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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the language training courses provided by the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) to government employees and their dependents, focusing on the use of experiential language learning and "bridging" classroom study to practical applications. Bridges are an important part of the FSI training program not only because they target job-related needs, but because they are consonant with adult learning styles. Students in the class analyze and identify their own needs, using the teacher as a resource person and facilitator. They then conduct role playing and on-site exercises to develop practical language skills. Self-evaluation is a continuing element of the curriculum. The principles of this approach are illustrated through a module developed for spouses of Foreign Service Officers who are required to use French for semi-official purposes in Francophone countries. The bridging technique of language learning can be adapted to any language course with little cost or advanced preparation. (MDM)

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Experiential Language Learning for Professional Experts

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Presented is a language training design for adult learners who need to perform certain functions specific to their jobs in a foreign language and cultural environment.

The design is based on the "bridge" concept developed at the Foreign Service Institute for U. S. government personnel to help progressively bridge the gap between the study of the language in the classroom and its use on the job. This concept is applicable to a variety of professional needs, makes few resource demands, and can be easily incorporated into almost any language program.

This design emphasizes:

- ***Principles of adult learning***
  Students inspire the content agenda based on their needs. A native-speaker facilitator draws on students' own professional expertise and real-life experience to identify and practice the relevant functions in the target language.

- ***On-site language tasks***
  Simulations are taken outside the classroom to sites where tasks would normally be performed.

- ***Communication coping strategies***
  Students build self-confidence and efficiency at performing language tasks through practice using conversational management devices, paraphrasing and verification techniques.

Principles for this design are illustrated through a module developed for spouses of Foreign Service Officers who are required by the State Department to use French for semi-official purposes at post in Francophone countries.

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Experiential Language Learning for Professional Experts

Summary of Presentation

I. INTRODUCTION

With new political and economic relationships forming around the world, many Americans in business and government find themselves in the position of having to learn a foreign language for professional purposes. Many may come to this task with limited language learning experience and now find themselves having to attain a relatively high level of proficiency in a short period of time in order to function effectively in their work. Our purpose this afternoon is to share with you a language training design for such adult learners who need to perform certain functions specific to their jobs in a foreign language and cultural environment.

II. LANGUAGE TRAINING AT THE FOREIGN SERVICE INSTITUTE

Our business at the Foreign Service Institute is foreign language training. We train a wide range of people: adults between ages of 25 and 55 (the average age is 39), men and women; political, administrative, and consular officers, their dependents, ambassadors. We train secretaries, communicators, and real estate specialists. We train people at all levels of their career. These are people who have already been abroad and are going abroad again.

Our students come to us with a variety of aptitudes and language learning experience. Some are gifted language learners; most are average, and there are also those who appear to have no capacity to learn a language. Some are experienced language learners who have learned several languages successfully; some may have learned the language in the country but without formal grammar instruction; others may have never studied a language before in high school or college, and may not understand terminology such as "noun" or "adjective."

All of this is to say that we do *not* have what one might call a "select" group of language learners. What all our students do bring in common to the language learning situation is:

(1) Professional experience
(2) Need to use the language in a professional setting.

Full-time intensive training at FSI lasts from eight weeks to six or seven months for a language such as French, Spanish, Italian, German, or Dutch. Students attend class five contact hours a day, five days a week. Within a six or seven month period, we bring students from a 0 (no functional ability) to a 3 or 3+ (professional proficiency—that is, to a level where the student is able to use the language to use the language accurately and effectively in most social, practical, and professional contexts).

The backbone of the program is an old-fashioned grammatical syllabus (some language sections are in the process of implementing a functional syllabus). Other components of the program include: content-based language instruction, cross-cultural

training in language use, skills training (with special emphasis on newspaper reading, comprehension of overheard, face-to-face, telephone speech), and work-related language use activities known as "Bridges."

III. BRIDGES AND EXPERIENTIAL LANGUAGE LEARNING

At FSI, the concept of needs-based language design existed from its inception, when it was discovered that what the students learned in class hardly served their needs at post. To remediate this situation, the FSI "bridge" was developed. The "bridge" is a type of activity that bridges the gap between the study of language in the classroom and its use on the job.

Bridges are job-related exercises, introduced at different stages in the language program, which are representative of the type of tasks performed by a broad range of US government personnel. There are bridges that deal with requests, conducting briefings, solliciting informed opinion, explaining US policy, and negotiating. "Getting the Facts" is one bridge which focuses on taking information over the phone, and passing on this information to a third party. The student learns to control the communication, and to verify accuracy of information.

All bridge activities aim to provide the student with *communicative coping strategies*. Learners, after all, need more than a set of technical or specialized vocabulary; they need more than just a list of "functions" or "gambits." Learners need strategies that help them to maintain control of the situation. These strategies include dealing effectively with questions and comments from the audience, soliciting informed opinion during an interview even when the interviewee is not entirely forthcoming, ways of responding to verbal attacks or hostile remarks, controling interruptions from the audience, keeping an interview on track, returning to a topic after being sidetracked, conceding, compromising, protesting.

Bridges help students to face the reality that native speaker speech will always be above the student's current level of understanding. In language training, it is necessary, therefore, to set expectations and build tolerance for being confronted with language above one's proficiency level. Bridges help to do just that; moreover, they provide tools for helping students to maintain control of the situation and build students' confidence using language in potentially stressful situations.

Bridges are an important part of the training program at FSI not only because they target job-related needs, but because they are consonant with adult learning styles. The characteristics of adults learning style can be summed up as follows:

(1) Adults, who are obviously self-directing in every aspect of their lives, have a self-concept of being responsible for making decision about their lives (the classroom often does not support this self-concept);

(2) Adults are motivated and devote energy to learn what they know will help them perform the tasks that they confront in their life situations, and that will help them to build their self-esteem;

(3) Adults come to the classroom with a greater volume and different quality of professional and real-life experience.

These characteristics of adult learning style call for an approach to language learning that recognizes the adult need for:

(1) A measure of control over the content of the course. Adults can judge for themselves what they need to know and whether or not they have learned what they need to know;

(2) Skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are relevant and immediately practical;

(3) Acknowledgement of personal, professionai experience.

In the Experiential Learning Model that you see on your handout on page 2, this personal, concrete experience is seen as the point of departure for learning new kinds of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The bridge incorporates elements of experiential learning insofar as it allows the learner to draw on her own professional expertise. We will return to the matter of adult learning style.

However practical bridges are designed to be, bridges deal with generic task-types; tasks that just about every Foreign Service officer needs to do on the job. Contrast this with job-specific training. In the early days at FSI, job-specific language training took the form of dialogues and vocabulary lists, consonant with view of language and language learning at the time. We present another type of design for job-specific training that not only provides the technical or specialized vocabulary, but communicative coping strategies as well, and takes into consideration adult learning styles. While based on the Bridge, the job-specific module design that we are about to present addresses the students' own job needs and situations that he or she will encounter abroad. Let us see how it works.

IV. HOW IT WORKS

We will be referring to the Generic Lesson Plan on page 3 of your handout. A lesson consists of four phases: Analyzing, Getting the Tools, On-Site Performance, and Self-Evaluation.

Like the bridge, the job-specific module is driven by students' needs based on the students' previous experience. Students in the class analyze and identify their own needs; that is, the situations in which the know they will need to use the language. They are, after all, the professional experts. The teacher is cultural and linguistic consultant, and facilitator.

With the teacher's guidance and their language resources, students work on getting the tools necessary to function in a one of the situations they have identified. They develop ways to express in the target language what this situation requires them to do (e. g. request certain forms of documentation, bargain over a price). Students practice phrases for pronunciation and familiarization. Listening to a tape recorded "overheard conversation" related to this situation enriches the linguistic input and provides listening comprehension practice. Scenarios may be role played for communication practice.

Note that when it comes to *role play*, the student never takes the part of the native speaker. This makes sense, in that the student will never find herself in such a role, nor will most native speakers see the person in that role. Rather, the goal is to prepare students to function in the roles that they, as government employees, as Americans, will assume at post, and to handle with confidence the situations that they are likely to encounter: visa lines, meetings, formal receptions, aggressive requests.

The lesson does not end with role play, but leads to the application phase, On-Site Performance.

On-site, out-of-classroom learning is not to be confused with immersion in target country or simulation (role play). On-site language learning involves using the language to get something that the students want to do in *the type of setting* where that

task would normally be performed (such as an office or kitchen). On-site language activity can be done right from the very first day of class. The student who comes to training without knowing a word of French is often not familiar with the premises either. So on Day 1, we take students out of the classroom and give them a tour. We take them around the building, pointing out key places and names of people that they will come in contact with throughout their training: the secretary, the director, the language lab, the library, and so on. After this orientation, we go back to the classroom and review the vocabulary, structures, and phrases.

On-site language learning is a necessary component of language training for at least two reasons:

(1) It is difficult to role play communicative *coping* strategies; and

(2) On-site language learning introduces an element of unpredictability into the communicative situation. This element of unpredictability provides a way for students to discover what they need to know, which can not be found out in role plays. It helps make students aware of how adequate their language skills were, what they can do and what they may yet need to learn. On-site language learning enables students later to self-evaluate and to reflect on their own effectiveness and preparation.

This leads us to the last phase of the lesson, Self-Evaluation, in which students determine if their language skills were sufficient to handle effectively the tasks, if they need more skills, and if so, which ones.

V. RESOURCES AND REQUIREMENTS

There are few restrictions in carrying out this kind kind of activity. It is relatively inexpensive, and can be incorporated into any language curriculum, whether it be a grammatical or functional syllabus, content-based, or skill-based program. Implementation of this design, moreover, does not require overhauling the entire curriculum into a task-based syllabus. Little course preparation is required, since the need analysis is conducted on the spot with the students. A module can be conducted in one to three days, depending upon complexity of task.

What is required are students with the same job needs and who are already experienced in the job they will be doing abroad, as well as a native speaker facilitator to conduct the activity—one who is versed in the procedures and who is familiar with cultural dimension of language use in the student's country of assignment. Access to native informants and work sites is essential. (This, of course, does not pose quite the same problem for ESL).

VI. FOREIGN SERVICE SPOUSE MODULE

The Foreign Service Spouse Module serves as an example of a variety of job-specific language module.

Why did we undertake to develop a Foreign Service *spouse* module and not Foreign Service *Officer* module? This particular module came about as the result of a recurrent demand for training that would be more oriented to needs of spouses. In one class of new students, we found that we had a six spouses—all women—who were interested in taking part in this type of class. Some had professions of their own: the class consisted of a lawyer, two teachers, and a retired FSO who was off to post with her still active Foreign Serivce husband.

There are several reasons to address the special needs of spouses at post. Whatever their own profession, spouses play a role in semi-official functions while at post. Moreover, where the foreign service *officer* in the embassy can often rely on foreign service national or experienced employees to translate and interprete, the spouse has no such resources at hand. And while language needs are often predictable and routine at the embassy, unexpected situations of everyday life tend to occur with more frequency, making practical knowledge of the language essential.

We began by consulting our students as to the kinds of situations that they encountered abroad where they felt they needed to know the the language. From this, we created a program that taught communication skills for situations such as handling medical emergencies, effective and natural use of the telephone, conducting interviews, orchestrating household moves, and hosting and attending social affairs. As you see on page 4 of your handout, one such session had to do with planning and cooking a meal with domestic help. The on-site performance preparing lunch took place at the instructor's home. It is worthwhile pointing out that two thirds of our students in French language training are assigned to posts in Subsaharan and North Africa. It is often the case in such countries that households will have domestic help, and that it is necessary to give instructions and explain certain procedures to domestics. Therefore language skills such as explaining to the cook that all vegetables have to be peeled are not irrelevant. In fact, on-site language learning provides not only the element of unpredictability essential to identifying and assessing one's needs, but the opportunity to point out the cultural dimensions of the task at hand.

VII. CONCLUSION

Our intention this afternoon was to present a learn-by-doing approach to language training. The students who went through this training observed that they gained increased self-confidence in using the language; they were no longer intimidated when confronted with a flood of speech; and that they gained the necessary tools to cope effectively using the language.

Rather than design a language for specific purposes course that *assumes* the needs of the learner, we had the students themselves identify what they needed to know and whether or not they learned what they needed to learn. We provided language skills which the students identified as relevant and immediately practical, and drew on the students' past experience at post. A design that is sensitive to adult learning style makes for more effective training: students are engaged and invested in what they are learning.

We continue to address the job-specific needs of other groups of students, such as general services and administrative officers. We are rethinking a consular course developed in the late seventies, one which consisted primarily of lists of questions and specialized vocabulary. While the consular officer may not need very high level speaking skills, dealing with the same routine questions case after case, the consular officer does need sophisticated interactive *listening skills* enabling him or her to understand a variety of foreign accents, rapid speech, and decipher handwritten materials. Finally, we are challenged with the development of economic-commerical modules which help students to use the language effectively when representing U.S. trade interests and promoting interest in American products abroad. This challenge has assumed major importance in training of our students, in line with our mandate for global competitiveness.