



Language Learning and Vocational Education and Training (VET). Challenges and Prospects.

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Abstract

Up to some decades ago, the concepts of Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Language Learning were considered irreconcilable and incompatible. Until the 19th Century, VET was regarded to be in opposition to a classical curriculum. Notwithstanding the growth of industrialization in the 19th Century and although several European countries introduced vocational education in elementary and secondary schools, it still remained an on-the-job phenomenon and thought of in a very narrow way. It was considered simply an alternative track for high-schoolers who weren't going on to college. Today, such a vision has changed drastically and VET can be defined as "education and training which aim to equip people with knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences required in particular occupations or more broadly on the labour market". In today's labour world, mastery in foreign languages is considered not just an excellent tool to bridge gaps but above all an instrument that enables workers to considerably improve their career prospects with several studies showing a very close connection between proficiency in languages and employability. Yet, despite this growing recognition that proficiency in at least one other language (besides the mother tongue) is advantageous in today's world, a lot still needs to be done in terms of implementation and methods of language teaching and learning which are more learner-focused, more practically oriented and, above all, more applied to professional contexts. One possible solution is the introduction of language courses for VET students which are a combination between Language Proficiency & Languages for Specific Purposes courses. Such courses would provide a method of learning, teaching and assessing basic skills or abilities in the language, according to the particular needs of the students and the specific requirements of the vocational domain. This obviously presents a number of challenges which need to be discussed and analysed from both the educators' and the students' point of view.

Keywords: Language Learning, VET, Language Teaching, Languages for Specific Purposes.

1. Introduction

Vocational education and training (VET) in schools is a relatively modern development. Until the 19th century, due to the low social status associated with such instruction as opposed to a classical curriculum, such education was provided only by apprenticeship. With the onset of the Industrial Revolution, national systems of VET started to differ widely in accordance with the societal characteristics of each nation with each country having its own VET system. By the late 19th Century public vocational education across the globe consisted mainly of manual training and practical arts while vocational learning remained an on-the-job phenomenon.

This has changed radically in recent years. Economic and social developments in many countries across the globe over the last decades have increasingly underlined the need for a major overhaul in vocational education and training. The rapidity of technological and social change, the dramatic shifts from agrarian or industrial eras to the knowledge era and beyond, accompanied by equally dramatic changes in the nature and structure of work, have impacted on countries and economies across the world. They have placed new broad-ranging demands upon technical and vocational education to better meet the increasingly complex training needs of industry, individual learners and other key stakeholders. This has led to vocational education, or career and technical education, which used to be associated mainly with trades like carpentry and culinary arts, to expand and venture towards infinite new horizons, featuring programs in fields like health care, technology, graphic design, agribusiness, artisanship, construction, engineering technology, hairdressing and beauty, health and



social care, hospitality, retail, and textiles and fashion, amongst others, and with most of these programs, if not all, including regular academic classes. As West (2012) puts it, the meaning of VET has shifted from denoting a 'fairly specific training or re-training for particular jobs to a very wide concept, overlapping with general education and spanning, in theory at least, secondary education, adult training both general and in connection with active labour market measures, much of higher education and lifelong learning as a whole (including quite explicitly non-formal and informal learning)' (p.19) [1].

2. Modern VET Programmes

Vocational Education & Training can be defined today as education and training which aim to equip people with knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences required in particular occupations or more broadly on the labour market [2]. In the face of the new technological developments, education, teaching methods and curricula must be continuously evaluated, not only regarding innovative and digitally based learning/teaching methods, but also with an even stronger focus on lifelong learning competences and transversal skills. This capability to acquire new skills and competences, to further develop existing knowledge (considered today to be more important than static knowledge), is the driving force towards extended schooling, towards making VET and general education more equal and towards making post-secondary and tertiary VET programmes not too different from other academic tracks.

One very effective way that can help VET students to acquire such skills is through international mobility, as this provides the opportunity of enhancing cooperation and of sharing good and effective practices. International mobility isn't only about academia and studies. The overall experiences and skills that accompany outward mobility often have the biggest impact on the student's development by increasing their human, social and cultural capital. Students gain international experience, get to know different cultures, improve their language skills, and develop a more cosmopolitan identity, which in turn all contribute to their personal development. But for this to happen and to be able to take full advantage of such international opportunities, language competences become key, giving access to these new opportunities and to "connect" with counterparts across the globe. As stated by The Economist, 'language has replaced work visas as the main barrier to mobility' [3]. Indeed, language is one of the main impediments to the efficiency and effectiveness of exchange programs between countries. The importance of language skills is also highlighted in the European Commission Council's Explanatory Memorandum statement (2018), where it is stated that "Language competences are at the heart of the vision of a European Education Area. With increasing mobility for education, training and work inside the Union, [...] and the overall global cooperation, education and training systems need to reconsider the challenges in teaching and learning of languages and the opportunities provided by Europe's linguistic diversity (p.11) [4].

In response to a rapidly changing global marketplace most countries now recognise the importance of a highly skilled, multilingual workforce. Students with good language skills enhance their future career prospects and opportunities in fields ranging from hospitality and tourism to health, marketing and finance. Expanding international connections in countless occupational sectors and in society at large have made knowledge of foreign languages ever so important. Foreign languages are no longer considered merely an ingredient of general education but have become a prerequisite for international communication and mobility in education, on the job, and in business. Indeed, in today's labour world, mastery in foreign languages is considered not just an excellent tool to bridge gaps but above all an instrument that enables workers to considerably improve their career prospects with several studies showing a very close connection between proficiency in languages and employability. A case in point is the CBI/Pearson education and skills survey (2019: 26) where it is stated that "Learning a foreign language can greatly benefit young people by introducing them to new cultures and dramatically expanding their horizon. [...] Businesses need people who can communicate with customers and suppliers around the world" [5]. Yet, despite this growing recognition that proficiency in at least one other language (besides the mother tongue) is advantageous in today's world, a lot still needs to be done in terms of implementation and methods of language teaching and learning in VET which are more learner-focused, more practically oriented and, above all, more applied to professional contexts. This is highly recommended even in the Report from the thematic working group "Languages for Jobs" European Strategic Framework for Education and Training (ET 2020) [6] which states that the demand for foreign languages and communication skills is steadily rising on the European labour market. In order to reduce the gap between offer and demand of language skills and to increase the motivation of learners, the experts of the group encourage the development and dissemination of new



methods of teaching languages which are more learner-focused, practically oriented and more applied to professional contexts.

3. Language Teaching and Learning in VET programmes

It is a known fact that many learners who attend vocational education and training courses across the globe are motivated to acquire a set of vocational skills to access employment, but are much less motivated to improve the basic language skills that underpin the acquisition of these skills. They are often reluctant to either start or return to studying languages, which they may well associate with negative memories from their early school years due to various reasons like not finding them appealing to their interests, seeing them as not being relevant to their lives and future careers, lack of modern equipment, among others. As Solodkova et al (2017: 97) put it, students following vocational courses look “with a consciously negative attitude to the foreign language acquisition. This academic subject is perceived as unnecessary, knowledge it provides is not considered as a future factor of competitiveness on the labour market” [7]. On the other hand, those learners who do take language courses, very often find it difficult to transfer the language skills they have acquired from the classroom to the workplace. It seems as though they are unaware of the possible benefits of embedding, integrating or contextualising basic language skills in vocational education and training and how this can give them a cutting edge at the workplace and on the job.

This importance of language learning in VET is also confirmed by UNESCO and ILO who recommend that technical and vocational education and training courses for the twenty-first century should include “the study of at least one foreign language of international use, which, while conducive to a higher cultural level, will give special emphasis to the requirements of communication, the acquisition of a scientific and technical vocabulary, and the need to prepare for international employment and multicultural working environments”(p. 27-28) [8]. One possible solution here is the introduction of language courses for VET students which are a combination between Language Proficiency courses and Languages for Specific Purposes courses. Such courses, perfectly in line with the occupational field singled out in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as one of the major fields for language use, would provide a method of learning, teaching and assessing basic skills or abilities in the language, according to the particular needs of the students and the specific requirements of the vocational domain. In very practical terms this implies that such language courses need to be totally learner-focused, practically oriented and applied to professional contexts, addressing the immediate and very specific needs of the learners involved while demonstrating the practical importance of the knowledge being taught and the possibility to use it in future professional activities.

This obviously presents a number of challenges which need to be discussed and analysed from both the educators’ and the students’ point of view. The emphasis should not be on how much language one knows but rather on what can one do with the language learnt. From the learners’ point of view, this implies making connections between new knowledge and experiences they have had, with real-world contexts and knowledge they have already mastered. From the educators’ point of view, they should strive to help learners understand linguistic concepts and forms in a situated and contextualized form – transforming simple things like food preparation, tools, technology... into potential language teaching tools. This is by no means an easy task. Such courses need to address the immediate and very specific needs of the learners involved, having as their driving force, both in the preparation stage as well as in the development stage, the needs analysis of the learners. For this reason, the starting point of any such courses should be a study of the learners’ needs, objectives and expectations for the course, which in turn should serve as the basis for informed curriculum practices, such as syllabus design, materials development and instructional design. This includes, among other things, forming a list of preferences of what the learners want and need to learn, as far as language and content are concerned. This stage is of fundamental importance, given that the needs of a learner studying, for example, in a hospitality course are totally different from those of another learner studying in an agribusiness or an engineering course. Even the language skills required may vary considerably. As a matter of fact, the people studying for hospitality purposes will most probably need specific reading and writing skills in the language/s being studied – 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, those studying the language to work in agribusiness would be more interested in listening and speaking skills, varying also according to the sector of agribusiness in which they would like to work. All this means that, to be able to perform a holistic needs analyses, the language teacher



also requires to gain a knowledge of the respective vocational sector. Having a realistic knowledge about the needs and expectations of the sector is essential for a successful curriculum design, making the cooperation between the educational institution and the sector of crucial importance. The advantage offered by such a profession-oriented approach is that it enhances the use of a profession-bound, purposefully designed methodology that gives the teacher clear clues as to what are the factual, most relevant and linguistically servicing ingredients that a student may utilise for an effective and fast acquisition of a vocation-oriented linguistic corpus. This implies that the teachers, besides fulfilling the role of curriculum designers, also have to design their own assessment measures that they are to use with their students, which in turn have to be verified for quality assurance purposes.

All this has serious ramifications on the role of the language teacher. The main role of the language teacher would be to help, to facilitate communication in class, to provide the tools for the learners to develop and acquire the skills they need and not to teach his/her students the rules of agribusiness or the regulations in the hospitality sector. The role of the language 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. In other words, the language teacher is to provide the learners 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 is quite a challenging task given that in the same group individuals may vary considerably in education level, motivation, aptitude for languages, work experience, self-discipline, etc. It therefore includes getting to know their knowledge in the language, their past work experiences as well as their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. All this implies that such courses cannot be taught according to any pre-ordained methodology. Rather than talking about a subject to be taught we need to think of which approach to adopt and this implies flexibility on the teachers' part, negotiating with the learners on how best to reach their objectives. In other words, the teacher needs to understand and be fully aware of the requirements of the particular trades or professions and they have to be willing to adapt to these requirements. They have to understand the context in which the language will be used as well as any specialist concepts and terminology. Only in this way can the teaching of languages become useful and relevant to the students in vocational education and training. As Lightbrow & Spada (2006) [9] state, language teachers need to be flexible enough to adopt and/or adapt different teaching methods according to the demands of their immediate teaching context. And given that language in different situations varies, very often it is left up to the teacher to tailor-make not just the curriculum and the methods but above all the materials to be used in each and every course in accordance to its specific context and centered on its appropriate language skills and discourse. In very practical terms, this can be achieved by following four basic steps, namely, (i) by consolidating basic grammar notions and rules, (ii) by becoming familiar with specific terminology, (iii) by introducing the kind of language to be used in their vocational domain, and (iv) by working on specific language skills pertinent to the employment.

Such language courses in Vocational Education and Training should have a threefold framework design. The first part should consist of an individual theoretical component of learning, which should include, among other things, revising some basic grammar notions and rules, becoming familiar with the most common terminology, introducing the kind of language students will encounter and use in their place of work and in their profession. The second part should consist of an individual practical component of learning, where, in collaboration with various companies in the specific field, each course participant is assigned a number of open-ended, supervised 'hands on' tasks which can be performed at his/her own level. The third part of the framework should provide the students the possibility to work in teams, pairs or groups – classroom discussions, role plays, etc. It is important to note that, given the possible heterogeneity of the groups, most of the tasks assigned, both on an individual level as well as in teams or group work, are to be open-ended and the learners should be free to adapt them according to their needs and abilities. Furthermore, specific learning outcomes should be set at the start of each component, essentially describing what a student is expected to be able to do as a result of a learning activity. It is imperative for the students to know the anticipated outcomes that derive from the instruction given and the subsequent learning that takes place in classrooms, workshops, or even in precincts outside of schools.

For the above to be achieved, co-operation is crucial. Teachers of the target language together with those from the particular vocational field, as well as (if and when possible) specialised workers, need



to come together to plan and design a holistic programme of studies in accordance to the requirements of the specific professional practice. Such programmes should enhance teaching quality and proliferate student numbers opting for VET. Needless to say that, although such interdisciplinary co-operation is not easy to achieve given that there might be many people involved and too many trades to relate to, with the right backing from authorities and a strong conviction from all concerned, such much-needed cooperation is not only desirable but doable. As stated in the VET4EU2 position paper on European Union policy after 2020 on Vocational and Educational Training (2019:19) the way forward is “integration of this cooperation into hybrid education involving companies and educational providers” given that “education and training provide something that increases when it is shared” (p.20) [10].

Conclusion

It is clear that languages today require a new market, and that language teaching and learning must go well beyond formal schooling, which does not necessarily provide the best context to motivate students to learn languages. Pace (2015: 480) affirms that “it stands to reason that students are more willing to work hard at something when they see how it connects to outside the four walls of the classroom and when they realise that they are able to take what they learn in school and apply it to real life” . This explains why language learning for vocational or employment-related purposes is still considered to be a sensitive and delicate subject, given that most language training courses on offer are still considered by students to be usually generic in scope and seldom specifically vocational, even though the authorities frequently acknowledge the need to take more account of the vocational aspect. The way forward is to create a situated language learning environment where learners could learn aspects of a particular language and a vocational domain whilst performing a real-world task. In other words, we need to move away from teaching to use the language to actually using the language to carry out tasks and actions in specific situations that are relevant and pertinent to the students’ lives. It is only by using real-world settings as a basis for task-based and technology-assisted language learning that teachers can equip the trainers with skills to integrate the acquisition of vocational knowledge and related language skills at the same time. This implies reconciling the vocational dimension of training with that of linguistic training whilst producing a valid paradigm for the teaching of languages for vocational purposes.

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