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HOW TO TEACH CAREER-ORIENTED FOREIGN LANGUAGE COURSES

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The teaching methodology of career-oriented foreign language courses differs in certain respects from that of conventional courses. Whereas the latter ordinarily stresses the teaching of all four learning skills--speaking, listening, reading and writing, the former de-emphasizes the reading and writing, because they are not normally used by the professional in dealing with non-English-speaking people. Although the student will in all likelihood be using some type of textbook, and will be learning to read the written language, acquiring the reading skill will only be a by-product of the learning process, not one of the principal goals.

Another essential difference between conventional and career-oriented courses is that the teaching of grammar is de-emphasized in the latter. This is not to say that grammar cannot be taught completely in a career-oriented course. However, one of the strongest appeals of this type of language training is that it does not follow the grammar-oriented track of the conventional type which the professional considers to be too time-consuming. As a parenthetical note, it has been observed that in many instances students of career-oriented courses are motivated to take conventional courses after they have completed career-related language training.

Probably the most significant distinction between conventional and career-oriented language training is the emphasis in the latter on the teaching of strictly relevant vocabulary. For example, a nurse needs to know the vocabulary associated with the care of the patient, whereas the names of the parts of a car or words in connection with vehicular traffic, which would be very helpful to a policeman, would be irrelevant and useless to her.

The foreign language teacher who plans to teach a career-related course must be able to answer three critical questions:

1. What? What foreign language material and what cultural items are strictly relevant to the profession for which the course is designed?
2. How much? How many situations, how much vocabulary, and how much cultural material should be included?
3. How? How best should the materials be presented in order to achieve the primary objective of the course: to teach the student to communicate orally in the target language?

Let us discuss these three questions in more detail.

WHAT?

If the instructor is fortunate enough to find a good textbook, this

question may in a large measure be answered by the materials themselves. Such texts, however, are indeed rare.

In considering course material, the instructor must categorize it according to "need-to-know" and "nice-to-know," automatically eliminating the latter. He must constantly ask himself if the student would ever need to use a certain word or expression in his profession. If the answer is negative, he should reject it.

Cultural material must likewise be carefully screened, and only relevant items should be utilized, e.g., an item on folk remedies which would definitely be relevant for nursing, medical, and paramedical personnel.

HOW MUCH?

The tendency among many instructors who present a career-oriented course for the first time is to attempt to cover too much. Since the language in this kind of training must become active rather than passive, it is preferable to present less material and teach it thoroughly, with a high retention rate, than too much, and cover it only superficially, with a resulting low retention rate. The end result should not be judged by the number of words a student knows, but in how many situations he can use them. For example, it is not sufficient for law enforcement personnel to merely know the foreign language equivalent of the word for hands, but to be able to say in an emergency: "Put your hands up!" or "Put your hands on the wall!"

The number of situations to be presented will depend on the duration of the course, but for this type of instruction, it will generally be from ten to twelve, to be taught in a period of one quarter or one semester.

HOW?

This is the most significant of the three questions and will consequently be treated far more extensively than the other two. It will matter little how effectively What? or How much? are answered if there is not a suitable reply to How? All foreign language students, but particularly those in career-specific courses, are motivated more by being able to speak and understand the target language than by any other factor. Various techniques which may be employed to teach the student to orally use the foreign language vocabulary and expressions in context will now be discussed.

Role-Playing

Communication is the ever-present goal of all that the instructor does in the classroom, and realistic role-playing, as described below, is the principal means of achieving this goal. In order to insure realism, the instructor may try to get permission to accompany a

police officer on patrol some night, or to observe the emergency room physician in a hospital, or to make the hospital rounds with a nurse, a respiratory therapist or other personnel, to accompany a social worker on visits, etc.

The Dialog

The basic element--the nucleus--of each lesson is the dialog. By reason of its dramatic potential and its natural, live, direct address form, it lends itself particularly to career-oriented language training. If taught improperly, it can be pure drudgery for both students and teacher. On the other hand, if taught correctly, it can be a very enjoyable, productive classroom activity.

The teacher should provide a good model for the students by acting out each role as realistically as possible, complete with proper intonation and slightly exaggerated gestures. He should not be afraid to "ham it up" and to use hats, spectacles, false mustaches, wigs, and other such items to liven up and inject humor into the presentation. If the dialog exchanges in the text are too long and too complex, they should be shortened and simplified. The dialog should not comprise more than ten exchanges.

After adequate group practice, "volunteers" should be designated to come up in front of the class and play the roles from memory as realistically as possible, using makeshift nursing caps, wigs, policeman's caps, etc., to identify the characters being portrayed.

Non-verbal cues in the form of overhead transparencies are very useful, both to the instructor during dialog drill, and to the student as a memory aid during recitation. Well-prepared visuals should contain a figure or drawing depicting each line of the dialog, if possible. A good text should contain such figures to aid the student in his dialog preparation and to facilitate the production of visual aids for use by the teacher.

Another valuable aid for the student is a tape of the dialog containing the voices of native speakers. Out-of-class practice with this by the student will enhance listening comprehension, articulation, and memorization of the dialog.

Supplementary Vocabulary

The key principle to be stressed in connection with teaching vocabulary is that it must be taught in context and not in isolation. The context should be natural and should be associated with the central theme of the dialog. For example, the word for head, to be presented as supplementary vocabulary to a dialog pertaining to the hospital emergency room, should never be taught as the target language equivalent of "the head," or "this is the head." Neither doctor nor patient would ever use the word in this manner. It should be taught in a

communicative context, such as the equivalent of "Does your head ache?" or "Where does your head hurt?"

Another valuable guideline is to insure that the vocabulary is that which is used between a professional and a layman--particularly an uneducated or a poorly educated one, and not between two professionals, such as one finds in some textbooks.

Still another important consideration is the determination of the prevalent regional usage. For example, certain terminology employed by Hispanics may vary from "standard" Spanish, and may also vary among Hispanics according to their origin--Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba. A good textbook will give the most commonly used Hispanic vocabulary and will make note of regional variations.

An understanding of certain slang--particularly drug jargon, epithets, and obscenities, may be useful for law enforcement personnel in order to determine the attitude of the speaker.

Vocabulary should be presented in drills in a variety of different contexts, but always in a communicative form. These can be in transformation, substitution, completion, or expansion drills, personalized questions, controlled conversation, or task assignments. In the latter, the dialog is taken out of lock-step, there is no fixed element such as one finds in pattern drills, and students converse freely using supplementary vocabulary, as in the following example:

You are a Spanish-speaking patient who is ready to be released from the hospital. Ask the surgeon (played by a fellow student) the usual questions prior to your release.

This will be true communication--the ultimate goal of the entire course. Each lesson should conclude with several of these task assignments.

Grammar

Each lesson should contain some very concise, simple grammatical explanations with examples taken from the lesson text itself. Their primary purpose will not be to teach grammar per se, but only to help the student to comprehend certain verb forms and other grammatical usages. No time need be spent on grammar drills, or in solving grammatical problems. It is amazing how little grammar the students need when they are constantly using the language as they do in this type of training. As Helen Warriner, former president of ACTFL, has observed regarding career-oriented instruction:

I like the almost total absence of grammar... I have definitely concluded that grammatical construction can be almost totally eliminated.

Pronunciation

It is not enough for the student to recognize that spoken Spanish sounds different than spoken English. He must be taught precisely what these differences are and be given practice in imitating them. Each lesson should contain some pronunciation material with some short, simple drills. Tapes for out-of-class use will afford the student additional practice. Since he will be using the oral language so extensively, the student should be instructed to practice aloud to gain maximum benefit, and should be urged to endeavor to acquire near native pronunciation and not to be complacent and settle for just a "passable" pronunciation.

Cultural Material

Each lesson should contain a "culture capsule" which is not only relevant to the profession but, if at all possible, related to the situation presented in the lesson. For example, a lesson pertaining to police handling of runaway youths could contain a cultural item on discipline in the Mexican-American, Puerto Rican or the Cuban home. A situation related to obstetrics could include a culture capsule on the practice of mid-wife delivery and the attitude toward hospitals in many Hispanic homes.

Cultural material should be assigned for reading and can be discussed briefly in English at the end of the class. Cultural awareness films and short presentations by guest lecturers may also be included in the curriculum.

It is essential that students be impressed with the existence of other cultures in our society and with the importance of respecting practices and beliefs which are different from their own.

Testing and Evaluation

Since reading, writing, and grammar are de-emphasized, no time should be spent testing students in these areas. The major emphasis will be placed on evaluating the listening comprehension and oral skills. This can be done in a variety of ways:

1. Dialog - Have students recite the dialog in pairs in front of the class. Grading should be based on the degree of the assimilation of the material, use of gestures, and pronunciation, including intonation. Questions which elicit responses consisting of portions of the dialog are an additional effective means of testing on this activity. The use of native speakers who have been briefed on the extent of the vocabulary beforehand can add a note of realism to this testing event.
2. Supplementary vocabulary--Testing should require students

to use the vocabulary in context. For example, using a projected image of the human body, the instructor points to the throat, and the student will say the equivalent of "My throat hurts," etc. Or the instructor could point to the wrist and give a negative gesture, then to the elbow, giving an affirmative nod,. This should elicit the student response in the foreign language: "My wrist doesn't hurt; my elbow hurts."

Students can ask each other questions in turn in the target language, using the vocabulary being tested, for example, the equivalent of "Where do you live?," "How did you sleep?," "How old are you?," etc.

As a welcome change of pace, and to provide more realism, a properly oriented native speaker can also be used in testing vocabulary use.

The directed dialog is an excellent means of testing vocabulary, e.g., "Tell the patient that you must give him a shot," or "Tell a shoplifter that she is under arrest," etc. Two students should be used in this testing exercise.

3. Personalized Questions--Since the professional will be communicating primarily by asking questions and receiving answers, the use of personalized questions is a very appropriate testing device. The student should be made to feel that he is role-playing in this as in all other activities. For example, the instructor could ask the student (the patient) in the foreign language how he feels this morning, or how much he (a drunk driver) has been drinking. Questions requiring a simple yes or no answer should normally be limited, since they afford less opportunity for oral expression on the part of the student.

Students should also be required to ask each other questions as part of the test. This allows for more student involvement and shortens the testing period, since two students are being evaluated at the same time.

4. Task assignment--The student will be involved in true communication in this type of exercise; hence, it will be one of the most effective means of testing. The task assignment sets the stage, placing the student in a certain role in a specified situation, then requires him to perform in the target language. Two students may prefer to play one of the roles. Following are two examples:

- a. You are a policeman. Another student is a Spanish-speaking person detained in connection with a burglary. Find out everything you can about him.
- b. You are a nurse in the emergency room. A Spanish-speaking man (played by the instructor or another

student) staggers in and collapses on the floor, but is still conscious. Ask him the necessary questions, and reassure him until the doctor arrives.

TAPES

Since one of the primary purposes for the use of tape recordings of lesson material is to enhance listening comprehension, the student should be instructed to avoid looking at the written version in the text while he is listening. Otherwise he will be exercising his eyes and not his ears. It should be explained to him that, after all, when a Spanish-speaking person is talking to him, that person will not give him a written script of what he is saying. Good recordings should be at normal talking speed, and the student should become accustomed to hearing at this natural pace and make every effort to imitate it, even though it sounds very rapid to him.

Tapes, if properly prepared, are designed to reinforce what is taught in the classroom; therefore, the student should be thoroughly familiar with the material in the text before listening to and repeating the taped reproduction.

Another primary purpose of tapes--to provide additional oral practice--is served when the student is encouraged to repeat everything aloud in a normal voice, instead of saying it to himself or whispering it. By saying it aloud, he adds auditory memory, which doubles his efficiency. By using his voice, he adds motor memory which quadruples his ability to remember.

AVOIDING ENGLISH

Too many foreign language teachers spend an excessive amount of time talking about the language (and in English, unfortunately) rather than talking the language. Since the student is being trained to deal with Spanish-speaking people in situations where English will not be accessible, he should become accustomed from the very first day of class to speaking and hearing only the target language in the classroom. This can be accomplished by means of several rather simple techniques, a few of which follow:

1. The instructor should set the example by refraining from using English himself.
2. The students should leave the classroom the very first day speaking and understanding some of the target language (greetings, expressions--"my name is _____, what is your name?").
3. The teacher should establish some firm ground rules for the use of the target language, explaining why English should be avoided.

4. Students who speak English could be penalized in some manner, and those who refrain from using it could be given some kind of recognition.
5. The instructor should use a variety of visual aids, particularly overhead transparencies of non-verbal cues for the dialog and supplemental vocabulary from the textbook.
6. The class can be terminated five minutes early to allow a short period during which students may ask questions in English on vocabulary, grammatical usages, and cultural aspects which are not clear. The teacher will reply in English during this brief period. Also, students should be queried on their understanding of certain points of grammar and meanings of words which the instructor should anticipate may be unclear. If the instruction is conducted properly in the target language, employing numerous examples, many visual aids, and a variety of drills, this five-minute period will be found to be more than adequate to clarify any poorly understood parts of the lesson.

ALTERNATIVE TEACHING TECHNIQUES

For teachers who choose not to use the audio-lingual technique exclusively in teaching career-oriented courses, alternative methods of teaching can be employed. Individualization is also feasible if adequate facilities are available. However, it is not the intent of this treatise to debate the advantages and disadvantages of different methodologies. Suffice it to say that the audio-lingual technique described herein has proved to be very successful in the career-oriented foreign language classroom and has succeeded in achieving its primary objective of getting the students to communicate effectively. Whatever technique achieves this same objective successfully can be considered to be valid methodology.

CONCLUSIONS

Foreign language instructors who succeed in obtaining administrative approval to shift from a strictly literary or philosophical emphasis to preparing condensed career-specific courses for certain individuals who are unable to enjoy the luxury of several years of conventional foreign language study should plan a modified teaching approach. Primarily, this will involve concentrating on certain of the language skills, such as listening and speaking, and virtually ignoring the others.

Relevancy is the keynote of all guidance on the selection of situations, vocabulary, and cultural material to be taught. Communication is the goal of all classroom activities. There are many effective techniques for achieving this goal, and they all generally involve role-playing. Vocabulary should be presented in a realistic context

and not in isolation.

The opportunity for the student to hear and speak the target language, which is his constant objective, will increase or decrease according to the amount of English spoken in the classroom, either by the teacher, or by the student himself, or by other students.

The audio-lingual method has proved to be very successful in teaching career-related foreign language courses. This does not rule out the possibility of other techniques achieving success, however.

The importance of instilling cultural awareness in the students of career-oriented courses should never be under-emphasized. The cultural material should, wherever possible, be relevant to the career-related situations.

A statement by Kenneth A. Lester is considered to constitute a fitting concluding remark to this treatise:

It is incumbent upon schools and colleges to provide, to the fullest degree possible, the means for students to develop the skills and concepts they will need in their chosen profession.¹

¹Kenneth A. Lester, "The Career Crisis." Accent on ACTFL, November 1975, p. 18.