

European Multilingualism Course as Part of Contemporary Language Education in Russia

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Abstract. *The paper discusses efficiency aspects and learning outcomes of an elective course on European multilingualism created within the framework of EU Jean Monnet Modules project. The authors argue that the course facilitated the development of European multilingualism awareness (EMA) with students. The growth of EMA level illustrated by annual students' feedback survey analysis demonstrates effectiveness of teaching strategies applied during the course implementation – on the one hand and adequacy of the course improvement strategies – on the other.*

Keywords – *multilingualism, plurilingualism, Jean Monnet Modules, elective course, NArFU*.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The paper presents an evaluation of the course in European multilingualism taught to language students of Northern (Arctic) Federal University named after M.V.Lomonosov. The course was developed as a part of the project “Multilingualism: the EU Dimension in Language Policy and Education”[†] initiated by the NArFU High School of Social Sciences, Humanities and International Communication in 2016 within the framework of the European Commission Jean Monnet Modules program and to this date is in the third final year of its implementation.

The aim of NArFU project is to facilitate interest in European studies in the sphere of language policy and education by means of research and educational activities, particularly through the development and implementation of the course in European multilingualism. The project had several objectives: developing a tailor-made course (academic module) for bachelor students based on the EU research with the use of interactive teaching techniques and practice-oriented learning activities; promoting teaching and research activities on the EU issues at the university and regional levels; creating a network of young scholars interested in the EU topics; disseminating the results of the

project (didactic materials, research articles, professional experience) within the academic professional community.

The academic module “Multilingualism: the EU Dimension in Language Policy and Education” was created for students of NArFU programs in Humanities (bachelor level). The purpose of the module is to provide students with general knowledge regarding language policy of the European Union in its linguistic unity and diversity along with presentation of innovations and best practices in EU language education. The course consists of three elements:

- Language situation in the European Union: linguistic unity and linguistic diversity;
- Language education strategy and policy in the EU;
- Practical aspect: profiles of EU countries regarding their language policy and education.

The academic module was implemented annually (per 54 hours) during the three academic years of the project lifetime (2017-2019).

The module treats the concept of multilingualism from different perspectives (education, culture, citizenship, employment) and at different levels (individual, regional, national, global). This introduction to the EU language policy and education issues was meant to equip the students with new knowledge of the EU dimension and awareness of multilingual opportunities for education and research. The academic module gives insight in multilingualism as a key factor of the EU language policy, providing background for lifelong learning, further employment and professional development. The suggested course focuses on new for NArFU students EU issues which are not usually covered in traditional university courses.

The module is of an interdisciplinary nature, incorporating education, social and culture studies, sociolinguistics. This approach allows considering multilingualism from different angles, uniting students and young researchers in different fields of Humanities into a network, and contributing to interdisciplinary research.

The project also included 2 workshops for university students and teachers and an International Research and Practice Conference “European Multilingualism: Shaping Sustainable Educational and Social Environment” (April 23-24, 2019).

The project team consisted of both experienced and young researchers and scholars, thus giving an opportunity

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to share teaching and research expertise and to gain new competences on specific EU issues.

The hypothesis of the study comprises two principal aspects: 1. The course in European multilingualism designed and implemented within the scope of the NArFU project provides a meaningful theoretical and practical contribution to students' knowledge and provides background for their professional development in the sphere of language policy and language education in line with the European standards. 2. Regular complex survey-based analysis of the course efficiency and relevance facilitated the evolution of the course and enabled the project team to streamline the module by way of several curriculum improvements.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Multilingualism is usually defined as a complex and at the same time a very common phenomenon spread around the world [1], [2]. The term's complexity is a result of its varied interpretation in different disciplines, diverse backgrounds of the researchers studying the term and specific conditions underlying the use of languages in multilingual settings [3].

The first studies on multilingualism go back to the 1950s and consider mainly sociolinguistic aspects and, to a lesser degree, psycholinguistic ones [4], [5], [6]. Nowadays the phenomenon is studied by various disciplines each of which has its own interpretation of multilingualism and the terms related to it. However, these different interpretations have some common ground and often diverge only in the dimension or form of multilingualism they refer to.

Two basic forms of multilingualism reflect both individual and social nature of it. Individual multilingualism is manifested in a person's capability to effectively use more than one language. In this sense, the term "individual multilingualism" is often substituted with the term "plurilingualism". The distinction between them is nevertheless quite clear. The Council of Europe in its Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe defines the terms. According to it, multilingualism is "the presence in a geographical area, large or small, of more than one variety of language" [7]. Drawing on this definition, individual multilingualism presupposes coexistence of more than one variety of language in the mind of an individual. Plurilingualism expands further and denotes not only an individual's ability to use more than one variety of language but a complex competence making communication effective and successful through cultural and linguistic interaction [8].

On the contrary, another form of multilingualism, societal multilingualism, concentrates on the language use by groups and communities rather than by individuals. The focus of its studies is on coexistence of language varieties and their position in society, expected linguistic behavior, intertwining of languages and ethnicity, culture, religion and other social phenomena [9]. Although societal multilingualism can be found in certain geographical areas, this is not to suggest that all the citizens of these areas are multilingual to the same extent. The situation when not all

the languages present in a certain area are used by all the citizens is characterized as proximate multilingualism [10].

Current multilingualism is a product of the ongoing process of globalization and has its characteristic features. People's mobility is one of the key factors accounting for the spread of multilingualism. Technological advance has the similar effect and in general alters the way people interact and communicate with each other [11]. Diversity, or superdiversity, is one more concept characterizing current multilingualism [12]. It comes to diversity of all the constituents and manifestations of multilingualism: language variants, practices, communicative situations and purposes of interaction. In addition, current multilingualism is often described as a complex and, therefore, unpredictable phenomenon spreading and changing quickly over the time.

Multilingualism is a reality in many countries and societies. The focus of our research is on the EU policy on multilingualism since the EU is considered one of the most multilingual entities in the world [13]. As the paper suggests, the course in the EU multilingualism can be beneficial to students studying the EU languages at university level. However, there can be found very few publications and research presenting such courses as part of contemporary language education.

III. METHOD

The aim of our research is to analyze the effectiveness of teaching strategies applied during the course implementation and evaluate the correlation between expected and actual learning outcomes reflecting European multilingualism awareness (EMA) level of students.

To attain this goal we used several methods, namely pedagogical observation during the teaching process and students' feedback survey analysis (including student interviews). Feedback analysis was used to trace the dynamics of changes with several meaningful parameters reflecting the course efficiency and the level of EMA, including figures of students' attendance, students' expectations, entrance and graduation tests' results and others.

Feedback questionnaires were used both for the purposes of course methodology improvement and monitoring of the EMA level dynamics. During the course implementation period (2017-2019) students' expectations and actual results were surveyed. While students' expectations were revealed at the beginning, results' monitoring was carried out during the final class of the course program. Afterwards, by means of comparative analysis strengths and weaknesses of the course were revealed to bring in improvements next year. At the same time statistical data was gathered to monitor key values of students' EMA levels.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As soon as academic module on European multilingualism was a new one to the university curriculum, one of the main practical aspects of further work within the framework of NArFU Jean Monnet Modules project was

increasing of popularity and quality of the course. Regular feedback surveys and student interviews were carried out after each year of the course implementation in order to expose possible areas of improvement. During the surveys students were suggested to rate (assigning points from 0 to 10) the following statements describing principle aspects of the course:

- theoretical aspects chosen for the course are relevant, understandable and sufficient;
- the choice of country profiles for the practical part of the course is optimal;
- the choice and quantity of visual materials is optimal;
- ratio of theory to practice is efficient and convenient;
- the number of hours per week is sufficient.

Students also were encouraged to give their comments on each of the survey items. The results for the 3 years of the course implementation are given in Table 1. The overall course efficiency estimation was calculated as arithmetic mean value of item points corresponding to each particular year and is represented in % for visual clarity.

TABLE 1. COURSE EFFICIENCY ESTIMATION

Item to evaluate	N _o of points (mean values)		
	2017	2018	2019
theoretical aspects chosen for the course are relevant, understandable and sufficient	6,8	7,5	8,3
the choice of country profiles for the practical part of the course is optimal	5,2	8,8	9,1
the choice and quantity of visual materials is optimal	8,5	8,9	9,3
ratio of theory to practice is optimal	5,5	6,3	7,9
the number of hours per week is enough	9	9,6	9,5
Overall course efficiency estimation (%)	70	82	88

The data of feedback surveys and student comments illustrated the highest necessity of optimization for the following aspects of the course: simplification and rearrangement of the theoretical part of the course; introduction of additional country profiles for the practical part of the course and changing of theory to practice ratio (according to students, the accent had to be shifted in favor of the practical issues). In correspondence with students' opinions the following modifications to the course curriculum were introduced:

- the amount of time devoted to the topic of legal and political aspects of European multilingualism was reduced from 6 to 2 hours, the 4 hours available were used to introduce a new country profile for the practical part (Finland);
- the data representing remaining theoretical aspects was simplified and exemplified, the order of logical parts inside the theoretical block was slightly changed, which allowed to further increase the amount of time devoted to

practical aspects (thus, during the 3rd year of the course implementation the amount of time devoted to the practical block was increased to 32 academic hours, which makes the final ratio of theory to practice 40% / 60%).

Feedback data of the 3rd year illustrates that the modifications introduced facilitated the increase of the overall course efficiency (relevance) level by 18% (that is from 70% to 88%).

The number of students who attended the course is one more criterion of the course efficiency and relevance. As the module on Multilingualism was among the elective courses, students could choose it out of the list of possible options. As soon as the course was a new one during the first year they made their choice on the basis of a summary description provided by the project team. During the 2nd and the 3rd years of the course implementation students' choice was already more conscious (based on the reviews and opinions from those who have already tried it the previous year). The overall number of students attending the course during 3 years was 108 (2017 – 31 students, 2018 – 38 students, 2019 – 39 students).

Increased number of attendees on the 2nd year indicates that the course content satisfied students' expectations (turned out to be interesting, theoretically and practically relevant in their view). Statistical analysis of feedback data shows 3 main reasons for appreciation: the course 1) broadens the mind (24% of respondents), 2) provides all necessary information about EU countries (21%) and 3) is in English (33%), other answers – 22%.

The answers largely correlate with students' expectations from the course, revealed during the entrance test (Fig. 1.).

1. to learn more about the EU countries
2. to learn what "multilingualism" is
3. to learn about language policy in the EU
4. to broaden the mind
5. no particular expectations
6. all other answers

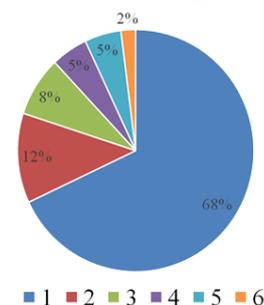


Fig. 1. Students' expected learning outcomes

Although there was a distinct increase in the amount of course attendees after the first year (which indicates a successful strategy of the course design and implementation), the growth of the audience numbers after the second year is almost negligible in spite of the changes introduced by the NArFU project team for the course optimization. It is not the ineffectiveness of optimization strategies that has to account for this stagnation, but the general decrease in number of the university students due to specific demography. Moreover, the percentage share of students who deliberately chose "Multilingualism in EU" as their elective course in 2019 was 15-20% higher among the whole spectrum of study groups majoring in English.

One of the main research aspects of the course implementation was monitoring of EMA level change with

students. In order to trace it two types of feedback forms were used: entrance questionnaire and graduation test. The two forms contained questions on the same topics in order to trace the “evolution” of different awareness aspects. Thus the entrance questionnaire included a self-evaluation EMA awareness scale (students were asked to estimate their existing level of EMA according to 0 to 100 points grading scale) as well as multiple-choice and free-answer questions on issues of EU multilingualism and multiculturalism. The overall amount of questions was 25. Examples of questions:

Do the EU countries have a centralized language policy?

What is the Shengen Area?

Is Russian language included in the list of EU official languages?

The entrance form was used to shape students’ initial awareness picture and reveal areas of insufficient knowledge.

While completing the graduation test (a more diverse and complicated question form) they had to answer more specific questions requiring higher level of knowledge and subject-matter understanding. The number of questions was 50. Examples of questions:

Who regulates the EU countries’ language policy?

What EU countries are not members of the Shengen Area?

What languages have the status of official languages of the European Commission?

The topical scope of the two questionnaires was the same, the difference consisting in profoundness of knowledge. When checking students’ answers we used a scoring system in which correct answers were rated with 1 to 3 points (depending on the level of specificity and difficulty). The highest total number of points possible per test was 100 (a numeric result which with a certain degree of approximation could be compared with the student’s self-assessment score). Summary data of entrance test results (Table 2) indicates that the initial EMA level with students was generally quite low (47 to 54% scored lower than 50 points).

TABLE 2. EMA LEVEL OF STUDENTS

Points	Entrance test results (% of students)			Self-assessment score (% of students)			Graduation test results (% of students)		
	1 st year	2 nd year	3 rd year	1 st year	2 nd year	3 rd year	1 st year	2 nd year	3 rd year
0-25	17	11	8	0	1	0,5	0	0	0
26-50	37	40	39	34	28	31	9	5	7
51-75	28	35	24	41	36	51	41	38	26
76-90	13	12	22	23	30	14	39	39	43
> 90	4	2	7	2	5	3	11	18	24

Comparison of the actual results of the entrance test and self-assessment score attests to the fact that students’ own

expectations concerning their initial EMA levels were erroneously high (the average estimation was 50-75 points). From this we can deduce that even NArFU students studying European languages (most of them have English as their major) scarcely interact (both in theory and practice) with the realities of European multiculturalism and language situation. At the same time graduation test results show that the situation changed considerably due to the implementation of the Course on Multilingualism in EU: absolute majority of respondents (over 90% scored above 50 points, the biggest annual share of students (50 to 67% scored above 75 points). The share of students who scored above 90 pts. rose 2 to 4 times in comparison to the entrance test results. This increase of the EMA level indicates practical contribution of the course to the development of students’ conceptual framework representing European language and cultural landscape.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Implementation of the academic module on European multilingualism developed within the framework of NArFU Jean Monnet Modules project delivered the following results:

- strengthening knowledge on the EU in general;
- increase of interest in scientific and academic activities related to the language policy and education in the European Union;
- acquiring knowledge on practical aspects of EU language policy through EU countries profiles.

The effectiveness of teaching strategies applied during the course implementation is illustrated by the growth of the EMA (European multilingualism awareness) level supported by the fact that the share of students who scored above 75 to 90 points at the final awareness test rose 2 to 4 times in comparison to the entrance test results.

The effectiveness and relevance of the course itself was regularly monitored and developed. Students’ feedback surveys demonstrate that the course improvement strategy applied by the project team allowed to increase it by 18% as compared to the initial level.

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