A way to teach a language for specific academic purposes

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Abstract

Learning a language for specific academic purposes is all about the goal. The goal is to acquire command of the language in that specific context.

Teaching a language for specific academic purposes is a very much a matter of methodology. The methodology is to parse the language into skills and offer the students exercises accordingly.

It is in the best interest of every student to practice one's own language skills. As such it is adviseable that they are provided with constant activities.

INTRODUCTION

Any language educational activity, in order to prove effective, ought to follow at the very least two types of goals. The types of goals in question are the short-term goals and long-term goals. (See Figure 1.)

Short-term goals	Long-term goals

Figure 1: A simple graphic representation of the basic types of goals of any language educational activity

The first type of goals, the short-term goals, is also known as the primary goals or the immediate goal. This is undoubtedly the most visible type of goals. Yet, this is the most difficult type of goals to achieve. It has to be said that some people seem to get bogged down at this stage. The reason is rather simple. Achieving this type of goals requires constant practice which is a time-consuming process. It is all about practicing one's language skills in related contexts order to acquire and ultimately master them. (See Figure 2.)

Short-term goals
Acquiring language skills

Figure 2: A simple graphic representation of the short-term goals of a language education

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The second type of goals is the long-term goals. While the second type of goals is not easily achieved either, it is easier to achieve than the first type since the fundamental have been acquired. The aim of the long-term goals is the formation of a perspective and ultimately an in-depth understanding of the language for specific academic purposes. (See Figure 3.)

Long-term goals
Developing in-depth understanding

Figure 3: A simple graphic representation of the long-term goals of a language education

It has to be said that, while achieving the short-term goals means, more or less walking on a beaten path, with foreseeable results, achieving the long-term goals is a far less predictable venture as it relies on any number of different subjective factors which may determine its outcome. (See Figure 4.)

Short-term goals	Long-term goals
predictable	unpredictable

Figure 4: A simple graphic representation of the nature of the outcome in the attempt to achieve the each type of goal

Having set the goals one must keep in mind the target public. For the purposes of this work, one will speak about public higher education which relates to a broad group of miscellaneous undergraduate students who may take a seminar in a language for specific academic purposes. (See Figure 5.)

Target public
Undergraduate students of a major

Figure 5: A simple graphic representation of the target public and its description.

Then, one is well-advised keep in mind the various upbringings which the undergraduate students have been experienced. The group is bound to be made up of people of various social strata, economic situations, religious affiliations and, of course, widely different educational experiences. This should be seen as an asset, since with great variety of backgrounds comes a great variety in the views of the students. This is relevant as it requires a particular communication pattern between the teacher and students, and thus a particular teaching method. (See Figure 6.)

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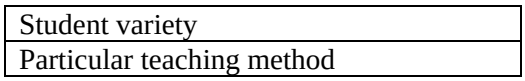


Figure 6: A simple graphic representation of the relationship between student variety and

As such it is not advisable that the caesura between secondary education methods and higher education approaches be too great. This approach is about the pursuit of new purpose under a traditional guise. (See Figure 7.)

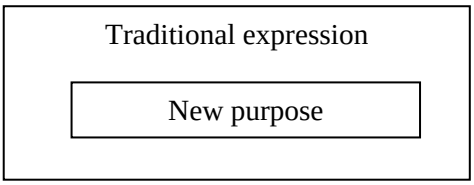


Figure 7: A simple graphic representation of a very general and extremely simplified version of the approach presented herein

In practice, the application of this theory requires a form of organisation which is able to encompass all conceivable types of exercises covering all the language skills without while, at the same time, allowing them to naturally derive from one another. Ideally, this form of organisation should be as simple as possible. One of the simplest types of organisation is called framing. (See Figure 8.)

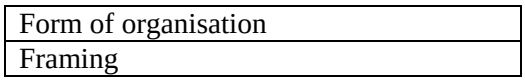


Figure 8: A simple graphic representation of a form of organisation

In order to build a seamless frame around all the exercises, the teacher may choose to create one's own presentation on the current topic. (See Figure 9.)

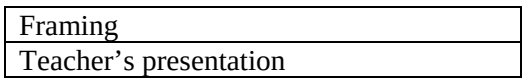


Figure 9: A simple graphic representation of a type of framing

The teacher's presentation is an interesting instrument since it can be easily dotted with exercises relating to the language skills. (See Figure 10.)

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Teacher's presentation
Language skills exercises

Figure 10: A simple graphic representation of the general types of skills which can be made part of the teacher's presentation

I. THE TEACHER'S PRESENTATION

The presentation made by the teacher may take the form of a presentation consisting in a sequence of projected slides. Ideally, the students ought to be handed out a collection of printed copies of the slides. The copies should contain all the activities but all the exercises are best left unsolved.

II. THE STUDENTS' PRESENTATION

An interesting activity for students may be the making and delivering of a presentation on the topic at hand. This means that the students ought to be informed in advance of the topics to be discussed during the current semester. The discussion is to be further extended to the assigning of the first topic for the presentation. It is here that two observations are necessary. The first is that it is probably for the best to assign each topic on a weekly basis rather that all at once at the beginning of the semester. The second observation is that one ought to make sure that the students understand the scope of the topic at hand.

The presentation is best made in a conventional power point format. As such it is well-advised to ask the students to refrain from using various presentation software which available online, even if they are tempted to do so by the graffic output. There are two rather obvious reasons for this request. Firstly, students are likely to use the free versions thereof and thus, their visualisation will most likely require a good internet connection at all times. Secondly, they cannot be stored or printed for future reference.

The presentation can be made by one student or a team, but no more than three students, depending on the length thereof. However, it is probably not a good idea for it to exceed a quarter of an hour to set aside enough time for the other activities.

Before actual presentation starts, the other students are to be encouraged to pay attention in order to understand the topic. Once the presentation is over, the other students are strongly encouraged to ask questions on the various pieces of information in the presentation.

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III. THE LANGUAGE SKILLS

While this is not technically correct, it is popularly assumed that there are for language skills for a language learner to acquire. These are said to be listening, reading, writing and speaking. There is seemingly commonsensical reasoning behind this list. Once can listen without having acquired reading, writing and speaking skills, as is the case with babies. One can read, without having acquired listening, writing and speaking skills as is the case with scholars of Sumerian cuneiform. One can write without having acquired listening, reading and speak skills, as is the case with classical language learners. One can speak without having acquired listening, reading and writing, as is the case with a kindergarten child. (See Figure 11.)

Popular language skills
Listening
Reading
Writing
Speaking

Figure 11: A simple representation of the list of perceived popular language skills

The state of the art in the field of language education is based on the assumption that there is almost always a case of comprehension, production or interaction. As such one is bound to speak about a more nuanced list of language skills. When it comes to listening there is listening comprehension. When it comes to reading there is reading comprehension. When it comes to writing there is text production. When it comes to speaking there are spoken comprehension and spoken interaction. (See Figure 12.)

Professional language skills
listening comprehension
reading comprehension
text production
spoken comprehension
spoken interaction

Figure 12: A simple representation of the list of perceived professional language skills

At this poit though, it has to be said that it is not adviseable to start working straight away on the language skills. A sort of easing into the topic

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is required. One may offer the students two connected exercises such as a crossword puzzle or a text with missing words, immediately followed by a an exercise where the terms in the former exercise are to be matched with their definitions.

In order to build up the listening comprehension skills of students, one ought to offer them a set of exercise based on a recording no longer than 6 minutes. These exercises may start with a simple exercise such as write the missing word or words. They may continue with something like “write true or false”. Then they may ask one to choose the correct answer between four or five choices in each case. Do not forget, in the end to ofer the students a recording script.

When it comes to the reading comprehension, one needs to find a different text on the same topic. Things can get a bit more complicated. One can offer the chance to skim the text and write a heading for each paragraph. In the same order of business one could offer the students a set of statements referring to each paragraph of the text and ask the students to decide if each statement is true or false according to the information in that paragraph. Then one may offer the students a few choices and let them choose the purpose of the text. But this is only part of building up the reading comprehension skills. To top it up, one may decide to add another text which is also connected to the larger topic. It does not have to be a large text as it could contain two or three paragraphs. Then the students may be offered a set of definitions and asked to find the matching terms in this text.

In the next part, one is free to ask the students to write down any and every type of text. Some people may ask for an essay and be specific on the details. As such the students may be asked to write an argumentative essay where they express their opinion and try to back it up with facts, an analytic essay where the students may try to go in-depth and explain the reasons behind a phenomenon, a comparative essay, where students may be able to compare two items or phenomena etc. However, that is just like eliciting the answer one may expect to hear. A much better approach to developing the ability to produce texts is to give the students their freedom to write on the topic the way they choose. In this way one does not feel bound and new and interesting information may surface.

Once the writing is done one may proceed to building up one’s spoken production skill. Thus, one may asily ask the student to speak about the topic at hand since, by now, one ought to be profficient enough to explain it by onself. The student is to be listened to carefully without interruptions even if recurent mistakes are made.

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When it comes to spoken interaction one may offer the students the chance to watch a short video on the topic matter. Again, the actual video may be suggested to them but, it may even be made compulsory. But the fact of the matter is that allowing each student to choose is probably the best course of action. This may be used as the starting point to the spoken interaction. Each student may be asked to describe what they have seen and the discussion may go in any direction.

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REZUMAT

Cuvinte-cheie: predare, limbaj academic specializat, învățare

Învățarea unui limbaj specializat este o problemă legată de scop. Scopul este dezvoltatea capacității de utilizare a limbii într-un context dat.

Predarea unui limbaj specializat este, prin excelență, o problemă de metodologie. Metodologia presupune analiza limbii și împărțirea sa în competențe urmată de exerciții corespunzătoare oferite studenților.

Este în interesul fiecărui student să își exerseze competențele linguale. În consecință, este de dorit ca studenților să li se ofere exerciții în mod constant.

KURZFASSUNG

Schlüsselwörter: Unterrichten, Sprache für bestimmte akademische Zwecke, Lernen

Das Erlernen einer Sprache für bestimmte akademische Zwecke ist eine Frage des Ziels. Das ziel ist die Beherrschung der Sprache in diesem spezifischen Kontext zu erlangen. Das Unterrichten einer Sprache für bestimmte akademische Zwecke ist vor allem eine Frage der Methodik. Die Methodik besteht darin, die Sprache in Fähigkeiten zu zerlegen und den Schülern die entsprechende Übungen zu bieten.

Es ist im besten Interesse eines jeden Studenten, seine eigenen Sprachkenntnisse zu üben. Als solches ist es ratsam, dass sie mit ständigen Aktivitäten versehen werden.

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