

The Teaching of Foreign Languages for Specific Purposes: The Way Forward

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Abstract

Mastery in foreign languages is considered, in today's world, not just an excellent tool to bridge gaps between people coming from different countries and to create strong sentimental and professional relationships, but above all an instrument that enables workers to considerably improve their career prospects. Multilingualism is today considered to be one of the key elements for a modern Europe, given that learning foreign languages permits citizens to enrich their lives, to grasp new ideas and to benefit from the European cultural diversity. In today's world, knowing how to use a language in specific circumstances and purposes gives people a very strong bargaining power, especially in the labour world. Whereas up to twenty or thirty years ago, speaking a foreign language was a very important prerequisite for just a few, like managers or diplomats, today it has become of fundamental importance in all professional circles. In fact, in today's European society, languages and intercultural play a fundamental role in getting to know different people and in obtaining professional and economic development. This means that there can be two main objectives for teaching/learning foreign languages: personal growth and professional growth. As declared by the European Commission in one of its documents on multilingualism, entitled, "Languages mean Business!", one of the main reasons why thousands of European companies lose out on concluding deals and contracts is their lack of linguistic and intercultural competencies [1]. And this is exactly why today we offer courses in foreign languages for specific purposes, be it for tourism, for call centres, for business, for commerce and so on, focusing on acquiring the necessary terminological, interdisciplinary and intercultural skills needed for specific jobs.

New society requirements to education and personality development, new life conditions have changed the attitude to the process of learning foreign languages. Hutchinson & Waters (1987) believe that as a result of this development a lot of pressure was exerted on the language teaching profession to deliver the required goods since whereas foreign languages had previously decided their own destiny, they now became subject to the wishes, needs and demands of people other than language teachers [2]. Dita Gálová (2007; viii) states that "globalization of the world economy requires professionals and specialists in various areas to communicate effectively in foreign languages. The success is conditional on their ability to manage language and cultural barriers, i.e. on the language skills and competences with respect to their professional areas"[3]. Indeed, mastery in foreign languages is considered, in today's world, not just an excellent tool to bridge gaps between people coming from different countries and to create strong sentimental and professional relationships, but above all an instrument that enables workers to considerably improve their career prospects. Multilingualism is today considered to be one of the key elements for a modern Europe, given that learning foreign languages permits citizens to enrich their lives, to grasp new ideas and to benefit from the European cultural diversity. In today's world, knowing how to use a language in specific circumstances and purposes gives people a very strong bargaining power, especially in the labour world. Whereas up to twenty or thirty years ago, speaking a foreign language was a very important prerequisite for just a few, like managers or diplomats, today it has become of fundamental importance in all professional circles. In fact, in today's European society, languages and intercultural

play a fundamental role in getting to know different people and in obtaining professional and economic development.

Unfortunately, many people in various countries still think that the only careers languages can lead to are translation and teaching. However, in the global marketplace that we now live in, languages have become crucial across all sectors. From law to finance, from tourism to technology, and from marketing to administration, most businesses today need linguists not just to permit communication across the globe but also to understand different cultural realities and needs. The balance of the world economy is changing as countries like China, India, Russia and Brazil have, in recent years, grown in importance. Consequently, speaking the language of these and of other nations will be a huge factor in how successful we are in the future. This means that in the world of work, language skills are becoming always increasingly important in organisations and businesses who want to remain competitive on an international level. Companies working within the global market require a versatile staff in order to communicate effectively and it is in their interest to employ speakers of foreign languages who are able to talk to clients, business partners, fellow employees in different countries in their own languages as this will not just help communication but, above all, it helps to make sales and to negotiate and secure contracts. This means that there can be two main objectives for teaching/learning foreign languages: personal growth and professional growth. As declared by the European Commission in one of its documents on multilingualism, entitled, "Languages mean Business!", one of the main reasons why thousands of European companies lose out on concluding deals and contracts is their lack of linguistic and intercultural competencies [4]. And this is exactly why today there exists an array of courses in foreign languages for specific purposes, be it for tourism, for call centres, for business, for commerce and so on, focusing on acquiring the necessary terminological, interdisciplinary and intercultural skills needed for specific jobs. This is confirmed by the CBI Education and Skills Survey (2009: 48) which states that "in an increasingly competitive job market, it is clear that foreign language proficiency adds significant value to a candidate's portfolio of skills, and can give them a real competitive edge when applying for jobs"[5]. Furthermore, the Business Forum for Multilingualism established by the European Commission (2008: 8) declares clearly that "A significant percentage of European SMEs lose business every year as a direct result of linguistic and intercultural weaknesses. Although it appears certain that English will keep its leading role as the world business language, it is other languages that will make the difference between mainstream and excellence and provide a competitive edge"[6].

Although the teaching of foreign languages in general and the teaching of foreign languages for specific purposes have a lot in common, from a practical point of view, teaching foreign languages for specific purposes implies addressing the immediate and very specific needs of the learners involved. This means that the driving force, both in the preparation stage as well as in the development stage of such courses, should be the needs analysis of the learners, who very often need that language for their job. For this reason the starting point should always be a study of the learners' needs, objectives and expectations for the course. This may include forming a list of preferences of what the learners would like to learn, as far as language and content is concerned, and of how they would like to learn it. For example, the needs of a learner studying a foreign language for scientific or technological purposes are totally different from those of another learner studying for medical purposes or legal purposes, or financial purposes. The same goes for individuals studying a foreign language for specific trades or occupations and others still concerned with finding a job. Even the skills required vary considerably. Very often, for example, people studying for commercial purposes need specific reading and writing skills – reading and understanding the contents of an email and replying to it; writing various letters of a different nature, be it a letter of complaint, of protest, of acceptance; taking minutes of an important meeting, etc. On the other hand, people studying a foreign language to work in a call centre are more interested in listening and speaking skills – answering the phone; leaving a message; giving information over the phone, etc. All this implies that teaching a foreign language for

specific purposes can be quite taxing and demanding. First of all it must be acknowledged that the learner, especially in courses that are specifically oriented for adults who already work in that particular field, is the primary knower of the content of the material. The teacher's role is to help, to create communication in class, to give advice, to provide the tools for the learners to help them develop and acquire the skills they need. When, for example, there is a course of Italian for commercial purposes or for legal purposes, the role of the teacher is not to teach them the rules of business management or to teach them the laws of the country. In all probability the learners are experts in the field. The role of the teacher is to equip the learners with tools and strategies that will empower them in a world where the teacher is only one of the many providers, or sources, of language exposure and communicative practice. His/her role is to provide them with the necessary linguistic tools to be able to apply the concepts, interpret them, and above all communicate in the target language, not just with the particular jargon characteristic of that specific occupational context but also with the language of everyday informal talk, that allows them to communicate effectively regardless of the occupational context. This, very often, implies flexibility on the teachers' part, negotiating with the learners how best to reach these objectives. In other words, the teacher needs to understand the requirements of other professions and be willing to adapt to these requirements. He/she needs to understand the context in which the language will be used as well as any specialist concepts and terminology, and this, in turn, implies the need for specific training, tailor-made courses and teaching the practical use of the target language..

Consequently, teaching a foreign language for specific purposes cannot be taught according to any pre-ordained methodology and therefore cannot be considered a subject to be taught but rather an approach. This means that the teacher is not only obliged to develop a learner-centered curriculum and to find the best methods to be employed to disseminate linguistic knowledge in accordance to the learners' needs, but also to piece together the curricular materials needed to reach the learners' objectives. It is a known fact that language in different situations varies and therefore the teacher has to tailor make not just the curriculum and the methods, but above all the materials to be used for each and every individual course in accordance to its specific context and centred on its appropriate language (grammar, lexis, register), skills, discourse and genres (Strevens, 1988, Robinson, 1991, Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998) [7]. The fact that teachers, very often, are asked to produce a course that exactly matches the needs of a group of learners, makes it practically impossible to either find suitably published material or to use a particular textbook without the need for supplementary material. This leaves very little choice for the teachers but to provide the material for the course themselves. And as Nunan (1987) puts it, this requires time, skills and support [8]. In fact this involves not just keeping abreast with the vast selection of published material and adapting it to the learners' needs, but very often it also implies developing a self produced resource bank of authentic materials.

In an article entitled "Business Needs Language" Language Magazine [9] explores 'What Business Wants: Language Needs in the 21st Century' and concludes that, within the American business sector, there exists a real need for a more systematic discussion of the role and value of foreign language skills, especially in the face of strong perceptions that English is and will continue

to be the lingua franca of international business. Elisabeth Lord Stuart, Operations Director of the U.S.-Algeria Business Council, argues that an enormous barrier to increasing US participation in overseas markets is the lack of appropriate foreign language skills and abilities among U.S. businessmen. Indeed, a lingua franca can never be enough in today's world to satisfy every communication need. Learning foreign languages for specific purposes, not only provide the keys to the cultures they represent but, above all, open doors to new markets and new business opportunities. Several research studies not only show that a variety of languages are required on international markets but also that the most quoted barrier to intra-European mobility remains lack of

foreign language skills [10]. It is no surprise that language skills are considered by employers as one of the ten most important skills for future graduates. This was confirmed by a recent Eurobarometer study [11] where 40 % of recruiters in the industry sector highlighted the importance of language skills for future higher education graduates. Another study, about the internationalisation of European SME's published by the European Commission in 2010, [12] shows how when companies start exporting, language and cultural barriers start being perceived as important obstacles.

One last consideration. It is a known fact that the demand for foreign languages for specific purposes and communication skills is steadily rising on the European labour market and that very often employers demand diplomas/certificates as a proof of language competence. This means that the testing and accreditation methods connected to language competences for professional purposes are becoming ever so important and relevant and that the language skills acquired through such courses, usually outside the formal education system, should be formally acknowledged. In this sense, the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) [13], which provides the structure not just of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines but also for most of the assessment methods for language competences, provides transparent and authentic proof of appropriate skills acquired for various occupations.

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