



## **Language Learning for Specific Purposes: Teaching Business Spanish and Business German to Students of the Export Management Program at the Higher Vocational Level**

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### **Abstract**

*The students of the Export Management Program offered by the Folkuniversitetet in Stockholm have a choice of learning Business Spanish, Business German or Business French as a third language. The aims of learning any of these three languages at the higher vocational level are purely utilitarian: The program combines curricular subjects with two internships. The first of these internships is carried out in an enterprise in Sweden, and lasts 16 weeks. The second internship, which is carried out overseas, has a duration of 19 weeks. The study program stresses the importance of good language skills and intercultural competence for the export sector.*

*Students need to master the business vocabulary and the syntax structures they will use during their internship. The approach of the program is purely acquisitive: The students are interested in obtaining language credentials that certify results to potential employers, and not in learning for the sake of personal development.*

*The task of the language instructor is challenging for a number of reasons: First, in contrast to Germany, there is no cooperative education in Sweden where schools and employers jointly prepare future employees; Second, credential inflation has become commonplace in Sweden, which means that in many cases high school graduates lack the basic language knowledge required for taking content and language integrated courses; Third, students' ages range from the early twenties to the late forties, and their cultural backgrounds are highly heterogeneous as well: From high school graduates who want to obtain the credentials that grant them swift entry as interns in an enterprise to older humanities graduates who aim to obtain practical skills in order to come into the employment market.*

*Teaching a third language for vocational purposes to such heterogeneous groups poses a challenge for the language instructor, since there is no time to go over grammatical structures the students might have problems understanding. The Business Spanish and Business German courses integrate business content and language parting from the assumption that students have at least a B1+ level in any of these languages. The use of English as a "bridging" language is a practical strategy since most of the students do have at least a B1+ level in English, and learn other curricular subjects in English.*

### **1. The aims of Higher Vocational Education programs in Sweden**

#### **1.1 Higher Vocational Education programs as a way into the labor market**

According to the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education, "Higher Vocational Education (HVE) Programs have come about as a response to a real labour market needs and their operations are in concert with employers and industry." The Agency states that the programs adapt to the needs of the labour market, and therefore new programs start as obsolete ones are eliminated. The Agency states that "...companies and organisations tied to the programs take an active part in the planning as well as the implementation of the programs". [1]

The Agency claims to analyse labour market needs for qualified workforce, in order to decide which programs are relevant and then allocate public funding to education providers. Education providers are usually colleges or adult schools. These provide theoretical courses which are then complemented by two internships. The students receive grades both for the courses attended as well as for their performance during the internship.

Higher vocational education programs are usually two years long, and it is a requisite to have a high school certificate (equivalent to twelve years of schooling) for applying. In contrast, vocational education programs require only a primary school certificate (equivalent to nine years of schooling).



## **1.2 The aims of the Export Management program directed to German-, Spanish- or French-speaking markets**

The program brochure states that..." The Export Management study program is offered by the Folkuniversitetet in cooperation with the Swedish Trade Council and the Swedish Chambers of Commerce in Barcelona, Düsseldorf and Paris... Our study program stresses the importance of good language skills and intercultural competence for the export management sector. Although our program provides students with excellent skills for the German-, Spanish-, and French-speaking markets, they also take Business English and intercultural communication, which enable them to work in any international context..."

The students have a full-time schedule and combine theoretical studies with two internships. During the first year, they complete a 10-week internship at a company in Sweden and during the second year they complete a 16-week internship at a company in a Spanish-, German-, or French-speaking country.

In the internship information sheet given to the internship providers, the Folkuniversitetet states that: "...By using their Spanish, French, or German language skills daily with colleagues and customers the students have the possibility of enhancing their mastery of the language in an effective way, while at the same time they gain an insight into the Hispanic, German, or French business culture", and that second- year students should be able to communicate with customers in different languages in a professional manner".

Having worked for over a year as an instructor of Spanish and German for the Export Management Program, the view of the author is that there is indeed a great gap between what the program brochure advertises and reality for a number of reasons.

## **2. Problems encountered by language instructors at the Export Management program**

Perhaps the greatest difficulty faced by third language instructors is the heterogeneity of the groups:

A) Students vary age from 19-year old high school graduates to people in their late 40s, who seek to come into the labor market through a higher vocational program and an internship in a company;

B) Students are both Swedes who usually have reasonable English skills as well as immigrants from very diverse cultural backgrounds. Some students do not master the English language and, in the case of the Spanish specialization, seek the program because they see an advantage of being native speakers of the language. This is especially the case of Latin American students.

C) The motives of the students for applying to the program are very varied: as mentioned above, some see the program as a means of entering a highly competitive labor market, while others apply for several study programs and might come into the Export Management Program as a second or third choice.

Moreover, some students have work experience while others don't. This makes a great difference in their motivation to learn a language that they know they will need as compared to others who study the program because it was their second or their third choice.

### **2.1. The educational background of Swedish high school graduates**

According to the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, learning a third language is mandatory from the sixth grade in elementary school. Sixth-grade pupils have a choice among mainly French, German and Spanish but a few schools also offer Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic or Russian as alternative third languages. Students who belong to minority groups like the Sami or the Roma also have the choice of studying their native language at school. One of the main problems schools face is that although learning a third language is mandatory, pupils have a right to drop out of third language courses anytime. According to the Swedish School Inspectorate, pupils have very few chances of actually practicing their third language skills. [2] Another problem the Swedish School Inspectorate mentions in its 2010 report on modern language instruction is that there is a high number of drop-outs. In most of the cases the schools do not find out the cause of why students leave modern language classes. One of the alleged causes of dropping out of modern language courses is that the subject is too difficult and that the pupils do not receive the didactic support they need.

Yet another great problem is the qualifications of modern language teachers: According to the Swedish Schools Inspectorate, a significant proportion of third language teachers are recent graduates while others graduated in the 1970s. Other instructors are native speakers of the languages they teach but lack the didactic skills needed for teaching a language successfully. In the case of Spanish the situation is especially critical, due to the fact that there are relatively few certified Spanish



teachers. Some pupils reported that they could have up to four or five Spanish teachers in a single school year. [3]

## 2.2. The effects of market reforms on education

Since June 1992 parents can choose the school they want their children to attend. It was no longer mandatory to send their children to the neighbourhood school, and a system of charter schools was established which favoured the establishment of “free” schools under private management. Though it would not be accurate to state that the academic level of the so-called “free schools” is generally lower than the level of public schools, the presence of these new actors has had indeed negative consequences on the Swedish educational system.

In the Swedish educational system, grades are very important for the individual student. [4] The competition that schools face in the new market has had grade inflation as a consequence. Grade inflation is problematic for several reasons: First of all, it reduces the legitimacy of using grades as a screening instrument for higher education. Furthermore, students tend to learn less when high grades can be easily obtained. [5] There are only national tests for the subjects of maths, Swedish and English.

The problem that grade inflation poses to the providers of HVE programs is that the institutions usually take students’ high school certificates at face value. In practice, students with good language skills have the same finishing grades as students with poor language skills. At the Folkuniversitetet, the Program Coordinator does not speak French, German or Spanish. Her choices are influenced by the grades contained in the students’ high school certificates. The consequence, as stated above, is that students with very different language skills sit in the same group and the instructor has to make sure that all of them acquire proficiency in the language they study before they start their second internship abroad.

## 3. Challenges and Strategies of Third-Language Instructors of the Export Management Program

Since the main aim of the HVE Export Management Program is the entry of the graduates into the labour market, the motivation of the students is purely acquisitive- i.e., obtaining a degree that certifies their skills. The language instructor has no time to “waste” in knowledge that is not going to be of direct use to the student.

For the students who have deficient language skills, the Folkuniversitetet offers complementary evening language courses at 50% discount. Some students have taken advantage of the offer and attend those courses.

The strategy of the author has been to integrate language teaching with study content: Since the students have to take the subjects of international trade and logistics, the subject matter of business Spanish and business German courses is the same as the subject matter of international trade and logistics, but in Spanish and German, respectively.

The textbooks used for these courses are *not really* language-instruction books but rather books basic business management and international trade books in Spanish and German written in for students of the vocational programs of those countries.

Furthermore, the instructor encourages the use of computer programs like Google translate in case the students lack the basic vocabulary, or find the contexts difficult.

The results have been mainly positive, though a few students who had extremely inflated grades, which in no way corresponded to their actual knowledge, left the courses and the Export Management Program altogether.

## References

[1] Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education homepage

[2] Skolinspektionen Sammanfattning Rapport 2010:6 Moderna Språk

[3] Ibid

[4] Swedish Competition Authority, Assignment Research Report 2010:6 ISSN 1652-8069

[5] Ibid