

Applying the Method of Design Thinking in Teaching ESP in the Context of Creative Tourism

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Abstract

Since one of the four objectives of today's education, as defined in the Strategic framework – Education & Training 2020, is to stimulate creativity and innovation, more and more universities have started to apply the method of design thinking (DT), a creative problem-solving approach used mainly in architecture and business. However, the potential of DT can be seen not only in terms of stimulating creative thinking, team-work or problem-solving skills, but also in terms of developing foreign language competences as well as making students more motivated. The present paper offers an insight into the possibilities and the benefits of applying DT in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP), providing the framework of the English lesson focused on the topic of creative tourism. In addition, the pros and cons of the method, based on the experience, are also summarized.

Keywords: English, Design Thinking, Creative Tourism;

1. Introduction

Much has been said about the importance of inter-disciplinary, problem-based and creativity-fostering approach in education with respect to the rapidly changing needs of the 21st century society [8], [9]. As proved by several research findings [6], [12], the method of DT, that was originally developed in the USA by a design consulting firm called IDEO specialised in innovation and problem-solving at the end of 1990s, can effectively address this challenge. In education it was firstly introduced by the D-school at Stanford University (USA) [1], according to which DT can be understood as a process of five stages. [5]. *Empathising* teaches students to reveal the real needs of the imagined or potential customers through asking questions or observation. In the phase of *Defining* the participants try to identify the problem, while *Ideating* is about finding solutions to it. *Prototyping*, as the next stage, is about making the best idea concrete using various materials. The last phase, i.e. *Testing*, is about getting feedback from the costumers [6].

The main benefits of this problem-based approach are that it enables students to work successfully in multi-disciplinary teams" [11], forces the members of the groups to listen to each other's opinion and to discuss it, what means that it, undoubtedly, also improves communication skills [6], [12]. These positives have also been expressed by the participants of the workshop organised by the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia, launched as a complementary element of the "Tourism Products" course within the Regional Tourism Bachelor's study programme. What is more, according to the mentors, students were far more active and enthusiastic than in case of traditional teaching methods. Drawing on the success of the mentioned workshop, the method of DT was also piloted within the course of English language for tourism 2 in 2018. The idea of testing the method of DT in FLE has been supported by the action-oriented approach of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment to language learning and teaching [2], since it "views users and learners of a language primarily as 'social agents', i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action".

The syllabi of the given course are concerned with the relevant terminology and issues of the fields most related to tourism, such as gastronomy, hospitality or various types of tourism, for example cultural, health or creative tourism (CT). The topic of the lesson focused on CT, a relatively new field of tourism that is becoming more and more popular abroad in recent times; however, in Slovakia its development is still at a very early stage, even though the potential of this country for developing this type of tourism is extremely high, especially due to the rich cultural heritage and living traditions [7], [10].

The next part of the paper offers a brief description of the framework of the lesson, providing an insight into the phases of DT. In addition, the pros and cons of the method, based on the experience, are also summarised.



2. Applying DT in ESP in the context of creative tourism

The main objective of the lesson was to test whether DT as a teaching method can enhance communication in English and whether it can make the students more active and cooperative. In addition, its potential to help to understand the point of CT, the basic characteristics and expectations of creative tourists, to acquire the relevant vocabulary in the field without any theoretical preparation prior to the lesson, was also tested.

The participants

Participants of the lesson were first-year students of the Regional Tourism Bachelor's study programme and a teacher, who took part in a one-week course of DT in Italy and works as an Associate Professor at the Department of Tourism. The group of the 20 mixed-gender (15 women and 5 men) and mixed-nationality (4 Slovakian, 15 Hungarian and 1 Ukrainian) students was divided into 4 teams.

The framework of the lesson

The framework of the lesson was developed drawing on the Stanford Model [5]. However, certain modifications were made in order to make the task less demanding with respect to the special conditions of the university environment. Hence, the last phase, i.e. testing, which is normally realized before product launch, was omitted. See below a brief description of each stage.

Stage 1: Icebreaking (15 minutes)

The goal was to make the team members able to work together. The task was to create a paper air fleet, making as many paper aeroplanes as possible in ten minutes, using only one arm and at least three different methods.

Stage 2: Empathizing – understanding tourists' needs (30 minutes)

At first students were asked to visit the webpage of Creative Tourism Network [3] to find out information about CT, the most typical activities, the needs and main characteristics of creative tourists. They were also given some links of online dictionaries in case of having problems with the meaning of the words. Then students were informed about the problem, as follows: *"A group of 5 French tourists (aged 20-30) has come to Nitra to spend some days visiting the most important monuments and sights. However, they also want to take part in creative activities. They can only speak English. The task is to offer/create products of CT in Nitra and its surroundings for non-Slovak tourists"*.

Each group had four members and a student who played the role of a young French tourist. Students within each team were asked to divide themselves into two groups. Two of the students had to search for information on the Internet about the possibilities for CT in Nitra and its surroundings in the given field (cooking, painting, etc.). The two other students had to interview the fifth student, i.e. the role-player, about his/her interests and expectations.

Stage 3: Defining the problem (5 minutes)

The groups summarized the information gathered from the Internet and from the interviewed person by answering the W4 questions on a "W4 Board", for example: Who? (e. g. "a young, French tourist"), What? (e. g. "wants to try out pottery"), Why? ("because he wants to spend his free time in a creative way"), Where? (e. g. "in Nitra or its surroundings").

Stage 4: Ideating (20 minutes)

1. Step: Brainstorming (10 minutes)

The members of the group brainstormed on potential solutions to the given problem. Each student wrote on a paper 3 ideas and then these ideas were rotated among members of the group in order to add any ideas that came into their minds.

2. Step: Prioritising (5 minutes)

The list with the ideas was rotated between the team members again and they had to write a "Q", a "B" or a "D" to each idea, while:

Q – *was the idea that is impactful but quick to create or implement* (e.g. information about the existing creative activities in English language on leaflets in accommodation facilities);

B – the idea unlikely to work, but most breakthrough if it did (e.g. to create a network of entrepreneurs in tourism and hospitality that would offer a variety of creative activities);

D – the idea most likely to delight the people for whom we are designing (e.g. to establish a company/organisation, a creative centre in Nitra that would organize creative activities of different kinds).

3. Step: Deciding on the idea to implement (5 minutes)

Students had 5 minutes to decide on the idea they were going to implement.

Stage 5: Prototyping (10 minutes)

The groups created a prototype of the idea selected in the process of prioritization using their imagination and various materials, (e. g. paper, pencils, plasticine, lego parts, drinking straw, etc.).

Stage 6: Presenting the ideas: 10 min (2 minutes/ group)

One of the students from each team presented the prototyped idea/solution.

3. Conclusion

The main objective of the lesson was to test whether the method of DT as a teaching method can enhance communication in English and whether it can make students more active and cooperative. Based on the observation during the lesson, it might be assumed that the real-life problem-solving approach of the task motivated the students to use English without making them aware of the fact that they were actually completing a communicative task. In addition, in order to reach the goal and to be successful as a team, they were far more cooperative and active than in case of classic role-plays or discussions. What is more, at the end of the lesson some of the students expressed that they enjoyed the lesson and that they would invite more lessons with similar tasks and approach.

Furthermore, it might be said that the method of DT seemed to be appropriate in terms of helping to understand the point of CT, the basic characteristics and the expectations of creative tourists, since the phase of empathising comprised a sort of investigation in the field, searching for information on the Internet using relevant sources and dictionaries. In addition, since they had to work with the basic terminology of CT they had previously found on the given web page, they acquired it naturally and simultaneously with completing the task. It means that the later stages lead to the fixation of the vocabulary that the students discovered on their own in the phase of empathising.

Despite the mentioned pros of applying DT in ESP, it must be outlined that the method works well with students with upper-intermediate or advanced level of English proficiency; however, it might be very demanding and time-consuming with less skilled learners. Similarly, it might turn out very well as a teaching method in case of selected topics, but might not work so well with others.

In summary, based on the experience it may be concluded that DT can be very fascinating and efficient both in terms of enhancing communication and motivation, as well as with regard to the CLIL approach. However, as stressed above, it is advisable that the teacher consider the time limits of the particular stages and the level of difficulty of the topic in question according to the skills and language proficiency of the participants.

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