

***Increasing Student Independence and Interdependence in Multidisciplinary  
Language Courses***

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**Abstract**

In this account of our teaching practices we will focus on the independence and interdependence among students and teachers in multi-disciplinary courses, *Business French* and *Translation*. We will argue that the success of our interdisciplinary practices is consistent with major tendencies in university education – increasing learner autonomy and growing interdependence between language studies and other disciplines. On the one hand, language studies cannot remain a stand-alone discipline but need to be adapted to the fields of students' specialization; on the other hand, business studies can be enriched with content-based language courses even immediately after an intensive beginner's course encouraging independent learning.

We will present our best practices, including inversed-classroom and use of on-line materials and tools like Google Translate. We will share our methods of using technology and linguistically- and culturally-informed explanations of language phenomena for the further refinement of language skills: class time can be used for more sophisticated interactions when technology can help with drills and independent preparation. Finally, based on comments in student evaluations, we will offer the hypothesis that in a globalized world offering ever-better translation devices to a continually-growing international student body, it may be possible to offer specialized language courses geared to other programmes of study earlier than was previously considered plausible.

Keywords: multidisciplinary and specialized language courses, linguistic and cultural knowledge, on-line resources and translation tools

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## **Introduction**

In recent years we have been using more and more on-line resources and electronic translation tools in our specialized language and multi-disciplinary courses, which deal respectively with *Business French* and *Translation*. Since the results of this practice involve both learners' independence and all sorts of interdependencies, we would like to describe how these resources contribute to our students' autonomy and how the dynamics of interaction among students as well as between students and teachers have evolved during these years.

Our original aim was simple: integrate the use of translation devices into our courses and teach students to use them independently and effectively. We did this, finding that it changed our teaching practices drastically, and according to student evaluations, for the better. This outcome and the study of trends in publications on didactics (by Lightbrown, van Lier, Lester & Carol, Gearon et al.) and on translation (by Hatim and Pim) led us to believe our findings might be presented as an empirical case of experimental didactics<sup>1</sup>. We believe it is important to continue sharing our observations and best practices because they may have bearing on the teaching of language courses generally. We hope our findings based on the results of 120 students in *Business French* and 350 in translation over a five-year period may prompt professors to create more specialized, content-based, professionalized language courses. In this contribution we will illustrate how electronically-based resources can increase student independence and interdependence among undergraduate participants in the teaching process, using examples from both *Business French* and practical translation courses.

### **1. Increasing interdependence**

#### **1.1. Student – teacher interdependence**

It is fair to say that since teaching without a textbook became possible thanks to the abundance of on-line resources available, interdependence within the student-teacher relationship, traditionally weighted in favour of the instructor's needs, has shifted to better reflect student needs. In previous years textbooks dictated the choice and order of topics to study and both professors and students depended on the textbook author's preferences and ideas. Since an ideal textbook could never be found, we tried to adjust content by skipping or rearranging some chapters but that always led to shortcomings due to disruption of the order projected by the author. Now, using on-line materials, we can easily adjust our course content to the needs of each class. This is a valuable feature given the reality of our new environment: a constantly changing international student community where we never know what exactly to expect. The sole constant characteristic of our classes is a high degree of diversity in students' native language, chosen university specialization, and level of foreign language preparation. Hence the first class is usually devoted to learning students'

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<sup>1</sup> See Mittler, Sylvia & Sonina, Snejina, (2018). This article contains a description of the didactic background and our practices for using on-line resources and translation devices both for learning business vocabulary and for translating non-literary texts.

specializations and their expectations with regard to learning outcomes. Teaching materials are then chosen accordingly.

There are certainly some constant objectives for each course. For example, in *Business French* the outcome of the course is threefold: students learn a great deal about the world of business and finance, about cultural differences in French and English correspondence, and about specific linguistic patterns characteristic of business French. However, once we added to these goals a fourth dimension – the skill of using translation devices in the business context – we discovered that we could easier adjust the course material to students’ specializations and even address the problem of different levels of proficiency in French. These different levels range from those of second-year students, who have completed only one year of university-level French, to those of francophone students aiming to familiarize themselves with the world of business.

Adjusting teaching materials for us means adjusting them to the proficiency level of the majority. Most often we have second- and third-year students among whom there are only a few francophones, so we choose quite simple videos with clear pronunciation and slow tempo for our *Business French* course, which is taught as an inversed classroom. Students can watch them at home as often as needed, and this alone is more helpful for levelling proficiency among them than the traditional scenario where the entire class heard a teacher’s explanations only once. If they desire, francophone students are given some extra materials for special presentations. Sometimes (especially in the summer semester) we have a very strong class with only a couple of second year students. In this case we add some more advanced video materials but give stronger students a task formulated to help the weaker student(s) in their group.

The inversed classroom in *Business French* presupposes viewing the prescribed videos at home and preparing a group presentation based on them. For this activity students are advised to use on-line translation devices like Google Translate, which we discovered acted as a further powerful levelling tool: even second year students can be creative with the help of translation tools, but it takes more effort for them to master their electronically-translated text for presentation. We will return to this aspect in a later section concerning student independence. Here we need to mention that the role of the teacher consists in choosing the right level of difficulty for on-line materials to be used, in providing a brief introduction accompanied by core vocabulary for each new topic, in warning about difficulties, in particular About what in French are called “false friends”, and in giving feedback after student presentations.

In *Business French* the best practice for providing feedback proved to be one consisting of the following steps: take notes during the presentations; sort problems according to type – pronunciation, register, meaning – while taking notes (simply write on different pieces of paper); after all presentations are over point out problematic issues and clarify difficult concepts; recommend some more video materials for review and clarification if necessary. It seems best to correct mistakes after all the presentations because one thus avoids identifying this or that student; it also gives the teacher an opportunity to summarize difficulties and to wrap up the topic. The exception here would be correcting a mispronounced term immediately in

order to avoid repetition of the mistake. However, to make the correction less direct, we ask the entire class to repeat the word together.

Student-teacher interdependence works much the same way in our translation classes, which begin in the second year, focus on instructor-chosen non-literary texts such as newspaper and magazine articles, and normally prioritize translation from English to French. Here again the teacher's role, particularly at the introductory level, involves having the students understand and then practice basic concepts such as the overall supremacy of faithfulness to meaning, the importance of clarity and precision and the awareness of different registers available to the translator. This is done in a classroom where each class member sits behind a computer screen and contributions are elicited sometimes from the entire group, sometimes from smaller sub-groups working on particular sections of text. All can offer suggestions as the group slowly constructs a sentence. Students soon learn there is no single perfect translation, only variations dependent on the translator's skill, ethics, and cultural sensitivity. Finding adequate textual solutions to the problems associated with these three aspects invariably stimulates them to develop a sense of translation as an exercise in strategic thinking. As they learn to focus on meaning before form, they only need the teacher to illustrate to them once or twice how to identify syntactic clusters and various difficult elements before attempting translation. The same "strategic" method lies behind choosing non-ambiguous words over polysemic ones, avoiding needless repetition, or at the most basic level, using logic to interrogate the meaning of words or phrases. It is always surprising for us in the first weeks of our introductory course to see how few students actually think about the words they use; happily this situation tends to improve as they gain more experience and continue with higher-level translation classes.

Axiomatic for translation is the use of on-line translation aids, including Google Translate, grammar correctors, dictionaries like Linguee and terminology banks like Termium. In translation as in *Business French*, second-year students must expend more effort to produce a competent translation based on their use since there is usually more to look up. Working within a sub-group however, "weaker" students can acquire helpful tips from more advanced peers, although the bulk of correction invariably falls to the teacher during whole-class sessions where suggestions are offered and a translation is group-built. In this interactive space it is the teacher's job to comment on appropriateness in a given context, further develop a suggestion by giving examples of what to use in other contexts, offer synonyms, or perhaps advance one of several alternative translations in order to stimulate further reflection. Great care is taken to create an atmosphere in which students can experience translation not as "right" or "wrong", but as a group defensive strategy game akin to some video games; the gamification element is important for freeing up creativity, minimizing stress and creating interactive enjoyment.

## **1.2. Interdependence between language studies and other disciplines**

Given today's abundance of on-line materials, the issue of student choice of topics is built into our courses. This works well for the choice of translation texts, particularly at a more advanced level where students have future professional needs in mind. Texts chosen for translation can thus deal with anything – finance, public health, information technology, shrinking biodiversity, agribusiness, even plastics recycling. Theoretically, this approach could also be used in Business French, but in practice,

the course requires us to cover certain basic and important topics within a short semester in order to give students a solid knowledge of business French. That said, there we still manage to tailor our content to students' specializations.

Since *Business French* caters to students from a great range of departments, we have long practiced breaking students in it into groups according to their specialization or future profession. These groups then stay together throughout the semester to work on projects related to their field of study. Home projects have always worked well because students are able to use all the necessary resources. In the past, however, in-class activities were often slowed down by the lack of expertise in specialized terminology.

With the arrival of translation devices available on cell phones and tablets, the terminology problem is now easily solved, and in-class activities can be as successful as home-prepared projects. So now from the very first class, when the group and its imaginary enterprise are created according to students' specialization (see Fig. 1 and 2 below), till the last class, when the enterprise comes to an end, each group has a chance to study business topics through the stages and problems of their particular enterprise. In the process, they master business French applied to their own field of study.

**Activité 1**

Pour former votre groupe, terminez les questions ci-dessous selon VOTRE spécialisation et selon VOS intérêts. Ensuite, suivez les instructions à l'écran.

- Est-ce que vous étudiez Google ?
- Est-ce que vous voulez travailler comme Google ?
- Est-ce que vous vous intéressez à Google ?

**Utilisez GOOGLE Traduction !**

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Figure 1. First class activity – group creation

**Student Interdependence**

- Groups formed in class:
  - managers
  - teachers
  - health counselors
  - etc.
- a small business
- a private school
- a wellness centre
- etc.

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Figure 2. Group specializations and their enterprises

In our experience, students are always happy to bring their own expertise to class and to talk about things that they know better than others (including the teacher). This leads to a real exchange and, with the help of translation devices, to serious conversations. Within a small group, students find and discuss terms together so specialized terminology does not present a problem, but for presentations offered to a larger audience, students are asked to provide a specialized vocabulary sheet (or the list on the blackboard) for the rest of the class.

### **1.3. Interdependence among students**

Starting from the very creation of the group and its corresponding enterprise in *Business French*, the group members work closely together. Every week they prepare a presentation on a new business topic and two or three times during the semester they work on a project – creating a commercial poster to launch their new product or hiring new specialists, which means evaluating their own CVs and cover letters and switching roles as they go from being job applicants to being hiring committee members and vice versa.

Some students' work is evaluated by a mark for the whole group under the condition that every member contribute equally to each presentation and project. This stipulation helps both weaker and stronger students to learn better: the weaker ones get the necessary training, but the stronger ones learn even better by teaching. Students enjoy helping each other and often form new friendships as a result of such close cooperation.

The group work provides a lot of fun when it comes to the discussion of cultural differences and attitudes that range from punctuality to dress and eating habits. Students are invited to share their experiences, opinions, and funny stories within the group and then bring their most salient findings to the general discussion. When each group presents its cumulative ideas on these topics, the class becomes a memorable lesson in business manners as well as in acceptance and tolerance of different cultural phenomena. Additionally every student in class gets involved and has a chance to contribute to the growth of cultural awareness among his/her peers.

In translation courses students work together on some home projects and have occasion to help each other in class too, leading to many of the same positive results. Interdependence fosters greater enjoyment. Cultural tolerance is underlined as students learn several times over that French and English have different ways of formulating ideas, ways which in turn reveal the presence of different cultural perspectives. Students' comments show that they enjoy such interactions greatly: "*a great way to learn ... because madame lets us help each other*". (A comment from course evaluations, FREC18 *French Translation*, 2018)

## **2. Increasing student independence**

As we mentioned in 1.1., on-line translation devices represent a powerful tool for levelling student language proficiency in specialized language courses: even second year students can succeed with the help of these devices, although compared to third- and fourth-year students it requires more effort for them to master their electronically

translated text for oral presentation. Nonetheless they too can fit into the big scheme of our *Business French* course, which is briefly presented in the following table:

Table 1. Course progress according to students' expertise

Course progress	Topics and activities	Examples of activities
First class	simple activities based on the following: - limited vocabulary - basic principles of business writing	- learn the main types of ventures - form their own imaginary venture - write a short business e-mail
Following classes	topics increasing in difficulty: enterprise organisation and development, employment, marketing, banking, transportation, insurance, stock market	for each topic: - group presentation - business letter sample
Last class	sophisticated tasks based on the following: - enlarged business vocabulary - awareness of business correspondence patterns and cultural differences	- discuss investment opportunities for the "gained millions" - write a detailed letter to investment advisors

As can be seen from the table, *Business French* progresses according to a vigorous alignment with the growth of students' expertise: from activities that require near-zero knowledge of business vocabulary and concepts to sophisticated tasks requiring the retention of almost everything learned in the course. Such alignment is supported by what is termed scaffolding<sup>2</sup> in an action-based approach. Let us see how scaffolding is complemented by on-line materials and translation tools in our practices.

In 1.2. we described forming students' groups according to their specialization, and in Fig. 1 we showed the possible use of Google Translate by students who may not know the French term for their field of study. Fig. 3 below illustrates how students' attention is drawn to the possibility of checking pronunciation as well via the same device: after a couple of students specialized in psychology have mispronounced the French word "psychologie", following the English model by leaving out the initial "p" sound, one can highlight the microphone pictogram in the top right hand corner of the translation window and suggest the constant use of it. In the very first class students thus learn that the soundtracks accompanying translations are extremely useful not only for those who are not sure about the correct French pronunciation but also for everyone who strives for better memorization by activating auditive memory.

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<sup>2</sup> Scaffolding is "supporting the communicative efforts of another speaker, especially a language learner, by providing vocabulary or partial sentences that the speaker can 'build' on" (Lightbrown, 2014, 146)



Figure 3. First class activity – pronunciation



Figure 4. Video materials useful for presentations

According to students, the soundtracks accompanying translations are excellent for preparation of in-class presentations, and especially so for students with low confidence. Even though struggling with the pronunciation of a particular French sound, some of these “weaker” students can progress considerably when given a hand from their “stronger” groupmates as well as individual consultations about articulation with the instructor. For a student to correct a pronunciation mistake once and for all it suffices to explain the articulation well, once, and have them pronounce a sound a few times correctly. After that the student can work on a difficult sound’s pronunciation independently using the soundtracks of translation devices and on-line dictionaries.

The advised procedure for preparing weekly presentations is as follows: students watch the assigned materials independently and then meet with their classmates outside of the classroom to create a short narrative for their presentation. For example, for the class on Marketing based on the video materials shown on Fig.4, they often create several dialogues about prospective kinds of products and their possible advertising. The presentations do not need to be perfect (only participation counts for the mark) and mistakes are in fact welcome – they allow us to draw everybody’s attention to possible pitfalls and constitute valuable learning experience. Still, the availability of translation devices and soundtracks helps to relieve the anxiety of those students who feel they need to put more effort into preparation, for they can practice



their part independently as much as they want. These students usually progress the most in the course.

Group tasks also benefit from greater student independence thanks to electronic translation devices. For example, in learning business correspondence, after the instructor provides a brief explanation of main concepts and distributes the handouts with thematically organized terminology and partial syntactic frames for business letters, the students can complement these frames with the terminology specific to their field of specialization and their business “venture”. Such secondary scaffolding was missing in previous years: students had to ask the teacher’s help for every missing vocabulary item and their creativity was thus often interrupted.



Figure 5. Business correspondence – syntactic frame

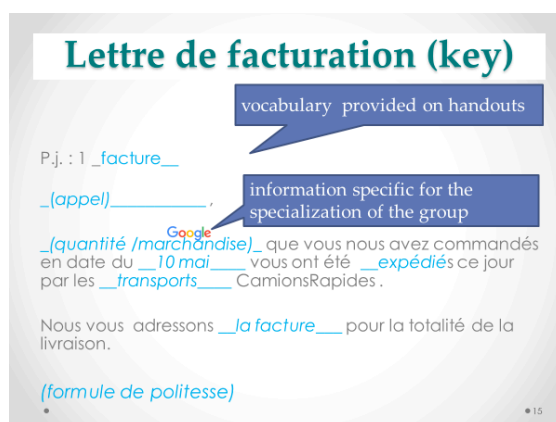


Figure 6. Business correspondence – scaffolding

Thus, in our content- and task-based *Business French* course, group presentations, projects, and business writing activities are now advantageously aligned with the growth of student expertise and allow for its independent improvement. Electronic translation tools complement teacher-supplied scaffolding by helping students at all levels build on the initial structures we provide. Already in 2007, van Lier considered autonomy a « defining feature » of scaffolding in the action-based approach. In both *Business French* and translation courses we have found that scaffolding helps to grow learner autonomy even further when it is combined with the use of electronic translation tools. For example, translation students are taught to use a self-directed three-part process when at work on the translation of a given text from English to French: first they decide on an initial translation with the help of Linguee, Google Translate and anything else they consider useful; next they test its accuracy by

checking for correct French usage in context, again using aids such as Linguee; and lastly they perform a final check by using those aids to translate back to English and verify that the meaning they set out to translate is unchanged. This degree of verification is only possible thanks to electronic translation tools. Through their use, students can gain greater sophistication and accuracy in translating as they increase their familiarity with a methodology that allows them to independently correct and refine their own work.

## Conclusion

To summarize the interdependence among the participants of the teaching process in our specialized language courses, we created the following table where the arrows show the main direction of interaction at each stage of course activities.

The table includes more traditional elements in the first column – there is nothing new in providing feedback as a teacher or in adjusting material to students’ level of preparation - but the second column breaks with tradition in most language courses because it systematically accounts for different student specializations. It is the use of translation devices that has made it possible to account for specializations, rendering interactions within the teaching process more meaningful and useful for students.

Table 2. Student-teacher and student-student interdependence

<b>Student – teacher</b> interdependence	<b>Student – student</b> interdependence
Information about students’ needs and levels ↓	Information about students’ specialization ↓
Choice of materials and activities ↓	Creation of student groups ↓
Tasks and on-line materials for weekly presentations or translations →	Preparation of presentations or projects based on group’s specialization or common interest ↓
Feedback on linguistic aspects, cultural aspects or business concepts	In-class presentations as well as work submitted ←

In our courses, electronic translation tools helped to improve inclusiveness because they provided a useful additional scaffolding device even for students with limited knowledge of French. Moreover, since these tools were used for independent practicing of skills at home, in class we had more time to work on important elements such as more sophisticated translation, pronunciation and cultural awareness. This led us to re-evaluate our role.

As teachers, we can describe our objectives in the following four statements:

- To guide students to more conscious mastering of linguistic and cultural phenomena
- To train them to expertly use translation devices that help them help themselves
- To underline the sometimes-overlooked importance of comparison as a method of understanding and assessing information

- To raise awareness of the multiple pitfalls that await the unwary translator

As for our course outcomes, they are summarised in the following table and illustrated by students' comments below.

Table 3. Course outcomes

<b>Course</b>	<b>Course outcomes before translation devices</b>	<b>Additional outcomes with translation devices</b>
<i>Business French</i>	business letter samples and good knowledge of vocabulary and syntactic patterns helpful for a career	confidence in knowledge of basic business patterns that can be complemented by translation devices
<i>French Translation</i>	expertise in consulting dictionaries and grammar manuals	proficiency in using translation devices and double-checking

Students' comments:

*“Mini-presentations helped reinforce prior topics very well. They also helped with developing better oral speaking skills. I really liked this course because it provided knowledge on a specific subject matter (business).”* (A comment from course evaluations, FREB18 *Business French*, 2017)

*“We were allowed to use on-line tools which most of us knew about already. But through trial and error I was able to decipher the ones that provided the most accuracy.”* (A comment from course evaluations, FREC18 *French Translation*, 2017)

As the above comments show – particularly the first one - students are more enthusiastic when they have a chance to discuss their field of study than when they are asked to perform some general activity in a language course. It is often true that language textbooks offer students rather banal and artificial tasks, whereas a chance to express in another tongue something considered real and relevant contributes to the desire to talk. The conversation then comes from the heart and can be based on genuine intellectual understanding, thus directly fostering a positive learning atmosphere<sup>3</sup>. There is also the joy of recognizing old friends – many scientific terms are almost the same in English and French and easily identified, remembered and used once one gets through pronunciation differences. Training in specialized terminology, whether for business, media, science and medicine, law or international relations, is certainly not new and is habitually included in graduate-level translation and interpreting programmes; we have encountered it as well in the upper-level courses offered within a few university undergraduate programmes. On the basis of our practices, geared to increasing learner independence, we would, however, like to suggest that today it is possible to *extend* this interdependence between language studies and other disciplines to encompass earlier, more preparatory levels of language instruction.

<sup>3</sup> On the benefits of the positive emotions in language learning see Jean-Marc Dewaele (2015).

In our interconnected world ever-better translation devices have already revolutionized human communication and opportunities for learning. More fundamentally, educators of all levels in many countries recognize students' need to receive intellectual training that not only offers knowledge but is also useful for a future career. At the post-secondary level, if greater professionalization of language courses is indeed perceived as a positive and relevant step forward, planners will have to take into account future specializations and include instruction in a number of career-defined syntactic structures and terminologies. Indeed, outside the university professionals already in the work force have already massively understood the advantages of learning languages in the appropriate context, the better to advance their careers; this is witnessed by on-line listings such as 'The 30 Best Online LANGUAGE Courses for Any Budget or Level' and the claim by one such programme, FluentU, that "more than 50,000 people are learning how to learn languages faster and more effectively" (<https://www.fluentu.com/blog/best-online-language-courses>). FluentU and other on-line programmes such as Babbel, LingQ, Duolingo, Foreign Services Institute, Internet Polyglot and Omniglot have sophisticatedly leveraged two important trends of the twenty-first century: technological improvements and the continuous growth of interconnections in a globalized world. At the university level, language educators can help fulfill a documented need - and remain meaningful - by recognizing that it is possible to offer specialized language courses geared to other programmes of study earlier than was previously considered plausible.

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