LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGE FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES IN TERMS OF PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCY DEVELOPMENT: PROPOSAL FOR A FRENCH TRAINING PROGRAMME FOR STUDENTS IN LIFE SCIENCES

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Abstract

Our paper is the result of twenty years of reflection and of teaching French to students in life sciences. This career path has given rise to several key concepts, namely specialized French as a teaching trend in didactics and, in training engineering, the construction of course progression, the objectives pursued and the profiling of exercises to ensure the development of learners' professional skills. The first part of our paper is of a didactic nature: it looks at the ideas that have marked the field of teaching French as a foreign language to professional audiences or those in the process of becoming professional, and also makes reference, where appropriate, to what has happened in the teaching of English. The aim of this part is not to draw up an exhaustive picture of the different methodologies, but rather to highlight the overall movement in this field of study. The second part is more practical and comes under the heading of training engineering, by proposing a specialized language teaching pathway, our point of view being, following Florence Mourlhon-Dallies' approach (*Enseigner une langue à des fins professionnelles*, 2008), that there is no one methodology that is better than another, but that it is all a question of project, audience and priority.

Key words: LSP (Language for Specific Purposes), Professional Competency Development, Proposed French Training Programme, Students in Life Sciences.

With its significant educational potential, the subject "foreign language for specific purposes" in higher education institutions contributes both to the personal development of learners and to the systematic renewal of professional knowledge, training, and development of students' communication skills. A strategy aimed at improving the content and methods of teaching language for specific purposes (LSP) involves the development of a holistic approach to problem solving based on theoretical study and experimental verification of teaching strategies (Matukhin D., Gorkaltseva E, 2015). The aim of foreign language teaching is to ensure students of non-linguistic faculties with the ability to use foreign languages in professional communication. "Therefore, being of practical usage, the study of foreign languages for special purposes aims at solving the communicative problems in students' future professional activity" (Belyaeva I.G. *et al*, 2019).

In the field of French didactics, it was around 1960 that 'scientific' reflection on the teaching of languages to adults in the process of professionalisation or in employment really began. The process of disciplinarisation of this area of language teaching was subsequently marked by a range of approaches, with labels that were often confused in practice (Holzer G., 2004).

However, it is important to identify the original contours and make conceptual demarcations, in order to show that this multiplicity of names is due to the fact that, depending on the nature of the demands and the dominant methodologies, the emphasis has been placed in turn on different training content and objectives (mastery of lexicon and grammar, reading and communication skills, professional skills, adaptation to the labour market (Mourlhon-Dallies F., 2008a).

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Our paper is the result of twenty years of reflection and of teaching French to students in life sciences. This career path has given rise to several key concepts, namely specialized French as a teaching trend in didactics and, in training engineering, the construction of course progression, the objectives pursued and the profiling of exercises to ensure the development of learners' professional skills. The first part of our paper is of a didactic nature and is based on the

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analysis of the main ideas that have marked the field of teaching French as a foreign language to professional audiences or those in the process of becoming professional, and makes reference, where appropriate, to what has happened in the teaching of English. The aim of this part is not to draw up an exhaustive picture of the different methodologies, but rather to highlight the overall movement in this field of study. The second part is more practical and comes under the heading of training engineering, by proposing a specialized language teaching programme, our point of view being, following Florence Mourlhon-Dallies' approach (*Enseigner une langue à des fins professionnelles*, 2008), that there is no one methodology that is better than another, but that it is all a question of project, audience and priority.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. *Main designations in use…*

Since the middle of the 20th century, approaches to teaching modern languages to adults in the process of professionalization or in employment have multiplied (hence the significant number of names created) and diversified (the multiplicity of trends reflecting distinct methodological approaches). By summarizing the main trends and their characteristics, we retain the highlights of the teaching of French for practical and professional purposes:

- 60s-70s

French as a specialized language (including scientific and technical)
Public: Scientific public
Methodology: Structuro-Global Audio-Visual (SGAV); 3-level teaching model: L1: basics of everyday language; L2: common scientific core VGOS (Vocabulaire Général d'Orientation Scientifique); L3: further training by discipline, based on a lexical inventory (VGOM - Vocabulaire Général d'Orientation Médicale, VIEA - Vocabulaire d'Initiation aux Etudes Agronomiques, etc.)
Functional French
Public: French government scholarship holders
Methodology: functional and communicative approach; considering the diversity of the audience and their needs; determination of content according to objectives; identification of communication situations and speech acts.

- 70s

Instrumental French
Public: (Latin America) Students; Researchers;
Methodology: French language as a tool for accessing written scientific and technical documentation.

- 80s

Functional French

Public: Professionals; Students; Researchers
Methodology: emergence of pragmatic linguistics; communicative approach (defining content according to communication situations); focus on the learner; emphasis on the use of authentic documents

- Since 1990

French for Specific Purposes
Specialized French
Public: Professionals; Students; Researchers
Methodology: communicative approach; learner-centred; linguistic feedback; discourse analysis; action-oriented approach task-based, project-based pedagogy); evaluation of communicative competence.
Professional French
Methodology: focused on professional practice.

2. *Specialized French/ French for Specific Purposes*

The multiplicity of names and the characteristics briefly presented show that, depending on the nature of the requests and the dominant methodologies, the emphasis has been placed in turn on different training contents and objectives (mastery of vocabulary, grammar, ability to read, to communicate, specialization and professional skills, adaptation to the labour market) (Mourlhon-Dallies, 2008). It is therefore necessary to go into more detail on the two dominations that particularly interest us for our study, namely specialized French, and French for specific purposes, and to identify their particular and common characteristics (*apud* Mangiante J.-M., Parpette, C., 2004; Carras *et al*, 2007; Mourlhon-Dallies, F., 2008a).

Specialized French is characterised by: a supply-side approach that anticipates, as it were, the future and potential needs of learners; a global approach to a discipline or professional branch; attempts to reflect the diversity of the field covered; broad audience; a set of resources and teaching approaches centred on (specialist) areas from which teachers draw to develop their lessons; the content of the programme, the supporting documents and the type of assessment are determined by the institution and the teacher, within the limits of the specialist area concerned; spread over time (medium- or long-term training).

French for specific purposes' characteristics are: training on demand; works on a case-by-case basis; well-defined segment; precise audience; tailor-made training engineering; intensive course (short-term training).

Both methodologies have in common: the new content not yet mastered by the teacher (the teacher's job is, in our opinion, an *ars combinatoria*).

From the above descriptions we can draw some halfway conclusions:

- ✓ The development from the middle of the twentieth century to the first decades of the twenty-first is that of teaching which has gradually moved away from strictly linguistic concerns in an attempt to link linguistics to its exteriors (socio-cultural, economic, cognitive, professional).

- ✓ The movement in didactics is parallel to that in discourse analysis and other language sciences: that of a certain interdisciplinarity coupled with 'praxeological' concerns (Mourlhon-Dallies, 2008a).

- ✓ We should not think that the approaches that preceded professional French are now outdated, nor should we believe that each new designation in our table cancels out the previous one.

- ✓ Depending on the teaching context, each approach has its own legitimacy and responds to its own concerns, in an extremely diverse field of teaching.

- ✓ It therefore appears that a certain know-how exists in terms of designing resources and training programs adapted to audiences in the process of professionalization; these resources, the result of an approach which aims to introduce students to professional discourse, to acquire specialized terminology and to know how to adapt to the requirements of their daily practice, also concern the acquisition of transversal language skills common to specialized disciplines (Velescu, Mihalache, 2023).

3. *French for Specific/Special Purposes (FSP) and English for Specific/Special Purposes (ESP)*

Although it is customary to equate the FSP and the ESP, it is nevertheless revealing to consider the notion of public and the way it is understood and categorized (we are here taking up the clarification of Mourlhon-Dallies F., 2008a). Thus, the ESP makes a clear distinction between academic audiences (English for Academic Purposes, EAP) and professional audiences (English for Occupational Purposes, EOP). The distinction between academic and professional is not without impact on the very notion of objective: for the latter, it is possible to determine the needs in terms of communication, skills, tasks, while for the former, students with still nascent trajectories, the objectives are broader (Mourlhon-Dallies F., 2008a) and the teacher of this type of learner quite often does the work of clearing the way and must make demarcations himself.

Specialized French can be seen as an institutionalisation of demand for French for Specific Purposes: it is because requests for training have been made for specific professional audiences that the training provision for these audiences has developed and diversified. (Carras C. *et al*, 2007).

Thus, we can see the similarity between academic audiences (in EAP = English for Academic Purposes) and those in specialized French.

Going through the ESP has the advantage of drawing on a reality of higher education, namely the degree of professionalisation of the learner population; in the early years of their course, students are 'professional apprentices', thanks to the specialist subjects; with the practical placements, they take their first steps in the field and find themselves in an in-between situation (Mourlhon-Dallies F., 2008b).

4. *Task-based teaching and specific groups of learners*

The chapter 2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) introduces the action-oriented approach by postulating that the language user is a social actor who accomplishes tasks in given circumstances within a particular domain (personal, public, educational, professional). The task is therefore defined as any action aim that the author represents as having to achieve a given result in relation to a problem to be solved, an obligation to be fulfilled, a goal that has been set. Not all tasks are purely linguistic. They often form part of a scenario/project that enables them to be linked and articulated. The French action-oriented approach emphasises concrete projects, often carried out in groups and with a strong focus on production.

"The action-oriented approach [...] makes perfect sense with a professional audience. [...] For this type of learners, the tasks, which are directly linked to the objectives and therefore to the needs, are very real and are at the heart of the training" (Carras C. *et al*, 2007).

In specialized language teaching, the task focuses on the production of oral and/or written discourse in line with current professional discourse. Several model texts or recordings are provided for this purpose; learners are encouraged to work with many authentic documents and to consult resources on the Internet, as is done, for example, in *Rond-Point* method; this method for teaching 'general' French can be used for specialized French in many respects, particularly in unit 8 of book 1.

5. *Proposed French training pathways for the professionalisation of learners in life sciences*

5.1. General French methods for teaching specialized French

The preceding considerations on the approaches manifested in the teaching of professional languages and on the place of the task in recent methodologies allow us to say that given our context of teaching French as a foreign language, it is appropriate to take into account the fairly wide range of training objectives for our student public in the proposal of the present training course aimed at the development of professional skills in specialized French.

The Forword of "Nouveau Rond-Point 1" method underlines the idea of resuming the strong points of the first "Rond-Point", which introduced the action-based approach to French as a Foreign Language, with the didactic unit based on carrying out a task. The NRP 1 has undergone a thorough reworking of the units and involves the learner working in greater depth on lexis and grammar. Interaction and negotiation remain key concepts if students are to acquire the skills set out in the CEFR effectively. Unit 8 of Livre de l'élève 1: « À chacun son métier » states as final task: "We are going to select candidates for three jobs and choose one job for ourselves". The unit's characteristics are:

- textual typology: classified ads, biographical data (website), playing cards, tests, job offers, professional profiles.

- communication and skills: talking about your life; evaluating your skills and competences; expressing and comparing your opinions; situating a fact in the past.

- grammatical skills: the compound past tense; the past participle; the place of adverbs; temporal expressions: during, there is, already ...

-lexical skills: professions; qualities; to know and to know well.

- (inter)cultural skills: Meilleurs mains de France; crafts.

The exercise 1, *Pour être pompier...* asks learner to match professions and the qualities they require with pictures of people. Thanks to this activity, students will considerably extend their lexicon of professions, on the one hand, and discover many adjectives describing qualities, on the other.

With the exercise 2, *Votre métier*, every student must explain to the others the choice (present or future) of a profession. This oral production activity will enable learners to acquire the vocabulary of professions and qualities worked on in the previous activity. They will also have to think about their own choice of profession and their own qualities. Approach: To make the link with activity 1 and refresh the vocabulary, the teacher asks students to write down - individually and for themselves - three of their essential qualities. Then she/he asks them to write down the profession they could practise. In turn they say why they dream of doing it by reading out the three qualities they wrote down and explaining whether or not, on reflection, these qualities correspond to their choice of profession. The rest of the class can react afterwards. Going further: The teacher asks his students to choose someone they know or someone in public life, to recall the person's profession and to explain orally whether, in their opinion, he or she has the qualities required for the job.

The exercise 3, *Avantages et inconvénients* ask learners to explain the representation, positive or negative, that people have of various professions.

In the Guide pédagogique (Teaching guide), the authors propose three steps, as it follows:

"A. Ask your students to think individually about the qualities and faults they see in the professions listed in this activity and to fill in the table on this page accordingly.

B. Then ask them to group together to see if they share the same representation of the different professions.

C. If your students are not yet practising a profession, ask them whether or not they still have their dream after this exchange of opinions and why. This opinion can be expressed either orally or in a short text. This is the equivalent of the production in activity 2 (I am/want to be... because I have such and such a quality): I am/want to be... because this profession...

Going further: To reuse the new vocabulary seen in activities 1 and 3, you can play *Qui suis-je?*"

5.2. The contribution of multimedia to the specialized language competency development

The teachers of languages for specific purposes can find a wide range of documentation on the Internet that is often reliable (if they check the sources carefully) and always up to date. On the other hand, multimedia is probably most productive for the learner. Therefore, multimedia offers the possibility of differentiated teaching and greater learner autonomy. Used for language teaching purposes, the multimedia tool, makes active, interactive, differentiated teaching possible.

We successfully use with our students in life sciences faculties the ONISEP educational kit and the onisep.fr website (Office National d'Information Sur les Enseignements et les Professions) (https://www.onisep.fr/metier/decouvrir-le-monde-

professionnel/agriculture) and we usually start by the discovery Quiz « Que savez-vous de l'agriculture ? » (The challenges facing agriculture today are to feed a growing population, meet quality standards and protect the environment. But do you know who the professionals involved are? Do you know the characteristics of agriculture in France? Test your knowledge of this key sector of the economy).

We continue with the educational worksheet « Portraits de professionnels. Qui est-ce? Un jeu pour reconstituer des portraits de professionnels »:

- aims: put together portraits of professionals to find out more about farming.

- content: find out about different jobs and learn more about them.

Students can work alone or in groups and then compare their answers. The exercises on the worksheet can be extended through Qui est-ce? (Who's who?), a game to reconstruct portraits of professionals.

The aim is first to identify the job and then to guess which job these sentences correspond to and thus reconstruct the portrait of each of these three professionals. The teacher can draw up a table to give them a more general idea of the activities, working conditions, qualities needed, advantages and constraints and, finally, the training required to practise the job.

The second activity aims to put together portraits of professionals using several sources of information. The learners must acquire data, organise and process it, make choices, coherent, problematic and argumentative statements in order to fill out two worksheets: Métiers de la recherche (Research careers) and Métiers de la production animale (Careers in animal production).

Content: discover careers and learn more about them.

Students can work alone or in groups and then compare their answers.

Materials and resources: Testimonials from professionals to get the activity started.

At this point in the training course, it would be interesting to discuss two documents with the learners: the Europass Curriculum vitae and the Cover letter. We can start with three exercises from Nouveau Rond-Point 1: « Petites annonces » (Matching a jobseeker profile to a suitable job offer), « Leur vie professionnelle » and « Le CV de Sophie ».

In the second stage, the students create their own CV and Cover letter using the Europass platform (https://europass.europa.eu/fr).

5.3. Assessment

5.3.1. Analysis of the existing situation in assessment

For language for specific purposes university-based training, assessment is an integral part of the training. Internal summative assessment is the sanction for this type of training. As a result, learners focus their efforts on passing an exam rather than acquiring skills.

More generally, it should be pointed out that the evaluation of these courses in an institutional environment does not always go hand in hand with the action-based approach used in the courses. However, if learners are placed in professional situations, it is important to include this type of activity in the assessment, whereas the examinations offered are often limited to a very traditional assessment, in the form of language skills.

5.3.2. Assessment of dual competence (proposal)

Teaching a specialized language raises the question of dual competence: linguistic competence on the one hand, and professional competence on the other (scientific knowledge and cultural competence). Dual assessment would be one solution, but this may be difficult to put in place, including for material and economic reasons. Assessment could be based on real-life situations, such as work placements (for example, the teaching units created by the authors of the manual « Communiquer en FOS » using authentic documents collected and the experience of scholarship students from the Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie). If practical application is out of the question, simulation may be an interesting means of assessment.

We use for the assessment of our students in life sciences faculties the video questionnaire: « Fiche métier », from the onisep.fr website; in this questionnaire, each student chooses a profession from the video file and fills in the questionnaire.

Another assessment activity is that one we call « Affiche du métier »: "You work in a company in the sector and, at a fair dedicated to agricultural careers and aimed at young people, you are invited to present your profession in the form of a poster, with the following content: places where you work; representative activities; qualities required; advantages and disadvantages of the profession. Draw up the poster and present it to your colleagues."

Resulting from a functional language teaching approach, « Le français de l'entreprise » by Michel Danilo and Béatrice Tauzin is part of the series of works which mark a renewed interest in the specialized field. The Forword signed by Jacques Cartier bears witness to this methodology: 'Its well-structured presentation, its division into different sections, each of which is presented as a

genuine technical dossier, and its pedagogical approach, which takes as its starting point the 'really' authentic reality, make this a solid work that is particularly well adapted to professional situations in the French-speaking world' (Danilo, M., Tauzin, B., 1990).

The Unit 4 - Découvrir l'entreprise (Discovering the company), with sub-chapters titled : Définir l'entreprise (Defining the company) ; Caractériser les entreprises (Characterising companies); Présenter l'organisation de l'entreprise (Presenting the organisation of a company); Analyser l'organisation (Analysing the organisation); Présenter les différentes formes juridiques des entreprises (Presenting the different legal forms of companies) allow us to give students the team project of the presentation of a company in their training field, with the following contents: Name; Logo; Slogan; Characteristics; Products/Services; Justification of choice of the company; Webography.

Then, we work on the Unit 5 – Entreprendre (Entrepreneurship), with sub-chapters: Créer, oui ou non? (To create, yes or no?), Avoir le bon profil (Having the right profile), Avoir une idée (Having an idea), Se mettre à son compte (Setting up your own business), Implanter une entreprise (Setting up a business), and the students must create their own business project (Mon projet d'entreprise) for the assessment (starting from exercise 1 page 48).

CONCLUSIONS

The training course that we have proposed has the advantage of using resources drawn from different approaches of teaching specialized languages and it is precisely this aspect that makes the work of the teacher who has before him an audience of students in the process of professionalization; consequently, a documentary like "We feed the world: le marché de la faim" (director Erwin Wagenhofer), which is interested in the modes of production and their consequences on global balances, showing rural people and industrialists, or films such as « Jean de Florette » (1986), based on the work of Marcel Pagnol (the reference to literature is not to be excluded in the teaching of specialized languages), the comedy « Je vous trouve très beau » (2005) with the Romanian Medeea Marinescu or the drama « Au nom de la terre » (2019), a great critical and public success, to name just a few. All resources are useful, if the language teacher combines them in a coherent approach that takes into account the audience, its objectives and its needs.

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