REFLECTIONS ON METHODS OF PROMOTING RESEARCH AT A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION IN SLOVAKIA

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Summary

The first chapter deals with the nature of research, i.e. what research is or rather what it should be; the second chapter contains the key research areas at the Faculty of Applied Languages, UEBA, and the third one contains reflections on the aims, sense, and content of the ways of promoting results of our publication and research activities at two promotion events, namely, Researcher's Night and the National Science and Technology Week. The paper also lists the most successful activities held on these two occasions.

Keywords
National Science and Technology Week, popularisation, publication activity, research, Researcher's Night

Összefoglalás

Az első fejezet a kutatás természetével foglalkozik, vagyis azzal, hogy mi a kutatás vagy inkább minek kellene lennie. A második fejezet a University of Economics in Bratislava Alkalmazott Nyelvészeti Karának fő kutatási területeit tartalmazza, míg a harmadik fejezet a kutatási és publikációs tevékenységünk eredményeinek nyilvánossá tételére, illetve azok céljaira, felfogására és tartalmára vonatkozó reagálásokat ismerteti két esemény, nevezetesen a Kutatók éjszakája és a Nemzeti tudományos és technológiai hét kapcsán. A tanulmány bemutatja a legsikeresebb tevékenységeket is, amelyeket a két említett rendezvényen tartottak.

Kulcsszavak
Nemzeti tudományos és technológiai hét, népszerűsítés, publikálási tevékenység, kutatás, Kutatók éjszakája

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Introduction

The present paper deals with to the role and scope of popularisation of our research outputs at my home institution, the Faculty of Applied Languages, University of Economics in Bratislava (UEBA), SR. However, given the prevailing emphasis on the quantity in the assessment of our publications as well as the current focus on sciences in contrast to the humanities, I'd like to mention some factors that act as obstacles to our ambitions in this area. The first chapter deals with what research is or rather what it should be; the second chapter contains the description of key research areas at the Faculty of Applied Languages, UEBA; a special chapter describes activities the aim of which is to disseminate knowledge generated by scientific and research activities. The paper also lists the most successful events promoting research organised at our faculty.

What is research and how it is done

Contemporary global trends in educational research are characteristic of the strengthening of research orientation in language learning and language teaching. David Nunan (2008) lists his students' answers to two questions about the content and aims of research. Let me quote from his students' answers to indicate how we, university teachers should approach to research.

According to Nunan's students, research is: "about inquiry"...; "a process which involves (a) defining a problem, (b) stating an objective, and formulating a hypothesis..."; "...undertaking structured investigation which hopefully ends in greater understanding of the chosen interest area"; "...evaluation, asking questions, investigations, analysis, confirming hypotheses, overview...".

As for the reasons for doing research, Nunan's students thought that the aim of research was to:

- "...enlighten both researcher and any interested readers... "
- "To satisfy the individual's quest but also to improve community welfare."
- " ... satisfy inquiry...";
- "To discover the cause of the problem..." (Nunan 2008, 3).

At a closer look we find that the students' answers contain the following key terms: *inquiry, quest, process, problem, investigation*, etc. Some of these expressions refer to the features of the process; some other to recipients and how researchers (authors) and recipients feel about research outputs. David Nunan himself adheres to a definition which emphasises a systematic and stage-wise characteristic of research: "...research is systematic process of inquiry consisting of three elements or components: (1) a question, problem or hypothesis, (2) data, (3) analysis and interpretation of data" (Nunan 2008, 3).

Having identified the nature and objectives of research, we can proceed to our next question, i.e. what we should avoid, and then our next question may be what we should avoid in our scientific and research activities. At this point, again I intend to quote David Nunan who turns our attention to a frequent absence of critical approach in this area: "If teachers are to benefit from research of others, and if they are to contextualise research outcomes against the reality of their own classrooms, they need to be able to read the research reports of others in an informed and critical way."... "Unfortunately", as David Nunan points out, "... published research is all too often presented in neat, unproblematic packages, and critical skills are needed to get beneath the surface and evaluate the reliability and validity of research outcomes" (Nunan 2008, xi).

The message for university teachers involved in research (which is to account for 50% of their activities in our country) is that they should beware of excessive generalisations when evaluating other people's research outcomes, and reflect on them critically, i.e. on the basis of adequate background data and evaluation criteria, as well as our own knowledge and experience.

Key areas of scientific and research activities at the Faculty of Applied Languages, UEBA

Key areas and at the same time current tasks in research and publication area have been derived from the interdisciplinary curricula of the study programme "Foreign Languages and Intercultural Communication". They include the following subject disciplines: Contrastive Linguistics, Lexicology and Lexicography, Political Linguistics, European Language Policy, Translatology, Intercultural Communication, Area Studies, and Professional Communication (business and commerce, economic diplomacy). The focus is on:

a) Updating the profile of the graduate from our Faculty in view of research developments in scientific disciplines studied in our core courses, i.e. explore new approaches to studying relationships between language and society (e.g. political linguistics), as well as work out and apply new approaches in cognitive linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and theory and practice of translation;
b) Designing the fundamentals of new materials submitted for new re-accreditation of the Master's study programme in the field of study "Foreign Languages and Cultures" in accordance with international trends in studying language(s);
c) Developing efficient methods and techniques of applying innovative ideas, methods in teaching foreign languages, testing and knowledge assessment, e.g. via E-learning or web-based learning.

Research Projects

This subchapter contains a brief overview of selected, successfully completed research projects of applied research funded by the Slovak Government agency (KEGA) carried out at our faculty (or its predecessor the Institute of Languages). Expressions in italics in the names of projects indicate the orientation of research to particular areas, disciplines, and methods.

List of selected KEGA projects (1995–2014):

- *Multidisciplinary Approach* to Developing Teaching Materials for the Instruction of English in Specialized Courses at the University of Economics in Bratislava
- Contribution to *Internationalisation of Education* at Schools of Higher Education Oriented to Business and Economics (Business Negotiations in German and English)
- *Web Based Training* for Business English and German
- Principles and Methods of Developing the Study Programme for the *Interdisciplinary Study* of "Applied Languages and Intercultural Communication"
- *Web-learning* System in the Course in "*Area Studies* of English- and German-speaking Countries"
- The Influence of *Web Applications* on Language Skills.

Explanatory note: KEGA (Cultural and Educational Grant Agency of the Ministry of Education, Science and Research and Sports, SR)

However, it would make little sense just to list achievements without discussing at least some related problems and constraints. The identification of strengths and weaknesses in our publication and research activities and disclosing their causes is an important part of decision making on future orientation of our research both at the faculty level and nation-wide and international levels. In our research reports we have pointed to a low performance in young researchers´ and doctoral students' projects (which is mainly due to the limit of 30 years); number of submitted projects which obtained funding submitted for funding (one of the reasons is an increasingly complicated format of the application form, which in effect, are becoming less and less user-friendly). At this point, it is necessary to mention another aspect that discourages a serious research in humanities, namely, categorisation of some publications

in humanities, e.g. reviews of doctoral dissertations or reviews of research project submissions are not categorised adequately, and as a result, their authors cannot gain research points that are so important in the process of evaluating HEI institutions. In a number of surveys carried out at our faculty, teachers commented on the assessment practice in this area: even if a manuscript submitted for publication (e.g. a result of two or three-year study) is not published, this is viewed as inactivity on the part of its author (teacher). In order to deal with the problems, we have decided to increase our efforts in submitting proposals for international projects and encourage our colleagues publishing in our scientific journal "Lingua et vita".

Activities Promoting Research: how to popularise scientific and research activities

This chapter aims to present some facts and ideas about strategies, ways and events of popularising scientific and research activities. In other words, it describes how to communicate the outcomes of our scientific and research activities to the public.

The strategic objectives of popularisation actions may be summarised as maintaining and strengthening support of the general public for science and research activities in a society that claims to be increasingly knowledge-based. Action plans for the support of popularisation usually contain general objectives which are formulated as "providing objectives", "raising awareness" and "accounting for the use of the (research) budget" (The last one will not be discussed here.) (4science.cz/read/document/69).

However, there are some obstacles to "doing research" and enjoying this process at the same time. The present-day society is not only more and more knowledge-based; it is also increasingly materialistic and commercialised. One of the consequences is that humanities are too often underrated in contrast to exact and natural sciences.

When planning specific activities for popularisation events, we need to take into consideration that natural scientists are probably in a better position to draw the general public's attention owing to their equipment (e.g. microscopes), hands-on experiments, guided tours of labs, and objects that people can touch or taste (and that is what persuades people that something makes sense or is "useful"). Fortunately, being language and culture teachers we have learnt to be inventive and use both our imagination and technical skills in the application of the multimedia to attract our learners' attention. And these are the ingredients needed when promoting our research results in the public.

Researcher's Night

Personal impressions

Imagine yourself in a long hallway of a large shopping area; the place is teeming with crowds of busy shoppers flowing in both directions, facing you as they are passing your stand, and also walking behind your stand. Individuals and small groups of secondary school graduates stop at your stand to view what it is that is on offer. And this is your chance to turn the passers'-by attention to publications written by your colleagues (and perhaps, by yourself), and ask them if they recognise faces of men and women of science that appear on the screen above your head. Why not try and fill in the questionnaire of knowledge; those who do will get a sweet or two. Then, you can tell them about the study programme offered by your Faculty, and suggest it would be fun to come and study at our Faculty of Applied Languages. And there is a good chance that one day they, members of the public, will join us – researchers.

I hope you have recognised in this account Researcher's Night, an annual European event.

The Researchers' Night is an annual all-European event held last Friday in September. In the year 2013, for example, it took place in 300 cities and in 33 countries (minedu.sk).

To promote our scientific and research activities on this occasion, we prepared various quizzes testing the public's knowledge of cultural differences, personalities of socio-political life in selected foreign countries the languages of which are taught at our faculty, as well as exhibitions of our publications.

National Science and Technology Week

This global event has been held in the Slovak Republic since the year 2007 (minedu.sk) and is organised under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Science and Research and Sports, SR and Slovak Centre of Scientific and Technical Information. The goal of this event is i.e. increasing the awareness of the public of science and technology and persuading the young to pursue careers in science, clearly suggests its prime focus.

Perhaps, we could draw some inspiration from how other nations celebrate this event, e.g. Brazilians. An article entitled *Brazilians learn about science through samba and carnival* posted on Science Development Network webpage offers a completely different perspective of how young people can be encouraged to embark on a researcher careers. The ideas expressed by Professor Bruce Lewenstein, "Science communication works best when it connects people's lives and interests"..."Carnival is about as interesting as it gets! So linking science communication with carnival is a great way to engage people in science", are worthwhile remembering when we start planning activities promoting science and research (scidev.net/global/communication/news/brazilians-learn-about-science-through-samba-and-carnival.html).

Coordinating bodies of the upcoming Science and Technology, Slovakia 2014 which is to be held in November 2014 recommend education institutions to prepare various accompanying events (apart from joining nation-wide activities), namely Open Door days, presentations, lectures and seminars, conferences, workshops, and exhibitions. (minedu.sk)

The most successful events we have organised at the Faculty level during the Week so far include mainly:

- lectures on numerous topics were held at department meetings, to which also international guests were invited, e.g. "Doing Business with the Arab World", Business Negotiations in Practice", "Generation Y Communication – how to succeed";
- methodology seminars on writing and submitting research projects;
- presentations of completed research projects to as well as of new teaching materials designed by our language teachers or on their PhD theses;
- presentations in obtaining Spanish and French language diplomas;
- discussions with international visitors organised in cooperation with AIESEC, e.g. Slovakia and Slovaks in the Context of Multicultural and Multilanguage Europe;
- cultural events with dancing shows (e.g. Latin American dances performed by invited dancing groups and ensembles).

Conclusion

Before we start persuading our colleagues and students to join us in promoting scientific and research outputs at events coordinated on the government level or globally, various doubts and questions may pop up in our minds. The strongest argument in favour of these popularisation events is their all-European or global scope.

On the other hand, a sound counter-argument might be raised, namely that the focus of research and scientific activities at universities should be on "hard-core" publication activities which earn their authors and institutions the best possible assessment in the form of research points.

Again, this time in a different context, we are facing the quality versus quantity conflict, and we need to be able to explain others and even to ourselves why it makes sense to communicate our scientific activities to the public, despite the fact that our efforts and time spent will not earn us the precious research points.

Let me conclude my reflections about research and ways and forms of its popularisation by the following three recommendations to colleagues from other higher education institutions and all those who are involved in promoting research outputs:

1) Develop the habit of critical reading and asking questions.
2) Use your imagination to design suitable activities for popularisation events.
3) Involve young people who believe that popularisation events make sense and who can communicate with the public.

Literature

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