New Media and Language Teaching for Professional Purposes: an Integrative Approach

Roxana Magdalena Bârlea
Bucharest University of Economic Studies (Romania)
roxanabirlea@yahoo.fr

Abstract

This paper explores different ways of integrating new media and technology with language teaching and learning - within the context of formal, nonformal and informal adult education. The main target are professionals working in multilingual and multicultural environments who are required to improve their communication skills very quickly in different languages, while focusing on their work. The current research addresses in-company language trainers, and deals with content and methodology aspects, while promoting the action-oriented approach to language teaching and learning. The questions addressed include: How to support individuals to become multilingual? How to better prepare them for a multicultural work environment, in which they have to continuously adjust to switching from one language to another, from a medium to another? How to provide them with transferable skills and tools to face such a new challenge? How to go beyond traditional approaches to language learning and improve their learning habits? How to use virtual learning environments more effectively? How to facilitate a transdisciplinary approach to language learning? The examples provided are based on the experience of teaching foreign languages as a language trainer in multinational companies in Bucharest and that of teaching Business French at academic level. The results achieved come to confirm the relevance of integrating new media in both the language class and in teacher training and development.

1. Introduction

The current paper's reflection started in a very specific context: teaching French for Specific Purposes (FSP) for employees in the fields of engineering, sales, and finance. This particular study targets professionals working in a multilingual and multicultural environment who are required to rapidly improve their communication skills in different languages, while focusing on their work. These professionals will often have to switch from mother tongue to at least one or two foreign languages in order to communicate in their day-to-day jobs: on a formal and professional level (which often includes very specific terminology and requires precision of meaning) or on a less professional topic (like, for example, a coffee break conversation with peers). The main communication channels are face-to-face interaction (one-to-one or meeting), telephone conversation, using the in-company messenger, or audio-visual conferences.

Learners taking in-company language classes deal with the following main challenges [2] and [3]: a) very limited amount of time to learn; b) high _extrinsic_ motivation (work-related pressure), and often times low _intrinsic_ motivation; c) learning habits and needs that differ from one individual to another; d) need for adopting new approaches in language learning; e) desire to use new technologies in the process of learning - trends similar to those identified by Muresan [4]. Very often, learners try to go beyond these language classes during their free time as well. Trying to learn more, they search the Internet looking for tools related to their field where they can use the target language. We now realize that the new media and emerging technologies are a valuable resource in the field of education. Research in this field has already given some attention to new media technologies. At the present moment, the task of such research is to explore new ways of learning a language using new media and making use of technology in order to enable students to learn a language quicker and more creatively.

1.1. Research Objectives

Our aim is to enable readers to (1) generate new ideas on how to benefit from various new media channels during in-company language training, but also (2) to guide learners to use those instruments to continue learning outside classes, individually, so as to become more autonomous.

1.2. Limits

Numerous limitations can determine us to ask ourselves if these learning approaches can be truly effective. Since they are not thoroughly checked by specialists and native speakers, some of the sources we mention can only promote erroneous or partial language competencies. Our response to this limit is (a) to train students to double-check their information and (b) to welcome partial language competencies as part of the learning process.

1.3. Methodology

This research is based on the action-oriented approach, which finds its ideal context in multinational companies. Learners have the opportunity to perform real professional tasks in real environments. Even the learning tasks are real (eg. to check documents in a certain language on the Intranet for solutions to a professional problem; to explain to a colleague how to solve it, etc. – see [1] for complex tasks). All the class activities have to be permanently selected, constantly adjusting the content of the language class to the learners' specific professional activities. Working closely with professionals in a specific field, language teachers have to conceive tasks which combine professional content with new media support in the language taught.

The conclusions of this study are, thus, based on my experience as an in-company French language trainer. The class activities presented below have been tested on a sample of adult learners in the situation described, characterised through measurable results achieved. For example, we started with A1 learners who, in a relatively short period of time (months), have gained confidence and flexibility in using the French language, while correctly performing professional tasks in French. Most of them have also become independent in French within the same amount of time.

2. New Media in the Language Class

This part of the paper outlines the components of the new media that can be used to teach and learn a language and how to use such tools. My oral presentation is focused on specific class scenarios based on this article.

2.1. Content

Reference will be made to new media technologies such as:
1. online mass-media:
    a. audio / video (online radio and TV channels)
    b. written (online specialized magazines, blogs)
2. specialized websites:
    a. audio / video (such as *YouTube, TV des Entrepreneurs*)
    b. written (*Wikis*, free websites for business correspondence)
3. social media (such as *forums, FaceBook, Skype, YahooAnswers*)
4. online platforms designed for language learning (eurobusinesslanguageskills.net)
5. online databases, dictionaries, thesauruses, *Google* tools etc.
6. Smartphone applications
7. virtual learning environments (VLE) (EasyClass.com, CourseBuilder)

YouTube for instance covers even some of the most remote subjects in very narrow fields of specialization. It contains dedicated channels, specialized in many topics, including sales techniques, recruitment etc. The *Renault* channel is a particular example, worthwhile including here for illustration purposes. On this channel, an engineer can find, for example, a tutorial in French, on how to use a specific piece of computer software named 'Catia', to design 3D car parts. The voice is that of a native speaker who is also a specialist in this field, providing the viewer with plenty of technical details (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7M7j25kmCdU&list=PLGVd_IdG7BJ7mn9eMpqyRaEnlsP2--nU6&feature=mh_lolz - accessed 20.02.2013). The language trainer can thus obtain genuine samples of communication typical for a certain professional field. Excerpts from *YouTube* videos can represent a starting point for listening or speaking activities. Also, learners can be asked to contribute to comments related to a certain video sequence, directly online, or even to create a video of themselves explaining a work-related aspect and upload it online.

The Social media are very useful when learners need to improve their interaction skills. The "instant messenger" is a professional tool which can be used with learning purposes.

Dedicated *FaceBook groups*, such as, for example, "*Francophones et francophonie de Roumanie*", or virtual social groups, like *Couch Surfing, InterNations, Rencontres Régulières Francophones à Bucarest* etc., are places where learners can interact with native speakers or with people interested in

using a certain language. Most of the topics on these social media channels are in General French ~~or English~~, but professional aspects can also be targeted.

One of the most interesting new social channels is *YahooAnswers* – a platform where any member can ask questions on a vast range of subjects; the questions are subsequently answered by other users in the group of expertise. This channel offers such a rich potential to learners mainly because those who answer questions often provide references or proof to back up their statements, making quality checks easier. The answers are also rated by other users, which offers an even greater degree of quality control and provides the learner with more chances to find correct examples of language use in different contexts.

When using a foreign language on all levels, some of the very useful yet not very used instruments are online *dictionaries, thesauruses,* and other language tools *(Google translate, OneLook.com,* etc.). Language trainers should teach learners how to use, for instance, dictionaries for collocations. These tools can prove to be invaluable sources of information when very accurate formulations are required in a professional context. This category of new media can also be installed on smartphones, so as to be available to the language users at any given moment.

Other important resources are *movie subtitles*, which are now available in a wide variety of languages. They can become a source of useful material in order to create different kinds of exercises. Many movies contain, for example, scenes about business meetings. Regardless of the language of the movie, the subtitles (and, often, dubbed voice-over recordings) can be used for languages we are interested in. Different exercises for contextualization, at the sociolinguistic, linguistic and pragmatic levels can be, thus, successfully designed.

2.2. Methodology

The language trainers should *present all these resources to their learners* who can use them in class, as part of different learning tasks or at home.

Trainers should *choose one open-access VLE tool* (such as Moodle or EasyClass) *and organise all the content* they and the learners identify on the Internet in clear sections, courses, in-class and at-home activities etc.

Working closely with learners, trainers have to *design tasks and projects which involve real communication* between learners, native speakers and other speakers of the target language, during which learners have to deal with real-world tasks (eg. solving a professional problem, which involves asking for help from another colleague, watching video tutorials, explaining a task etc. – using the target language). In LSP, communicating with a specific goal, in order to accomplish a task, address a need or reach an objective is even easier than when teaching general languages. Learners already have to accomplish specific work tasks in a foreign language where they need to improve their skills. This is why language trainers should permanently work with the learners, who are specialists in their field, when designing class activities and when establishing the competencies to acquire.

For the teacher, the preparation phase often takes more time than the actual teaching. This is the reason why it is very important to create common databases, in order to exchange ideas and to share the fruit of our work with fellow colleagues. The *open-source* or *hub* models could benefit all the parties involved.

The language trainer should work in class on different aspects of the communication, related to a specific professional field, based on material obtained from the new media mentioned above. Trainers should ask themselves what specific linguistic means the learner needs in order to perform a certain professional task and focus on these linguistic means in class.

In the example above, the 'Catia' tutorial movie on the Renault *YouTube* channel, one of the many possibilities for its use would be to teach learners how to pass on explanations to another colleague – at a linguistic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic level. Learners will, therefore, have to deal with: the structure of their discourse (introducing the different parts of the presentation, using connectors); specific vocabulary; grammatical elements (modals, imperatives) and other peculiarities necessary in such communication situations. This is called "specialized grammar" [3] – teaching linguistic elements not in a certain progression, but depending on their frequency in the professional discourse used in a specific work context.

The learning tasks based on this kind of material are real, as teachers can ask learners to participate in debates on forums, to film themselves explaining a professional activity and upload the movie on *YouTube*, to contact a fellow via messenger or e-mail. For instance, one of the tasks the Renault engineers have to perform is to explain corrections made to different car parts. Surprising as it may

seem, when they were asked to upload these explanations in French on *YouTube*, their posts received feedback from other users and so the professional interaction became real.

When converting the authentic document into learning material, I could see from experience that it is very important to create "grids" and worksheets in order to structure the content that has to be taught. These support tools help mention the level at which the material can be used, the objectives of the activity, linguistic competencies to work on, the form of evaluation, its various steps and sub-activities to conduct with students, etc. They will often render the content clearer even for the author of the activity, helping the teacher to devise a better teaching plan. Building on the teacher's grid, it is then easier to design the learner's grid, which explains the aim of the class activity, the tasks involved, etc. Different models of such grids are available on the Internet or in the literature [cf. les "Dossiers thématiques" in different issues of *Le français dans le monde*].

2.3. (Self-) assessment

Guided (self)-evaluation of the competences and the knowledge acquired through these methods can be very useful for assessing the progress made. Teachers have to be trained to create descriptors and "can do" statements related to the content they teach and learners have to be trained to use them. (See *The TAMSEF Descriptors* (to be published) – specific "can do" statements to be used in teaching / learning languages for business). Learners also have to be able to correlate their specific professional communication needs to the content learned this way, which requires more in-class training and practice in this direction. The suggestion would, therefore, be to dedicate more time to teaching *how* to learn, and how to evaluate oneself, in order to train learners to become more autonomous in their language learning efforts.

3. Conclusions

To conclude the current paper, by way of a summary, here are some personal reflections which have evolved while investigating the best ways to benefit from new media-based class activities, presented in what follows as suggestions to fellow language teachers.

In my opinion, nowadays, preparing a language class most often implies choosing a VLE, in order to gather and organise learning material based on New Media instruments; deciding what specific sociolinguistic, linguistic and pragmatic aspects (related to the learners professional field) to work in class; designing tasks involving real communication in their work environment and dedicating a good amount of time to explaining to learners "how to learn" / "how to self-evaluate".

We should create and share more resource and reference databases, which are priceless tools for teachers and students. Itself a 2.0 generation medium, *Dropbox* is one of the perfect free services to use in this case.

Regular training sessions should be organized for teachers, so as to help them learn how to use these new media in class and to be up to date. They can offer the opportunity for debates, and new ways to use this material in class can be identified.

References

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