12 Beyond the language class

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Abstract

As economies are inevitably becoming dominated by multinational and global companies, the need for Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) is growing accordingly. Language institutes in higher education are trying to tailor their curriculum to meet the expectations of such companies each with their specific technical vocabulary. While LSP courses are basically successful in providing graduates with the indispensable components of language competencies, the reality is that almost all such corporations have developed their own specific terminology, unfamiliar to LSP at large. This implies that the newly recruited employee is bound to be faced with the prospect of having to master technical jargon peculiar to the given corporate environment. The aim of the present paper is to demonstrate how the advantages of and skills in efficient – mostly digital – materials design on behalf of the teacher can be transferred to those having to continue developing vocabulary, communication, and interpersonal skills after the completion of formal training. The need for such methodology is justified by the findings of a survey recently conducted among young employees of multinational companies in a major city in Hungary.

Keywords: employability, transfer of materials design, language for specific purposes.

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1.   Introduction

Apart from the qualifications multinational and global companies require, the competitiveness of new graduates in the labour market is strongly influenced by the skills they possess. One of the crucial skills expected of professionals is foreign language proficiency, as it provides an advantage for those involved in the selection process and also for business organisations in their international activities (Hajdu & Czellér, 2016).

Accordingly, the European and particularly the Hungarian labour market has seen a dramatic increase in "[e]mployers' demands for highly qualified workforce with excellent communication skills and a decent command of one or more foreign languages [for the past decade]" (Czellér & Nagy-Bodnár, 2016, p. 75).

Having realised these requirements, language institutions in Hungarian higher education have been offering a wide range of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and LSP courses incorporated in their curricula to prepare students to face the challenges the labour market presents.

LSP courses have proved to be successful in providing graduates with the general and indispensable components of language competencies including reading, technical vocabulary, oral communication, listening, writing, confidence in the use of grammar and the basics of intercultural skills. As a result, most graduates manage to land jobs with promising perspectives.

However, a new position at international companies tends to present specific language requirements well beyond the scope of ESP or LSP classes, thus well beyond the language teacher's control.

There is an old Chinese saying: 'Give a man a fish, he will eat for a night – teach a man how to fish, he'll never go hungry again'.

Owing to the nature of the technical language of different professional fields – particularly that of the business world – in line with the socio-economic

environment and the diversity of corporate cultures, no LSP training course in formal education can fully ensure that the language learner will master the interpersonal skills and the specific vocabulary relevant to a given workplace. Companies tend to develop their own specific terminology, and the job-related vocabulary may be too specific to be included in any course book.

Newly recruited employees may find themselves at a loss even after years of studying the foreign language. Consequently, continuous progress in oral and written communication should be anticipated.

The objective of the present article is to demonstrate how language teachers can help young professionals overcome the above-mentioned obstacles. A possible solution to facilitate the new employee's individual language learning progress is to transfer to the students certain elements of materials design during the LSP courses. The paper intends to highlight one specific area of the application of digital resources and devices – the sophisticated word processor – as it is most suitable for individual study and, although indispensable in every aspect of our professional work, is still not fully exploited.

The shift in the application of computer platforms towards mobile devices – especially tablets and smartphones – coupled with the availability of pictures, sound, and video has overshadowed the potentials of the word processor, which is also available online.

The concept of life-long learning is both necessitated by today's society and globalised economies, and facilitated by digital mobile devices and Internet-based resources.

2. Method

The need for skills transfer has become obvious from a survey carried out among employees of multinational corporations in Debrecen, a major city in the northeast of Hungary. The objective of the survey was to make an assessment

of the adaptability and degree of usefulness of language skills acquired in LSP courses at the University of Debrecen and in some other institutions of higher education, mainly in the eastern part of the country.

Young professionals were asked to fill in a questionnaire and semi formal interviews were also conducted. Although much of the information gained was predictable and the findings merely helped confirm certain assumptions, the responses shed light on some intricate, less obvious factors as well.

3. Results

Some questions most relevant to the topic of the paper are discussed below.

Question 1. How important was your command of a foreign language in landing your current job?

On a scale from one, meaning not important at all, to five, representing absolutely essential, the answers averaged five. The maximum score to this basic question was in accord with expectations. Not surprisingly, all respondents agreed that they would not have been hired if they had lacked foreign language skills, irrespective of their qualifications.

Question 2. To what extent does your command of a foreign language correspond to the requirements of your current position?

The responses had an average score of 3.9. Taking into consideration the fact that all the participants in the survey had a good command of at least one foreign language, levels B2 or C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference, – a B2-level certificate in at least one foreign language is the prerequisite for the issue of a degree in Hungary –, the score of 3.9 seems relatively low. It clearly shows that they have to continue developing their language knowledge and keep themselves up-to-date on a regular basis in order to be able to fulfil professional requirements.

Question 3. What language skills and competencies do you think you should develop further?

The respondents' answers suggest that the young employees' priorities include both general and technical vocabulary, with special emphasis on job-related terminology (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Answers to Question 3 (a: speaking, b: listening, c: reading, d: writing, e: general vocabulary, f: technical vocabulary, g: grammar, h: translation, i: presentation)
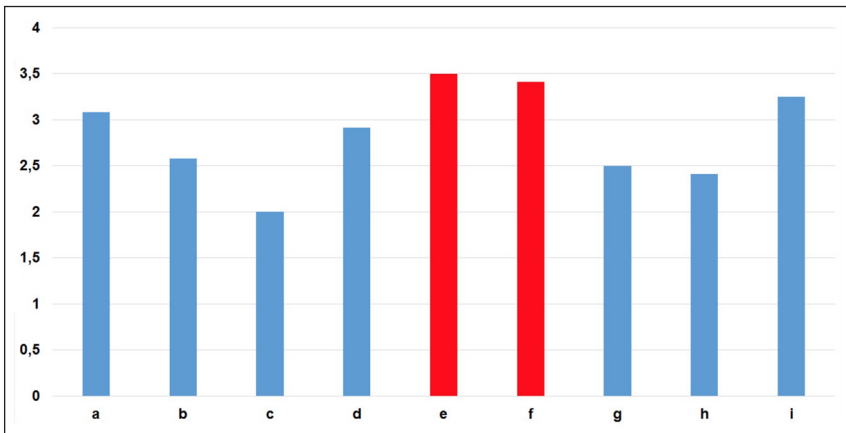

Question 5. How do you improve your English on your own?

With the advent of the digital era, both the learner and the teacher have become receptive to novel ways of language acquisition over the past two decades. In the absence of formal training, young professionals tend to show a preference for the vast amount of digital resources as opposed to printed ones (coursebooks, newspapers) available for individual work (Figure 2). Efficiency in self-study, however, cannot be taken for granted as a result of the availability of resources; it can only be achieved relying on an optimal approach incorporating both human and technical factors. The learner has to be prepared for this phase of individual

study prior to graduation, during their studies at university or college, when the language teacher still has the opportunity to transfer certain techniques, elements of materials design, to students in order to facilitate the individual learning process.

Figure 2. Answers to Question 5 (a: course books, b: radio/TV, c: reading articles on the net, d: language courses on the net, e: videos (Youtube, etc.), f: websites with professional content)
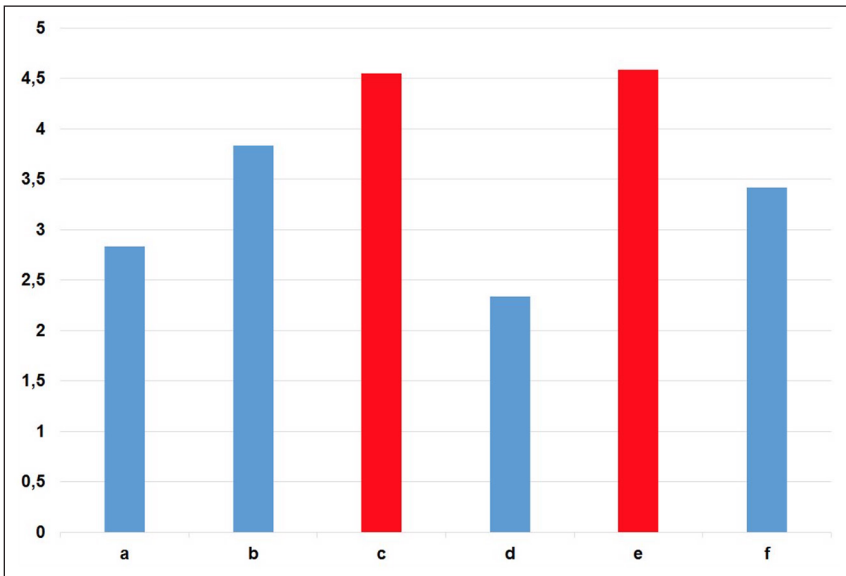
The application of up-to-date digital resources may require thoughtful consideration and even restraint. When the students use online resources, the teacher should give exact methodological guidelines on how to use them, browsing the net should always be task based (Czellér & Nagy-Bodnár, 2018).

As a result of the introduction of commercially available computers (ZX Spectrum, Commodore 64) in the early 1980's, foreign language teaching became one of the areas trying to exploit the potentials of the new technology. The first attempts resulted in simple programmes created by computer specialists. The methodology was in its infancy, the creation of such digital materials relied on

the computer programmer, and language teachers were unable to create their own programmes.

The spread of the IBM compatible Personal Computers (PCs) in the late 1980's and 1990's together with word processors represented a breakthrough in the application of computers for language teachers. It was at that time that the language teacher became truly involved in the use of computers for language teaching purposes. The process of test-creation, editing, correction, and storage etc. became a fundamentally simple task for the teacher.

The 1990's also saw the introduction of object-oriented programming languages and Windows-based programmes. Multimedia applications on CDs and online language teaching programmes have been released aiming to facilitate all aspects of language acquisition including basic skills such as reading, listening, and even writing and speaking.

Over the past decade, the Internet, social media, speech recognition, speech synthesis, and artificial intelligence have been in the forefront. The level of sophistication of groundbreaking innovations in the digital world – virtual reality, robotics, Youtube etc. – has once again overshadowed the fine-tuned potentials of the word processor, which, however, can be equally useful for the language learner.

The past decades have seen a shifting focus from the computer programmer (+ language teacher) towards the language teacher (+ computer programmer), through the emergence of online resources to the learner. It seems appropriate for language learners to utilise some of the possibilities in such a way that they develop a more creative and analytical approach to them. A dynamic and ambitious attitude is a precondition for life-long learning and elements of materials design in language acquisition seem compatible with it. As Gündüz (2005) states,

> "[t]he language laboratories [created in the 1970's gave way] to computer assisted language learning work stations. 'Micro computers

used as word processors complement the audio facilities, enabling the interactive teaching of all four language skills reading, listening, speaking and writing'. (Crystal, 1987, p. 377). Crystal further adds that today a great variety of [foreign language teaching] exercises, such as sentence restructuring, checking of spelling, checking of translations, or dictation tasks, and cloze tests can be computationally controlled using texts displayed on the screen" (p. 194).

While back in 1987 Crystal mentioned the usefulness of 'text displayed on screen', three decades later it is equally important to examine the methods with which texts can be organically incorporated into language development. This method implies an approach that is analytical, creative, and is in the form of self-study.

As progress is a never-ending phenomenon and the framework of language teaching in the distant future cannot be predicted, currently, the main concern of language learners should be the maximum degree of exploitation of the existing possibilities. Therefore, the importance of the potential advantages of the fine-tuned word-processor has to be emphasised, with the help of which useful tasks such as analytical reading can be performed.

One objective of analytical reading is to sensitise learners to even minute details relating to grammar, vocabulary, collocations, idiomatic language, style, register, and syntax. The method lies in the notion that, instead of presenting rules and giving exercises to students for practising and drilling, which are common components of the traditional methodology of language teaching, the teacher should encourage the student to find, discover, and reveal the same aspects of the language by carrying out simple research into the text, the possibility of which is offered by the latest versions of word processing programmes, the most common of which is Microsoft Word.

Since the new file format 'docx' was introduced, Microsoft Word has incorporated a number of useful improvements which are only comparable to functions of concordance programmes. Statistical data concerning frequency of occurrence,

textual environment, for example, hitherto exploited by linguists and literary scholars, are now available to any language learner. The most notable of these features is the 'find' command, which can be successfully used for analytical reading.

One of the most trivial statements made in connection with language development – be it the speaker's mother tongue or a foreign language – is that reading is one of the most basic and also the most useful means of fostering and promoting verbal expression. Although the advantages of reading are undeniable, today's technologically sophisticated world has altered the present generation's attitude to reading in such a way that the availability of information has shifted the interest in detail towards a focus on reading in the form of scanning or skimming a great number of texts with the maximum speed. The tendency and capability to sort out the main points of a text , while an ultimately considerable skill, is bound to decrease awareness of details of a foreign language which are still essential components of language development.

As a result of the widespread application of the communicative approach, and English being a lingua franca, a common means of communication between speakers of different languages, students feel empowered to interact freely and creatively.

Another consequence of this teaching method is a certain degree of permissiveness on behalf of the teacher in terms of choice of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation for the sake of the student's fluency, self-confidence, and an optimal degree of spontaneity.

In order to facilitate the correct use of a foreign language, the teacher has to find novel ways of making students more sensitive to such details and making them internalise the correct forms for themselves. One useful tool to achieve this goal is to give project-like tasks to students basically as homework, which leads to discovering particular lexical or grammatical features of a language. Providing the student with text-based authentic examples for home study is likely to be beneficial. Recommended steps are as follows:

- the teacher selects useful (mostly online) resources and texts;

- the link of the text is sent to the students for home study; and

- the student's task is to use the 'search' function of the word processor (Ctrl+F) for particular features of the language. The occurrences of words, phrases or grammar items in the given text will be automatically listed and highlighted.

The example that follows illustrates how this simple method can be used: for instance grammar – singular or plural. Table 1 shows the correct use of English non-count nouns (e.g. news, information, advice, furniture, equipment, etc.). Despite being aware of the grammatical rule, students tend to use such words incorrectly (either with the indefinite article or in the plural). With the help of the 'find' command, the student is given instant examples of how such words are used in a text and the authentic, real-life occurrences may reinforce and activate existing passive vocabulary and knowledge of grammar.

Table 1. Travel safety[3]

Navigation	Non-count nouns: e.g. advice
• The FCO travel advice helps you • provide tailored advice for • you should read the travel advice • on the travel advice page	"The FCO travel advice helps you make your own decisions about foreign travel. Your safety is our main concern, but we can't provide tailored advice for individual trips. If you're concerned about whether or not it's safe for you to travel, you should read the travel advice for the country or territory you're travelling to, together with information from other sources you've identified, before making your own decision on whether to travel. Only you can decide whether it's safe for you to travel. When we judge the level of risk to British nationals in a particular place has become unacceptably high, we'll state on the travel advice page for that country or territory that we advise against all or all but essential travel. Read more about how the FCO assesses and categorises risk in foreign travel advice. Our crisis overseas page suggests additional things you can do before and during foreign travel to help you stay safe".

Despite its simplicity, this process of listing and highlighting can considerably contribute to the clarification of other problematic areas of English grammar.

4.   Conclusion

Regular application of the method described above can enable the student to exploit these features of the word processor and benefit from it in the same way as they are prepared to use online dictionaries. Nonetheless, as Dhaif (1989) says,

> "computers can never replace the 'live' teacher, especially in language teaching, where the emphasis is on mutual communication between people. [Computers] can just play a role in teaching the second or foreign language as an aid to the teacher" (cited in Razagifard & Rahimpour, 2010, p.11).

While this claim may hold true for the foreseeable future, the role of the teacher is bound to undergo considerable transformation as a result of artificial intelligence, which is gradually pervading all aspects of our intellectual life.

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