DESIGNING A FRENCH FOR LIBERAL ARTS PROFESSIONS COURSE

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Abstract
French for Specific Purposes (FSP) courses prove to be challenging for both learners and teachers because they have to be tailored to audiences with increasingly specialized needs who are concerned, to various degrees, about their integration in a French-speaking professional work environment. This paper will respond briefly to the main questions regarding the design and teaching of a French course for liberal arts professions which was created primarily for Canadian students interested in the legal, medical and educational fields, but is also open to students who need an extra language course in order to meet their program requirements. The designer of a second-language course that proposes specific training complementary to general linguistic training needs to carefully determine the course's learning objectives and teaching strategies, to create a syllabus which responds to multifunctional needs, and to choose evaluation techniques that are more suitable for learners who will eventually work in an intercultural environment.

Key words: *French for Specific Purposes, legal French, medical French, French for education, learning objectives, teaching/learning materials and resources, learning strategies, evaluation techniques*

INTRODUCTION

A Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) course usually responds to demands from an audience with professional expertise who needs intensive linguistic training in order to use a second-language in their particular fields of work. This category of courses proves to be very challenging for both learners and teachers. But when such courses are designed for university students who sometimes have only a vague idea about their future field of work, are these challenges still the same?

According to Jean-Marc Mangiante and Chantal Parpette (2004, p. 17), the authors of a book on French for Specific Purposes, “français de spécialité” seems more appropriate than “français sur objectif spécifique” when the course responds to the request of a group of non-specialists. More recently, complementary appellations like “français à visée professionnelle” and “Français Langue Professionnelle” take into consideration either linguistic competencies shared by several fields of work or the nature of the audience. However, I must say right from the start that all these designations take into account the presence of an audience more or less specialized who is concerned, to various degrees, about their integration in a French-speaking professional work environment.

In this paper I will respond briefly to a number of questions regarding the design and teaching of a French course for liberal arts professions that I created for students interested in the legal, medical, and educational fields, but which is also open to those willing to simply take a French language course as part of their program requirements.

Among the questions raised by the design and teaching of a language course for specific purposes I will address the following:

(1) What is the best way to teach this type of course to a group of learners whose communicative needs are not strictly determined by their professional activity?

(2) What are the learning objectives for a one-semester French for specific purposes course whose syllabus has to respond to multifunctional needs?

(3) What are the most efficient methods of searching for and analyzing the available material?

(4) What are the best strategies (a) to avoid the risk of reducing the communicative objectives to the simple acquisition of a specific lexicon and (b) to make the course both useful and interesting?

(5) What are the proper evaluation techniques in a course built around specific communication scenarios but intended for learners who do not necessarily possess a particular professional expertise?

1. NEEDS ANALYSIS

Before designing a language course for specific purposes intended for university students the teacher has to analyze their needs for such a challenging course, or at least to make reasonable assumptions about these needs. Unlike similar courses offered to specialists in various disciplines, a language course for specific purposes designed for students who might come from various disciplines proves to be even more challenging. Since students are not always sure about the profession they want to practice after their university studies, they take a course of language for specific purposes primarily as a language course, hoping that it might help them in their future professional interactions in a foreign country.

Mangiante and Parpette (2004, pp. 14-15) consider this type of course a drift case ("cas de dérive") for the simple reason that there is no training "urgency" nor "specific objective to be attained". As for the university teacher, who possesses a limited knowledge of a specific domain other than language and/or literature, the design of a language course for specific purposes is not at all an easy task. But if this is the case, why should a non-specialist take up such a challenge?

In my case, two factors contributed to the decision to design a French course for liberal arts professions, namely for law, medicine, and education.

(a) First of all, a number of the students enrolled in our French programs plan to have a second major in political science or philosophy because they hope to attend law school after their undergraduate studies. Other students are interested in becoming French teachers. Very few decide to continue their studies in the medical field but, like most people of their generation, they have an increased awareness about the need to live a healthy lifestyle and to prevent illnesses, therefore, they welcome the idea of learning some useful French medical vocabulary.

(b) The second factor is related to changes in the workforce. In recent years, given the complexity of most jobs and the difficulty in getting a good one, young people have more doubts about their capacity to face the work world, especially when they do not have any experience in the field they associate with their academic competencies. The only thing they do not doubt is that they will be part of a globalized world where they will need not only specific knowledge, but also a diversified set of personal and professional skills.

As can be seen in this particular case, the learners' needs analysis was based on the assumption that these three attractive fields could be of interest to a number of students who chose a small liberal arts institution without always having a clear idea about their future field of work. Some of them take this course because it is different from other traditional language courses, others only because they needed to meet the requirements of their academic program. Despite the lack of clarity of their needs, my intention was to embark with them on a challenging intellectual adventure that later might give them the desire to work in a French-speaking country.

2. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In the absence of explicit demands from the group of learners, how could the teacher establish clear objectives for this type of language course which is supposed to convey a specific vocabulary, syntax, and discourse, but also to enhance a cultural awareness much needed in the target context? Unlike courses tailored for learners who have similar professional knowledge but different linguistic competencies, my French course for liberal arts professions is designed for third and fourth-year university students who already took at least two grammar courses at the intermediate and advanced levels. However, establishing the learning objectives for this type of course is not easy, especially because of the time constraint (one semester) and the lack of a strong initial motivation. I had to "graft" these objectives on the general linguistic and cultural "trunk" of my group of students and never lose sight of the course-aimed outputs. As it is stated on the course outline, by the end of twelve weeks, students

(a) will have acquired specific basic French vocabulary and structures related to various professions (law, medicine and education);

(b) will have used the new language acquisitions in role-play and simulations relevant to different professional environments;

(c) will be able to use coping strategies for expressing themselves in a professional setting with limited knowledge of a specific variety of the French language;

(d) will have read and analyzed several general and semi-specialized texts without major difficulties;

(e) will have contributed positively in group learning activities and projects;

(f) will have made a presentation on a topic related to one of the three fields studied in this course.

Obviously, the teacher could favor certain objectives in each of the three sections of the course. For instance, it is unrealistic to expect that students will be able to acquire oral competence in legal French or to produce legal documents. Some realistic objectives in this short course would be to introduce students to the general view of the legal field in France and in their native country and to make them use very basic lexical and grammatical structures which are specific to this field. As for the medical domain, students will acquire a limited set of French vocabulary which will be integrated in brief oral and written activities. The focus will be on useful communicative strategies that could be applied by learners in a Francophone work environment. In the last section of the course, a selection of short articles about the French and Canadian education systems could constitute the starting point of interesting discussions and debates around current issues in education. Considering the fact that students are already familiar with the various argumentative strategies they use in other courses, the communicative dimension of the course will be considerably increased. Unlike the previous sections of the course, the acquisition of a specialized vocabulary is not the main target, but only an element of a familiar discourse students must adapt to various work situations.

3. TEACHING/LEARNING MATERIALS AND EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES

The collection of data for a language course for specific purposes could take a considerable amount of time if there is no proper manual for the selected field(s) of work. Fortunately, CLE International has

published several textbooks which can be used in a course designed for learners who are interested in law, medicine, tourism, or business. However, in a short course created for non-specialists, only a few chapters can be used in the classroom because these textbooks are intended primarily for professionals who are highly motivated to acquire strong competencies in their respective field(s) of work.

The first time I offered this course I used *Le français du droit* (Penfornis 2006), a manual that presents the main concepts of legal French in a very concise manner. The basic juridical vocabulary is then integrated in various activities which can be completed individually or in groups. Given the difficulty of legal texts, this manual's authors employ very few authentic legal documents, which makes this textbook relatively accessible to students. But, since the manual presents only the French legal system, I considered that it would be appropriate to also use several articles related to the Canadian legal system and Canadian political institutions and jurisdictions.

Several years later, I decided to stop using the French textbook because most of the information I needed for the legal terminology was freely accessible on various Internet sites. Therefore, I selected and adapted the documents containing the basic information about legal French and posted them online for my students. For those who were willing to go deeper into the legal field I also posted several useful links. Needless to say that this research for educational resources and the analysis I had to do before putting them online was very time consuming.

For the medical French section of the course I chose to use *santé-médecine.com,* a small textbook published by Dallies and Tolas in 2004. Again, I put in the syllabus only the chapters containing the basic medical terminology and I added several articles dealing with current health and medical topics such as flu epidemics, organ transplant, smoking or use of drugs, and euthanasia. I also used audio-video materials in order to enhance students' comprehension skills.

As for the field of education, whose vocabulary does not present a big challenge to students, I approached this area through various articles dealing with relevant issues such as the education system in France and Canada, the integration of equality in various pedagogical practices, authority and discipline, school violence, the need for elimination of gender stereotypes, etc. For this course segment in particular, students are able to engage in more discussions about cultural differences and to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the French and Canadian education systems, especially since a number of them participate in various student-exchange programs in France and other French-speaking countries.

4. LEARNING STRATEGIES AND CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

In a 12-week French course offered to students with various degrees of motivation, a teacher who plans to introduce them to three liberal arts domains needs to simplify the selected material and choose a minimal number of communicative situations relevant to a foreign cultural environment. The designer of such a course has to avoid falling into the trap of long lectures on French civilization and refrain from overemphasizing the lexical and grammatical aspects of the proposed specific discourses. Adding a playful dimension to this course will greatly facilitate the learning process.

4.1 Classroom activities for legal French

In her book, *Didactique du français juridique* (2007, p. 99), Eliane Damette presents four learning strategies for legal French that could be easily used in other language for specific purposes courses : (a) a "panoramic" strategy, which gives an overview of the legal field; (b) a "transversal" strategy, which focuses on the linguistic aspects; (c) a "meta-cultural" strategy emphasizing the links between law and society; and (d) a "global" strategy that facilitates the "personal and creative" appropriation of the elements learned through the other three strategies.

Most of the types of activities I use in this section of the course are similar to those included in Penfornis's textbook. The goal of the proposed activities is to make students aware of the specific meaning of everyday vocabulary when it appears in legal documents. As Eliane Damette (2007, p. 89) explains, "There is a legal terminology because the law gives a special meaning to certain terms". In her book, she draws up a typology of activities that could be used in a legal French course (Damette 2007, pp. 48-50).

In my course I favor vocabulary exercises such as fill in the blanks, multiple choice, true or false, scrambled sentences, or search for intruders in a list of words. These exercises make learners aware of precise legal vocabulary and the linguistic characteristics of legal discourse. They are more appropriate for learners who are not in the process of becoming specialists in any of these three fields, but might benefit in the future from these basic professional language and communicative skills. Some other activities based on connecting or comparing various elements presented in a short text, encourage reflection and critical thinking, especially when they are done in groups. For instance, the analysis of several communication situations may require students to link each of the given situations to a specific legal professional or court; or, after comparing three lawyers with different specializations working in different places, students might have to answer questions related to the best choice of lawyer for various hypothetical circumstances.

4.2 Classroom activities for medical French

For the second part of this course, Dallies & Tolas' textbook *santé-médecine.com* (2004) provides basic medical terminology which is reused in short dialogues and texts. This small manual also proposes a variety of matching activities, fill-in-the-blank exercises, word(s)/sentence-picture association activities, and short dialogues constructed around several general medical communication situations. By using the task-oriented approach, the teacher gives students the opportunity to act out various parts in instructive and sometimes funny role play, such as a medical appointment and consultation, a doctor home visit, or a conversation with a French pharmacist. In some of these particular cases, the linguistic competencies are not sufficient for north-American learners who need to be aware of some cultural elements specific to a Francophone milieu. After reading some authentic documents or short texts created for teaching purposes, students become acquainted with the more restrictive norms of interaction when it comes, for instance, to speech acts subtended by power-knowledge rapports (Damette 2007, p. 158).

The intercultural learning process is also facilitated by multimedia resources that have to be carefully selected in order to let students discover not only a body of knowledge, but also a "savoir-vivre" which is indispensable in a French-speaking professional environment.

4.3 Classroom activities for French for education

In this third section of the course, based on the reading of several articles and on students' experiences, vocabulary acquisition is not as important as in the two previous sections. However, the classroom activities are built around communication situations students are familiar with and discussions of current pedagogical practices encourage the learners, especially those who plan to become teachers, to reflect on various aspects of the Canadian education system and to compare them to other countries' education models. Students develop their linguistic and intercultural competencies when they are asked to propose effective measures against school violence, to find solutions for schools attended by mostly disadvantaged students, or to eliminate the inequality in education based on gender, race and culture. Simulating a parent-teacher conference or a discussion with a student who has behavior problems will also help learners to reflect on the complexity of the teaching profession in a culturally diverse school environment. The classroom could become, even if only for a short period of time, a place for taking action and designing measures which could hypothetically impact a young person's life. Students are aware of the importance of these topics because the media shows them almost daily the disastrous consequences of ignorance when it comes to or the inability to adapt to the new realities of school.

4.4 Selecting the best teaching and learning strategies

It is undeniable that the teacher of a foreign language course for specific purposes must use learning and teaching strategies that are specifically suitable for achieving this course's general objectives. In order for my students to acquire a minimum of specialized vocabulary and specific grammatical structures used in the three fields of work, I carefully selected the most appropriate strategies and activities for each of these domains. Paraphrasing exercises, for instance, prove to be very useful in acquiring medical terms, but they are to be avoided in legal French (Abry 2007, p. 40). The new specialized vocabulary needs to be used in various lexical activities in order to be easily memorized. Role play seem to be more appropriate for the education and medical fields sections, while problem solving and case study activities make the reinvesting of legal terms easier. The grammatical approach is mostly inductive and the new concepts are immediately contextualized in activities relevant for the legal, medical and educational fields.

Choosing the most effective teaching and learning strategies for each of the three course components helps to avoid the risk of reducing the communicative objectives to the mere acquisition of specialized vocabulary and linguistic structures. On the other hand, by favoring certain strategies, the course becomes more accessible and more interesting to the group of learners. One of the preferred learning strategies in all second-language courses is the analysis of authentic and culturally diverse communication situations. Therefore, short audio-visual materials and fictional or non-fictional texts are an invaluable resource for both teachers and learners.

But how do course designers decide which are the best teaching and learning strategies in the absence of ample knowledge about the domains of the social activities presented to a group of learners who do not have a strong motivation for these particular occupations? First, I would like to reiterate the fact that a language course for specific purposes differs from other language courses mainly at the content level and much less at the methodological level (Mangiante & Parpette 2004, p. 78). For instance, students are familiar with the methodology used in delivering other language courses previously taken: comprehension questions, charts to complete, cloze exercises, crossword puzzles, role play, simulations, debates etc. The choice and length of the classroom activities depend on the level of learners' second-language competencies as well as on the course's general objectives. Teachers need to take into account the fact that there are no specialists in this type of course and, therefore, everybody has to be actively involved in the cooperative learning process. Ideally, the participatory activities based on the action-oriented and task-oriented approaches should encourage learners to use a second-language in a professional environment. Through various classroom activities, learners are invited to simulate different professional interactions they might experience later on in their future profession. Group-learning activities such as problem solving, role play, debates or mock job interviews have the additional advantage of making students aware of different cultural attitudes. An experiential-based learning component would further enrich learners' *savoir-faire* if this course could be extended to a full year.

5. COURSE EVALUATION

Evaluating the content acquisition of a language for specific purposes course constitutes another important challenge for the designer of this type of course. As Dominique Abry notes in *Le français sur Objectifs Spécifiques et la classe de langue* (2007, p. 52), the classroom activities selected for this language course are mostly based on the action-oriented pedagogy, while students' evaluation "still has requirements that are very academic". Indeed, most university courses use a formative evaluation which is carried out at various stages during the school year. Since students know that most of their course grade is the result of a quantitative written evaluation, they concentrate their efforts on the course components that are to be tested and tend to neglect the acquisition of competencies which are not part of the evaluation. In my course, for instance, students have to write three quizzes and a

midterm exam, plus an article review reflecting a theme related to justice, health and medicine, or education. But they also have to prepare an oral presentation on one of these three topics.

As for the final exam, the first time I introduced this course in our French Studies program I decided to replace it with a group project. Since I knew that most of my enthusiastic and dynamic second-year students were going to enroll in this course in their third year, I assumed that they would favor a project-type evaluation. I was correct in my assumption; students welcomed this idea. In groups of three to six, they wrote several skits inspired by various work situations. They carefully researched their subject and wrote the part of the character they were going to play. They met on a regular basis to write, rehearse the skit, and prepare the costumes and props needed for their performance. The four skits were presented in the college's beautiful Great Hall. The audience was comprised of not only their colleagues, but also several French teachers and guests that the students had invited. This was far from being a simple final course evaluation. What a pleasant surprise it was to see that the abstract concepts learned during the course came to life through the magic of my students' voices and gestures. The quality of the four projects exceeded my expectations. My colleagues who were present at those performances still remember the contagious humor of the trial presented by six talented students whose skit was inspired by a real case or the parent-teacher conference played by four students who were admitted that year to the Faculty of Education.

Sadly, two years later there was no magic. This subsequent group of students, less homogenous and less motivated than that first one, didn't feel comfortable with the idea of presenting their skits in front of a large audience. They were more comfortable in the classroom and I understood their motives when I saw the group presentations. In the course evaluation, most of those students expressed that they would have preferred a more traditional final examination instead of a creative group project. Therefore, I decided to give an option to my next group of learners and let them chose democratically the form of the final examination for this particular course. To my big disappointment, for the past two years students opted almost unanimously for the written formative evaluation.

What conclusions can one draw from this particular experience? Should a teacher impose on students an evaluation technique that seems adequate to the course's learning objectives at the risk of making them frustrated and possibly discouraging other students from taking this course in the future? In a small university like ours it is easier to take into account students' needs and expectations because we teach them in more than one course over a period of four years - something that can also be a disadvantage, since some students are influenced by their colleagues in their choice of courses. On the other hand, in a larger institution, where it is almost impossible to know who will enroll in a particular course, the teacher of a second-language course for specific purposes can only make assumptions about the learners' needs, while having more flexibility in selecting the evaluation methods for their course. Nevertheless, it remains important to remember that each teaching experience gives educators new ideas about how to enrich future students' learning experience.

CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that there are numerous challenges in designing and delivering a university language course for specific French, this unique pedagogical experience is extremely rewarding because it allows both learners and teachers to explore together specific professional knowledge and attitudes that are indispensable in an intercultural work milieu. Teachers who propose specific language training, complementary to general linguistic training, need to gradually update their knowledge of specific types of French in order to stimulate learners' curiosity about fields of work which require the mastery of a second language. Lexical and discursive particularities of various speech and text types used in specific professional circumstances will lead learners towards a better understanding of the complex nature of human interaction within a multicultural context. Since the didactic exploitation of authentic documents used for specific purposes crosses several work fields, students will have the chance to go beyond these fields' boundaries and acquire new perspectives. Besides acquiring a

multidimensional communication competence by adopting a trans-disciplinary learning approach, students will have a better chance to connect new knowledge, and to accept the unknown and the unexpected in a work context with a different attitude.

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