

Treating Learners as Themselves

Treating Learners as Themselves is a challenge which faces all teachers. If you teach what is essentially a content subject, like Management Theory or Marketing, the opportunities available for you to reach the learners as people are rather limited. If, like those involved in the teaching of Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP), you teach what is essentially a skill-centred subject, then you already have a head start. And, if you can try to combine skill-learning processes with content, then you are well on your way to providing a learning environment which will capitalize on the learner's individual potential.

1. Introduction

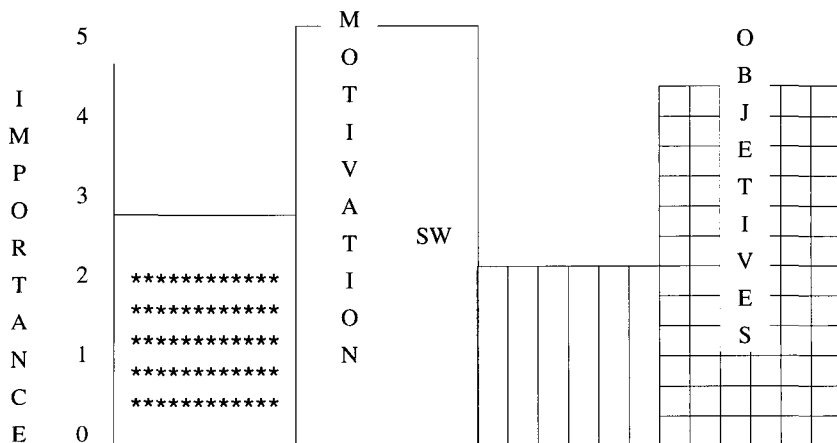
In this short article I am going to look at “What’s special about LSP?” and to suggest ways in which the challenge I have outlined can be met. Firstly, I am going to describe what happened when I posed that question to a group of about forty teachers attending a seminar on English for Specific Purposes. I’m going to relate their responses and the different activities we undertook in the course of the seminar in order to delve deeper into the question. I will include in this section of the article a detailed description of one activity which I think you could easily use in most LSP contexts to great effect, and which is in itself in consonance with my basic approach - a kind of learning “loop”. Finally, I will present a further two classroom activities which I have developed in working with learners of “Business English”. Both of these are activities aimed at bringing into the process of learning some of the same skills which the learners would use in their work situation, and I offer these as further examples of the kind of thing we can do to treat our learners as themselves.

2. Starting point: “What’s special about LSP?”

Let’s start by answering this question. Perhaps, though, the answers I’m going to list now are quite familiar to you, as the kinds of

answers my seminar-participants gave me were more or less my own, and those I had previously encountered. They said that LSP was special because of the “highly motivated students” with “clearly-defined objectives”; and because of these students who were “experts in the subject-matter content”. They also highlighted the negative nature of courses they felt were “less creative”, which involved significant “time pressures” because of their “fixed deadlines”; all of which added up to “More Teacher Time”. Furthermore they mentioned the added questions of the kind of “vocabulary” they felt they were expected to command, and of the special range of “register(s)” their learners needed to acquire. Now, I would agree that all of these *are* special to any LSP course, but let’s consider just how special each one really is, and what inter-relationships exist between them.

If you used a bar chart to indicate the different degrees of importance of these topics, as I asked this particular seminar group to do, the most important aspects would come out as being those of the “highly motivated students” with “clearly-defined objectives”.



Now, as that is the case, the next questions to ask are “Why is that so?” and “Is this a real issue, or is it mostly in the mind of the teacher, rather than that of the learner?” Of course, you will say, the questions of motivation and objectives affect both parties, but do they? My hypothesis is that they exist more in the mind of the teacher, because of a lack of specific LSP *training*, than in the mind of the learner. How can I justify this suggestion and, if it proves to be accurate, what can be done about it?

To tackle this situation we need firstly to define the essential nature of the issue, so let’s make some distinctions between the nature of teaching Languages for General Purposes, (LGP) and teaching LSP. In LGP aims and objectives are generally established by the working environment. Learners don’t have the need to express aims or objectives in anything more than the vague terms of “I’d like to learn English/French/Arabic”. LSP learners are a different kind of creature. They do know what they need to do, and when. They can also be induced to explain how well they need to do it. Looked at from one side of the fence - the LGP side - these factors represent major challenges; from the other side - the LSP side - they are the essential foundations on which to build a successful and satisfying course. Successful and satisfying for both learners and teachers.

To conclude this expansion of my hypothesis I would say that the essence of working with LSP learners lies in the fact that they *can* express their needs and objectives in clear, precise terms. They are not always terms which the LSP teacher can use easily - hence my previous question as to whether or not this is a “real” issue - but they are a base from which to work.

3. “How to elicit the information?”

The considerations of background which I have just concluded led me, with my seminar group, to the following roleplay activity based on a situation suggested by one of the participants. In the next section you will see how this “roleplay needs analysis” worked.

4. Needs Analysis from a Roleplay

The starting point
for most LSP learners is their need “*to do something*”.
That means they can give you in simple terms
both their objective *and* the way in which
they will have to test it.

Procedure:

- 1 Divide the group into threes, and in each three assign these roles:

You are the PURCHASING MANAGER of a chain of department stores. You are meeting the Sales Manager of a potential new supplier of footwear. You have never met before and all you know about him/her is the letter of introduction which you received asking for an interview. The meeting takes place in your office.

You are the SALES MANAGER of a company making footwear of all kinds. You are meeting the Purchasing Manager of a chain of department stores for the first time. You have written to him/her

to arrange the meeting which is going to take place in their office.

You are going to act as OBSERVER. All you need to do is watch and listen to the conversation, and write down anything you notice in terms of the types of expressions they use, the attitudes they take, or the postures they adopt.

- 2 Once the threes are organised and have carried out the roleplay for about five minutes, stop them and ask them to feed back to the whole group their impressions, and most specifically the points the observers had noted down.

5. Writing their own syllabus

What did seminar participants come up with? Well, they were able to provide a number of clear content headings reflecting those we listed above as being the important aspects of LSP. The items they listed included Vocabulary, Register, Structures, and Functions; and under each of these they were able to begin to list the items, examples, or exponents that would fill out these “core content lists”. Just the same kind of thing that you would find at the back of a prescribed coursebook, of course, but with one significant difference: these syllabus components are given to the teacher by the learner, not by the School, the Administrator(s), or the national curriculum. What could be more motivating for a learner than to see, in the second session say, a draft syllabus demonstrating that their course is being planned objectively, based upon the evidence of their own real needs. Does this mean, therefore, that the LSP teacher has to be a course designer and syllabus writer, too? Well, yes. At least, what it does mean is that they should be able to go into the needs analysis they have made and to extract from it a wide range of specific items. It

also implies that they should be able to structure a teaching program for themselves, and to order the way in which they present these to their learners. Teaching LSP, as I suggested right at the start, does require a certain amount of specific training: specific training which is often all too difficult to find. And the lack of such training means that LSP teachers can only refer to the limited works available on the market in the lack of such training. However, what cannot be denied is that all of this translates into “More Teacher Time”.

6. “More Teacher Time.”

For the moment, let’s return to our needs analysis. Naturally enough, here the next question arises: “What do you do with the information you have acquired?” And the answer to this inevitably brings us to the vexed question of teacher time. If you look at the way in which a teacher working on a General course distributes their time, you will find that an awful lot of it goes into the preparation *before* the class. On an LSP course things are different: the initial work is limited when you have no coursebook to follow; the follow-up work is the all-important part. After the class is the time when the teacher needs to sit down, reflect on, analyze and prioritize the work that has just been done, and on what should come next.

7. Follow-up options

This mode of working has many, varied developments, and it is not the intention of this article to go into these. Perhaps the most complete source of ideas on this aspect of LSP is contained in Peter Wilberg’s book on teaching one-to-one. For the time being I will present five follow-up options to the roleplay we have described to indicate the general manner in which you could work.

- 1 Learners script all or part of the roleplay, and then exchange texts with another group. Each group corrects the other's version.
- 2 Learners write full or partial transcripts from video or audio recordings. Use these for language improvement.
- 3 Each character writes a report for their superior (define this person according to the specific roleplay). Observers write you a report.
- 4 Each character writes a letter to their opposite number "in role" (i.e. A writes a letter to B, and B writes a letter to A). They detail their recollections of the content of the meeting; add more considered opinions about it; make suggestions as to further action. Observers write to their Training Manager.
- 5 Learners choose a different situation they would like to act out, or they describe real or imagined situations of their own.

By using these options the product of one session - which is just like the resource input text of "Unit One" from a prescribed textbook - can be processed into the core material of the next and subsequent sessions: "Unit Two", "Unit Three", and so on.

8. Further activities

To end this article I am going to present two further activities - *Decisions, Decisions!* and *Setting an agenda* - developed on courses of "Business English" I have taught. Each activity is presented with its own specific rationale, so here I shall say no more than that I have found these do achieve the approach outlined in this article, and

provide both a successful and satisfying learning experience for the learners I have worked with, and for me as teacher. I feel sure that in your teaching situation you could develop similar activities out of the working environment of your learners.

One final practical comment before ending. Essentially, these are intended for learners of intermediate level or above. They can be fitted into 45 to 60 minutes time slots, and the only resources that you need are copies of the questionnaire or handouts included here. Needless to say, before using the activities in class, you should always carry them out for yourself!

Decisions, Decisions!

GIVING AND GETTING INFORMATION about decision-making processes, strategies, and techniques never fails as a means of getting people talking. Everyone is anxious to find new approaches to this perpetual problem. If the teacher is willing to share answers with the group, then they'll be much more relaxed about sharing their own experiences.

The objective of fixing a 10 minute time limit for answering the questionnaire is to compel learners to write and not be indecisive.

Focus:

Narrative techniques and sequences of tenses; superlatives and conditional forms such as "What would you do if ...?" and "What would you have done if ...?"

Procedure:

- 1 Introduce the topic of decision-making. Talk about difficulties people have when making decisions. Give an example or two.
- 2 Distribute the questionnaire, and go over the instructions.
- 3 Go through your version of the questionnaire, to show how you have answered the questions.
- 4 They complete the questionnaire.
- 5 Withdraw and observe the activity. Mingle with the group, and provide any supporting language needed.
- 6 Once they have finished, contribute any good ideas or advice which you have picked up during the session.



You have only TEN minutes in which to make notes to answer the following questions:

- Do you make decisions easily ...
 - in your professional life?
 - in your family life?
 - in your social life?
 - in your interior, spiritual and emotional life?
 - in competitive situations?
 - over money matters?
- Can you recall a decision which you have made and which you are proud of? How did you reach that decision?
- Can you remember another decision, one which you made and which proved to be a bad decision, or which you are ashamed of? How did you reach that decision?
- What is the single most important thing that you have learned, read, discovered, or been told about making decisions?

When you have finished thinking about these questions find someone in the group who you would like to share your answers with.

After you have spoken together write down any really good ideas or advice that they have given you along with the person's name.

Then change partner and find someone different to talk to.

Change partners as many times as you like in the time allowed.

Finally join up with some of the others to make a small group and share the good ideas and advice that you have written down.

Give due credit to your sources!

Setting an agenda

MEETINGS take up an inordinate amount of time for most business and professional people, and most of them will agree that the success of a meeting depends on the amount of preparation time invested in it.

In the classroom, however, they often abdicate responsibility for this kind of investment which leads to less efficient learning. This activity draws on professional skills, by applying them to language learning.

Focus:

Prioritizing; meetings and discussions.

Procedure:

- 1 Write haphazardly on the board the names of the activities which you intend to cover in the session. Add descriptions where necessary.
- 2 On one side of the board, draw up an Agenda Table:

AGENDA

Items	Time

- 3 The group set the order of the agenda for the session. They discuss the different activities written on the board and decide on the order, and on the time to allocate each one. Allow 5 minutes for this.
- 4 Answer questions on points of information, and intervene only on pedagogical grounds. Monitor language use, and provide support. If they can't agree let them try to work out compromises.
- 5 When they've set and agreed the agenda carry it out. Give timechecks, but do not be directive: if any modifications are required they make the decisions.
- 6 At the end of the session review the agenda and discuss the effectiveness of their planning.

*Setting an agenda*¹

(1) Key

ORDER in which to deal with each item.
FOCUS of the activity.
MATERIALS textbook, authentic, none.
MODE group-, pairwork, lecture.

FOCUS	MATERIALS	MODE	TIME
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			

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