

Title of example of practice: The challenge of CLIL in a French “School of Economics”

Author

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Institution and initiating department/faculty

(i.e. where example of practice takes/took place):

Toulouse School of Economics, University of Toulouse 1 Social Sciences
<http://www.tse-fr.eu/index.php?lang=en>

Departments/faculties in which initiative implemented/to be implemented:

Toulouse School of Economics (TSE), whose programme includes the selective “feeder” senior year of a Bachelor’s degree in Economics (in French), a two-year Master’s degree programme entirely in English, with the possibility of undertaking doctoral studies, also in English.

Abstract

(QA question: What are/were you trying to do?)

TSE is a renowned School of Economics, ranking among the very top European programmes. The aim of this case study was to gain further insight into the level of institutional sensitivity to language issues in the local CLIL context, and to see to what extent the work carried out in LANQUA might serve to raise awareness of what can be accomplished with a truly dual-focus approach to CLIL.

Background – contextual issues giving rise to the initiative

(QA questions: Why are/were you trying to do it? / What are/were the aims and objectives?)

While recent legislation has seen French higher education moving toward local autonomy, the system remains strongly centralised and two-tiered. On the one hand, there is a highly selective network of professionally oriented engineering and business schools, little given to research; on the other hand, nearly a hundred universities accept all high-school leavers who have obtained the national Baccalauréat exam (currently about 65% of the 17 to 19-year-old age group). The implementation of the Bologna process has meant increased pressure for universities with excellent track records in research to make their mark on the competitive international scene, introducing the notion of elitist schools in a theoretically egalitarian republican context with no selection other than the Baccalauréat and minimal tuition fees (generally 150-300€).

Striving for international excellence within this context of limited means, Economists at the University of Toulouse 1 struck out from the common lot in the 1990’s. Partnerships were first established with corporations, and the doctoral programme began to be taught in English in 1996 — a rare exception at the time. As of 2004, a certain number of first and second year Master’s level courses were then offered in English to create a “pool” of doctoral candidates. In 2007, the elitist Toulouse School of

Economics officially opened its doors, at the same time as the Ministry of Education allowed TSE, one of 13 institutions, to set up a private foundation to secure long-term financing.

Description of activity or initiative

(QA question: How is/was the activity/initiative implemented?)

Students can enter (and be excluded from!) TSE at different levels, beginning with the senior year of the Bachelor's in Economics. Applicants from the second year of Bachelor's programmes (French or foreign) are selected on overall academic excellence, including in English. No criterion level of English is set, however, since the TSE Bachelor's programme is taught entirely in French. The English language component consists of an obligatory semester module of 20 hours of LSP (Economic English), for a minimal number of credits. Traditionally, there has been no collaboration between language teachers and content specialists; the language teachers do, however, base their course on the economic press and on oral presentations.

The Master's (and doctoral) levels of TSE, though, are taught entirely in English. As for entry on the Bachelor's level, no specific language requirements are specified for first year MSc. Entry into second year MSc asks for self-assessment ("very good, average, poor") of writing, reading and speaking ability, and specifies that applicants must be "comfortable" with receptive skills (http://www.tse-fr.eu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=29&Itemid=183&lang=en). Application forms, nonetheless, do refer to the possibility of "additional courses in English". Foreign students are told they must have the equivalent of 100/120 on the TOEFL¹.

Thirty hours of Economic English (and of French for foreigners) are offered on an optional basis (no credits) in an intensive module at the beginning of the first year of the MSc programme. No other dedicated language support is provided for students or for staff. Content teachers do, however, work on a one-to-one basis with students on papers and dissertations in English, taking language into account, and practice job interviews with doctoral students. The new University language resource centre also offers possibility for independent work (for both students, teachers and administrative staff), but few people connected with TSE have thus far registered.

Courses are taught primarily by French or foreign professors, the great majority of whom have international careers and work solely in English. The one native English speaker on staff is seen to "have an advantage", and to be "too good" — challenging for some students to follow linguistically and pedagogically. Similarly, the student body numbers few native-language English speakers or students from northern Europe, and is composed primarily of non-French speakers, mainly from Asia, Russia and Latin America. English is definitely the *lingua franca*.

Evaluative comments

(QA questions: What are/were the outcomes? What is/was the impact? Is/was the activity/ initiative successful? How do you know whether or not it works/worked?)

From a genuine CLIL perspective there is thus only limited formal concern expressed for language, academic communication or intercultural competences, either for students or for teaching staff. The general impression seems to be that everyone is coping sufficiently well, even though there are indications that some teachers' English language communication skills are not optimal, and that students' difficulties with written communication hinder their work from being readily accepted by respected journals. Questions of pedagogical methodology regarding, for example, appropriate use of oral communication skills and ways to avoid plagiarism are raised by some teachers, but not on any widespread basis.

Systematic institutional evaluations are not common practice in France, making it difficult to confirm —

¹ The most recent version (2009) of the official brochure *Programs taught in English* (<http://www.campusfrance.org>), published by CampusFrance representing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Higher Education and Research, specifies 250/300 on the computer version of the TOEFL, a format no longer administered.

or not— such impressions. However, the idea of a questionnaire survey on language difficulties among students was welcomed by one of the TSE directors. It was also suggested that work on English writing, speaking and presentation skills would be useful on undergraduate and first year Master levels, but that second year MSc was already too late for improvement to take place. In any case, although university statistics are not available to document the claim², the employment record of TSE graduates is exemplary. Whether, over time, the relative lack of sensitivity to language issues in CLIL will negatively affect the institutional image thus remains to be seen.

Advice to others

In a context such as this one, raising institutional language awareness is foremost, followed by encouraging political commitment to implement the dual focus known to characterise a quality CLIL environment. Where such top-down consciousness on the part of university management or discipline specialists is either absent or is recognised but “denied”, problems of student employment, international publication or institutional image may over time influence decision-makers. Attitude surveys and institutional or external follow-up of such questions — including comparison to European quality benchmarks— could play a role on this level. From a bottom-up perspective, and contingent on interpersonal relations between discipline and language teachers, the latter can also try to establish connections with the former, and if the context makes it possible, engage in action-research projects to methodologically bring language issues to light.

Reflection/any other comments

QA question: Is/was that the best way to do it? Why/why not? What improvements or adjustments are needed?

While TSE management appear to be satisfied with student performance and with exemplary employment records for graduates, it may well be that the price students pay to gain working competence in English language and communication skills is too high. What barriers and obstacles are there in this context to explain why the scientific and strategic rigour applied to teaching and learning the discipline of Economics does not transfer to teaching and learning the discipline of English?

On a local level —the senior year of Bachelor-level TSE as well as the earlier “feeder” years of other Bachelor’s programmes—, reinforcing institutional language support and integrating it in a collaborative manner into the disciplinary logic of undergraduate studies depends on the level of language awareness and on local politics. Changing the former means seeing the need to adapt as something vital; influencing the latter is, for the reasons given below, an on-going issue, particularly difficult in the present French context of divisive major national educational reforms.

On a wider, national level, the barriers and obstacles to systematic institutional analysis of the CLIL context may be seen to be rooted in French history and culture. Encouraging change on such levels will require long-term advocacy on the part of language professionals.

- Education is traditionally geared to theory rather than to practice, and language for students of other disciplines (economics, law, medicine, etc.) is generally seen as a means to an end and not an end in itself. Similarly, language teacher training remains content-oriented (literature, civilisation), with little attention willingly paid to “practical” issues of pedagogy and didactics, particularly in the context of teaching to non-language specialist students.
- Consequently, the status of language teaching and learning for specialists of other disciplines is very low, and research in applied linguistics is little recognized or valued. In a society where academic rank and “noblesse” are very strong³, collaboration on an equal footing is difficult between discipline teachers and language specialists.
- In a country conscious of defending its national language against the hegemony of English as a *lingua franca*, the concept of “foreign language policy” in higher education is vague, and

² Such follow-up of students is not generalised in France, but is now being asked for by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research.

³ Cf. Ph. d'Iribarne, 2006. *L'Etrangeté française*. Seuil: Paris.

rarely translates concretely into integrated language and disciplinary practice.

- CLIL is seen as an economy of scale in a country where OECD figures have underlined the low level of government financing of higher education⁴ compared to other developed countries.
- The lack of tradition for systematic institutional internal and external analysis. While a new system of national assessment is being put into place at the time of writing (2009), its complexity and “top-down” spirit do not argue in favour of significant change, or even accrued language awareness, in the national or local CLIL context.

⁴ Data reported in *Le Monde* July 30 and October 3, 2005 and August 17, 2006.