Insights into the Present and Future of Language and Communication Training

Ivan Berazhny
University of Applied Sciences (Finland)
ivan.berazhny@haaga-helia.fi

Abstract

The paper discusses how vocational teaching of language and communication can be developed to suit the future educational contexts. To do so, the paper reviews changes that have taken place on HAAGA-HELIA's Porvoo Campus, Finland. The paper demonstrates how teaching of languages and communication can 1) be integrated with other courses in terms of the content and relevance to work-life 2) adjust to the economic reality; and 3) be pro-active in designing and testing virtual learning environments. The paper argues that the above adjustments can help create future-proof teaching methods and curricula. The paper concludes that despite the innovative infrastructure and curriculum design on Porvoo Campus, the staff and the students still need motivation and training to stay future-oriented in their development.

1. Introduction

This section briefly introduces HAAGA-HELIA University of Applied Sciences and its Porvoo Campus.

1.1 HAAGA-HELIA University of Applied Sciences

HAAGA-HELIA University of Applied Sciences is the leading university of its profile in Finland. It is a private university, partly funded by Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. The university has about 10 000 students and employs about 700 staff on its campuses in or near Helsinki. The fields include business, information technology, tourism, hospitality, sports, journalism, and vocational teacher education. HAAGA-HELIA offers education to Finnish and international students on Bachelor and Master levels in Finnish, Swedish, and English languages. The focus is on quality, diversity, specialisation, research and development, work-life, and entrepreneurship.

1.2 Porvoo Campus

In 2011 HAAGA-HELIA moved several of its degree programmes into brand-new premises in Porvoo. The premises, known as Porvoo Campus, were designed for innovative educational practices and new curricula and promote regional development, innovation, and internationalisation. Besides education in Finnish and Swedish, HAAGA-HELIA's Porvoo Campus offers degree programmes (International Business and Tourism) to international students in English. The annual intake for each international degree programme is 40 students. The students' professional fields include sales, international marketing, event management, business travel, and travel technology. The studies last about three and a half years, and the students are welcome to advance through the studies faster, if possible. The studies include an exchange period abroad, a work placement, and a thesis.

The infrastructure of Porvoo Campus was designed for teamwork, flexible learning environments that implement work-life, latest technologies, and socially responsible practices. To exemplify, instead of individual offices the staff share large working spaces; the classrooms resemble meeting rooms and can be easily transformed into other types of working spaces; the rooms have transparent glass walls, and are equipped with smart boards, document cameras, etc. Each new student gets a laptop computer with up-to-date software tools. The Campus invests into Green Office, wireless environment, and healthy life-styles. For more, please see HAAGA-HELIA's [11] and Porvoo Campus websites [12].

2. Pedagogical approaches

This section reviews several approaches towards learning that form the principles of vocational teaching, research and development on Porvoo Campus.

2.1 Approaches towards learning

HAAGA-HELIA provides incentives to its staff to update their pedagogical competences. Thus the staff are eager to benchmark and innovate across various approaches. For example, teaching on Porvoo Campus may be seen in terms of behaviourist approaches [8], whereby the teachers adopt low-interference teaching styles and work through non-judgemental and corrective feedback. Teaching may also be described in terms of cognitive approaches [8], whereby the teachers scaffold the contents and guide the students towards meaningful reflections. Teaching can also be defined in social constructive terms [8], whereby the class becomes a self-directed and self-correcting environment, where the students observe each other, make mistakes, take initiatives, etc.

Striving for such an eclectic approach, the teachers enable the students to simultaneously
- create and share knowledge;
- form and practice professional skills;
- experience and adjust to work-life environment. These strategic principles are reflected both on micro-level, in classroom activities and design of courses, and on macro-level, in general assessment criteria and curriculum design. Sections 2.2 and 2.3 will present the implementation of these principles in more detail, as part of an approach that combines inquiry learning and project-based learning.

2.2 Inquiry learning

The staff on Porvoo Campus use inquiry learning [3] as a framework to coordinate the curriculum, design courses, and optimise the use of resources. According to inquiry learning, the curriculum is layered into three study levels:
- the level of adaptation, where the students follow basic studies and adjust to the new ways of collaborative learning;
- the level of application, where the students follow professional studies and take an important role in the design and implementation of their learning
- the level of development, where the students accomplish their studies, work placement and thesis in innovative entrepreneurial ways. Such layering allows gradual empowerment and enablement of students towards collaborative, entrepreneurial, and research-based knowledge and skills.

On each level inquiry learning is implemented through courses that include the following steps:
- the students and the instructors set their developmental tasks and learning goals;
- the students and the instructors identify the learning contents of a course;
- the students and the instructors agree on the theories and methods to be applied;
- the students construe their knowledge and skills collaboratively;
- the students reflect and evaluate their learning process and outcomes;
- the students disseminate their resulting knowledge. Such staging is applied with variation depending on the level of the studies. For example, on the level of adaptation, the role of instructors in identifying the goals, the contents, and the theories is that of guides. On the level of application, instructors scaffold the learning processes. On the level of development, instructors act as coaches.

2.3 Project-based learning

Inquiry learning on Porvoo Campus is embedded in work-life environments. To achieve this, HAAGA-HELIA implements project-based learning, whereby companies, municipal organisations, and other stakeholders can commission semester or course projects to the students. The projects become the core of the students' learning and the instructors help students in adjusting the learning contents according to the needs of a project. Project work allows students to run meetings, delegate responsibilities and develop work-life identities. All study levels feature project work, be it semester projects, course projects or thesis as a project. Together inquiry learning and project-based learning form a framework that helps secure both future employability of HAAGA-HELIA graduates and HAAGA-HELIA's future competitiveness. Additionally, such cooperation between the industry and the university may decrease the industry's labour costs and may provide extra funding for the university.

3. Future forecasts

This section will discuss the relevance of forecasts into the future of work-life and the future of education to the development of Porvoo Campus curriculum.

3.1 Future of work

To secure the employability of graduates, the staff help the students develop future-proof competences, which include job-application skills, responsible self-management, entrepreneurship, etc. This goes along with recent forecasts into the future of work [2], which urge young graduates to map their own competences and resources; to move from general knowledge towards the mastery of specialist skills; to develop competences that create value, are rare and difficult to imitate; to seek careers in future-proof fields; to stay visible and flexible; to act as connectors in business rather than as competitors. With the help of the instructors the students continuously consult and apply such future-inspired recommendations in various project work and courses.

3.2 Future of education

The staff on Porvoo Campus also follow the forecasts into the future of education. Such forecasts help implement and assess innovations in the education industry. For example, a think-tank Envisioning Technology offers an insightful map of educational future [10], where education by 2020 and 2040 is seen as uninterrupted, globalised, gamified, and digitalised. Media [9] forecast that free and for profit online education will enable individual academics to compete with large university groups as certified providers of higher education. Such forecasts encourage the students and the staff to redefine attendance, assessment, classroom environment, etc., whereby the instructors "outsource" part of their traditional workload to on-line platforms and to the students. As a result, each course can extend into virtual domain and feature peer review, learning diaries, study portfolios, project management software, and tandem studies. This enables the students to get individually-tailored courses, and the staff to network with the industry and focus more on research and development. Technology and project-management also enable more efficient design and coordination of the curriculum.

4. Curriculum design and coordination

Curricula on Porvoo Campus are coordinated both across semester courses (horizontally) and across study levels (vertically) to minimise overlaps and discontinuities in teaching and to optimise the use of the university's resources. Such coordination will be described below.

4.1 Horizontal coordination

All teachers synchronise their teaching when they deliver their contents to the same class during a given semester. This is done through
- a shared semester project, whereby all course assignments can be used as parts of the semester's project report
- large integrated courses, whereby several instructors co-share the contents of a course in a fused and complimentary manner; and
- a cloud-based collaborative learning platform, whereby courses are co-managed by students and instructors.

4.2 Vertical coordination

Teachers communicate across the study levels to ensure that semester projects and courses of the same module build up from one study level to another without overlaps and discontinuities. For example, team-building projects lead to internationalisation projects, and then to research and development projects. Similarly, within English language module, English Communication (first level) is followed by Business English (second level) and by Academic English (third level).

5. Teaching of language and communication subjects

This section will focus on the theories that inform teaching of English language and communication courses to students who study in English. The theories will be presented in their applied modes.

5.1 Content and Language Integrated Learning

Teaching of language and communication courses on Porvoo Campus follows CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) approach [7].The content comes from business and tourism fields, while teaching English means equally teaching the content *through* English; teaching *about* English;

and teaching *English* [4]. This is enabled by integrated courses and multi-field expertise of the staff that have both industry experience and language teaching skills.

5.2 Systemic Functional Theory and Multimodality

For English language and communication courses, CLIL approach is strengthened by the Systemic Functional approach to language (SFL) [5]. SFL theory helps explain language and communication phenomena in simple terms and offers the students efficient tools to improve their writing and speech, their English grammar, field-specific vocabulary, and knowledge of genres. Situations and texts through which the students master their language and communication skills vary with semester projects and learning goals, yet usually the students advance as follows.

On the first study level the students tune their articulation and intonation skills, compile semester vocabulary lists, distinguish between specific and abstract lexical meanings, explore collocations, and learn written and spoken genres. On the second and third levels, the students master efficient clausal grammar, structured and cohesive communication, formalised genres, and argumentation skills. On all levels, the students practice self-assessment, peer review and editing, co-authorship, public speaking, debate, technology-mediated communication and other professionally relevant linguistic activities.

Additionally, English language and communication training on Porvoo Campus includes teaching how linguistic and non-linguistic content works together. For that, multimodal approach [1] to communication becomes useful. With multimodality students learn the basics of visual communication, graphic design, document literacy, media publishing, etc. [6]

Thus multimodality, SFL and CLIL help integrate content knowledge with linguistic and communication competences within a given course. Within a semester, the students and the staff rely on project-based learning to coordinate the studies. Within a degree programme, inquiry learning helps coordinate the curriculum across the three study levels.

6. Students' feedback

The above described curriculum design and teaching are also based on feedback from students. To make the latest feedback visible, the author conducted several qualitative interviews with the students.

6.1 Method

The sampling (12 students) included students from International Business and Tourism Degree Programmes. The nationalities included Finland, Vietnam, China, Latvia, Tanzania, Macedonia, and Bangladesh. The sampling represented all study levels and included an equal number of female and male students. The students also varied from somewhat struggling to very advanced. Participation was voluntary and featured an informed consent form. Each interview was semi-structured and lasted about an hour. The questions were posed in various forms and order to preserve natural communication. The interviewees were asked to review the notes to ensure reliability. The responses and the names were kept confidential. The interviews had three topics:

Topic 1: What is education? What do you expect from a university? What approaches and teaching styles do you prefer? What type of learner are you? What needs to be improved in inquiry learning?

Topic 2: How and why did you apply to Porvoo Campus? Which schools are competitors for Porvoo Campus? What should Porvoo Campus do more or differently to attract talented applicants?

Topic 3: How will education change as an industry in the future? What is a future-proof learning environment? What subjects and methods are future-proof and deserve more space in the curriculum?

6.2 Results

The interviews were successful. The students spoke amply and considered the transcripts fair. The responses were put together as a single narrative and discussed in staff meetings as follows.

The students' self-management skills vary. Several students are motivated to study by family and friends. Yet the majority see themselves as organised learners. Quality education was defined as interesting, relevant to work-life, socially responsible; based on theories, new exclusive knowledge, critical thinking, and life-long learning. The students want to pursue their passions, to influence the design of curricula, and to learn virtually. They also look for urban social life, rich diversity, low cost of living, good reputation, student activities, and high-tech infrastructure.

Porvoo Campus was evaluated positively as a place that offers all of the above. The students clearly prefer "learning by doing" and to be "in charge of their learning". Examples of best educational practices included "working in real business meetings", "studying politically correct language", "cooperation with companies", "technology courses", and "service design courses."

The students also listed challenges of matching students for teamwork, motivating free-riders, avoiding mixed messages, providing individual feedback, achieving consistency in teaching standards. Many students noted that inquiry learning works best when teachers are committed, present, and fair. In students' opinion, teachers should be experts, role models, and have connections to work life. Additionally, teachers should treat students as colleagues; be open-minded, flexible, and approachable. The students also valued power distance and expressed desire for a dress code.

When it comes to applicants, HAAGA-HELIA's Porvoo Campus has a strong appeal due to free education, reputation, and its pedagogical framework of project-based learning and inquiry learning. At the same time universities with similar profiles may have more visibility. In students' opinion, Porvoo Campus should communicate clearly distinctions between its degree programmes and other universities. To do so, the students suggest on-line surveys for the young, sponsoring popular events, offering sports facilities, and letting applicants experience Porvoo Campus virtually. The students would also like to plan such activities and make marketing diverse, intense, and visible.

According to the students, the future will see secure virtual reality as part of every course. Degree programmes will offer more specialisations and more joint courses with other universities. Work-life innovations will be implemented without delays. Technology courses, business communication and languages will get more space in curricula. There will be more opportunities to improve English. Entrepreneurship, travel subjects, emerging markets, and healthcare will remain future-proof subjects.

7. Conclusions

The above paper discussed how vocational teaching can be developed towards the educational contexts of the future. The example of HAAGA-HELIA's Porvoo Campus has shown how project-based learning and inquiry learning can make a reliable framework for that. At the same time, the students' feedback revealed an important role of teachers in making inquiry learning a success.

References

[1] Bateman, John A. Multimodality and Genre: a foundation for the systematic analysis of multimodal documents, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

[2] Gratton, Lynda (2011). The Shift: The Future of Work is Already Here, HarperCollins UK.

[3] Hakkarainen, K., M. Bollström-Huttunen, R. Pyysalo & K. Lonka (2005). Tutkiva oppiminen käytännössä Inquiry learning in practice (published in Finnish). Helsinki, Finland: WSOY.

[4] Halliday, M. A. K. (1993). Towards a language-based theory of learning. Linguistics and Education, 5(2), 93-116. Reprinted in Collected Works, vol. 4 (2003): 327-352

[5] Halliday M A. K. & Webster Jonathan J. (eds.) Continuum Companion to Systemic Functional Linguistics.Continuum.YL. 2009.

[6] Hiippala, T. (2012). "Reading Paths and Visual Perception in Multimodal Research, Psychology, and Brain Sciences" in Journal of Pragmatics 44(3), 315-327.

[7] Mehisto, P., Marsh, D., & Frigols, MJ (2008). Uncovering CLIL: Content and language integrated learning in bilingual and multilingual education. Oxford: Macmillan.

[8] Moore, Dale A.; Leamon, M.H.; Cox, P.D.; and Servis, M.E. "Teaching Implications of Different Educational Theories and Approaches." Journal of Veterinary Medical Education. Summer 2002.

[9] http://www.economist.com/news/international/21568738-online-courses-are-transforming-higher-education-creating-new-opportunities-best

[10] http://envisioningtech.com/education/

[11] http://www.haaga-helia.fi/en/about-haaga-helia

[12] http://porvoocampus.fi/