

Towards An Integrated Teaching of Foreign Languages in Institutions of Higher Learning

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Abstract

This study is based on interviews we had with 40 respondents half of whom had done what we called course switching in order to have content and language learning because to them, one without the other seemed inadequate in today's job market. This resulted in doing two Bachelor's degree, one after another instead of going straight for a Master's degree program. We try to understand the rationale behind this decision and propose how foreign language learning should be restructured in Higher Institutions of learning in order to teach languages in the way that students of the 21st century want. We also offer insights on why it is important to study foreign languages in this globalized world. The study is based on the experiences of students and alumni of Kyambogo and Makerere University. These experiences contain interesting lessons which are pointers to new ways learners are suggesting to their institutions of Higher learning if they are to embrace the study of languages wholeheartedly. Students are yearning for integration of foreign languages both in sciences and arts courses. To these learners, the era of segregated teaching of foreign languages appears irrelevant and updated.

Keywords: foreign language teaching and learning, integrated learning of foreign languages, segregated learning of foreign languages, course switching, linguistic immersion.

INTRODUCTION

According to Moller A. and Catalana T (2015: 327), the term foreign language teaching and learning refers to the teaching or learning of a language in a nonnative environment. This implies that the input in that language is restricted (Rebecca L Oxford). Therefore, in Uganda and Africa as a whole, a number of languages are taught in universities as foreign languages. For English speaking Africa, these include French, German, Arabic, Spanish and Chinese (which is a new comer on the list). In Uganda, following the recent government emphasis on the teaching of science subjects, the above languages, especially French, have seen the numbers of their learners dwindle at Advanced level and at University with the sole exception of Makerere University. A new formula of how the study of foreign languages can coexist with the study of Sciences and Business courses need therefore to be found by universities.

In this context however, we are seeing new trends emerging and which need to be explored: Some young people first study courses that their parents wish them to study (the most common being International Business), and then come later to languages as soon as they are capable of sponsoring themselves. Others start with a degree in Education with a foreign language component and after 2 or three years of teaching, they divert and go for another professional course (engineering, development studies, Accounting and Finance being the most

common options). This study explores the root causes of this new trend which we have called course switching but which other people have called retooling following the phasing out of some subjects on the secondary school curriculum in the 1990s. We feel that this is a pointer that the university curricula may be ignoring important language needs of the students and that there is need to study the modalities of how to satisfy them. Integrated teaching of foreign languages seems to be what the students of the 21st century need rather than a segregated kind of teaching of languages which is currently the norm. In Kyambogo University for example, French has been taught exclusively in the Faculty of Arts and Social sciences in order to train teachers for ordinary and advanced levels. An Attempt was made to introduce it in the Bachelor of Arts in Arts but very soon the numbers started dwindling until there were no more admissions of students of French in that program. We believe the students (at the time of choosing University programs) are wondering whether French is only studied by those interested in the teaching profession.

Problem Statement

It has been observed that some students are adopting a new trend in the study of foreign languages in Higher Institutions in Uganda. Rather than studying French immediately after Secondary education, they start with a Business or Engineering course and soon after graduating they start all over again and register for a Bachelor of Arts with Education where it is

possible to combine for example French and History or Economics. The purpose of this study is to understand why young people are taking such a drastic decision despite the sacrifice they have to make in terms of carrier or study opportunities they have to make. We are presuming that this desperate move may be caused by lack of University programs design in such a way that foreign language study is embedded therein.

Research Questions

In this study, we wanted to attempt to answer the following questions:

- I) What is integrated teaching of foreign languages?
- II) Why are the young people doing course switching? Is it because the current course outlines lack integration of languages?
- III) What are the advantages of foreign language integration?
- IV) Which university programs need an urgent language component in their syllabus?
- V) What would be the modalities of a successful language integration of a foreign language into other academic programs?
- VI) What would be the role of the different French sections in this new context of foreign language integration?

METHODOLOGY

We identified 20 people who had undergone the above course switching having started with a Degree in International Business. We knew personally 3 people of this category. Using the technique of snowball sampling, we managed to find 17 others to whom we distributed questionnaires in order to understand what prompted them to switch to language after a degree in International business. Each of the first 3 people helped us to identify a person who did the course switching and we continued inquiring until we got the number of respondents we needed. Another group of 20 students from Kyambogo University (10) and Makerere University (10) was identified and interviewed in order to find out whether they understood the rationale behind course switching. For the second category, it was a random selection among the students of French of year 1, 2 and three of the two institutions. Both groups were given questionnaires which were returned after one week. The data collection took place in May 2017 immediately at the end of the semester II examination and before the deployment for School Practice for the case of Kyambogo University. For Makerere University, the collection was done in the last week of Semester two before they sat their end of semester II examinations.

MAIN FINDINGS

Partial Integration between Content and Foreign Languages

According to online sources, there are two ways of understanding integrated teaching of foreign languages. The first one is about teaching the different language skills (Listening, speaking, reading and writing) as a block and not as separate skills). The proponents of this line of thinking argue that in real life, these skills are never acquired in isolation but as a whole. However, according to our respondents, this is not the kind of integration they want. What they want is a double training in content and language in the same program. To avoid course switching and save time, they would prefer something which lies between segregated teaching languages as it is currently practiced and what the researchers call Content and language integrated learning (CLIL). CLIL is a term which was coined in 1994 by David Marsh. Topics in subjects such as History, Geography, physics and others are selected and learnt in a foreign language. In other words, children are basically taught in two languages in order to give them enough early exposure in the foreign language and a context within which the new language can be used. This approach would be expensive in Africa because there would be need of not only bilingual teachers but also specialists in different disciplines. Our respondents said they wanted hours of languages added to their different disciplines as elective course units. We asked them whether they wanted a foreign language from year 1 to year 3 so that by the time they graduate with a degree in Engineering, they have a working knowledge of French, German, Spanish or Chinese. Out of the 40 respondents, 35 wanted this kind of partial integration. They argued that the third year is a busy year, that it is better to leave it out. In other words, according to our respondents, there is no need of a costly linguistic immersion program but just need to make languages a meaningful option in the different programs of our universities. The existence of a language department is not enough. Languages must be given enough space in the different academic units of our universities. It is worth observing that faculties which have tried this integration have only one course unit either in first year or third year. The volume of language learnt is usually too small to be meaningful on the job market. Therefore, as we think of integration, we must always have in mind the link with the job market. Are the skills acquired usable on the job market? This should be a constant question for curriculum designers in universities.

Importance of Communication Skills in Foreign Languages

To the question, "Why did you switch from a Degree in International business to a Degree of Arts with Education"? , several respondents told us that they felt that they needed a training which gives them a

competitive edge in a job search. These students believed seriously that the knowledge of foreign languages widens job opportunities. A person who is bilingual and is qualified in international Business can be employed in Embassies, private companies like Total and NGOs... A bilingual musician can sell his services in French speaking countries. Respondents told us that learners today are more informed than their parents were. Therefore, when they do such a course switch, it is because they are scheming for a good job, a good salary, and good working conditions. This response was given by 18 respondents out of the 20 of group B (See questionnaire in annex B) whom we interviewed. In group A, all the respondents agreed with this position. All the respondents concurred however that course switching is an inconvenience. They said that parents do not always understand its rationale. One of the respondent said her friends always ask her whether she is on a Masters program. In other words, these young people are misunderstood both by their relatives, their friends and the general public. When she applied for a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Education after completing a degree in International Business, the administrators of the university she applied to did not understand her at all. She therefore felt that if there had been a serious foreign language component in the first degree program she did, she would never have thought of enrolling for a Bachelor of Arts Degree with a foreign language component.

Some respondents mentioned the fact that when you have a good training in a foreign language, you acquire useful intercultural competences which enable you to work harmoniously with people of different cultural backgrounds. This is a soft skill always sought by employers in many international organizations. This position is supported by many scholars as we found out on many internet websites. Auburn University in the US for example believes that " *Foreign languages expands one world's view and limit barriers between peoples.* Its websites informs the students that when you study foreign languages, " *your marketable skills in the global economy are improved*" (cla.auburn.edu/.../twenty-five-reasons). This is what Ugandan students read on American websites and since most of them dream of travelling and trying their luck in getting a job abroad, switching courses becomes very tempting even if it means losing some years of gainful employment. They know the language skills are rewarding on the long run both on a professional and personal basis.

Matt Johnson (<http://www.werelocalize.com/>), a fluent German speaker concurs with the above reasoning when he says that learning a foreign language increases the chances of starting a rewarding career in translation and the possibility of getting a job in a global company. On a more

personal, Alex Seix (www. Toptenreviews.com) says that learning a foreign language enables one to think creatively. Quoting several researchers, he says that there is scientific evidence that children who are learning a foreign language get higher intelligence scores in standardized tests. Ashton Newton (www.wou.edu/...importance-foreign...) explains that the study of foreign languages helps to educate a well round and culturally understanding person who will see the doors of employment open in government, business, law, medicine and technology.

Benefits of Foreign Language Integration in Other Academic Programs

According to 38 respondents out of the 40 we interviewed, this arrangement saves time and money. It also adds value to the graduate's professional profile because one can get a job abroad and given the current unemployment rate among the youth, this is a great advantage. Bilingual engineers and businessmen can find great opportunities in the Democratic Republic of Congo. As the situation stands now, there is a huge language barrier which stands on their way unless they accept to spend a lot of money and go for extra training at Alliance Française. Several respondents also mentioned the ability to get important connections and friendships which later on can help to get a rewarding job.

Modalities of integration of foreign languages in the university curricula

All the respondents were of the view that the integration cannot start with all the programs of any given university, that priorities will have to be made mainly because there will be need to train the lecturers who will implement that reform and to retool the existing ones who are used to segregated teaching of foreign languages. The needs of the learners will have to take the upper hand. The traditional language content, according to them will have to be trimmed in order to have a bigger proportion of content compared to the one of language. Many respondents wanted advanced language course units to be made electives in year I and II while Beginners language course units would be made compulsory in some programs from year I to year III. The programs commonly mentioned as a priority for integration with languages were Tourism, International Business, journalism, political science and engineering, Hotel management, Marketing and hospitality. One of the respondents said that while she was doing her Bachelor's degree in International Business, a French beginner's course was offered but it was too basic to be useful in communication at the job market. This is why she ended up coming to Kyambogo University for a real training in the French language and literature. Young people today know what they want out of a university and when they do not get it, they find a way of solving the problem. Program switching appears to be an attempt

to fill up the loopholes in tertiary education. Students are therefore yearning for an international education. Learning a foreign language is a first step towards realizing that dreams.

However, according to these respondents, integration of foreign will not necessarily lead to the closure of the existing foreign language sections. These will continue training the needed teachers, designing the necessary language curricula for specific purposes and distance learning. They will also play an important supervisory role in teaching and assessment. In practical terms, this means that lecturers teaching foreign languages in Home Economics, Engineering, journalism, Political science..... will now be coordinated by one center for foreign languages so as to ensure quality and harmony in content delivery and modes of assessment. The respondents also said that for this integration to succeed, new methods of teaching foreign languages and new teaching aids will have to be designed and multiplied. This is where there is a real challenge because all these reforms will require financial resources. The lecturers of the content subjects will also have to be sensitized on the concept of value addition which comes with the learning of foreign languages.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the data collected from the 40 people whom we interviewed, we recommend the following: Universities should give a chance to integrated teaching of foreign languages in form of Communication skills both at beginners and advanced level. At beginner's level, there should be at least a course unit per semester offered as an elective from year 1 to year 3. This is in order to enable learners to acquire at least a working knowledge of the language they are learning. The link between university training and the world of work should always be on the minds of university curricula designers.

For advanced programs, there should at least at least one course unit per semester for the first two years for the same reasons as above.

New programs for language for specific purposes should be designed in order to start with priority sectors such as Tourism, Business, marketing and Hospitality, Engineering and political science.

The different foreign language sections should not be closed on the pretext that they have small numbers. Closing them will be result into narrowing the job opportunities for their graduates in the world economy and reducing their employability. Internationalization of higher education will only be possible if there is a policy on the teaching of foreign languages in African Universities.

CONCLUSION

The central question in this article was: Why are some students doing course switching that is graduating in a Business course, graduating and enrolling for a Bachelor of Arts with Education with a foreign language component. The discussion we held with the students concerned and their peers helped us to understand this new trend. The learners are thinking much faster than curriculum designers. In order to survive in a world suffering from youth unemployment, they have understood the chances that the study of languages can offer. Let us help such students by integrating languages in different academic profiles. In that way, we shall have opened new opportunities for young people in the world of work. They will be more productive because they will fit well in intercultural settings which are becoming the norm rather than the exception. They will have a technical competence and a communication competence which is sought by many employers in international organizations.

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