

Improving Research and Language Skills

Ines E. Veauthier

Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz (Germany)
veauthie-@uni-mainz.de

Abstract

The need for general language skills, on the one hand, is widespread in many different jobs today where oral and/or written communication play an important role. Language specialists, on the other hand, work in a wide range of jobs, such as translators, interpreters, terminology experts, lexicographers, technical or medical writers, software localizers or subtitlers, to name just a few. In most cases it is considered part of the professional competence to have sound research skills at one's disposal. This is, however, an area that often does not receive enough attention in academic environments. It proves particularly beneficial to combine studies enhancing both linguistic competence and special research skills making use of Information and Communication Technologies.

This paper will show an approach to teaching these subjects by providing a case study, namely a terminology workshop focusing both on linguistic and on research issues. The course is designed to give students both a sound theoretical background and the incentive to apply their knowledge in a meaningful way. Students work in small groups making it necessary to negotiate with their fellow students the methods and strategies used for each task as well as the presentation mode. By exchanging the results of their work with other groups they will gain a broader range of methods they start feeling familiar with. Also, the workshop is geared in such a way as to increase the students' motivation to refine their research strategies and improve their language skills.

The paper will focus on the targets of the workshop and the practical steps used to have the students reach the targets. Students' performance is measured not only by assessing the output of the group but also by offering independent study projects which aim at delving deeper into certain areas connected with the issues of research and language skills.

In trying to define the term research skills it becomes evident that it is closely related to the terms information literacy and media literacy, thus referring to key skills of the 21st century. These skills comprise some traditional techniques like using books and journals in a library as well as more recent tools like using the internet, while critically evaluating sources and information located either way. The internet offers access to online tutorials such as BBC's "Top Tips for Research Skills" [1] or downloadable material by the University of Washington libraries [2].

Since both libraries and the internet are in widespread use throughout industrialized countries it might be doubted whether it is necessary at all to develop students' research skills at universities and colleges. There is, however, the risk of an "information overload", making it increasingly difficult to manage data in a competent way. Media education programmes have started in many areas and the importance of media literacy is recognized (e.g. in the European Union), yet studies indicate the continuing need for an initial assessment of students' research skills (Caspers and Bernhisel 458-68) [3]. Media resource use requires a wide range of expertise so any approach to teaching research skills should be seen as part of an ongoing, lifelong experience (Meister and Meise 53-55) [4]. It should also take into account the new values which are developing and which reflect a long-standing tradition of humanist values: "The most prominent value is the defence of individual autonomy based on critical

thinking, free examination and the right to information. It is further based on equal access and the egalitarian distribution of competences and capacities" (Pérez Tornero and Varis 44) [5].

Rather than being restricted to certain areas, research skills are essential in many different jobs today where they are considered as part of the professional competence. General language skills are demanded as well to cope with various communication needs. Moreover, there are numerous positions in which specialists are required, such as translators, interpreters, terminology experts, lexicographers, software localizers, subtitlers, technical or medical writers. One useful approach to teaching future language specialists is a combination of linguistic and research issues which will be shown below by highlighting some points of a case study, namely a terminology workshop. Students learn to analyze highly specialized business and economics texts, taking the meaning and interrelation of terms and concepts into account, thus facilitating the subsequent translation of terms and texts.

There are two aspects related to the terminology workshop to be considered. On the one hand, the competent research as such is required, on the other hand, the students need to include in their analysis the complete text as well as the greater context so as to make sense of the information processed. The latter aspect has received closer attention since the 1980s and is termed world knowledge or cultural literacy (Hirsch 2) [6]. This skill is the prerequisite for decoding complex messages: "The explicit meanings of a piece of writing are the tip of an iceberg of meaning; the larger part lies below the surface of the text and is composed of the reader's own relevant knowledge" (Hirsch 34) [6].

Due to the different background knowledge of the recipient as well as of the sender of a message, only a careful consideration of the aspects contributing to the context will facilitate communication as intended. Another factor adding to this effect is the inconsistent use of terms, e.g. using synonyms or terms from different functional areas. An easy example provided in the workshop is the use of "share market" as a verb or a noun, respectively (Page [7]; Cooperman [8]). The incongruent elements of these information layers create a certain ambiguity which is usually termed vagueness when referring to specialized texts (Stolze 94-99) [9]. A third factor which tends to be overlooked is the detection of defects in the original text. If the mistake seems to provide a new meaning it is difficult for students to recognize and solve the problem so it is important to include such situations in a learning experience. To give an example, an article on the stakeholder management strategies of a bank states that "P&G's reputation for using cutting-edge financing techniques cast doubt on its claims to be nave in this matter" (BancWare) [10]. Most students will be confused how to fit parts of a church building, "nave", into this banking context before realizing the correct term should be "naive".

Consequently, a competent research process must start considering the complete text in the original language before turning to the target language. The different steps should be seen as elements of a closely connected communication process, regardless whether the result will be a summary, a translation, a terminology database or any other document. Analyzing a problem in its entirety instead of using fragments and looking at single words can also be stated as one of the targets for the terminology workshop. Some other targets are the acquisition of background knowledge referring to research techniques, language skills and terminology management as well as the practical application and transfer of this knowledge.

To reach these targets, one of the first steps in the workshop, after an outline of terminology basics, was to develop criteria to be able to validate internet sources and any information obtained. In small groups, the students had to agree on the criteria and create an acronym. Afterwards they compared the results of their own group first with that of the others in the workshop, then with a term provided by secondary literature: "CARS", as suggested by Harris [11] is short for credibility, accuracy, reasonableness, support. Certain criteria were chosen by most groups, thus representing a form of consensus, while a variety of additional aspects was also deemed relevant, making everyone aware of the many facets of a thorough analysis. This learning process was complemented by an interactive

tool provided by a Swiss university, introducing areas of internet research such as validating results and improving search strategies (SPRINT) [12]. The above-mentioned options provided by the BBC [1] and the University of Washington Libraries [2] also come in useful at this stage.

An article from the Harvard Business Review on the topic of culture and strategy in a business environment was used with several aims in mind. Since it discussed the dynamics of teamwork, it was meant to make the students reflect on their own social skills and the direction their team was taking, thus realizing the greater context and the implications of this text. Recognizing the need for sophisticated search strategies constituted another aim. Analyzing the importance of trust in a team, the author of the article emphasized: "This 'we're all in it together' cultural norm is certainly egalitarian, but it doesn't support specialization, scale, or accountability" (Merchant) [13]. Only at a closer look did this seemingly simple statement prove to be a challenge since the meaning of "scale" was vague. There is a wide range of meanings connected with this term, in general language usage as well as in special fields, such as music, biology and economics. An initial online search, e.g. using google, provided approximately 637,000,000 results, which did not help the students find any explanation that seemed to make sense in the given situation. Nor did a restriction to economics help, since terms such as "economies of scale" did not provide any logical solutions. This served to illustrate a third aim of this exercise, namely realizing the importance of a compatibility check when doing research. Choosing a term in the target language at random would put the whole document at risk and might even lead to legal consequences. A successful approach will require a combination of linguistic skills and refined research techniques, resulting in a definition of "scale" as the payment assigned to a particular job classification.

Having examined and compared many different definitions for the term "scale" in the last task, the next step was a closer look at definitions. If they are to be used professionally, they need to meet certain criteria; moreover, a number of common errors will be found again and again in definitions. Understanding about synonymy and polysemy are closely related areas, and so is the differentiation between terms and concepts. Students worked in groups using material on only one of the areas (Arntz, Picht and Mayer 68-72, 125-33 [14]; Stolze 146-51 [9]). Among other things, they had to come up with practical examples for the theoretical concepts they studied and they had to negotiate with their team members how to present their topic. Upon completion they joined forces with a group that had worked on a different project and the teams exchanged their results. Explaining the topics to each other helped them to gain a broader picture, e.g. they could detect logical gaps in their own approach, see which examples were well chosen, start connecting and combining the information, etc.

The workshop continued with the practical application and complex transfer of the background knowledge and the skills acquired. A specially designed worksheet provided a comprehensive opportunity to test the progress made. The entries in the worksheet contained a number of economic terms and their definitions, synonyms, antonyms or translations. The first step was meant to be only a cursory glance to detect major flaws, incongruent data or obvious connections. The sources were included and the students had access to the file, so next they reviewed and evaluated the entries in detail. This also facilitated comparing data with alternative sources, thus qualifying the original material. Upon completion the worksheet was annotated, expanded and adjusted to be used as a glossary and the students had recorded their findings in an explanatory note.

Part of the students' performance was an independent study project in which they developed a portfolio. They consulted with the instructor as to their study interests and options; the range of projects they chose was very wide. Some opted for a more academic approach, such as examining the conditions and prerequisites of terminology management, while others selected an area of economics and did practical research on terms and definitions using sources they had validated.

The portfolios as well as the overall performance of the students proved their development throughout the workshop since they now had different tools and techniques at their disposal. Becoming familiar



with the methods and approaches needed both at university and in professional positions requiring sophisticated research and language skills enabled them to use their skills in a competent way.

References:

- [1] BBC Key Skills: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/keyskills/extra/module2/1.shtml> (accessed 30 July 2011)
- [2] University of Washington libraries: <http://www.lib.washington.edu/uwill/research101/> (accessed 30 July 2011)
- [3] Caspers, Jean and Steven Mark Bernhisel. "What do freshmen really know about research? Assess before you teach. " *Research Strategies* 20.4 (2005): 458-68.
- [4] Meister, Dorothee M. and Bianca Meise. "Medienkompetenz als lebenslange Herausforderung." *Unesco heute* 1 (2008): 53-55. http://www.unesco.de/fileadmin/medien/Dokumente/unesco-heute/uh1-2008/uh108_s53-55.pdf (accessed 10 Aug 2011)
- [5] Pérez Tornero, José Manuel and Tapio Varis. *Media Literacy and New Humanism*. Moscow: UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education, 2010. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001921/192134e.pdf> (accessed 28 Aug 2011)
- [6] Hirsch, Eric Donald. *Cultural Literacy. What Every American Needs to Know*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.
- [7] Page, Andrew. "Putting the cart before the horse." March 2, 2010. www.cornucopiafp.com.au/articles/news/putting-the-cart-before-the-horse.aspx (accessed 30 July 2011)
- [8] Cooperman, Leon G. "Foreword." *Trader Vic – Methods of a Wall Street Master*. Victor Sperandeo. New York: Wiley, 1991.
- [9] Stolze, Radegundis. *Fachübersetzen – Ein Lehrbuch für Theorie und Praxis*. Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2009.
- [10] BancWare ERisk, Sungard 2011. <http://www.erisk.com/learning/casestudies/bankerstrust.asp> (accessed 20 Aug 2011)
- [11] Harris, Robert. *A Guidebook to the Web*. Guilford: McGraw-Hill, 1999.
- [12] SPRINT – Schweizer Portal für die Recherche im Internet, Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft Chur: <http://www.sprint.htwt3.info/> (accessed 20 Aug 2011)
- [13] Merchant, Nilofer. "Culture Trumps Strategy, Every Time." *Harvard Business Review*, March 22, 2011. http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2011/03/culture_trumps_strategy_every.html (accessed 20 Aug 2011)
- [14] Arntz, Reiner, Heribert Picht und Felix Mayer. *Einführung in die Terminologearbeit*. Hildesheim: Olms, 2009.