

## CHALLENGES OF TEACHING ENGLISH FOR THE TRAVEL AGENT HIGHER VOCATIONAL PROGRAM

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The aim of this article is to highlight the problems the author faced teaching English for specific academic purposes at the higher vocational level at a Swedish vocational college. Heterogeneity, grade inflation, lack of academic freedom and a general lack of discipline in Swedish educational institutions are factors which have played an important role in the poor academic performance of Sweden in the last PISA study conducted by the OECD.

*Keywords: vocational education, academic freedom, curricular design, English for specific academic purposes.*

On February 26, 2009, the Swedish Parliament approved the decision to start higher vocational educational programs in the country. These programs would differ from university academic programs in several ways: First, they would depend on the needs of the labor market; second, their curricular content would be determined by the relevance of the subjects for potential employers, and third, students would be able to influence the curricular content of the study programs. In contrast to academic study programs, which are often unrelated to the needs of the labor market and are much more related to scientific research and the arts, the aim of the new higher vocational programs would be "...to cover Sweden's need for qualified labor" [1].

In 2013, the Travel Education Centre of Stockholm started a program called "Incoming Tourism Agent." The aim of this program was to prepare tour guides and tour operators to meet the demands of the Stockholm Visitors Board, which had launched a marketing initiative together with other cities on the Baltic seaside in order to foster tourism in the area.

### **Relevance of the Travel Agent Higher Vocational Program**

The Incoming Tourism Agent program was created to meet the needs of a growing hospitality industry in the Stockholm region. Besides providing the students with regional history and geography courses, special emphasis would be given to English in general and Business English

in particular. Furthermore, other courses were to be given in English, namely, Legal English for Contracts and basic Hospitality Law.

The program, like most higher vocational programs in Sweden, has a duration of two years, in which theory courses are combined with two internships, one in Sweden and the other one abroad. Due to the fact that Swedish is a minority language and that the great majority of the visitors coming to Stockholm do not speak Swedish, it is of utmost importance that the incoming tourism agents master the English language, and it is highly desirable for them to have knowledge of other languages as well. Good English skills also prepare the students for their internship abroad.

According to the head teacher of the program, the Stockholm Visitor Board had informed her that it had received a number of complaints from foreign tourists that the English level of the Swedish guides was poor, and that it needed to improve if the city of Stockholm was to attain its marketing goals. The head teacher told the author, who was going to teach the Business English, Legal English and basic Hospitality Law courses that teaching English at an advanced level was of great importance. The author decided to use an advanced English book for Business and Economics students which she had used for many years when she taught business English to higher vocational tourism students in Germany [2]. The level of the book was quite high (B2, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). The instructor had used

the book in Germany several years with excellent results. Furthermore, this book would prepare the students for the Legal English and the Hospitality Law courses, which would be given totally in English. The instructor planned to use other complementary materials like articles about macroeconomics and movies for the three courses. Furthermore, for personal reasons, and using her academic freedom as she had always done in Germany, she would add subjects like business ethics, corporate social responsibility, sustainability social justice and animal rights to the course.

### **Characteristics of the Vocational Curriculum in General and of the Incoming Tourism Agent Program in Particular**

In contrast to the academic curricula of universities, *“the ultimate success of a vocational (...) curriculum is not measured merely through student educational achievement but through the results of that achievement- results that take the form of performance in the work world [3].* Put plainly, the goals of the vocational curricula are purely utilitarian: to provide the student with a range of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values which contribute to his or her future employability. The relevance of the vocational curriculum is directly determined by the needs of the labor market, and therefore cooperation between higher vocational education providers and employers is of great importance when determining curriculum and course content. In contrast to academic curricula, vocational curricula are dynamic and change according to the needs of the labor market. They are sensitive not only to new technological developments, but also to population trends like immigration, emigration, unemployment and employment in specific sectors of the economy among other variables. Furthermore, they are also subjected to politics: Since the Swedish youth unemployment rate of 21.2 % is relatively high [4], one of the main goals of the Swedish government is to provide a possibility of employment for unskilled youth and other groups who would otherwise not participate in the labor market through the higher vocational programs and the internships, which count as work experience.

According to the American Society for Training and Development, skills that employers want their workforce to have are organized into a hierarchy of seven skill groups [5]. These are:

Organizational/Effectiveness/Leadership

Interpersonal/Negotiation/Teamwork  
Self-Esteem/Goal-Setting-  
Motivation/Personal and Career Development  
Creative Thinking/Problem Solving  
Communication: Listening and Oral Communication  
3 R's: Reading, Writing, Computing  
Learning to Learn

For the higher vocational Incoming Tourism Program, an eighth group of fundamental skills would be English language proficiency and intercultural communication.

### **Curricular and Course Design to Meet the Needs of the Swedish Hospitality Industry**

Although the Swedish National Agency for Education states in its press release of November 21, 2012, that the English knowledge of Swedish pupils is “very good”, and that 66 % of the pupils had reading comprehension skills that corresponded to the highest level, knowledge in colloquial English is not enough for students who will complete an internship abroad, and much less if they are to become professional travel agents.

Furthermore, a basic knowledge of Legal English is fundamental if they are to sign contracts with foreign tour operators, as well as an awareness of the basic responsibilities of travel agents and tour operators according to current hospitality law.

### **Challenges and Difficulties Encountered**

Perhaps the greatest difficulty the instructor encountered when the course started was that the group was quite heterogeneous: Besides the Swedish students, there were two mature students, one from the USA and another one from Japan, who had excellent English skills; there were 4 Russian students who were ambitious and had good study habits, but whose English skills were not very good; furthermore, there were three young immigrant students who had an extremely low knowledge of English, very deficient study habits and were not motivated to study. After the first test, the instructor spoke to these students urging them to enroll in an evening English course so they could keep up with the group. The students did not follow the advice of the instructor.

Another major problem was grade inflation: With the advent of charter schools in Sweden in 1992, giving high grades has become a bait for schools to attract students and receive govern-

ment funds. Many applicants to the program had presented high school certificates that indicated very good English skills, yet the reality in the classroom was quite different.

Furthermore, the role of the teacher is of very low status in Sweden: If higher vocational students do not like a particular subject, they can decide to eliminate it from the curriculum, no matter how relevant the subject is. Attendance is not mandatory, and punishing lazy or irresponsible students is undesirable because it is tantamount to losing government funding if the students drop out of the program.

There is a major conflict between the two basic aims of vocational education: on the one hand, there is the government policy of providing young people, especially those with a low academic profile, a chance of entering the labor force; on the other hand, it is meeting the expectations of potential employers. This problem does not exist in Germany, where potential employers partly finance the studies of their future staff. In Germany, enterprises which provide internships design curricula together with higher vocational colleges. Moreover, Germany has a highly hierarchical educational system: If students do not attain the minimum passing grades, they are forced to leave the program after the second round of tests.

### **Survey and Results of the Business English Course**

Roughly 50 % of the students complained at the end of the semester that the book had been too difficult, and that business and economics knowledge was not relevant for them, since they intended to work in the hospitality industry. The other 50 % said that they were very satisfied with the course, which not only had provided them with a lot of new vocabulary and concepts, but also with a basic knowledge of business management and macroeconomics. Thus, the head teacher decided that the book was inadequate, and a new book of English for Tourism would be used the next year.

The three immigrant students had attained a score which was significantly under the 60 % minimum to pass the subjects. They were given a second chance, and were able to pass the exams with a very low grade, but did not master the subjects.

When the course was offered the following year, a new book of English for Tourism was

used, but the results were not better. The group was as heterogeneous or even more than the former year, and there were students whose English skills could hardly be considered pre-intermediate. The weak students complained that they had learned very little, but admitted that they did not study at home after the lessons. One of the assignments was to write a job application in English. Two students handed in exactly the same letter of application. The instructor sent a written report to the head teacher that the students in question had cheated, but the head teacher decided not to do anything about it.

Moreover, the weak students complained to the head teacher that they did not want to read *Ethics for the New Millennium*, by HH the XIV Dalai Lama as complimentary literature, so the head teacher ordered the instructor to stop using the book immediately. Finally, the instructor was given the order NOT to show the movie *Earthlings*, which had been seen on the last day of the course the former year with the aim of breaking the monotony of the textbook, and had been the subject of a class discussion about sustainability, corporate social responsibility, business ethics, human and animal rights. The head teacher informed the instructor that her only responsibility was to teach English, and not to speak about corporate social responsibility, ethics, social justice, sustainability or any other "unrelated" topics in class.

Due to a total lack of academic freedom at the higher vocational level, an open disregard for the instructor's authority and the absence of any action taken against the students who had openly cheated, the author decided to quit teaching at the Travel Education Centre.

### **Conclusion**

According to the OECD, the academic level of Sweden is comparable to those of Greece and Chile. While just 25 years ago Sweden used to have one of the best educational systems of the world, according to the last PISA study conducted by the OECD, Sweden ranks 38 in the world in terms of educational achievement. The study pointed out that Swedish students lack motivation for studying and that there is a general lack of discipline in Swedish schools.

It was a great shock for the author, who came to Sweden from Germany in 2009, to see that the Swedish educational system was very, very far from the German system in many

respects: To begin with, due to historical reasons, academic freedom is tantamount to sacred in Germany. Secondly, competence is of paramount importance, and not inclusion. Thirdly, enterprises finance a third of the costs of higher vocational schools, and have therefore a say in curriculum design and in the academic level they expect of the graduates. Students who fail a test twice are requested to leave the higher vocational study programs. Germany depends on know-how and therefore the weaker students are given other study alternatives. The author worked in higher vocational education for seven years in Germany, where academic achievement has a great importance. She was always encouraged to offer courses of high academic level.

In contrast, Sweden is a small country with a tradition of consensus decision-making. Like Germany, it depends on exports, especially of high tech and know-how. It has a relatively high unemployment rate, especially among unskilled youth and the immigrant population. If this Scandinavian country does not want to lose its comparative advantages, it must take drastic measures to improve its much flawed educational system. One first measure would be to introduce admission tests to colleges and higher voca-

tional schools. A second one would be to elevate the status of the teacher, and to expel students who do not meet academic standards from higher vocational colleges. Another important measure would be to define educational priorities. Finally, education in Sweden should be more based on facts and knowledge than on politics and ideology.

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## ПРОБЛЕМЫ ОБУЧЕНИЯ АНГЛИЙСКОМУ ЯЗЫКУ МЕНЕДЖЕРОВ ПО ТУРИЗМУ В СИСТЕМЕ СРЕДНЕГО ПРОФЕССИОНАЛЬНОГО ОБРАЗОВАНИЯ

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Цель статьи – выявить проблемы, с которыми сталкивается преподаватель английского языка для академических целей в профессиональном колледже Швеции. Разный уровень обучаемых, снижение требований к результатам обучения, недостаток академической свободы и низкий уровень дисциплины в шведских учебных заведениях являются факторами, оказывающими существенное влияние на уровень успеваемости шведских студентов, который оценивался с помощью многофакторного теста PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), проведенного ОЭСР (Организация экономического сотрудничества и развития).

*Ключевые слова: профессиональное образование, академическая свобода, программа обучения, английский язык для академических целей.*

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