

"To Put it Simply" – Teaching through and about Simplicity

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Abstract

*In this talk, I will present the outline of an ESP course for students of Information Design drawing upon John Maeda's book *The Laws of Simplicity*, illustrating how a text can be used in a threefold manner, as a source for information and ideas, as an example of language usage, and as the basis for developing and/or selecting teaching materials. The combination seems particularly attractive to future information designers, judging from the anonymous evaluations by students, who described the course as the best and most practically applicable English course they had taken so far.*

*The *Laws of Simplicity* suggests itself for an English course in information design as its author, a graphic designer and computer scientist, proposes ten laws for simplifying complex systems in business, life and product design. Not only is the subject matter of interest to students, it is also the unique correspondence of content and style of presentation that is appealing and also invites further investigation.*

My students were required to read the book as homework and during lessons we discussed the content and the language used. Concerning the tasks I concentrated on oral work, vocabulary and grammar, listening comprehensions as well as autonomous learning by having students do research on certain questions. The exercises methodologically also vary between different teaching and learning styles. The variability in the approach is supposed to contrast with the overall topic of the course.

1. Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to show the difficulties but also viable methods of teaching English as a foreign language to students whose main subject and also centre of interest does first and foremost not lie in the acquirement of a foreign language. In my talk, I will present the outline of an ESP course for students of Information Design drawing upon John Maeda's book *The Laws of Simplicity*, illustrating how a text can be used in a threefold manner, as a source for information and ideas, as an example of language usage, and as the basis for developing and/or selecting teaching materials. In this paper, however, I want to explain the theoretical background and primarily focus on the benefits the methodology I used offers for English as a foreign language learning and teaching since the use of varying tuition methods fosters learner autonomy and motivation through interactivity and multimedia. Using subject-specific authentic texts clearly raised the learners' motivation which was further increased through fun in the activities, curiosity as the subject matter was of interest to students, multimedial learning material and social interaction. The learners were automatically involved in making choices and in modifying and adapting their goals which is typical of CLIL classrooms. This constructivist approach to learning where the learners are offered content dependent possibilities promote learner autonomy and therefore guarantee a better outcome.

2. Combining Content and Language Teaching

"CLIL offers opportunities both within and beyond the regular curriculum to initiate and enrich learning, skill acquisition and development. The exact nature of these opportunities will depend on the extent to which the CLIL context demands an approach which is more content-led, more language-led or both." [1] In my lessons, issues concerning the language are more dominant than those concerning the content as the course itself is being called Professional English and is defined as language class. However, to break open the boundaries of teaching mere language skills which the students are being

taught in their first three semesters at university anyway (and before that at school), I decided to give the course a different direction and rather focus on content issues using the English language as a means of communicating these issues. According to the fundamental principles of CLIL, potential synergies are built and thereby learning is made more effective. I highly value a constructivist approach to learning especially fostering learning methods where learners use both cerebral hemispheres. This kind of interactive and mediated learning requires social interaction between the teacher and the learners.

The term *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)* was introduced by Vygotsky in order to describe an "always challenging learning environment which at the same time is within reach of individual learners on condition that appropriate support, scaffolding and guidance is provided." [2] In the study at hand, this guidance was provided by myself in helping the students to cooperate and collaborate with each other effectively in order to construct their knowledge on their own. Being design students, these learners are by definition creative – creativity is being tested in the admission exam in several ways before they are even admitted to the degree programme – and this creativity is highly discernible in their ways of problem solving and overall thinking which in turn made it a really enriching experience for both sides.

The traditional goals of foreign language teaching such as the learning of grammar and the reading of texts are successfully integrated in the communicative setting of the CLIL classroom. Van Esch and St John describe this approach as follows: "Approaches to foreign language learning have also moved from orientations almost exclusively directed to grammar and translation to more eclectic approaches geared to learning how to communicate in a second or foreign language." [3] The students are motivated to use the English language as a tool for communication where ideally language using and language learning go hand in hand. This motivation can be drawn from the integration of content issues into the language classes where controversial discussion topics led to lively, emotional discussions where the use of the language happened automatically and naturally, therefore inherently improving the oral communication skills immensely. The language is regarded as medium of learning and not entirely as the object of learning, although this aspect is – in contrast to real CLIL classrooms – not completely negligible since the course itself is still being labelled an *English course*.

The enlargement of the lexicon happened partly intuitively by reading the book mentioned above, but partly also through especially designed vocabulary activities, the aim of which conformed to two of the five language dimensions of CLIL as mentioned in the CLIL Compendium, namely "to develop plurilingual interests and attitudes as well as to deepen the awareness of both mother tongue and target language." [4] My students were asked to read two chapters weekly, from one lesson to the next without using a dictionary to look up unfamiliar words. As Maeda's style is – as the title of the book suggests – easy to read and the content was easily comprehensible for my design students, they understood the subject matter well enough to be able to debate on the respective passages each lesson. These fruitful discussions, where I considered myself the "language expert" and them the "design experts" which was a win-win situation for both sides were then followed by a pair work activity to figure out some of the still unknown words, again without using a dictionary. I tried to show them that there are several ways to "guess" these words, be it from the context, from the use in a well-known song or poem, be it from the word stem, the Latin or Greek root, the similarity to the first language or by looking at the meaning and function of certain affixes. These exercises were not only once but repeatedly resulting in a *Eureka!* since the success rate of the guessed vocab obviously took the fear off students to be able to read English specialist literature even without having to carry around a dictionary or at least a laptop or smartphone with the right dictionary app. Again, the decisive factor which made students even *like* a vocabulary exercise was to place it into the *right* context, where *right* is to be understood as comprehensible when it comes to the use of foreign language as well as appealing when it comes to the subject matter to students. As Dalton-Puffer puts it, "if the language learner is exposed to input which is comprehensible either because of the context in which it occurs or through intentional simplification, acquisition will occur, especially if the learning situation is characterized by positive emotions." [5]

Thus, the goal to achieve true integration of language (form) and content (meaning) was achieved by putting an emphasis on language in order to understand, develop and discuss the content. Simultaneously, the students reached a high level of discourse largely imparting, developing and constructing knowledge themselves. I would therefore answer the overall question "*Integrating language and content – from duality to fusion?*" [6], posed by Dalton-Puffer, Nikula and Smit with a

clear Yes. It is germane to CLIL teaching to focus on the interface of the two areas and to put emphasis on the role the language can play in the construction of relevant content.

3. Creating Conversation

In the breezy treatise "The laws of simplicity", graphic designer and computer scientist Maeda proposes ten laws for simplifying complex systems in business and life - but mostly in product design. Maeda's upbeat explanations usefully break down the power of less: fewer features, fewer buttons and fewer distractions - while providing practical strategies for harnessing that power. The first three laws, based on principles of reduction, organization and efficiency, form the foundation for increasingly complex and self-referential concepts like the importance of context and the potential for failure in simplification. Combined with trust and emotional commitment, Maeda demonstrates how complex systems can become downright lovable: Maeda recalls "the Tamagotchi craze of the late 1990s... showed that anyone could fall in love with a small electronic keychain"[7] drawing a corollary to the almighty iPod (an iconic example referred to throughout and well known to students these days). Emphasizing the delicate balance-work involved in simplifying the complex, Maeda manages well to stimulate ideas. although he admits the process isn't easy, and that his ten laws do not necessarily provide all the solutions.

This subject and genre-specific text was the key trigger to create lively discussions among students. One precondition for felicitous conversations, however, is that the students have already reached a fair amount of language competence as reading, understanding and furthermore discussing the subject in question is definitely a certain challenge to language learners. Thus the challenge for the teacher is to find a fair balance between discourse practice and the teaching of lexicogrammar.

However, the idea of using content in language courses is not a new one and the content naturally varies from course to course and from department to department. What most of these language courses have in common, though, is that the learning of the language is integrated into the learning or dealing with relevant content, and vice versa. The interesting content hereby proves to be useful for the language acquisition. And of course, it is the language teacher's task to supply the missing language in case of troubles. Hence, the learners learn "to communicate by communicating, rather than by preparing to do so through practicing the various pieces of language." [8]

Having selected a book written in a simple but witty style with a content easy to understand for future information designers, not too specialized but rather covering a wide range of potential application fields in a designer's everyday life, the reading did not generate resistance as other deliberately chosen texts have done before, but rather made them talk with commitment showing genuine interest. In order to keep the discussion flowing, it is vital not to interrupt students whenever they make a mistake, but rather pay attention to the students themselves and create a feeling of self-esteem amongst them. The focus should thereby clearly lie on fluency, not accuracy. The language is used for communication, for social interaction with the fellow students and the teacher. The goals of language learning are reached automatically since the students internalize what was said as knowledge and competence later. Dalton-Puffer also points out the additional social component by stating that "every kind of spoken interaction is a process where participants collectively take and share meaning from the environment in order to accomplish their everyday social lives." [9]

When using a text which is of substantial interest to the learners, these conversations reflect real-world communication even though the interaction takes place in a classroom, resulting in a nearly natural conversation situation. The activity types should of course be carefully selected and suitable to the given tasks in a relevant way. I varied between whole class interaction, group work, pair work, individual work, student monologue and teacher monologue. This variation allows for having different ways in which students get to use the foreign language as each activity type certainly has its own potential for interaction.

Larsen-Freeman poses the question what the goals of communicative language teaching were and answers it by stating that it was to "enable students to communicate in the target language. To do this, students need knowledge of the linguistic forms, meaning, and functions. They need to know that many different forms can be used to perform a function and also that a single form can often serve a variety of functions. They must be able to choose from among these the most appropriate form, given the social context and the roles of the interlocutors. They must also be able to manage the process of negotiating meaning with their interlocutors." [10] That is why I still embedded lexicogrammar exercises into the lessons, but never neglecting the overall goal, namely that true communication is purposeful

and even in a classroom setting not being made up exclusively of grammar gap-fill activities and the like.

4. Learner Autonomy

In a communicative teaching approach, students are above all *the communicators*. In the ideal case they are more motivated since they will feel they are doing something useful even in compulsory language classes. They can express their individuality by sharing their own beliefs, ideas and opinions and should therefore consider themselves as co-communicators managing their own educational process to a certain extent rather than being mere learners.

With regard to educational processes and roles, individuals should think critically and strategically in approaching learning as well as be self-directed in implementing and sustaining collaborative learning tasks. "Collaboration and open communication are the central processes of an educational transaction in which ideas may become material for critical discourse and the construction of knowledge. Authentic communication and collaboration depend upon mutual respect and personal responsibility. In such an environment, education becomes an uncertain journey where teachers and students together explore new perspectives and paths of understanding." [11]

But what exactly is the role of the teacher respectively the learner in such a constructivist setting? The aim of learner-centeredness is to make the learner aware of the pedagogical goals and content of the lessons. Two types of attractive goals are hereby combined: content goals and learning process goals since not only learning material is transmitted but the learner is also shown what it means to be a learner by allowing him/her to actively take part in the process of learning. According to Nunan, "a learner-centred approach is based on a belief that learners will bring to the learning situation different beliefs and attitudes about the nature of language and language learning and that these beliefs and attitudes need to be taken into consideration in the selection of content and learning experiences." [12] The broad variety of exercises I used in the CLIL classroom mentioned above integrate two important aspects for learners: (1) individualized learning is fostered and (2) the development of a community is promoted between the learners and thus they develop a collaborative sense of community.

With this transfer of responsibility for learning from the teacher to the learner, the role of the teacher has to be redefined as well. It is changing from being a transmitter and presenter of the learning material to a facilitator, knowledge base, resource, helper, coordinator, counsellor and advisor. Herein the role of the teacher is expanded, teachers get additional competences which enhance their role and make it more complex than ever before. Voller adds among other key features of support a teacher should be able to offer the following two which I consider of true importance: "(1) a capacity for motivating learners (encouraging commitment, dispersing uncertainty, helping learners to overcome obstacles, being prepared to enter into a dialogue with learners, avoiding manipulating, objectifying or interfering with, in other words controlling them) and (2) an ability to raise learners' awareness (to 'decondition' them from preconceptions about learner and teacher roles, to help them perceive the utility of, or necessity for, autonomous learning)." [13] Bulif, Hanor and Wulff also maintain that "it is the teachers' responsibility to cultivate and guide presence, reflection, and self-directed learning in educational environments, regardless of whether that setting is an adult academic classroom, a business-training site, or a web based virtual K-12 classroom." [14]

However, the concept of learner autonomy sparks considerable controversy among teachers and linguists inasmuch as they have not yet reached a consensus on what the advantages of learner autonomy are, or rather if there are advantages to gain at all. For Benson, however, autonomy is even a precondition for effective learning; "when learners succeed in developing autonomy, they not only become better language learners but they also develop into more responsible and critical members of the communities in which they live." [15] Autonomy is not – despite many misconceptions – a means to replace the teacher and to bring along isolation, but rather an enrichment as it basically fosters the capacity to take control over one's own learning and thus it provides a way of teaching the learner to take responsibility. Of course, autonomy as a multidimensional capability will take different forms for different learners and even for the same learner in different contexts.

Predominantly, in CLIL classrooms conversational encounters play a major role and thus for learner autonomy a conversational construction seems to be desirable. Especially in language learning learner autonomy takes a pivotal position as we learn our first language autonomously. And yet when learning a second language we tend to follow instructions rather than take control of our cognitive processes or learning management.

Teachers should attempt to promote autonomy by trying to keep the balance between preparation and spontaneity. When it comes to preparation, we have to focus on specially designed exercises. Creating meaningful exercises comprising a certain social aspect since the learner should be motivated to interact with other learners and the teacher undoubtedly demands great commitment of the teacher. These exercises should ideally support the learner in developing better language skills as well as in approaching content issues intelligently, critically questioning them, originally and independently expanding them and reflecting upon them. The exercises have to be organised as learner-centred activities so that they sensitise the learner to an awareness of factors that affect his/her learning, such as the above mentioned vocabulary-guessing task. These exercises can easily and effectively be combined with integrating new media into language teaching. Accordingly, I often used short video clips, mostly talks given by the author John Maeda himself, as a trigger for discussion. The students seemed to enjoy the use of multimedia, valued the authenticity and up-to-datedness of the material I chose and as a result indulged in lively discussions on the previously seen clip. As a matter of course, the teacher finds him/herself in a constant search for proper up-to-date material, variety in tasks and the right methodological alternation between different teaching and learning styles and can not rest on his/her laurels. This commitment is definitely time-consuming for the teacher but it certainly pays off. In my case the whole course seemed to be attractive to future information designers, judging from the anonymous evaluations by the students, who described the course as the best and most practically applicable English course they had taken so far.

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