

20 years of AELFE: LSP, and language learning and teaching in Higher Education - Some personal reflections from Germany

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Abstract

In this paper I share some more personal views on language learning and teaching in Higher Education in Germany to see how Languages for Specific Purposes (LSP) has fared there in my experience over the years, to comment on some over-exposed versus neglected issues in our field, and hoping that these more personal observations may trigger off some reactions and reflections by readers on their own backgrounds and situations.

Keywords: Languages for Specific Purposes, Higher Education in Germany, language learning and teaching.

Resumen

20 años de AELFE: LFE y enseñanza y aprendizaje de lenguas en la educación superior. Algunas reflexiones personales desde Alemania

En este artículo comparto varios puntos de vista personales sobre la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de lenguas en el contexto de la educación superior en Alemania con el fin de comprobar, desde mi experiencia, el rumbo que han tomado las lenguas para fines específicos (LFE) con el paso de los años y estudiar algunas cuestiones que han atraído un número mayor de estudios, y aquellas que han quedado un tanto relegadas; todo ello con la esperanza de que estos comentarios más personales puedan llevar a los lectores a reflexionar y contrastar ideas tomando como base sus antecedentes y su situación.

Palabras clave: Lenguas para Fines Específicos, educación superior en Alemania, enseñanza y aprendizaje de lenguas.

Over the last 20 years AELFE has developed into a major agent in the field of LSP encouraging research, disseminating its results and influencing and supporting appropriate classroom practice. It has been my privilege to be associated with *Ibérica*, the journal of AELFE, since its inception, and it has been interesting for me to see it reflect the growing specialisation and professionalisation of the field. Now, after some years in retirement, I am aware that developments are taking place which I am no longer quite so closely involved (and familiar) with. So for a contribution to a celebratory issue of the journal I feel it would not be appropriate for me to attempt to provide a survey of “the” important past developments and future needs. However, it may still be interesting to share some more personal views on a more limited and particular field, that is language learning and teaching in higher education in Germany, to see how LSP has fared there in my experience over the years, to comment on some over-exposed versus neglected issues in our field, and hoping that these more personal observations may trigger off some reactions and reflections by readers on their own backgrounds and situations.

As already suggested, enormous progress has been made over the years in developing a more differentiated view of what the idea of languages for special purposes would or should imply. We have come to realise that a closer analysis of the nature of LSP would at least imply a closer look at the language of a particular academic discipline, at language for academic purposes generally, and at the language needed to perform in a profession based on an academic education. Each of these have been the focus of enquiries and research, and apart from producing many valuable insights and data the results also tend to underline the truism that only on the basis of advanced, differentiated, challenging contents is it necessary and possible to develop an advanced, differentiated language command.

So the analytic side of LSP looks like being well taken care of. However, while the scope of enquiry and research in LSP is boundless in theory – any language, any subject specialisation could be a potential field of attention and effort here –, in practice the vast majority of activities tends to focus on English as a language, and on economics/business as a content area, with technology, law and medicine as remote also-rans. This invites two comments. While the current focus on English is obvious given its current dominant position as an international language, it would be very short-sighted to forget that for future career purposes students may have other, or at least additional, language learning needs. Even in firms where English is

the corporate language, but of course especially in small or medium-sized companies any professional career trying to take advantage of the opportunities of the markets of the European Union (EU) would need the support of an appropriate professional command of any of its major languages, and looking further afield would seem to show that doing business, say, in Russia or in China would profit from being able to explain, demonstrate, argue, but also to lead and monitor activities in Russian or Chinese. In fact, as an anglicist myself I may be allowed to suggest that the current over-emphasis on English, in Germany, to have all secondary schools start with English, to push English into primary education, to have more and more kindergartens introduce English programmes, and at the other end to see that well over half of language teaching at universities is still devoted to English, results in a linguistic mono-culture which we would do well to see with a critical distance¹. In the 40 years of my own language teaching career I have seen English shift from one of the major language amongst others, to “the” dominant language squeezing other languages out of educational interest in the process, and I could easily foresee the external circumstances instrumental in bringing this shift about to change quite naturally again moving English into a different role, if not back to its previous position, and giving prominence to another language or languages. Perhaps even in less than another 40 years.

In a similar vein, the ubiquitous focus on economics/business as the dominant content area in LSP, no doubt reflecting current market forces and demands, tends to blur the fact that there are many other fields where languages are used for their own, different “special purposes”, and where more efforts in research, in quest of knowledge but also as the basis for appropriate language teaching would be appreciated. In fact, all academic disciplines have their own ways of using language, and the same applies to the professions based on them. In this context, it is curious to observe that the humanities in general and the philologies in particular often seem to be like blind spots, as if for them the notion of LSP could not possibly apply. This would be a deplorable error. To illustrate from an example of professional language use here, many students of the philologies go into language teaching, and as a teacher trainer I have often observed that students even with a reasonable general command of the target language have great difficulties in coping with the linguistic challenges of conducting classroom business in a foreign language, to negotiate meaning with their learners, that is to modify their language to take their learners from where

they are, to correct and criticise, but also to encourage their learners, etc. These are teaching skills, no doubt, but depend to a large extent on a language command suitable for this “special purpose”. However, not much information is available, nor has much research been done, on the language of the foreign language classroom or the teacher’s language within it, and while there are nowadays many courses for business students – for example on business negotiations in a foreign language – courses for future teachers with a focus on their own professional language are rare to non-existent² although most language teachers are non-native speakers of the language they are teaching.

Looking more generally at languages in Higher Education, the impression is that the potentially infinite variety of personal language learning interests by students is often matched by a remarkable degree of institutional uncertainty as to what should be offered. One may do well to remember here that needs analyses starting off from the communication contexts which students must be able to deal with and which therefore their language course programmes should prepare them for, make it possible to reduce the natural complexity of individual language use to three prototypical communication contexts for our students. As is well known, one of these is the “specialist-to-specialist” communication context: students need to be able to access the academic literature written in their field of study, to formulate research questions and results, to participate receptively and productively in the academic discourse of their specialisation (for instance when studying abroad), and also to be able to engage in specialised communication when working in their professions in the medium of another language with colleagues in or from another country (for instance, when an engineer talks to an engineer about a construction project in a different part of the world, on a work placement, or job posting).

There is also, however, the “specialist-to-layman” communication context: in all professions based on an academic qualification is it necessary also to be able to communicate to the non-specialist what is planned, what could, would or should be done, etc. Typical examples would be doctor-patient, lawyer-client, teacher-parent, engineer-town councillor, architect-customer communication; and also, vice versa, professionals need to be able to understand the interests, needs and wants of the lay public even if their descriptions are vague and do not use the specialised terminology of the field. And then there is, of course, the context of “everyday life”, including the observance of socially acceptable behaviour patterns. This

communication context is particularly relevant for students, for example when on work placement or for a study period abroad, but of course also generally in private contacts with foreign colleagues here or when working abroad.

An attempt to survey in how far these communication contexts are covered in language programmes would tend to show that only the first of these is usually seen as the proper field of LSP. Here, it is true, much progress has been made for instance to realise that it is more than just a question of a list of specialised vocabulary items, and it is good to see that more or less extensive efforts are often being made to help students acquire the appropriate language skills. The second, “specialist-to-layman” context, however, has attracted much less interest and attention, and there is usually little systematic provision of appropriate language learning opportunities here. Even in the frequent “business negotiation” courses the (imagined) partner more often than not is another person also with a business background, not a customer or other layman to whom, say, the implications of an intended business transaction would have to be made comprehensible. As for the third, “everyday life” context, there is obviously a lot of overlap with general language learning, but it should not be overlooked that the learning needs for our clientele are much more strongly focused on academic and professional work contexts and intercultural specifics characteristic of these social contexts, rather than, say, on general tourist information. There is more specificity here than is apparent at first sight, and it is a pity that this area is often considered as sufficiently covered in general language courses and therefore not given the focus it deserves.

One can see that departments, units or centres responsible for the language teaching of a university do not (and perhaps cannot) provide language courses covering all of these contexts to the same degree of detail and intensity, nor would there probably be enough room for it all in the study course programmes of the students. However, it would be highly desirable if there was some clear notion of what can be done or what is intended, so as to show what the explicit profile of the language teaching programme was meant to be. This is by no means always the case, and it is not rare to find constellations where programme planning does not go much beyond the scope of an individual course, with a fairly random focus on any of these contexts.

What is underdeveloped, in my observation, is a sufficient awareness of the need for language programmes in Higher Education to be clearly university-

specific – that is, different from those in general adult education, both in content and delivery. If that was not the case, there would be no reason for such programmes to be offered at an institution of Higher Education, and not elsewhere. This specificity should be reflected in a content orientation towards the fields of study on offer at a particular university and in the resulting communication contexts as shown above. In addition, however, this specificity should also be reflected in the arrangements, implementation and organisation of such programmes. After all, learners in a university language programme are a special subgroup of all potential language learners, they come with a more than average level of general education and intelligence as evidenced by their university entry qualification, they have already learnt other languages before entering university (usually English and at least one other), they derive their motivation mainly from their field of study (and not from language learning), and they need to be very economical with their time. University-specific language programmes could and should therefore be characterised by steep learning curves, by cognitive support and recourse to previous language learning experience to enhance retention and memory, and by attractive innovative and creative (even experimental ...) learning/teaching approaches such as task-based learning, e-learning, blended learning, learning platforms, group projects, simulations, case studies, tandem arrangements, ICT-supported learning projects with partners from abroad etc., in other words approaches which do not just carry on with what learners have been accustomed to at school, but which make use of the extra opportunities a university context can offer, to enhance effectiveness but also, perhaps even more importantly, motivation.

Of course, the reality is often quite different. In Germany, at any rate, there is a marked gap between the research side in LSP, on the one hand, and language learning and teaching for students, on the other. The research side is carried out by university departments as evidenced in the activities and publications of academic societies such as those for applied linguistics (GAL)³, for research in foreign languages (DGFF)⁴ or periodicals such as the *International Journal of Specialised Communication*⁵, with strong international links to, for instance, AILA⁶, AELFE⁷, and to many other organisations specialising on particular skills, languages or subjects. The teaching side, on the other hand, is mainly carried out by university language centres or similar teaching units, with tenuous connections to and influence on research. Research in LSP tends to be pre-occupied with micro-analysis looking at facets of the nature of LSP in all kinds of contexts and for all kinds of

purposes, with academic and professional language use one point of interest among many others, but the macro-level of foreign language learning and teaching programmes for students of the diverse disciplines of a university as described above seems to be of little special interest or concern as a serious research question⁸.

Organisations such as the German association of language centres (AKS)⁹ with its UNICert[®] framework and model¹⁰, or CercleS¹¹, its European equivalent, are making great efforts in trying to redress the balance, to bridge this gap and to help the personnel actually doing the language teaching to develop their professional backgrounds and skills, to look beyond the confines of an individual course, and to influence the research agenda. But it is an uphill struggle. The problem is exacerbated by the current tendency in university language centres to (have to) shed permanent full-time staff in exchange for a growing number of part-time or freelance teachers on short-term contracts who do not have the time to become too closely involved, and where the decision-makers from outside the language centres often believe that anyone who is a native speaker of a language and/or an expert in a particular field would and should be able to teach the language concerned. We all know that this is a popular misconception, and it is a point of growing frustration for language teaching units to see that as a consequence they now need to keep investing an increasing amount of their time and energy into basic and extensive in-house teacher training rather than directly into teaching students, with the frustration resulting from the realisation that the efforts are often wasted on short-term effects owing to the frequent staff turnover generated by an administrative fear that teachers may sue for permanent employment if their services are used repeatedly and/or for any length of time. In such a context the question of being aware of or involved in LSP development or research is very remote and far on the horizon.

But we are moving here into a discussion of the external conditions of teaching and research, and although this does have an enormous influence on what can be done, it is a different story and not our central issue here. The focus of our contribution here has been more on the conceptual side of LSP in the special context of language learning and teaching in Higher Education, in Germany. We started off from a description of the nature of LSP, and then went on to consider which communication contexts our students might find themselves in and for which they would need to be prepared for their studies, their academic careers and/or their later

professional lives, what kind of teaching they should therefore be offered, which languages, content areas and perspectives are currently over- or underrepresented, and which problems in the field are perhaps particularly acute in my own country. No doubt what I have presented is a personal, perhaps one-sided view of the situation, and I would in fact be very happy if readers were able to say that things were rather different in their own cases, backgrounds and contexts. I do believe though that the general picture is not too far off the mark. The specific setting of language learning and teaching in Higher Education, in content as well as in delivery, has still to be discovered here as a genuine and important area worthy and in need of more research and development than at present, and more ways need to be found to connect these processes with the activities of those who do the actual language teaching of (and not about) LSP.

So there is still a lot to be done. But not to worry. The contributions of AELFE through its journal *Ibérica* over the past years have been greatly appreciated and would certainly have deserved more prominence here. 20 years may seem like a long time, but they are not much in the eye of eternity – or the snail-pace of educational progress –, so there is every reason to look forward to more, positive, interesting and useful developments in the future, in which I am confident AELFE and *Ibérica* will play an increasingly important role, perhaps in the course of time closing some of the gaps pinpointed above, and certainly generally raising the visibility of our field. May AELFE therefore continue its good works over the next 20 years to come, to become an even more prominent agent in the field of LSP, encouraging research, disseminating its results, and influencing and supporting appropriate classroom practice, for the benefit of all concerned.

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Prof (em) Dr **Bernd Voss** retired (in 2005) from Technische Universität Dresden as a Professor of English and (English) language teaching. He studied English and Romance Philology and worked as a teacher, lecturer, head of language centre and professor in various schools, colleges of education and universities in Germany (Paderborn, Bielefeld, Bayreuth, Neubrandenburg, Dresden) and the UK (Edinburgh, Strathclyde/Glasgow, Dundee). Main interests: teacher training, languages in Higher Education.

NOTES

¹ This is also true for the Higher Education sector, and it is well worth noticing that a publication such as the journal *International Higher Education* (IHE) is routinely published in English, Chinese, Russian, and Spanish, and not just in English only (for more detail see URL: www.bc.edu/cihe).

² This applies also to published course book material. A notable exception: Glyn Hughes et al. (2007). *Practical Classroom English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

³ “GAL” stands for *Gesellschaft für Angewandte Linguistik* (“German Society of Applied Linguistics”). For further details see URL: www.gal-ev.de

⁴ “DGFF” stands for *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Fremdsprachenforschung* (“German Society of Research in Foreign Languages”). For more information see URL: www.dgff.de

⁵ See URL: www.fachsprache.net

⁶ “AILA” stands for *Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée* (“International Association of Applied Linguistics”). For further details see URL: www.aila.info

⁷ “AELFE”, needless to say here, stands for *Asociación Europea de Lenguas para Fines Específicos* (“European Association of Languages for Special Purposes”). For more information see URL: www.aelfe.org

⁸ There are occasional studies on individual courses, but little on the arrangements and effect of complete programmes. By contrast, there is quite a range of studies e.g. on CLIL in schools.

⁹ “AKS” stands for *Arbeitskreis der Sprachenzentren, Sprachlehrinstitute und Fremdspracheninstitute* (“Association of Language Centres in Higher Education”). For further details see URL: www.aks-web.de

¹⁰ See URL: www.unicert-online.org

¹¹ “CercleS” stands for *Confédération Européenne des Centres de Langues de L’Enseignement Supérieur* (“European Confederation of Language Centres in Higher Education”). See URL: www.cercles.org

