

*The Teaching of Foreign Languages for Specific Purposes - How and Why*

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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 but above all an instrument that enables workers to considerably improve their career prospects. Multilingualism and using a language in specific circumstances and purposes is today considered to be one of the key elements for a modern Europe giving people a very strong bargaining power, especially in the labour world. 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. There can be two main objectives for teaching/learning foreign languages: personal growth and professional growth. This is why today we teach foreign languages for specific purposes, be it for tourism, for call centres, for business, and others, focusing on acquiring the necessary terminological, interdisciplinary and intercultural skills needed for specific jobs. Such courses imply addressing the immediate and very specific needs of the learners involved, having as their driving force, both in the preparation stage and in the development stage, the needs analysis of the learners. The starting point is a study of the learners' needs, objectives and expectations for the course given that the needs of the learners vary considerably. This gives the teacher a new role - 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.

Every time I am asked to prepare an Italian course for specific purposes, be it a “Commercial Italian” course, an “Italian for Call Centres” course, “Italian for Hotel Front Desk People” etc, the first thing I do is ask myself the following questions:

- i. What is a language for specific purposes?
- ii. Who are my clients/ students/ my audience?
- iii. What are their objectives? What objectives would they like to reach?
- iv. What is their level of Italian?
- v. What should my role be in such a course?
- vi. What /which methods shall I adopt?
- vii. What shall I include in my course?

In other words: The teaching of a foreign language for specific purposes: How and why?

Balboni (2000)<sup>1</sup> describes a language for specific purposes as a linguistic variety used in scientific and professional sectors. Its objective is to help anyone belonging to that particular scientific or professional sector communicate in the least ambiguous manner possible. 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”<sup>2</sup>. Jesus Garcia Laborda (2011) is, maybe, even more specific, when he describes LSP as “the teaching of a language as a second or foreign language for certain groups of students to whom the syllabus, tasks, and methodology is especially tailored to their interests and needs”<sup>3</sup>.

Indeed, 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 a few years ago, very few people considered speaking a foreign language an important prerequisite, today it has become of fundamental importance in all professional circles. In fact, in today’s European society, languages and interculture play a fundamental role in getting to know different people and in obtaining professional and economic development.

In the global marketplace that we now live in, language skills are becoming always increasingly important in organisations and businesses who want to remain competitive on an international level. Companies today 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. 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<sup>4</sup>. This is also confirmed by the Bologna process: “If higher education programmes are to be relevant to the European labour market, graduates have to be able to communicate in a number of languages and to expand their repertoire in changing needs”<sup>5</sup>.

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"<sup>6</sup>. 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"<sup>7</sup>.

Furthermore, 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<sup>8</sup>. 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<sup>9</sup> 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,<sup>10</sup> shows how when companies start exporting, language and cultural barriers start being perceived as important obstacles.

This explains why today there exists a need to diversify the language training market with courses in foreign languages for specific purposes. Although the teaching of foreign languages in general and the teaching of foreign languages for specific purposes have a lot in common, there exist two main divergences, namely, (i) the learners and the reason why they are learning the subject and (ii) the aim of instruction. Usually, as we shall see, the teacher of foreign languages for specific purposes has 3 main tasks: (i) to carry out a needs analysis; (ii) to design the course; and (iii) to prepare original/authentic teaching materials.

Such courses in foreign languages for specific purposes imply addressing 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 should always be an analysis of the learners' needs, objectives and expectations for the course, which can vary in their scope and focus<sup>11</sup>. This includes forming a list of preferences of what the learners want and need to learn, as far as language and content are concerned, and of how they would like to learn them. This is by no means an easy task given that in the same group individuals may vary considerably in age, 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 (especially in countries where the target language is spoken) as well as their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This can be done either by means of an interview or a questionnaire or else by means of a writing task or an initial test. I consider this stage as fundamental since the needs of a learner studying, for example, 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. This usually helps me determine what to teach, how to teach it and what materials must I use to help the learners reach their goals. As a matter of fact, the people studying for commercial purposes usually 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, those studying the foreign language to work in a call centre are usually more interested in listening and speaking skills –

answering the phone; leaving a message; giving information over the phone, etc. What is important is that the language being taught should be presented in authentic contexts. This helps learners understand better and become acquainted with the particular ways in which the language is used in functions that they will need to perform in their jobs.

One must also take into consideration whether or not the learners already work in that particular field or if they are still concerned with finding a job. Those already in the job are the primary knowers of the content of the material and experts in the field. We need to keep in mind that we are not teaching them the job, but rather to help them communicate better about their work in the target language. The role of the teacher will therefore be to help, to facilitate communication in class, to provide the tools for the learners to develop and acquire the skills they need, to become autonomous learners. If, for example, there is a course of Italian for commercial purposes or for legal purposes, my role as a teacher is not to teach them the rules of business management or to teach them the laws of the country. There is no doubt that the learners are experts in the field. My role 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.

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 how best to reach their objectives. In other words, the teacher needs to understand the requirements of the profession and be willing to adapt to these requirements. It is important 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. 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. The fact that, very often, the teacher is 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 means that the teacher has to provide the material for the course himself/herself. Hutchinson and Waters (2009)<sup>12</sup> suggest three main factors that need to be addressed when designing materials for such courses, namely, (i) the criteria for implementing or modifying materials, (ii) the subjective criteria on what teachers and students want from that material, (iii) the objective criteria which is what the material really offers. Furthermore the teacher has to tailor make 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 (Stevens, 1988, Robinson, 1991, Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998)<sup>13</sup>. And as Nunan (1987)<sup>14</sup> puts it, this requires time, skills and support. 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.

From the point of view of the course contents, each course plan should be threefold: there should be the individual theoretical component of learning, which includes, amongst other things, revising some basic grammar notions and rules, becoming familiar with business

terminology, introducing the kind of language they will face and need to use in their profession, and writing letters; the individual practical component of learning, where, in collaboration with third parties (employers, banks, business communities, legal offices, hotels, [depending on the nature of the course], etc), each course participant is assigned a number of open-ended, supervised ‘hands on’ tasks (answering emails, writing letters, attending meetings, etc) which can be performed at his/her own level; the third component should consist in group work and team work – classroom discussions, role plays, etc. It is important to note that, given the heterogeneity of most of the groups of learners, most of the tasks assigned, both on an individual level as well as in team or group work, should be open-ended and the learners are free to adapt them according to their needs and abilities. At the end of each course, a detailed evaluation sheet should be distributed to the course participants in order to have their feedback on all the aspects of the course. I consider this exercise of fundamental importance as it helps the teacher reflect on what decisions need to be taken before starting a new course.

In an article entitled “Business Needs Language” *Language Magazine*<sup>15</sup> 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.

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)<sup>16</sup>, 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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  - <sup>6</sup> <http://nationalemployerservice.org.uk/resources/cbi-nord-anglia-education-and-skills-survey-2009/>

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- <sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Martin (2010) lists 6 different types of needs analysis, namely: target situation analysis; present- situation analysis; strategy analysis; means analysis; learning-centered approaches and language audits. “Designing and implementing a French-for-Specific-Purposes (FSP) Program: Lessons Learned from ESP in *Global Business Languages*. Vol. 5, Article 3. Purdue Research Foundation.
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