative Means and Methods in Teaching Foreign Languages at Mykolas Romeris University". The goal of the project is to provide university students and professors with the possibilities of learning an additional EU working language with the help of a digital laboratory.

Materials and Methods

Teacher attitude research was carried out with the help of a questionnaire and this article deals with the following statements from the conducted questionnaire: 1) attitude towards the use of IT in foreign language learning, 2) interest in innovative language teaching methods, 3) willingness to experiment and test new methods, 4) attitude to a friendly learning environment, 5) concerns with learning outcomes.

Results

The results of the questionnaire point to the areas of further discussion of what teachers really think in having a media in the classroom and exploiting electronic sources, thus being positive towards progressive methods in teaching.

Key words: *attitudes, language classroom, IT in foreign language learning.*

Introduction

The modern demands on successful self-realization in one's professional life are more and more intensely understood as an ability to function equally well in several, not one language. For university graduates and for university educators, equally, this poses a question if the university is able to provide professional preparation in several languages and several professional language sets. An immediate solution to the problem would be to enhance students' awareness of the different language scenarios, to expose them to sources with a variety of real life materials and to allow them to adjust individually to the demand of intense language learning. Information and communication technologies are seen as a great support, though "no longer seen as the panacea, but rather as one of the many technological aids that [...] teacher can choose to use to enhance learning and teaching (Davies et al, 2005).

The demands put on teaching are related to the success of the general undertaking of the learning process since much of the success in the process of learning with the help of technology depends on proper training for teachers and on the imagination of teachers devising activities (p.4, *ibid.*). Teachers' positive attitudes (values) or negative attitudes (prejudice) towards technological environment in the classroom may highly affect the process and the effect of learning (Barros

et al, 1997, 1998). Undoubtedly, the teacher training and teacher imagination must relate to the fundamental divide of view points of education identified as traditional and progressive.

Aim of the Study

Related to the EU Structural Funds project “Developing Lifelong Learning Access: Innovative Means and Methods in Teaching Foreign Languages at Mykolas Romeris University”. The goal of the project is to provide university students and professors with the possibilities of learning an additional EU working language with the help of a digital laboratory.

Materials and Methods

The teaching team consists of 9 language teachers and one internal material expert. The task for the language teachers involved in the project is: 1) to select material, and 2) develop methodology, which would lead to the successful acquisition of a foreign language within digital environment, taken as generic definition for the new classroom environment without emphasizing the type of the digital laboratory. Teacher attitude research is carried out as part of the overall system of steps in methodology creation.

Methodology used within the mentioned project involves a broad range of undertakings: defining attainment standards; writing evaluation rubrics for skills; balancing planned and unplanned elements within the modern classroom; etc. Therefore, one of the early steps in creating methodology was to determine the priorities in teaching attitude inventory which were worked out within the project team, 9 language teachers and the internal material expert. Another methodology creation measure will be externally conducted outside the project to measure learners’ achievements within the digital classroom.

Research on teaching attitude

Teaching attitude is seen as an ongoing project activity. It consists of several research stages depending on the project progress. At the initial stage a structured questionnaire to determine the existing situation among university language teachers was carried out.

The first stage in developing teacher attitude data was status quo research through questionnaire analysis. The constructed questionnaire consisted of 31 multiple choice items written with regard to the theoretical implications of the Wehling and Charters, Barros and Elia and Minnesota Teacher Attitudes Inventory (MTAI) developed by Cook, Leeds and Callis (Bunting, 1984; Barros, 1998; Cook, 1951). The questionnaire looked into language teachers’:

- attitude towards the use of ICT in foreign language learning;
- interest in innovative language teaching methods;
- willingness to experiment and test new methods in practice;
- attitude to a friendly learning environment ;
- concerns with learning outcomes.

The questionnaire was sent to respondents selected on intentional basis. The respondents were our colleagues, university teachers and we received answers from 3 Lithuanian universities (Mykolas Romeris University, Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, Vilnius University) all from the capital city of the country (statistically there are 21 state and 6 private universities in Lithuania) and from 1 higher education non-university institution, college in Kaunas (there are 28 state and 12 private colleges in Lithuania). The respondents – 41 language teachers at the higher educational institution were all, with the exception of three men, women. This allows us to state that our questionnaire is indicative of women respondents’ attitude to the use of digital technologies. 13 of the respondents (32.7%) received prior training to use digital laboratories for language teaching. The extent and depth of the training was not questioned. Teaching experience of the respondents’

ranges from 5 years to over 35 years, however it was not possible to determine statistically significant difference in the responses because of the small number of respondents (see Figure 1).

The responses to the questions lead into shaping the existing situation and furthering our research in stage two through open interviews, carried out currently.

Here, the review of the most indicative responses which lead to further theoretical and practical considerations about teaching are reviewed. Statistical analysis, since the respondent scale is very small, is rather interpreted in terms of planning further qualitative research, but not through application of statistical data processing.

Results

Questionnaire interpretation

Statement 1: Information and communication technologies provide better opportunities for language learning. The findings revealed that the majority of the respondents tend to favour modern educational technologies. 87,8%, (N=36) of the respondents agree that technologies provide better opportunities for foreign language learning. 9,8%, (N=4) of the respondents are inclined to see them as a helpful tool, whereas 2,4% (N=1) of the study participants think that technologies do not ensure better foreign language learning. Thus, we conclude that the majority of the survey participants could be identified as possessing a positive attitude towards teaching and learning with new technologies. However, the small number of respondents does not allow establishing reliable connection with the other interests and attitudes through the questionnaire (The findings are presented in Figure 2).

An interesting comparison to the questionnaire findings would be research "Student use of the learning material and resources at the higher educational institutions" carried out by a group of scholars under the Ministry of Science and Education of the Republic of Lithuania in 2005 which indicates that the university and college students, in fact, prefer traditional sources of information to the electronic sources of information.

The surface review of the situation appears to show that the language teachers at the universities may form the forefront in the use of the electronic media, showing greater reliance on the electronic media as a source of learning than the students.

Statement 3. Interest in innovative methods and learning environment. We have researched teachers' attitudes towards innovative teaching methods and the impact of learning environment on learning. The findings indicate that the bigger part of the surveyed teachers think that they are interested in innovations and believe in positive effect of innovations upon learning - 65,9% (N=23)

Figure 1. *Experience in teaching.*

Figure 2. *Information communication technologies provide better opportunities for language learning.*

of the respondents and 26,8% (N=12) are more interested than not interested. Only a small part of the questioned university teachers (4,9%, N=2) indicated that they more disagree than agree with the proposition, while 2,4% (N=1) have not thought about these pedagogical issues. The data are presented in Figure 3.

Statement 4. The next statement declared **willingness to test innovative methods in practice**. The responses distributed in a different way than in answering the previous statement: more than half of the respondents (51,2%, N=23) admit experimenting and testing new methods in practice. However, this figure is lower in comparison with 65,9% (N=26) interested in innovations. This data reveals some existing controversy between teachers' interest in modern methods of teaching and reluctance to try or test them in the classroom. The extent of the problem may not be statistically measurable, but the gap between interest and experiment becomes visible. About one third of the teachers (29,3%, N=11) more agree with this statement than disagree whereas 12,2%, (N=5) are not so given to innovations in their practical work. The smallest number of them (4,9%, N=2) have never considered this aspect of teaching and must apply traditional methods in their work. Both types of responses do not differentiate teachers work other than on self-esteem and attitude to innovations.

However, the further research should also include questions of what is innovative method in the view of many university language teachers and which intrinsic or extrinsic motives lead to the use of this method. Besides the pitfall here is not to echo Barros and Elia definition of teachers as information providers who possess "the belief that all students are identical and ready to follow the same type instruction" (Barros, 1997). The data are presented in Figure 4.

Statement 7. If we discussed **the attitude to students' individual work**, we would see that the majority of language teachers do agree that the main objective of a teacher is to encourage a student to work and solve the problems individually. Out of 41 respondents as many as 20 teachers (48%) are of this opinion. 16 respondents (39%) also more agree than disagree with this view. 3 of them (7.4%) more disagree than agree, only 2 respondents (4.8%) have never thought about it (see Figure 5).

Student learning, interpreted as adult learning on the interaction level between a teacher

Figure 3. *Interest in innovative methods and learning environment.*

Figure 4. *Willingness to test innovative methods in practice.*

and a student is, probably, best summed up through constructivist approach (Pollard, 2005; Tamosiuniene, 2006). It is interesting to note that constructivist approach also discusses student's individual work. The teacher's job is to provide the students with the information, the example, and the guidance that they need to build understanding on their own. However, the issue to test further is how able are teachers' to pick up from the students individual work and reintegrate it into the bigger picture, the further step in research directs us into the analysis of case studies in this area.

The constructivist approach here may call for further interpretation of the grand theories, or discourses, or forces present in the learning environment and contemplated by the teachers, on the one hand, and the practical transactions between the teacher and the student in the classroom, on the other. These two approaches may be different and controversial and, indeed, their relationship is difficult to trace as indicated by J. Cullen et al. Responses of the questionnaire in comparison to the other statements "sees learning outcomes as one manifestation of an evolving dialectic between the discourses of teaching and learning and the everyday realities of pedagogic practices." (p.54 Cullen et al, 2002).

Statement 9. Friendly learning environment is favoured by the majority of the respondents. Even 28 of university language teachers (68.3%) fully agree that friendly learning environment and the teacher's attempts to interest the students is essential. (N=9) respondents also more agree than disagree with this attitude. Only (N=2) respondents (4.8%) more disagree than agree or have never thought about it (see Figure 6).

Incidentally, constructivist approach also encourages students to be engaged in a friendly interaction with the teacher and with each other. Constructivists think that social discourse helps students change or reinforce their ideas. If they have the chance to present what they think and hear others' ideas, students can build a personal knowledge base that they understand. Only when they feel comfortable enough to express their ideas, will meaningful classroom dialogue occur. Fun comes from overcoming challenges, or seeing things in a new way, or doing something you did not think you could do. Therefore, it is satisfying that 68.3% (N=25) of the respondents try to transmit

Figure 5. Support to students' individual work.

Figure 6. Creating friendly learning environment.

the atmosphere of caring and understanding. However, the real concern is 31,7% of teachers who do not feel comfortable with the friendly attitude in the classroom. The MTAI scale (mentioned above) showed that teachers who are not interested in friendly atmosphere in the classroom tend to dominate and think in terms of his/her status, the correctness of the position he/she takes on classroom matters, and the subject matter to be covered rather than in terms of what the a student needs, feels, knows, and can do. The neglect of latter implications, dimensional to adult learning may indicate, that the university teachers are not fully prepared to see their class as adult learners (Tamosiuniene, 2006).

Statement 11. Concern with learning results. One more essential issue concerning teachers' attitudes to the teaching process is monitoring and evaluation of students' progress. It is important to note that 68.3% of the respondents (28 persons out of 41) do care about the results of their students. 8 respondents (19.5%) more agree than disagree with the importance to think of the results. Only 2.4% of the respondents more disagree than agree. Yet, 9.8% of the respondents (4 out of 41) have never thought about the importance of the results of their students. The interpretation of the data is controversial.

B. Gourneau who researched 210 undergraduate education students claims that both the teachers and students need to contribute to the learning environment for a relationship of closeness and acceptance to develop. It is important to allow students both responsibility and freedom within the classroom community. This author identified and analyzed five key attitudes among which *Sharing Responsibility* stands out (Gourneau, 2005). Thus the shared concern with the learning outcomes is important in achieving the goal of the learning.

However, this author, also highlighted elements of learning destruction that included placing too much emphasis on grades or giving the one and only correct answer to questions. Too many details or directions to assignments also discouraged students and left little space for creativity, the students became disengaged from the learning process. Extrinsic motivators reduced the students' desire to learn and even lowered their achievement levels whereas intrinsic motivation and fun-making can add to effective teaching and positive learning environment. With effective attitudes, teachers and students can develop relationships of mutual respect and trust. "Teachers should capitalize on students' intrinsic motivation, cognitive learning styles, and skill levels. This type of environment will be most conducive to fostering learning" (Gourneau, 2005). Therefore the majority, 9.8% of teachers, who are not given to the extrinsic motivation may possess the right attitude.

The findings concerning this variable are presented in the following Figure 7.

The supportive elements of "the concern for the outcome results" can be determined from the above statement: fostering intrinsic motivation, cognitive learning styles, and skill levels (Gourneau, 2005). The further proposition for research would be to identify such elements and their measure in the digital classroom.

Figure 7. Interest in learning results.

Conclusions

The status quo questionnaire results may appear predictable for a university language teacher population, however they point to the areas of further discussion of what teachers really think in having a media in the classroom such as digital laboratory and sharing responsibility, accepting diversity, showing kindness and care, being positive towards progressive methods in teaching. Through comparison with the university students unenthusiastic attitudes towards electronic sources the situation appears to show that:

- the language teachers at the universities may form the forefront in the use of the electronic media **which fact is seconded by the teachers high interest in innovative methods and learning environment** and may be more enthusiastic about electronic laboratories than the students.

Statement of willingness to test innovative methods in practice indicates some controversy between teachers' interest in modern methods of teaching and less enthusiastic approach to testing them in the classroom, however the pitfall of well wishing teachers entering the digital classroom may be teachers who turn a blind eye upon the diversity of students and assume that one method fits all.

Enthusiastic approach to the individual work of the students, though corresponding to the grand theoretical approaches, in practice creates a new interest – where is the meeting point of all individual interests in the digital classroom.

University language teachers' in their majority 68.3% support creating friendly and learning environment, however the depth of the implication of such environment for the student performance may not be equally shared by all teachers. The questionnaire reveals the hypothesis that part of language teachers at the university level may not be regarding their students as adult learners.

Teachers concerns with learning outcomes should also be further tested as reflective of a discourse recognising the elements of such concern, or disclosing the content of concern and relating it to the whole teaching belief.

- the language teachers at the universities may form the forefront in the use of the electronic media;
- there exists some controversy between teachers' interest in modern methods of teaching and reluctance to try or test them in the classroom;
- enthusiastic approach to the individual work of the students poises a question: where is the meeting point of all individual interests in the digital classroom;
- that part of language teachers at the university level may not be regarding their students as adult learners since the classroom environment does not correspond to the adult classroom definition;
- teachers concerns with learning outcomes should also be further tested for the content elements of such concern.

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