Local Aspects of Internationalisation of Higher Education

Ľudmila Hurajová [1], Jana Luprichová [2], Gabriela Chmelíková [3]

The Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava, Faculty of Materials Science and Technology in Trnava
Slovakia

Abstract

The process of internationalisation of higher education triggered by globalisation differs in various aspects, such as purpose, goals, human resources, education system, geopolitical situation, etc. At present, there is no standardisation of this process and the internationalisation of higher education can take several forms: student and teacher mobility, international projects, research teams, branch campuses, internationalisation of home (IoH), etc. This paper provides an insight into the concepts of internationalization process, specifically concepts of IoH in different higher education institutions (HEIs). Besides, findings in the field of IoH based on research and experts' experience are presented. The findings indicate that local context matters and should be considered before starting, developing, and fostering the process of IoH. This paper illustrates the situation in HEIs in eastern Europe and selected west Balkan countries regarding IoH, and how interdisciplinary cooperation of teachers might accelerate the IoH process. Local aspects of IoH in the context of the Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava, particularly at the Faculty of Materials Science and Technology in Trnava are introduced and the results of applying CLIL in enhancing IoH are described. The roles of English and ESP teachers within the IoH process are debated. Finally, as far as IoH is concerned, the findings and results are discussed with some recommendations for future research and an effective IoH process in HEIs.

Keywords: *Internationalisation of Higher Education, CLIL, ESP, interdisciplinary cooperation, English Education Environment, Internationalisation of Home*

Introduction

The issue of internationalisation of higher education has been a topic discussed among researchers for decades. Globalisation, the opening of the global labour market, and the solution of global problems in environmental or other areas trigger the pressure on the prototype of the university graduate, which led to the process of internationalisation of higher education in several dimensions. The level of mobility of university students and teachers is increasing worldwide, international projects and teams have been formed, university campuses have been built abroad, especially by American and English universities, and joint or dual study programmes have been created. Internationalisation of higher education in many cases means developing an English Education Environment (EEE) to stay open for the other scholars, students, and teachers. This trend affects not only students and teachers but also the administrative staff of universities, who are pressured to increase their competence in English or other foreign languages. The same pressure is exerted on the management of universities. In the literature, we have come across the terms Internationalisation of Home (IoH) more often in terms of the Internationalisation at Home (IaH) – which deals with the forms of internationalisation process inside a higher education institution.

1. Internationalization at Home (IaH)

Beelen and Jones [1] deal with the definition of the term IaH, providing a range of IaH concepts and understandings. They see the importance of IaH in providing an enriched and attractive environment not only for incoming mobility students but also for domestic students of Higher Education Institutions (HEI). On the other hand, they see some pitfalls in the misunderstanding of the IaH concepts and they define IaH as "*the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments". (year, p.?)*

Witt and Leask [2] emphasise the need to involve all students in the international education environment and they state that there is no standard model of the internationalisation for all HEIs. Local contexts, discipline and other aspects must be considered.

1.1 IaH in Slovakia

The process of the internationalisation of higher education, accelerated by the Bologna Process, has been developed in HEIs across Europe for several decades. EU state political representations gradually adopted national strategic programmes to guide their HEIs on how to start and set up the process of the internationalisation within Higher Education. Slovakia has adopted such a document only recently as one of the last, if not the last, EU countries. In the given document (National Strategy of Internationalisation of schools till 2030), the issue of the internationalisation at home is introduced based on the definition of Beelen and Jones, stated in this article. The internationalisation is not perceived as a goal but as a way to improve the quality of Higher Education. The document has mentioned activities that helped accelerate the process of the internationalisation of higher education in the past, but they have been only individual and isolated initiatives of individual institutions. The goal of the strategy is to set a framework with relevant aims for the process of the internationalisation of higher education so that it can be implemented in all higher education institutions in Slovakia. Additionally, to other specific goals, the document also has commented on the support for the development of study programmes in foreign languages, especially joint programmes with institutions abroad. One of the aims is to increase the level of promotion of studying in Slovakia and provide information for potential foreign students at least in English or other foreign languages. Activities and programmes using digital and information technologies more intensively in the framework of the internationalisation and building the so-called "Collaborative Online International Learning" will be supported as well.

1.2 IaH at STU MTF

The internationalisation process at the Slovak University of Technology, Faculty of Materials and Technology, where the authors of this article work, has included mainly the mobility of students and teachers and international research or pedagogical projects. The level of students' interest in studying abroad increased slightly, but the interest of foreign students to study at the Faculty stagnated. The process of the internationalisation of the curriculum has been done sketchily, some subjects were converted and offered to students in English, but there was very low interest shown from domestic students, and foreign mobility students mainly studied via individual consultations and guidance by the teachers of the subjects they applied for. The Internationalisation at Home was the subject of interest for ESP experts who initiated several research projects with the aim of determining the readiness of students and teachers for building the English Education Environment.

1.3 Research projects at STU MTF

ESP teachers with some expertise in CLIL, after gaining experience from an international project in the ERASMUS+ Scheme, considered the CLIL approach to be a suitable form for setting up an EEE in a local context with the aim of accelerating IaH. The first institutional project (**INTER MTF I**) was focused on the readiness of disciplinary teachers for setting an EEE from both linguistics and didactics perspectives. In the second follow-up project (**INTER MTF II**), they focused on students, their readiness for an educational environment in the English language and their attitudes to studying selected subjects in the English language. The findings from the institutional projects were the basis for the international project **CLIL teachers – CLIL HET** (Visegrad+), in which six project partners, among other things, prepared a didactic material for disciplinary teachers with the aim to support them in using the CLIL approach when setting up an EEE.

1.4 Findings

The first institutional project **INTER MTF I** was carried out in 2017-2018. To find out the linguistic readiness of teachers and their attitudes towards establishing an EEE within their discipline subjects, two methods were used: a questionnaire and the electronic standardised language diagnostic test – CEPT Reading and Listening of Cambridge. One hundred respondents took part in the survey, most of whom were working on a permanent employment contract at the given time, which means that mainly key employees of the Faculty participated in the questionnaire. Sixty-eight% of the respondents declared their willingness to teach their subjects in English, even though most of them had no experience in teaching in English either at home or abroad. In this research project, we also focused on the knowledge or experience of teachers with the CLIL approach, which we found as a suitable form for setting up an EEE in HEIs, where non-English speaking people prevail. More than 90% stated no experience or knowledge in CLIL. The questionnaire respondents also stated their subjective perception of their language competences and their readiness for teaching in the English language. They felt to be the strongest in their professional terminology register and the least skilled in using grammar and communicating with students in the English language. Only 54 participants of the questionnaire took part in the language diagnostic test. The data we obtained cannot be generalised, but they indicate the situation in the language readiness of disciplinary teachers for setting an English Education Environment. In terms of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

(CEFR), 18 disciplinary teachers reached level C1 and above and nine reached level B2, which could be sufficient for CLIL lessons preparation of. From the given data, we can only assume that from a linguistic perspective, approximately 25% of the Faculty's teachers in the given period were prepared to teach in English, and most of them would be willing to set up an EEE. The disciplinary teachers declared a lack of didactic competence so this should be fostered if considering the setting of an EEE. Students – one of the main stakeholders within Higher Education were asked to be involved in the next institutional project **INTER MTF II** conducted in 2019-2020. We investigated the students' language readiness and attitudes towards the teaching of discipline subjects in English. Here, 365 students participated in the questionnaire survey. Only 304 students completed the language non-standardised test (by OXFORD). After analysing the pseudomised data of the participants, a data set of 251 students, who participated in both the questionnaire and the test, was generated. In the questionnaire, we asked students not only about their attitudes towards the teaching of discipline subjects in English but also about the form of such an educational environment. As far as the level of English competence was concerned, the majority of students reached the A2/B1 level in language testing (30.3%/31.3%),18.8% of students achieved level B2 and only 8.2% of students demonstrated level C1. We selected several findings from the students' attitudes towards learning discipline subjects in English expressed in the questionnaire:

- Students with the level of language competence B1 and above more positively inclined to study discipline subjects in English,
- The achieved level of language competence does not affect the students' preferences, they prefer selected lectures or partial teaching in English (regularly 20-30 minutes in a given subject), and obtaining more credits for such a subject than the same one taught in Slovak,
- Students with levels B1 and B2 would welcome the evaluation of the student's performance in English (subjects/courses taught in English),
- Students across the levels of language competence preferred to study in English particularly the subjects related to their main study focus.

The preference of students to study discipline subjects/courses in English only partially, confirmed our assumption that CLIL would be a suitable approach when establishing and setting up EEE in Higher Education to foster IaH. However, students expressed the need for language support in case of studying a professional subject in English. They would prefer a supportive language programme in an online environment, or an intensive language training (min. 120 hours) before starting to study the subjects in question in English.

The initiation of the international project in the Visegrad+ Scheme – **CLIL-HET** – was based on the findings of the above-mentioned INTER MTF I and II projects. The goal of the international cooperation was to create a digital platform for two professional communities of teachers in Higher Education, ESP/CLIL experts and disciplinary teachers, to connect them for deeper cooperation in setting up an EEE in their HEIs. The results of the project as well as the research part of the project are part of the portal at www.clil-het.eu. The local contexts of the HEIs in the project partner schools in Hungary, Serbia, and Poland were very similar in terms of teacher and student readiness for an EEE. The situation was different only in Albania, as the HEI is a private educational institution, and the education language is English. In other countries, both linguistic and didactic readiness of disciplinary teachers to establish and lead an EEE, seemed to be the challenge The project findings indicate that the interdisciplinary cooperation between ESP/CLIL and disciplinary teachers is the way to an effective set of an EEE within disciplinary subjects/courses and thereby enhance IaH.

2. Roles of teachers in IaH context

As mentioned in Chapter one of this paper, the term IaH arose in Europe in the late 1990s because of the insufficient internationalisation of Higher Education that focused predominantly on students and staff mobility, however, with minimum collaboration of particular universities. The first steps with the intention to change the direction of the European Higher Education were made at the Ministerial Conference in 2007 in London where Ministers adopted the strategy "The European Higher Education Area in a Global Setting". It introduced some priorities, including intensifying policy dialogue, strengthening cooperation based on partnership, promoting European Higher Education to enhance its worldwide attractiveness and competitiveness, as well as furthering the recognition of qualifications [5]. Later on, the European Commission launched the strategy called "The European Higher Education in the world" in 2013 whose aim was to increase not only the mobility of students and staff but also increase the cooperation of the EU countries themselves and EU and non-EU countries. The strategy involved the following key areas – international student and staff mobility; the internationalisation and improvement of curricula and digital learning; and strategic cooperation, partnerships, and capacity building. These categories should not be seen as isolated but as integrated elements of a

comprehensive strategy" [6]. Meeting these goals requires a change in the perception of the role of teachers themselves in Higher Education and, at the same time, the teachers in the IaH context. Generally, the academic staff at universities is represented by subject or disciplinary teachers whose role is to teach in the fields they are experts in. Secondly, in non-philological universities, language support for students is covered by so-called ESP teachers. The key role of all staff and stakeholders in the future should lead to the development of such IaH programmes that are more student- and staff-centred, thus involving them more in the process as beneficiaries and key the drivers of a change. Launching this process should be also preceded by internal audits examining how staff and students perceive and make sense of the IaH policies, strategies, and initiatives at their home universities. Subsequently, all interested parties can contribute to the implementation of an intercultural dialogue in HEIs, which entails for example "preparation/training for staff in working in international teams", "programmes of integration of international students and staff AND home students", "engagement with the wider society" [7].

2.1 Roles of ESP teachers in IaH

The concept of Internationalisation at Home is an important pillar in the internationalisation strategy, as not all stakeholders have the opportunity to study, work, teach, or execute research abroad. IaH prepares an international environment not only for students and teachers, but also for the administrative staff, to build a real international campus. Once the university admits this process, the first step should be initiated by ESP teachers. ESP teachers at HEIs are usually English teachers with university diplomas covering the content from specific disciplines in their classes in the English language but, on the other hand, they usually do not have a sufficient degree of knowledge in any subject taught by disciplinary teachers. The package of knowledge that students acquire in ESP lessons also contributes to a better orientation within exchange programmes at foreign universities where the students face new experience, and at the same time, prepare their students to meet the high requirements of the current international global job market [8]. So, the ESP teachers are the right employees who have the adequate knowledge about the internationalisation process. As IaH deals with aspects of internationalisation in a home university, ESP teachers and other stakeholders can start implementing some activities that involve the development of international curricula and programmes, modification of the teaching and learning process, staff development and training, and enhancement of extra-curricular provision [9].

As stated above, the authors have recently successfully finished the Visegrad+ project whose aim was to develop a professional platform to enhance the internationalisation process in HEIs in V4 and Western Balkan countries. In the stated region, it was the pioneer project in the field. The project aimed at grouping ESP and CLIL experts to prepare an online platform for networking within the involved countries to support the disciplinary teachers (DTs) working in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to set up an English Education Environment. The project partners have decided to pilot the CLIL approach to education in their HEIs. As the CLIL application in disciplinary courses requires close cooperation with disciplinary teachers in HEIs, and as already mentioned ESP/CLIL experts cannot cover professional fields as deeply as disciplinary teachers can, DTs' cooperation in the preparation of the courses was very significant [4].

2.2 Roles of disciplinary teachers in IaH

Subject or disciplinary teachers at universities are experts in specific fields, who predominantly teach in their mother tongues, as well as they design, prepare and develop courses, modules and teaching materials. Moreover, they undertake individual and collaborative research projects that are published in peer-reviewed journals and actively contribute to the institution's research profile, to professional conferences and seminars in their fields of expertise, being able to operate abroad, too. This means, the disciplinary teachers with a good command of the foreign language have experience with the IaH at universities abroad and are ready to implement its strategies in their home universities. It also highlights Beelen and Leask that Internationalisation at Home is a set of instruments and activities 'at home' that aim at developing international and intercultural competencies in all students. Just as with the internationalisation of the curriculum in general, IaH is specific to the context of a discipline and, within that, to a programme of study in each university [10].

The idea of IaH was also reflected in the project mentioned above. The role of disciplinary teachers, who already had some experience with the English Education Environment, together with CLIL and ESP experts was to prepare their lessons, as a whole or partially, in the English language, while applying the principles of CLIL methodology. Obviously, it was preceded by two phases – in the first phase of the Project, the Project partners compiled a Didactic Material for DTs based on the principles of CLIL methodology. In addition, a linguistic test was prepared for DTs to assess their language level. During the second phase of the Project, DTs who taught their courses completely or partially in

English, received tutoring from the ESP teachers involved in the Project, and discussed the lesson plans prepared by the DTs. Then, video recordings were made of the classes taught by the DTs, while being observed by ESP teachers. An integral part of the Project was also the design of an online platform including three important parts: the Community Corner, the Didactic Corner and the Research Corner. The main goal of the Community Corner was to build professional communities of CLIL and ESP experts and DTs around Europe, to provide a platform to contact each other and share experience and best practices related to setting up an English Educational Environment at home universities.

Conclusion

The individual initiative of ESP/CLIL experts in the local context of a Slovak university resulted in three projects with the aim of finding out the most effective way of setting up an EEE to support the IaH process. We assumed, and are still convinced, that the CLIL approach is the right choice when setting up partial teaching of discipline subjects in English. In our context, we identified several areas that needed support. A) Linguistic programmes for students and also for disciplinary teachers to develop their level of language competence, B) Didactic programmes for disciplinary teachers to foster their skills for establishing an EEE within their subjects. C) Reward system for teachers to support them in setting an EEE. D) Assessment system for students' performance within the EEE. Beelen and Jones [1] oppose that "*simply providing a program in English is insufficient for it to be considered an internationalized curriculum*" and suggested some ways how to internationalise the curriculum for example by "*comparative international literature, guest lectures by speakers from local cultural groups or international companies, guest lecturers of international partner universities etc.*" We agree with them, however, we think we should start with establishing an EEE within discipline subjects/courses first to be able to enrich such an environment with the instrument proposed. Wilkinson and Gabriels [3] raised some questions about "*Englishization*" and its impact on cultural identity, the academic and scientific world, and how EMI programmes have changed the environment of academia. It seems that global and local contexts and their requirements must go hand in hand to provide a rich environment for students so that they can become professionals with their own cultural identity and competences for international teamwork to solve global tasks. Without deep interdisciplinary cooperation within academia, this mission is not possible.

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