



Think Tank piece by Maria Matheidesz

VOCATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LANGUAGE TEACHING

Introduction and background

The accession of the former communist countries to the EU has increased the linguistic diversity of the European Union and changed some mobility patterns in the labour market.

While university graduates and professionals may have had opportunities for international contacts through conferences and joint projects even before the accession, skilled and manual workers had hardly any chance to work outside their own countries until recently. With EU membership this layer of society has gained new opportunities for working internationally and in different language environments.

However, foreign language teaching in vocational education has been neither a first priority nor been carried out very effectively in most countries, so these new players in the labour market start their international career with a considerable communication deficit.

The two main issues for discussion arise:

1. How can these new players of the job market cope with the linguistic and cultural challenges of the new environment they are working in?
2. How can the language teaching profession respond to their special needs and prepare them better for the new challenges?

Challenges of skilled worker mobility in the extended EU

- Limited academic and language learning skills through vocational training
- No tradition of learner autonomy and self study
- Different language learning needs (to achieve a functional general level of proficiency, i.e. B2, is not realistic)
- Communication problems often derive from cultural differences

- They have less time for learning the language – facilitating „on the job” learning would be essential

How can the language teaching profession respond to these needs?

- Needs analysis by profession?
- Which professions need most communication?
- Awareness raising in cultural differences?
- Crash courses in survival general language or rather specific language only?
- Crash courses for oral skills or for other relevant skills only?
- Is it possible to teach only professional language?
- Would multi-language electronic glossaries with specified terminology with visual help be useful? (e.g. the 100 keywords for plumbers, carpenters etc.)
- eLearning programmes?

Differences between general and professional language learning and aspects to consider when designing professional language learning programmes

Needs & aims	
General language learning	Professional language learning
Linked to competences set by levels and outcome competences (CEFR)	Specific, linked to special needs
Structured course curriculum and syllabus aims specified by general needs	Specific and focused aims
Wide target groups in mind	Specialised groups with specific aims and goals to achieve during the programme

Planning	
General language learning	Professional language learning
Curriculum and syllabus planned along basic competences	Syllabus content to be defined by the needs of a special group - negotiated syllabus
Learning content defined by institutions	Experts to be involved in the planning
Equal balance of general language skills	Participants bring in their individual needs and specialised knowledge

Levels	
General language learning	Professional language learning
Same or similar language and competence levels in one learning group	Diverse language competences in one group
Diverse needs and interests but uniform outcome level aims in one learning group	Common or similar aims and needs but diverse outcome levels (partial competences)
Learning process aims at an equals balance of general outcome competences at one particular level	General and specialised outcome competences to be achieved at different levels

Teaching content	
General language learning	Professional language learning
Attempt to raise interest in a learning group of diverse interests	General and specific, common profession related interests
Teaching material not always relevant to all	Relevant and authentic materials can be provided by learners
Authentic materials taken from everyday life	Need for including both profession-specific and general themes

Skills	
General language learning	Professional language learning
An equal balance of the four basic skills	Skill focus to be defined by learners' needs
Strong emphasis on oral skills in classroom practice	Specific sub-skills (e.g. writing quotations)
Consolidation by self study	Special skills can dominate a whole course – significance of learners' input and contribution to skills specification

Learning activities	
General language learning	Professional language learning
Linked to curriculum and syllabus aims	Linked to the special needs of the learning group
Typically designed by the teacher	Activities to be designed by learners
Language practice in general “real-life” situations	Relevance of language situations and activities increase the sense of progress

The above points of general analysis have been developed on the basis of a special programme in English for a group of interior designers in Hungary, which was successfully implemented in 2005-2006.

Potential outcomes of the Think Tank discussion:

- to explore what is already available in terms of coursebooks, other teaching materials, course descriptions, programmes and projects in professional language teaching at non-university level
- to specify short-term and long-term aims for the Think Tank to propose for further development of effective professional language teaching for the new mobility challenges
- to find contacts and networking opportunities for professional programme and materials development
- to launch a sample project to serve as a basis for further programme or project development
- to identify appropriate funding for a project which would develop a sample programme with relevant content and methods for one specific professional group
- to set up a working group to further explore suitable materials on the web to be integrated into professional language programme development for different professional groups
- to establish links with relating EU funded projects within the framework of the EUROPASS project
- etc.
- etc.

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