

Building bridges to Europe: languages for students of other disciplines

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British Higher Education institutions have for some time now been promoting Europeanisation policies, offering languages and foreign exchanges as part of their undergraduate programmes. However, the organisation of such programmes and the question of how integrated languages should and can be remain problematic, and the commitment to such programmes varies considerably from institution to institution. This paper argues the case for *vocationally relevant* language courses for students of other disciplines – focussing on architecture as an example – to enable them to compete successfully as future employees of the Single European Market. It also describes the process involved in developing a vocational or subject-specific language course.

THE NEED FOR VOCATIONALLY RELEVANT LANGUAGE COURSES

The arrival of the Single European Market in 1992 has meant for Higher Education – amongst other things – a recognition of its responsibility to equip students with the necessary skills to compete with well qualified multi-lingual graduates from other European countries for the same jobs.¹ It is well known that “in Britain, 70% of 15–24 year olds are unable to converse in a second language.... Across the Channel, the proportion is much lower – 50%.” (Prag 1994: 18). Six years after the arrival of the Single European Market and numerous appeals to put more emphasis on the teaching and learning of foreign languages in all educational sectors, the situation does not seem to have improved significantly.²

It can of course be argued that UK graduates do not have the same need for a sound foreign language ability, as English is widely spoken and accepted as predominant, particularly in technical subjects. However, “this attitude is mainly prevalent among people without a second language and hence they do not realise the benefits it may bring. Such people may often think that they have done very well in contact with people with another Mother tongue, but almost certainly opportunities have been missed with this narrow approach...” (Vaughan and Shipway 1995: 76). It is also an attitude which puts the person who relies on others to speak his or her language in a psychologically weak position. As Tony Giovanazzi points out, “when a person is always the one who has to be spoken to in his own language, he becomes, how-

ever brilliant in his own sphere, the one who always has to be accommodated, and therefore ultimately irksome, or always humoured, and therefore eventually patronised” (Giovanazzi 1997: 46). In other words, the person loses his or her intellectual equality. On a more pragmatic note, the *Scotsman* warns in a leading article that “anyone who imagines that the French or the Germans learn English to assist our exports rather than their own is deluded” (*The Scotsman*, 27/6/97). The fact that communication barriers lead to missed business opportunities has been well documented over recent years³, but it is important to note that cultural competence which is developed through foreign language learning is just as vital for a better understanding and cooperation with other countries.

There are great employment opportunities especially for those graduates “who can combine technical skills with linguistic ability” (Trapp, *The Independent*, 16/4/1997), and Derek Prag, MEP for Hertfordshire, has answered the question whether languages really matter for a “well-trained professional” (Prag 1994: 16) in the UK unequivocally:

So what’s in it for you is that many opportunities will be opening up. There may be better remuneration abroad; [...] there may be market opportunities, such as providing [...] consultancy services in major centres such as Paris and Brussels. Young men and women will be needed to assist British firms in their overseas activities, [...] already there are more and more examples of industrial co-operation. [...] Major projects, such as the Channel Tunnel, a European network of high-speed trains, and measures to protect the environment, are all strengthening and

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modernising Europe's structures. And you will be able to get involved in all this... (Prag 1994: 16)

There are differing views as to how such involvement can be achieved. In the context of the language course used in this paper as an example of good practice, namely languages for students of architecture, one frequently hears the argument that architects "speak with the pen" and do therefore not have the same need as other professionals to use language, never mind foreign languages. However, to argue this means to disregard the two fundamental aspects of professional activity of an architect, which Medway (1994) in a paper on the role of language in technological activities calls the *conceptual* aspect, i.e. the virtual building, and the *social or interactive* aspect, i.e. the process of realisation of the actual building. These two aspects can be seen as parallel to the two broad functions of language which Halliday (Halliday, 1973) describes as *ideational* and *interpersonal*. While the virtual building is a symbolic or ideational and not primarily a linguistic achievement, language is critical "in establishing and developing the virtual building as a shared social reality. [...] The architect's idea does not become the socially-shared virtual building until confirmed and corroborated by numerous others..." (Medway 1994: 90, 92). It is this interpersonal dimension of architecture where the need for language becomes most obvious, "but it is also, less obviously, an ideational necessity too" (Medway 1994: 103). Having established the need for language in general in the field of architecture, it is only a small step further to acknowledge the importance of *foreign* languages for architects. Not only does the process of learning a foreign language make students more aware of the above mentioned functions of language, it also gives graduates advantages over others in the competition for jobs. Architectural practices within the UK are increasingly involved in work in continental Europe, and are forming European wide practice collaborations. Scrutiny of job advertisements in newspapers and professional journals such as *Building Design*⁴ suggests that knowledge of a foreign language has become more and more essential for many jobs in the field of architecture.

It was in response to these professional developments, that a new architecture course [The BSc (Hons) Architecture with Languages] which aims to train graduates capable of strengthening these international enterprises⁵, was validated at the Scott Sutherland School of Architecture in Aberdeen in 1994. The general aim of this course is "to ensure that students are enthusiastically introduced to European culture and suitably prepared for employment in the architectural profession within the European Community" (DCD, BSc (Hons) Architecture with Languages 1996: 9). It differs from traditional architecture courses in three areas:

1. There is a compulsory subject-specific language component in years 1, 2 and 5.

2. There is a compulsory exchange year at a university in a French- or German-speaking country.
3. The practical training year is spent in an architecture office in a French- or German-speaking country.

THE LANGUAGE COMPONENT: MAKING LANGUAGES RELEVANT FOR STUDENTS OF OTHER DISCIPLINES

Needs analysis and objectives

If we take the notion of "learner centredness" seriously, course design which "offers the individual learner opportunities for using German [or French] as a medium for genuine communication" (Kohl 1996: 48) should start with a needs analysis of the learners. In the case of the architecture language component, we find ourselves in the almost ideal and very rare situation of being confronted with a professionally and linguistically homogeneous group of students. They all study architecture as their main subject, they all have to live, study and work in a French- or German-speaking country for two years, and they all have a SCE 'Higher' qualification or equivalent in the language they have chosen.

In defining the objectives of this language component, the following two factors have therefore to be taken into consideration:

- Students need to acquire a competence in the specialised linguistic register of architecture, i.e. they have very different needs than, for example, tourists visiting the foreign country.
- However, they also need the socio-cultural skills to survive for two years in a foreign country.

Depending on how homogeneous or heterogeneous the group is, the factors influencing the definition of objectives vary considerably from group to group.

The question of how these two factors should or can be integrated into a course, both pedagogically and organisationally (not to mention cost-effectively), leads to the heart of the debate about *languages for special purposes* (LSP) versus *languages for general purposes* (LGP). While it is clear what LGP is, there does not seem to be a generally accepted definition of LSP, and those definitions which can be found "vary considerably in the importance which they attach to the specialist component" (Royall 1994: 133). What LSP does not mean, however, is teaching general foreign languages to a group of specialists, a perception which still exists in many institutions. It also does not mean "giving out labelled diagrams and long word lists from [specialised] manuals as learning assignments" (Hersh 1994: 214). In other words, LSP

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should not concentrate solely on terminology. Clearly, the focus of LSP should be on

the learner's work and life. [...] This focus on learning for work and life has skills acquisition, confidence in the use of language and socio-cultural norms, flexibility of expression and action at its core, and an understanding of how one's professional pursuits can be seen within the above context (Brewster 1994: 101).

Such a clear focus offers an excellent opportunity for integrated or context teaching, the obvious and immediate contexts being the other parts of the educational curriculum in which the students are engaged. "To use these contexts as the source of language work and language practice lends immediacy, variety and self-generating applicability." (Giovanazzi 1997: 40) Foreign language teaching is thus no longer conducted either in a contextual vacuum or in a touristic context which seems to have replaced the vacuum in many cases. Context teaching has advantages both for the teacher and the learner. Language teachers who analyse and explore the vocational contexts at the development stage of a language course do not have to speculate or make assumptions about the likely future use of the foreign language. Although this is a time-consuming and difficult task, it has obvious benefits for the learning process, because students who perceive the relevance and application of language learning in their vocational contexts feel more motivated and will start to see foreign languages as a core skill. The input on the part of the language lecturer is often underestimated,⁶ but clearly important. If students are to feel motivated, they have to believe that their German or French lecturer shows some interest in their subject area and appreciates at least some of the problems involved (Reuben 1994: 25). It is also almost impossible for language lecturers to choose appropriate teaching materials without any previous knowledge of the vocational contexts in question (Twomey 1994: 196). In the case of the architecture language component, the very low drop-out rates seem to suggest that motivation is strong among the students. A recent survey of language learners at Scottish universities has also shown that the "vocational impulse" (Hall and Bankowska 1994: 10) for studying languages rates very highly.

This does not mean, however, that general contexts are completely excluded from such courses. On the contrary, the specific aim of the architecture language component is "to acquire a level of competence in a foreign language and an understanding of related cultural aspects which permits comprehension and communication in general and specific technical contexts" (DCD, BSc(Hons) Architecture with Languages 1996: 9).

The teaching staff

If language courses for students of other disci-

plines are to be integrated to a very high degree into the main subject, it is legitimate to ask whether such courses should be taught by a language lecturer or a lecturer in the other discipline with a sound knowledge of the foreign language. It can be argued that in the case of the architecture language component, an architecture lecturer would be a more competent judge of what is relevant linguistically for his or her students. However, while language lecturers as non-architects have obvious short-comings, they compensate for this by their knowledge of the specific skills involved in the 'uniqueness' (Coleman 1994: 58) of the language learning and teaching process.

The numerous variables in the language learning process [...], the distinction between learning and acquisition, the role of the teacher as a learning facilitator rather than a knowledge dispenser [...], all these factors dictate that a language teacher must possess knowledge and skills far beyond those normally sought from a university teacher (Coleman 1994: 60).

It is important to note that the language lecturer does not claim to teach architecture but French and German, and architecture in French or German becomes the goal not of the lecturer but of the student (Myles 1994: 128).

As noted above, it is essential, however, that the language lecturer tries to gain insights into the contexts and issues of the other discipline. How can this be achieved? Initially it is often important to look for areas in the other discipline which are familiar to the linguist. The obvious connection to architecture for a linguist for example lies more in the historical and cultural and less in the technical context. Thus, linguists with a background in literary studies will see many parallels between developments and trends in architecture on the one hand, and literature and art in general on the other. Concepts like 'Classicism', 'Modernism', 'Post-Modernism' exist in literature in a similar way as in architecture.

Other sources of information are specialised books, magazines, TV and radio programmes, the Internet etc, and of course discourse with colleagues in the other discipline. This collaboration between the language specialist and the subject specialist "is clearly a useful template for the design of vocationally relevant materials" (Twomey 1994:195), and it is vital for the success of an LSP course (Scott 1994: 15). Again, it is an aspect which is often overlooked, and it has led the authors of a recent survey of university language departments in Scotland (Hall and Bankowska 1994) to call for closer collaboration between languages and vocational departments (Royall 1994: 140). In our experience, staff development language classes for lecturers in other disciplines are one example of positive collaboration. They serve a worthwhile function both for the subject specialist and the linguist. The subject specialist finds out

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