



The borrowed knowledge of LSP teachers in French higher education

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Abstract

In the field of educational studies, little attention has been paid to the analysis of knowledge formation enabling teachers to carry out their pedagogical work. Indeed, knowledge formation is associated with degree contents chosen as a specialty, which then lays at the basis of course content and teachers' professional competence. However, when it comes to languages for specific purposes (or LSPs), the sources and methods of knowledge formation must also encompass the topics that normally accompany the teaching of language skills. Most LSP teachers are not educated in scientific, legal or otherwise professional knowledge they use as subject matters in their language classes and 'borrow' from experts in those fields. The present contribution aims to trace the origins of such a knowledge, define it and assess how it consolidates into a crucial aspect of teacher development in LSP teaching in higher education, based on an ongoing research project involving LSP in a French university. Taking into account the dearth of academic literature around the issue of teachers' knowledge formation, some exploratory and qualitative inquiries were carried out within the University of Toulouse, involving different LSP areas, based on group discussion and discourse analysis. The results should serve as the basis for a more thorough investigation at regional or national level involving more quantitative tools. One of the expected outcomes of this research is also to show that it may somehow collide with professional attitudes and received knowledge about the legitimacy that goes along with teaching in higher education and how it may question teachers' relation with academic knowledge.

Keywords : *borrowed knowledge – teaching skills- higher education- France- languages for specific purposes – legitimacy- professional representations*

1. Introduction

In the context of growing academic internationalisation of study paths, professional outcomes as well as student employability have become key objectives for most European universities, thus sparking off the development of English courses for specific purposes to all categories of degrees, masters and doctorates. Those classes are generally taught by qualified teachers who rarely master the disciplines or skills their language classes relate to. When it comes to teacher development, most research papers are devoted to the enhancement of their pedagogical skills, but not so much to the complex relationship they entertain with the core knowledge of their course content. As we know, languages cannot be separated from real life reference, and this complex connection is studied in the field of both continental and analytical philosophy. In the context of ESP teaching, it has been observed that there is an imbalance between the teacher's linguistic knowledge and the students' content knowledge, as they are already specialised in a particular field, be it science, law or commerce, for instance [2]. In such case, there can be some collaboration between teacher and students if communication skills are better trained and developed in the class. However this analysis does not deal with the formation of the teacher's knowledge of the specialised content of his ESP course. This will be done in Part One of the present contribution, with the presentation of two key concepts forming the construct of "teacher literacy", i.e. the "borrowed knowledge" and its corollary, the "transactional praxeology". Together with the traditional academic status of teachers and lecturers as knowledge holders,



those concepts participate in the shaping of the professional identity of higher education ESP teachers and may explain the nature of their relationship with 'specialised' knowledge. Part Two will then discuss those definitions based on the elements of a study carried out at the University of Toulouse in 2021 among ESP teachers concerning their attitude towards teaching content they did not master and their preferred pedagogical strategies and relationship with their colleagues in other departments and academic fields.

2. ESP teachers' literacy skills

Literacy is a wide, "elastic" field of research [6] that include different actors and skills, such as learning and teaching skills and many other areas of research, as well as a great variety of approaches. In the case of ESP teachers, they possess professional skills and academic skills in the English language and various cultural studies, which form the bulk of their education, but rarely in the academic or professional content they base their language course on, something that necessitates further discussion of its theoretical foundation.

2.1 The concept of "borrowed knowledge"

Following Chevallard [1], this partial mastery of a subject-matter may be referred to as "borrowed" and forever "in progress". It develops in the context of implicit or explicit collaboration between experts from various fields who accept relying on other specialists' expertise in terms of knowledge and skills. It implies being aware of the existence of boundaries between the disciplines involved, based on the assumption that any established knowledge can be used by an outsider from that field but reduced to its basic or more general elements, an aspect called "beneficial alterity". It also implies that this layman's version of a hitherto academic or professional knowledge can and should be shared in the context of teaching; thus it constitutes an instrumental, teaching-based source of pedagogical content for educational purposes used by a language teacher [4]. Furthermore, it means that any teacher in a higher education context may not be considered as an expert in the course content, a position which may be at odds with the current academic standards. This may reflect negatively on ESP teachers, as they may feel out of place in an institutional environment dominated by specialists in other areas, a phenomenon described as "threatening alterity" by Chevallard. Besides, that type of knowledge always changes with time and experience [3]. Generally speaking the "borrowed knowledge" can be detected whenever some sort of educational process takes place, that is, whenever somebody undertakes to teach anything to another person. It is thus always associated with a specific praxeology enabling ESP teachers to incorporate that knowledge into their course arrangements.

2.2 The "transactional praxeology" of ESP teachers

This phrase, borrowed from Chevallard's seminal article, aims to describe how ESP teachers leave their comfort zone, select their sources and adapt them to their classroom context based on their students' language skills according to the CEFR, which should prevail over content and theme. In that regard it is akin to CLIL approaches, but its added value lies in the possibility for ESP teachers to adopt some teaching techniques borrowed from the specialist field as it is taught in the anglophone sphere, thus providing for an insight into the educational culture of areas other than languages, and incorporating parts of ESP teachers' initial academic knowledge into the actual teaching process [4]. The next step aims to describe how those teachers envisage the formation of their "borrowed knowledge", "transactional praxeology" as well as the professional representations attached to their teaching missions in higher education.

3. The preliminary survey

It was conducted in 2021 among ESP teachers at the University of Toulouse Capitole, which teaches law, economics and business governance and communication. A sample of six



teachers agreed to form an informal group where the issues of knowledge formation, didactic approaches as well as professional identity and the place of ESP teachers in a broader, interdisciplinary context were discussed.

3.1 The sample

The group involved in the discussion of the above-mentioned points comprised Four women and two men, all experienced in ESP, who had been teaching the subject for five to over ten years. The topics included law, economics, business organisation. The following synthesis accounts for a three-hour recorded discussion. For the sake of clarity and concision, it has been broken down into the following items.

3.2 Forming one's borrowed knowledge

All participants acknowledge that they base their approach to ESP on the professional and academic needs of their students, for which they consult all relevant administrative documents. Regarding their own grasp of the subject matter, which they feel is an essential starting point, they resort to generalist articles online, encyclopedias, press articles or audio/video sources that can be understood by B1 level students. Most stress the importance of the material constraints of teaching hours and students' language skills to devise a course. All participants agree that it takes a minimum of three years to struggle less with the topic. It was also noticed that teacher-students interactions fuel the learning process for ESP teachers, who feel more like students who can check their own progress.

3.2 Didactic strategies

Language issues are specifically dealt with in the form of exercises borrowing from existing class material, which means that priority is given to content first. At least half of the participants do not resort to manuals used in an anglophone context, like law, because they initially concern secondary school students, but others do not see it as an obstacle. It all depends on the students' degree of specialisation. But all agree that language exercises are useful whenever linguistic proficiency is low or average. Above B2, they can be replaced by project-based learning, or other language-based activities necessitating the learning of a specific methodology, like debating.

3.3 Academic status and legitimacy

Although ESP courses are interdisciplinary in essence, there is little to no collaboration with specialist teachers. However, they get help from other language teachers, which means that the disciplinary barrier plays a part in their quest for knowledge and does not foster otherwise fruitful exchanges among academics. What was also stressed is the feeling, among ESP teachers, of not conforming with the usual professional representations of the word of academia, since they are aware of the incomplete nature of their borrowed knowledge in an environment where mastery of a discipline is crucial and is part and parcel of an academic's professional identity. The dominant feeling among participants is their perceived lack of legitimacy as they deal with themes and topics they do not master, as a rule. ESP teachers are thus general practitioners with specialised skills in language and culture. Many, as researchers, deal with very different fields of study, which may place them in a schizophrenic position whereby their research interests are not really considered, and their hybrid teaching status not fully recognised by their peers in other disciplines.

4. Conclusion

Even though ESP is a well-established line of teaching in French higher education, the issue of legitimacy is still a thorny one, and one that bears a brunt of ESP teachers' professional



development. However, the situation is by no means fixed, as the promotion of interdisciplinary courses is greatly encouraged by national and transnational institutions like the European Commission. As research evolves in that direction, so does teaching in higher education. This may well be a golden opportunity for ESP teachers as they could use their academic talents and teaching experience to fully embrace their diverse borrowed knowledge to make a difference for students.

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