

CULTURE MATTERS: DESIGNING AND DELIVERING A FRENCH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (FSP) COURSE FOR THE MEDICAL SOFTWARE SECTOR IN BELGIUM

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Abstract: *This article describes the creation of French for specific purposes (FSP) materials for the medical technology sector for in a week-long course designed for non-specialist French speakers going to Belgium on a three-year medical software project. Language for specific purposes (LSP) generally incorporates general cultural competence, which has long been considered a central component of foreign language education, along with developing competencies and skills based on employers' requirements, language awareness, and professional competencies. Alongside key linguistic skills – for example, vocabulary building in a certain area such as law, medicine, or technology – LSP courses need to equally consider individual regional cultural elements including linguistic variants as an integral part of their specific purpose, instead of adding it as an ancillary aspect. Because of the interconnectedness of language and culture, LSP educators must explicitly and methodically consider cultural familiarity as an outcome by integrating it into the needs analysis, development, delivery, and conclusion of the course. In this example, the instructional team collected and modified materials from textbook and web resources to create an FSP course that included an overview of French medical and technological terminology as well as an introduction to Belgian French, relevant cultural material, and a focus on linguistic authenticity. Using qualitative methods, this article presents the ways in which the FSP course foregrounded culture and demonstrates specific examples from the pedagogical materials designed for students. This curriculum model can serve as a framework for those interested in infusing their FSP curriculum with cultural relevance as an additional specific purpose.*

Keywords: French for Specific Purposes; Belgium; pedagogy; culture; designing and implementing; medical software sector

1. Introduction

Language and culture have a close and complex connection, and it is impossible to fully understand a culture without knowledge of its language. In the twenty-first century, these interrelated elements are crucial for effective functioning of globalized workplaces, international business, travel, work abroad, and our increasingly globalized neighborhoods and civic institutions. For example, US employers report a 53% increase in demand for bilingual workers in the past five years (ACTFL 2019 17), and the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the need

for global crisis communication (Piller, Zhang, and Li 2020). With the increasing internationalization of curricula in postsecondary institutions there has also been a meaningful increase of students who possess nuanced cultural understandings (Deardorff 2006). Thus, the need to teach both cultural and linguistic competence remains an urgent priority.

Writing in *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*, Michael Byram called on language teachers to be "teachers of language and culture" (2009: 331). Language teaching has long been considered a medium for teaching culture (Kramsch 1993; Sercu, 2006), and language for specific purposes (LSP) courses, which are designed to train international professionals in specific fields, are no different. Among these, French for specific purposes (FSP) courses are currently in high demand, as a recent analysis of undergraduate education in the United States attests (Bouche and Reisinger 2021). Yet, as this article demonstrates, there are multiple layers to this objective of teaching culture.

This article describes the experience of creating an FSP course for the medical technology sector within the context of a week-long course designed for three intermediate (B1/B2) French speakers going on a three-year medical software project in Belgium in which the three students would adapt a new software system to their clients' needs, move crucial health data, and train physicians and nurses on how to use the new software over the course of two years. In addition to the language for specific purpose component, the course also provided an introduction to Belgian French. Because the class was not for university credit, no formal assessments were created; this article describes the experience of course creation and learner feedback from course evaluations.

2. Centering culture in LSP through analysis and course design

In considering variants of a global language such as French, connections between language and culture are especially important, because these variants reflect cultural specificities. With 29 independent nations where French is an official or main language, each locale has produced an abundance of linguistic variants. When discussing culture, learning about a specific variety of French and how it has developed is one way to investigate different countries' histories and cultures, as well as wider societal considerations, in addition to meeting the goal of teaching language for specific purpose. In the example of this course, whereas the learners had already established a good foundation in what is known as standard general academic French through university studies and study abroad programs, in addition to training students in medical and technological French, a second goal was to enhance cultural awareness of how French language use in Belgium differed from the International European French dialect generally taught to those learning French as a second language. Aiming for linguistic authenticity, in addition to technical language skills, exemplifies how designing LSP courses requires deeper knowledge and research.

In professional settings, communicative competence is viewed as wider than linguistic competence (Luka 2007). As Nteliou and Kehagia (2016) have demonstrated, skills for effective cross-cultural communication in a globalized work environment are key in LSP courses in postsecondary education. Given the importance of cultural knowledge and competency in human communication and interaction, FSP courses must build cultural trainings into their design and

implementation from outset to conclusion. And because cultural competence is multi-faceted, it is important to consider knowledge of a specific region and its linguistic variant(s). This is particularly key in the case French, a pluricentric language with a global reach. From Senegalese to Swiss variants, there are different nuances and colloquialisms unique to distinct Francophone regions, countries, and cities. This is the case in Belgium, where French is one of three official languages, alongside Dutch and German. French is spoken differently in Belgium, Switzerland, Quebec, and throughout Francophone West Africa. In English and Spanish, similar regional distinctions exist as well. Although the French in Belgium is closer to the French in France, than the French in North America (Quebec), there are frequently used words and expressions unique to Belgian dialects. Belgian French reflects the influence of the languages of the other Belgian regions, the Flemish Region, the Brussels-Capital Region, and the Walloon Region. Belgian French is also infused with vocabulary from Picard, Walloon, Lorrain, and other regional Romance languages. Given this regional context, the course ultimately consisted of an overview of French medical and technological terminology as well as an introduction to Belgian culture and Belgian French.

Like most effective teaching, LSP is an endeavor based on a specific set of goals. As research demonstrates, materials resulting from the needs analysis are based on aspects such as specialty or topic, learner situation, skills needed, and expected outcomes (García Laborda, 2011). In addition, LSP course design and implementation require attention to a number of factors such as student needs, course objectives, and instructor resources available. Because of these varying factors, instructor flexibility is key (Martin 2010). Elizabeth Martin describes the course design as a “cyclical” process “where periodic feedback from all parties involved (coordinators, teachers, students, administrators, etc.) will continually influence course design, materials, and evaluation techniques” (2010: 5). Gisèle Kahn summarized the objective of French for Specific Purposes as needing to be as “functional” as possible, making the point that “la ‘fonctionnalité’ est aussi synonyme de réalisme” (1995: 144). In other words, an LSP course’s success is based on its ability to meet real-world goals. For our learners, this meant specialized terminology as well as an overview of Belgian French. To arrive at these goals, the instructional team followed Basturkmen and Elder’s methodological approach to creating an LSP course. Following these researchers’ emphasis on course design, the instructional team began with two key first steps: needs analysis and description of language utilization in target situations (Basturkmen and Elder 2004). These initial steps were important to weigh the gap between students’ proficiency and the communicative needs of the target situation in order to determine the communicative needs the students may have. In addition, this process included determining the course focus, the terminology to be covered, and the educational methodology. The needs analysis also included specialty, situation of learners, necessary abilities, anticipated outcomes, and cultural skills (García Laborda 2011). Our team found that, in addition to specialized vocabulary for the medical and technological sector, we had to explicitly consider cultural competencies – in this case, Belgian French – as an important objective. We integrated the cultural component of Belgian French into the creation, development, and delivery of the course.

3. Medical software in Belgium: An FSP example

The three students enrolled in the course had all studied in France but had never been to Belgium. Their company, a Wisconsin-based electronic health records software firm, requested a customized course for them before they embarked on the project, which would involve adapting a new software system to their clients' needs, moving crucial health data, and training Belgian physicians and nurses on how to use the new software. In this case, all three learners were in their mid-20s and had a French level of B1 or B2. Two of the three students had begun their French studies in middle school; the other started in high school. All had studied in France (Aix-en-Provence, Paris, and Strasbourg) for durations of two to three months but had never visited Belgium. One student had specific training in French for business, having had attended the *École Supérieure de Commerce de Paris* during her undergraduate studies.

Conducting a thorough needs analysis for the course ultimately integrated cultural components into teaching activities. Beforehand, we invited students to reflect upon and make comparisons between the different cultural contexts of France and Belgium (CoE/CEFR, 2001). Then, to create relevant learning activities for the group, the instructional team kept cultural proficiency front and center by collecting and modifying authentic material which included medical and technological as well as cultural information that incorporated Belgian French. Because the students were adult learners, their involvement in the design process was key. According to Knowles et al. (2005), adult learners need to self-direct their learning and are more likely to be actively involved in the learning process if the activities chosen are experiential and problem-solving, resembling real-life and work experiences.

4. Creating a tailor-made curriculum

Research shows that LSP textbooks are often insufficient to meet the goals of learners (Beaulieu 2014). Thus designers of LSP courses generally must research, collect, and process the necessary knowledge and information that will provide the foundation of the program's targeted communicative situations. As Christine Noe demonstrates, beginning with a situational context is a useful approach because it emphasizes the discursive nature of specialist language (2003: 197). The type of texts and situations being studied are important to successful outcomes, so the instructional team focused on these specific students and their language-use plans. Successful LSP teaching should be focused on students and their language use plans; as García Laborda demonstrates, students' needs and subjects will shape the tailor-made materials (2011). The data collection of the needs analysis represented a foundational step in the approach to creating an LSP course and considered the linguistic needs of the learners as distinguished by a frequency of terms and structures (Mangiante and Parpette 2004, Richer 2008). More specifically, the analysis consisted of the identification of the communicative situations in which students would be likely to find themselves within the target context during the professional project, as well as in listing linguistic and cultural knowledge that students would need to acquire. To design the syllabus, teacher-designers made lists of activities, speech acts, and cultural knowledge. The set of questions developed by Mangiante and Parpette for designing such a course addressed the areas the course would explore, and the specific lexical information needed for successful outcomes. With this focus as a guide, a more detailed

investigation followed, in which the teacher-designers anticipated communicative contexts the three students would expect to encounter, contact dimensions (face to face, email, etc.) they would be using, and codes used in the professional workplace (tone, register). The teacher-designers investigated potential new situations and contexts in which the students might find themselves after completing the course and arriving in Belgium. Finally, the instructional team researched aspects of Belgian culture and Belgian French to prepare the materials.

5. Examples of teaching materials: Language and culture

In this project, the creation of didactic materials first focused on general medical terminology (health symptoms, diagnoses, medical personnel, treatments), then focused on specialized terminology about medical software found on documents on the Internet. The teacher-designers collected authentic documents necessary for the creation of pedagogical resources for specific purposes for the medical technology sector in Belgium. The Internet was a valuable tool the teacher-designers utilized in the cases in which textbooks fell short. Teachers used video documents such as promotional tourism videos, adapted and paired with pedagogical documents, about Brussels and Wallonia. In addition, vocabulary building exercises using new technological terms were incorporated into didactic resources. Students appreciated reviewing what they already knew from standard French courses while building up their lexicon with more specialized terms for their project such as “télécharger un dossier” (upload a file), “synchroniser les données” (synchronize data), and “authentification à deux facteurs” (two-factor authentication). This relevant material gave them a solid preparation for the different lexical referents they would encounter on their project. The teacher-designers also adapted such industry terms as “interface,” “secure messaging,” and “patient portal” into speaking and writing activities. Students practiced scheduling meetings and explaining the steps of using the software to carry out work in collaboration with their interlocutors.

In the case of the significant cultural component to the course, building cultural intelligence and linguistic authenticity was key for the empowerment of students to connect “to a world that is culturally different from their own,” or a skill Stein-Smith has called the “ultimate twenty-first century competency” for global and multilingual citizens (Sercu 2005 1, Stein-Smith 2018). Relevant cultural material also gave the learners a solid preparation for the different cultural referents they might encounter on their project.

This cultural material included Belgicisms, e.g., words, expressions, or phrases that are unique to Belgian French. Introducing students to Belgian French made substantial amount of the course. These sessions were taught by a guest lecturer who was a Belgian native. As *Barbarić* and *Matijević* (2018) demonstrate in their study of teaching cultural competence within an LSP, figurative expressions can be used to improve communication skills and gain better understanding of the social conventions and norms that establish the collective consciousness of a particular target culture, and the Belgicisms presented in our course included such expressions.

For example, all the students knew the French phrase “il pleut” (“it’s raining”), but not “il drache,” which means the same thing. From the Dutch word “draschen,” it is a Belgian regionalism for a downpour. Equally confusing to students who learned

French in France would be “à tantôt” meaning “à toute à l’heure” (“see you later”). Students also needed to learn “septante” and “nonante” for 70 and 90 respectively (the ventigesimal “quatre-vingt-dix” is still used in Belgium for the number 80). Expressions unique to the country’s capital, Brussels, were also introduced, such as “volle gaz,” an expression from the Flemish meaning “quickly,” or “full steam ahead.” Finally, as in Switzerland and in Francophone North America, “déjeuner” (“breakfast”), “dîner” (“lunch”) and “souper” (“dinner”) are used in Belgium instead France’s terms, “petit-déjeuner,” “déjeuner,” and “dîner.” Whereas most of these students would have encountered the previous example, which is often taught in first-year French courses, other expressions were more advanced. For example, in the realm of the workplace, the idiomatic Belgian phrases such as “ça peut mal” (“there is no risk”), “postposer” (“to postpone”), and “savoir” (used idiomatically to mean “to be able to”) were of a more advanced nature and new to the learners.

6. Discussion

*The needs analysis of the instructional team revealed the necessity of teaching technical vocabulary and structures in addition to orienting students to the linguistic variants of their specific Francophone context in Belgium. Going beyond standard general academic French was key in both cases. As this experience of this FSP course demonstrates, cultural awareness was not just a value-added item but was foundational for the language-learning educational endeavor. Becoming familiar not only with technological and medical terminology but also Belgian French, not the International European French dialect with which the learners were already familiar, was necessary. In their course evaluations, learners provided qualitative feedback about the importance of the time the instructors spent on Belgian French. As their awareness of the influence of Belgicisms in everyday and professional communications increased, they had a greater appreciation for the differences between Belgian culture and what they had learned in their prior study abroad programs in France. The students valued reviewing the specificities of vocabulary for meals and numbers, as well as the idiomatic expressions they might encounter in the workplace. As one student wrote in the course evaluation, “We were able to talk to [the instructor] about Belgian culture and learn some of the major differences between the French spoken in Belgium and the French spoken in France.... [I]t was interesting to learn that the words for breakfast, lunch, and dinner are a bit different in the two countries. The word the French use for lunch means *breakfast* in Belgium! Things could have gotten confusing in Belgium if I hadn’t learned about these differences.” Although this region-specific vocabulary is often presented in beginning French courses, it proved useful for the students to review it and to delve into more advanced examples. Another student added “I was able to walk away feeling confident and prepared to work in a professional French-speaking environment.” Another student commented, “The cultural aspect was useful and interesting for our day-to-day interactions both socially and professionally.” Although all the students came into the course already confident in their spoken French, knowing about elements of Belgian culture along with key Belgicisms was essential to their assuredness that they could fulfill their professional goals. A student expressed in the course evaluation their appreciation for the “crash course in grammar structures, healthcare and technological terminology, and Belgian culture.”*

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper presents an original example of how to approach teaching FSP for medical technology in the site-specific context of Belgium. The course design and delivery experience and its qualitative learner feedback demonstrate how much the concepts, attitudes, and ways of interacting with and looking at the world conveyed in Belgicisms were of importance to students' goals. When students become aware of the span and influence of Belgian idioms, they were able to add to their communication skills and gain better understanding of a target culture.

As this example demonstrates, mutual interactions between language and culture have central significance in teaching and learning another language, both in general language programs and in LSP courses and programs. Indeed, learning a second culture or cultures is often intricately intertwined with learning another language. Teaching language, whether in generalist or in specialist courses, should always be accompanied with teaching culture, including the variants of a language whenever necessary. In addition to teaching technical vocabulary and helpful expressions for professional use, a modern LSP course needs to integrate linguistic authenticity throughout the teaching. Through relevant and authentic materials, teachers can invite students to enter into the process of gradually constructing and refining their understandings of another culture. Regional linguistic distinctions may also be vital, such as in this case students who already knew the International European French dialect but who had not yet experienced Belgian French. As a small yet important component of linguistic authenticity and proficient communication, the inclusion of Belgicisms in the intensive course enabled the learners in this example to better prepare for their project in Belgium and broadened their perspectives on *la Francophonie* in ways they found enjoyable and profitable. When helping develop multilingual professionals who can also be considered global citizens, we need to consider culture just as much as we consider specialized terminology, and this paper presents a course that participated in that endeavor.

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