



MASARYK UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF ARTS
Gorkého 7, Brno
mailing address:
Arna Nováka 1
602 00 Brno, Czech Republic

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND AMERICAN STUDIES
Tel: +420-54949 6660
Fax: +420-54949 1522
email:english@phil.muni.cz
<http://www.phil.muni.cz/angl>

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Dear Students,

This letter is one that has been long in the planning, but which I was not yet ready to send to all of you. Unfortunately rumors and misinformation have been spreading amongst you regarding how practical English is to be taught in this Department beginning in the next academic year. This has forced me to write to all of you before all of the final details have been worked out, so you will forgive me if what I write here may not be identical with the future structure of the degree programs in this Department. You will also forgive me if I choose not to go into some details about discussions held amongst the Department staff and questions of finances in the Department and at the Faculty. Let me also take this opportunity to thank those of you who have taken the time to write me on the subject. I do appreciate your interest in the Department and its future.

First off, let me assure you that despite what you have heard from various sources, practical English is not being "cancelled." I understand how this rumor started but it has no basis in fact. The teaching of practical English is and will remain an important aspect of degree programs offered by the Department.

This is not however to say that there will not be changes in the way language teaching is carried out in the Department. There certainly will be and they are part of a larger reorganization of studies in this Department. These changes are based on a number of factors, including the outflow of credits from this department, the structure of the Faculty budget and the Department budget and staff, conceptual discussions held amongst the staff of this Department and concerns raised in the past by students about various aspects of their studies here.

Formal and informal discussions about what is taught in the Department are an ongoing part of the evolution of our degree programs. This process is dynamic and means that every so often changes are made in the degree programs in response to changing situations, demands and needs. One such round of discussions is culminating in a series of changes that will be introduced from the autumn 2007 semester, meaning that they will primarily impact only those students who are currently in their first year of Bachelor's studies and future students. The rest of you will not be significantly impacted.

Now to the issue that seems to concern many of you, practical English. Over the recent (and not so recent) past, one of the major concerns that your teachers have expressed is the relatively poor level of writing skills that you have when it comes time to write essays and diploma theses. While some attempts have been made to address these issues through the introduction of an optional course (Academic Writing) and the shifting of the focus in some courses (Introduction to Literature) from discussions of what should be the course focus to an emphasis on writing skills, the overall results have not been satisfactory. Another concern that students themselves have expressed is the fact that not enough focus is placed on their spoken language skills in practical English. A third issue of concern within the Department is the need to continue to emphasize the core (track) areas of study (linguistics, literature, translation, cultural studies) that are and must remain the focus of the degrees granted here. But since the number of courses and credits that a degree program may consist of is finite, any additions to the program in one area mean reductions in another.

Recent developments in the Department's structure and budget have given a push to reevaluate practical English in light of these areas of concern. A series of discussions have led to the following proposal, which continues practical language teaching but focuses the courses more on the skills that students need to be successful both in their studies and afterwards.

In the Bachelor's degree program, the teaching of practical English will have the following form:

1st Year: Practical English I and II, Grammar I and II (all compulsory)

The structure, number of hours and credits for these courses will remain unchanged.

2nd Year: Academic Writing, Spoken Fluency and Language Exam (all compulsory)

Each course will be worth 4 credits and end in an exam, the exam will continue to have no credit value (as is the norm for all of these types of exams in the Department).

These two courses will replace the optional PE III-VI courses that were only offered for credit.

In addition a number of optional courses will continue to be offered that focus on specific areas (for example collocations, vocabulary development, etc.), although these will probably primarily be taken by single-subject students given the demands placed on double-subject students by their other departments.

The thinking behind this plan is as follows. The first year of studies will continue unchanged and is thought of as a transition from secondary school/language school teaching methods that focus on working with generalized course books. After this transition, the focus, as I said above, will be on developing those skills you need to be a successful student here (writing and speaking). The Department will be increasing the out-of-class support for practical English in the Department, including on-line support in ELF and the addition of language lab facilities to the SAC. However, students will not be spending classroom time working on language course books. These changes will also mean that students will be taught by the most highly qualified members of the Department (something that has not always been the case) and that the courses offered will best use the unique skills and talents of our teaching staff. In plain words, more students will have better access to better teachers than has been the case.

As for the Master's degree program the changes are more profound. A decision has been taken to raise the credit value of courses in the Master's program from four to five, which better reflects the demands placed on students at that level. While this will not change the number of core track courses that Master's students must take, it will reduce overall the number of courses they must complete. Furthermore, the Department has decided to eliminate practical language courses in this program as inconsistent with the mission and level of a Master's degree program. Students whose language skills still need improvement at this level – after ten years or more of studying English – must make their own way.

In addition to these changes, there will also be changes to the number of credits that single-subject students may take outside the Department, but I will be explaining these changes in a separate letter to those students.

We in the Department feel quite strongly that these changes to practical language teaching will produce students with better overall language skills, which means they will be better able to succeed in the job market after graduation. I hope that in time you will come to agree with this point of view.

Respectfully yours,



Jeffrey A. Vanderziel
Department Head