

**LANGUAGE AWARENESS WORKSHOPS : A TEACHER
TRAINING PROGRAMME COMPONENT IN THE PROJECT
OF SPECIAL ENGLISH FOR ROMANIA (PROSPER)**

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Abstract

The paper presents a case-study of a teaching/learning situation observed at the Bucharest Polytechnic University, Romania. The case was explored as part of a language awareness workshop devised as a training component on a peer-basis within the larger framework of a teacher training programme run at intra or inter-institutional level. At the same time, information is supplied on the “history” of PROSPER, its further development perspectives and future management policy.

Background

The ESP project **PROSPER** (Project of Special English for Romania), initiated and sponsored by the British Council, was set up in September 1991, and included six major ESP institutions in Romania in the areas of science and technology and business and finance. 80 teachers and about 20,000 students originally participated. In the following years, the number of institutions tripled (to include other institutions in the areas mentioned as well as medical universities) with a corresponding increase in the number of the teachers and students. The aim of the project is to upgrade the level of ESP/general English teaching in Romanian ESP tertiary education institutions in order to improve the standards of proficiency in English for future personnel working in key sectors of the Romanian economy.

After almost four years of operation the project has achieved beneficial developments in terms of quality of teaching/learning standards and principles, participatory

development, large-scale team spirit among ESP practitioners, sustainability and on-going change. This has been achieved by:

- providing in-service training for ESP teachers both in UK and in Romania
- developing skills in ESP syllabus and course-design, and materials writing/adaptation and offering permanent in-country support in these areas
- providing ESP resource centres in key institutions
- encouraging networking among ESP practitioners in Romania and with counterparts in other countries through participation at national and international conferences, meetings and the publishing of a project newsletter
- regular professional meetings run within Special Interest Groups (SIG) sessions
- In June 1993, the first ESP Conference in Eastern Europe was organized in Bucharest reuniting about 150 ESP practitioners from Romania and abroad.

Within the wider scope of an on-going process of professional upgrading, language awareness sessions (LA) have been organized within the larger format of a teacher training (TT) in-service (INSET) programme. LA has also been considered as the focus of case presentations and debate carried out within the ESP-SIG sessions. The issues under consideration range from curriculum perspective, appropriate methodology assessed against classroom practice in given home teaching situations to reflections on the relationship between language study and pedagogy, content of teaching materials in conjunction with teaching strategies, etc.

Such collaborative/team TT or teacher development (TD) sessions have raised in the trainees (or rather peer-trained trainees) the awareness for the need to establish a proper balance between the theoretical and the practical aspects of the profession - knowledge about language (KAL) as a basic, indispensable component of teaching on the one hand and the use of the syllabus content and the skills necessary for the management of the teaching-learning process on the other. Reiterating Edge's formula of the three competencies: "user-analyst-teacher" of language, Wright, talking about LA in teacher education programmes for non-native speakers points out that:

“Knowledge about language also makes a powerful psychological contribution to the teacher’s work - confidence. This confidence may be seen as vital for any teacher but even more so for the non-native speaker who may be held up as a model and source of information about the language. Very often, demands similar to those placed on native speakers of English are placed upon non-native-speaker teachers. They are expected to know their language, both as user in the everyday sense and as technician in the pedagogic sense. Here, user and analyst combine”

(Wright, 1991:63)

KAL together with an appropriate interpretation of the syllabus content, its flexible use, pacing and complementation against a proper assessment of the learner’s needs, would render a language awareness workshop (LAW) a most profitable component of a TT/TD programme. This aspect appears particularly relevant in the case of adopting and adapting teaching materials (text books), a frequent yet necessary initial phase in most foreign language teaching programmes designed and operating on a regional/national base as *“currents of change”* or *“mediums of innovation”* in teaching methodology.

In situations when, - for reasons of institutional constraints such as number of classes per week/semester, teaching schedule etc. - textbooks or segments of textbooks are adopted, there are aspects that teachers should observe in order to carry out an effective teaching strategy. When adopting parts/units from such textbooks, teachers should be aware that these textbooks have been conceived and organized by the respective authors as *“content and methodological wholes”* with underlying objectives and strands of proficiency, choice of topics and functions, an appropriate sequencing of the tasks, as well as with a certain strategy of pacing, re-cycling, assessment and evaluation. Consequently, a careful selection and/or amendment of the teaching/learning issues should be considered and an appropriate teaching strategy adopted.

In view of the above, we have selected here one of these *“case-presentations”* originating in a certain teaching/learning situation (*“a case”*) at the Polytechnic University of Bucharest.

The Case Study

Problem identification

Teachers have signalled difficulties encountered in dealing with the use of modals in ESP texts approached with second-year students. These difficulties lie in the fact that students' knowledge about the use of the modal verbs as acquired during the first year of study does not offer enough theoretical and practical knowledge and support on the subject. Among others, the main coursebooks, used by the teachers at the Bucharest Poly, with first-year students, are: *Headway* by J. and L. Soars, OUP, 1987 and *The New Cambridge English Course* by M. Swan and C. Walter, CUP, 1990.

As mentioned above, such textbooks are conceived by their authors as content and methodological wholes, so the modals as well as other grammatical issues dealt with in the respective units are only partially illustrated in any one unit, mainly through their contextual extensions of meaning (for instance can/could for requests and offers). This fragmentary presentation in one unit is, of course, in keeping with the function-based approach to teaching grammar, and is, occasionally, later supplemented and recycled by the authors in other units or volumes of the same textbook. Students who are only exposed to part of a coursebook will only be exposed to part of the whole picture.

When second-year ESP texts are approached, it is obvious that a distinction between the basic meanings of the modals and their syntactic behaviour would have been a good starting point in the first year of study and a reliable basis to draw on in the second year, when students have to infer the various uses of the modals in ESP discourse. Therefore, the problem we have identified in our teaching/learning case as far as the modals are concerned is that second-year students are not properly equipped to cope with the requirements of ESP texts after they have covered function-based coursebooks in the first year of study.

Hypothesis

The meanings and the uses of the modals in ESP texts in the second year of study can be more successfully internalised by learners if their basic/core meanings are introduced first or, at least, if mentioned and reinforced through the necessary theoretical and practical support (explanations and tasks). In this way students are less likely to encounter problems if their exposure to a particular modal construction is of a contextually extended use. We consider this course of teaching as normal as, say, the “birth of a metaphor” which always springs or stems from the basic, literal meaning of a word and not the other way round.

Problem Investigation

Starting from the above hypothesis, we devised and distributed a pre-session questionnaire to the teachers in our team. The purpose was to collect data on their beliefs, teaching strategies and on the difficulties encountered in teaching the modals and then to use this data for the organization of the language awareness workshop proposed.

The data collected revealed that there is no team strategy for teaching the modals. Teachers admitted that they rarely go beyond the functional framework of the first year textbooks although some of them claimed to teach some grammar on the modals in the first year of instruction, when necessary. Task supplements were again rarely, if ever, considered and teachers also admitted that they frequently re-teach modals to second-year students in accordance with ESP text requirements.

Intervention

At this stage, two options could be considered. One was that teachers who have signalled such problems tried to solve them individually or in collaboration with one or two colleagues from the respective team, devising amendments both at the theoretical and practical level. The second, the one actually adopted as a working principle, was to present the case to the whole team and try to demonstrate that such cases which may be detected at individual level could be more profitably set as problems to be **solved**

and shared with peers at intra or inter-institutional levels. We have considered this a means of turning to good account valuable, individual expertise which, when scrutinized and tried out through team-work may bring professional empowerment and upgrading.

The Language Awareness Workshop

As our contention is that teachers' own beliefs and approach to certain classroom issues are key factors in the successful implementation of a language curriculum we have organized a LAW focusing on this particular case-study.

The workshop was a means to promote/develop collaborative work at team level on a given issue suggested for debate. In this particular case, for operational reasons, we have offered a sample analysis of two modals only, - CAN and MAY -, and their occurrence (meanings and use) in two ESP texts selected for analysis.

It is obvious, however, that the LAW proposed here is a "moment" or one of the components of a larger TT/TD-programme format; being a component in free variation, other similar Law's can fit in, focusing on topics of interest and use for classroom action in different teaching/learning cases. Such cases can be signalled and proposed as topics for a LAW debate by any member of the teaching team. The whole process included several stages:

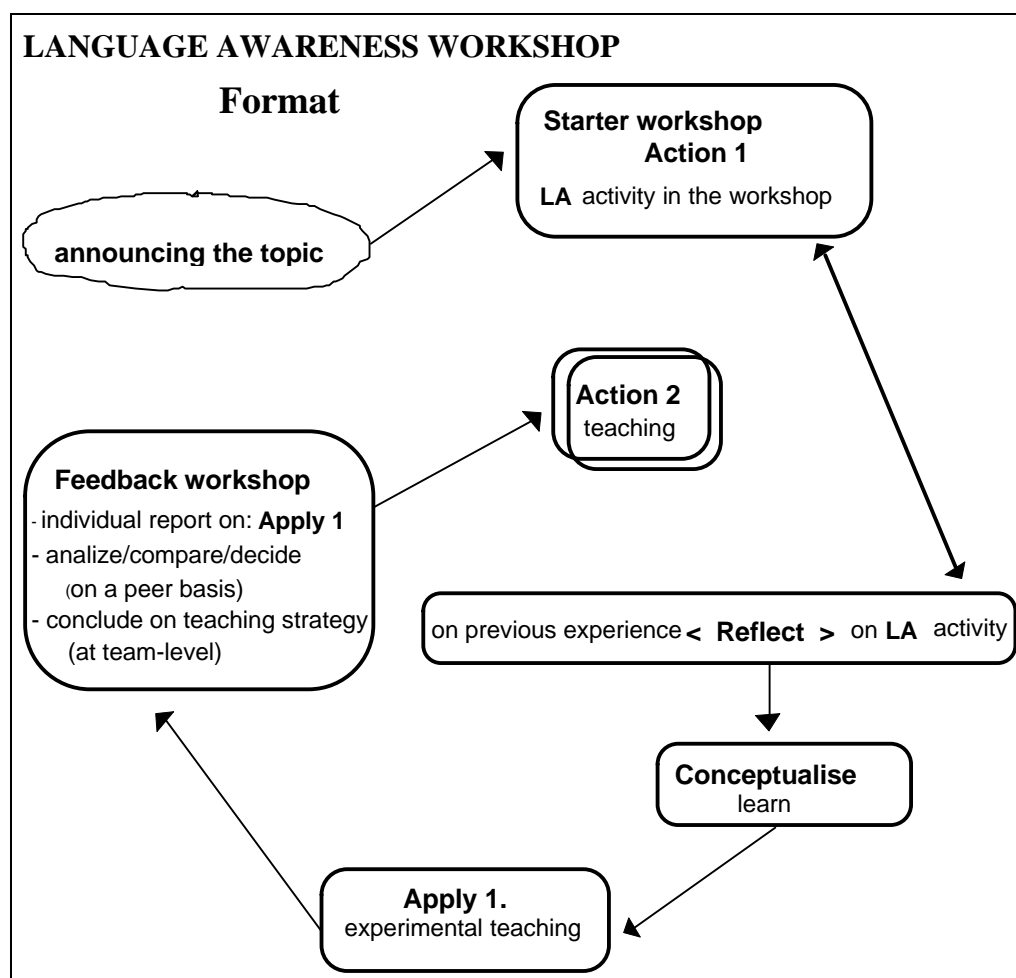


Figure 1

The starter workshop consisted of:

a). **the problem-solving activity.** In the first stage, participants were given copies of texts without the captions marked, in order to get familiar with the content and discursal aspects; then, the texts were presented with the captions marked and accompanied by an in-session questionnaire including the points of analysis proposed. The analysis of the captions followed as a group-work activity, with reports and debate in plenary.

b). **collective debate and proposals.** Solutions were suggested to be further tried out in the classroom - experimental stage illustrated as **Apply 1** in figure 1. From the discussions before carrying out the experimental stage, it was obvious that a lot of reflection occurred. At this stage, participants made remarks on their previous teaching

experience, on the LA activity proper, as well as on reference works to be consulted in order to devise appropriate tasks to improve the teaching/learning case considered. By way of suggestion, a reference-works list on the case, and a sample tasks-package, was proposed by the organizers; the list as well as the task-package remained open to discussion and collective improvement, at a further stage.

The *doing of the activity* and, implicitly the *reflection on the process* itself hopefully triggered a certain amount of *learning*. As a trainer this *learning* is obviously something you cannot “measure” or “control”. You can only hope that the activities suggested have helped it happen.

Although in the LAW diagram (figure 1), the “**reflect**” and “**conceptualize**” captions, for graphical reasons, have been represented as separate units, they actually happen simultaneously. What we have here is a process of continuous reflection and conceptualization “hovering” between **Action 1.** and **Apply 1.** Whatever *learning* has happened, this is to become apparent during the **Apply 1.** stage, when teachers will go back to the classroom and try out the ideas generated in the workshop.

We consider it extremely important to mention here the teachers’ suggestion to set the results of the experimental stage as topics of team-debate in a follow-up session, the **Feedback workshop**. This was described as the “sum-up moment” in which the experience resulting from the experimental stage was to be reported individually and then approached as an issue of collaborative debate and, most importantly, as **decision taking at team-level**. We consider that the proposal to organize a final round-up session proves that participants fully appreciated the usefulness of the LAW and meant to turn it into a training instrument carried out on a regular basis.

During the **feedback workshop**, teachers’ individual reports presented data on the experimental stage with special emphasis on the content of the teaching-document in use and the teaching strategy adopted. Individual presentations were then analysed with all participants and decisions at team level were taken for further classroom practice. These mainly viewed the relation between a given teaching document and the

teaching/learning strategy to be adopted (with special focus on task addition), as well as some institutional constraints and their possible impact on the teaching/learning activity. Thus, the case submitted for analysis and concluded upon at team level could become a data-bank component, always available for further reference.

The feedback workshop ended with the teacher's description of the LAW profile in general (given in figure 2) and of the respective case-study feedback in particular (figure 3).

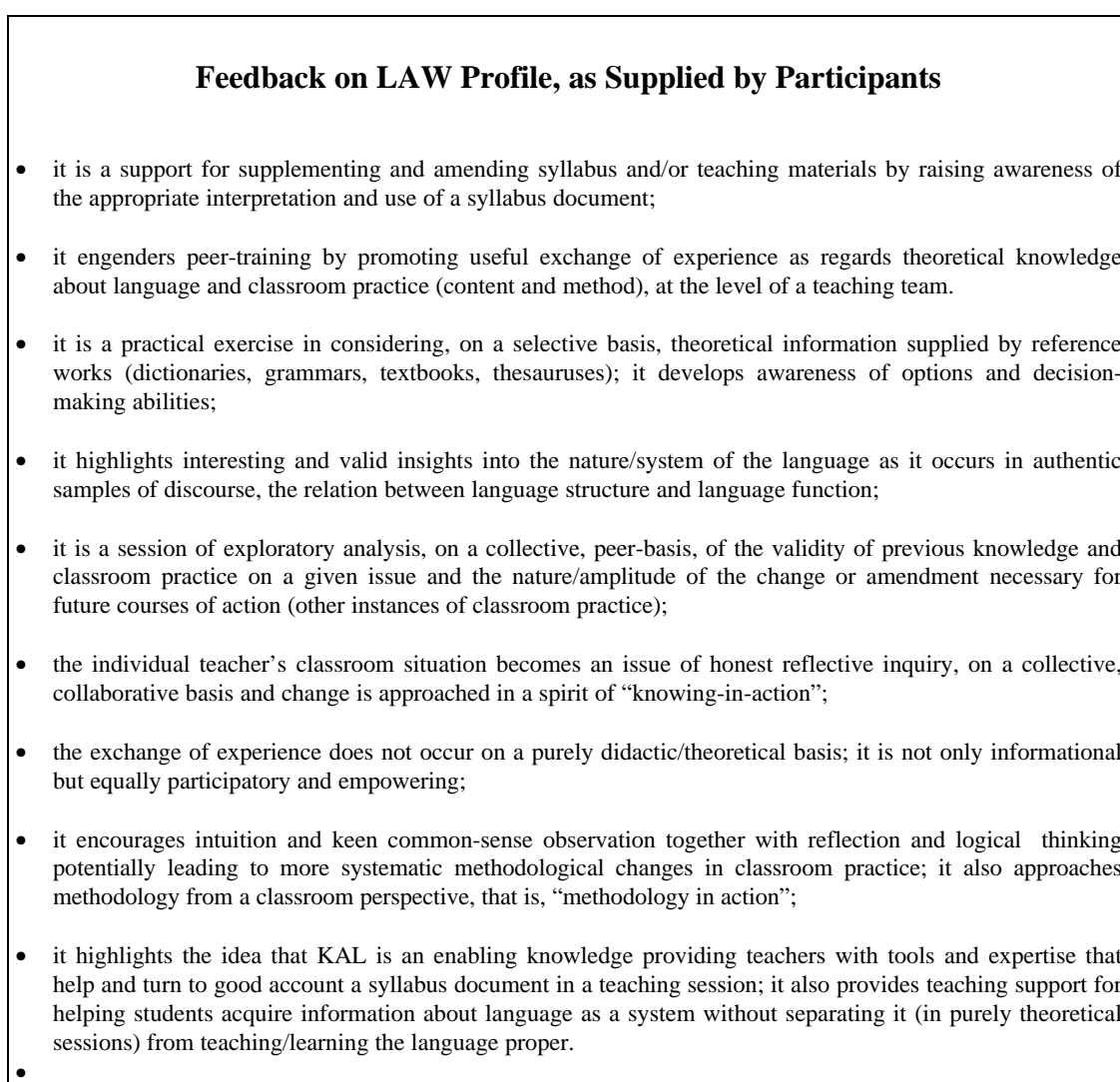


Figure 2

Case Study Feedback

- awareness raising of the institutional constraints going along with and having a certain impact on the work of the teachers (class size, number of classes per week/semester, students' proficiency level and learning profile, attendance); it allows teachers, through a flexible research and decision-taking process to adopt interpretations and trends of change based on practical data and constraints rather than by theoretical constructs alone (such as curriculum);
- it points out the necessity of identifying, during the 1st.-year instruction, the suitable sequence when adapting/adopting units from textbooks and exploiting them against the later, 2nd.-year learning needs of the ESP students;
- it provides appropriate teaching repertoires of techniques/strategies for pacing the work on language data, that is, the input information about language given to 1st.-year students in a classroom session so as to complement and assist 2nd-year teaching/learning.
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Figure 3

Conclusion

After the follow-up workshop the salient point was the idea that as members of a teaching team teachers could, at the same time, consider themselves as trainees and beneficiaries of an upgrading, refresher-like developmental course of action. The main difference, however, was that professional development can be also achieved on a peer basis and not exclusively through courses delivered by experts. By being collaborative and producing with team-decisions, such a course of action will also help tone down singular professional views/decisions and contribute to creating a profile of professional competence and expertise at the level of a teaching team. We also consider that the value of such a workshop is that it may build up a well-rounded TT procedure. It will actually be a collaborative, refresher-course activity and, implicitly, an enabling means to potentially develop **teachers** into **teacher-trainers**, as illustrated in figure 4.

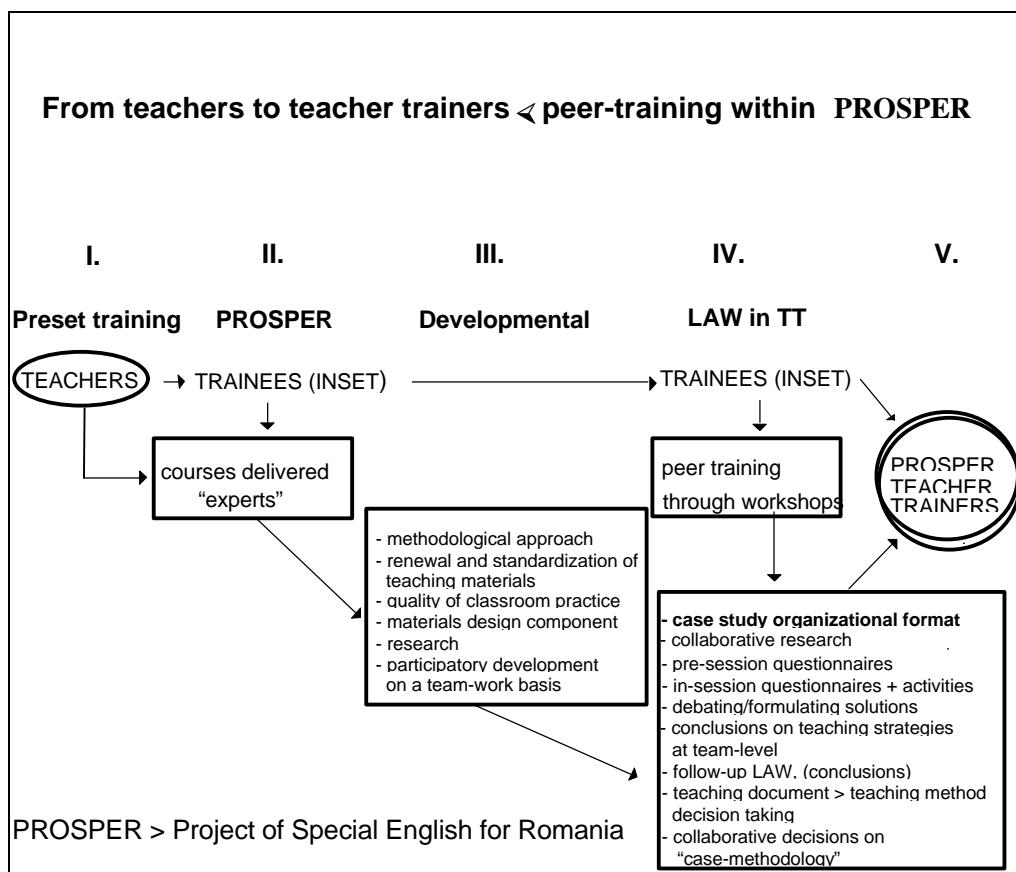


Figure 4

At the same time, if carried out on a regular basis, the activity may be viewed as a possible means for a *“project move-on stage”* carried out by its own participants. Considering the actual developmental stage in **PROSPER**, when its operational profile and its sustainability are mainly in the care of its beneficiaries, new courses of action, as the one just presented, may contribute to designing future base lines of the **project management policy**.

References

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Wright T. 1991 *Language Awareness in Teacher Education Programmes for non - nature speakers* in C. James and P. Garrett (eds)