

The specialized language acquisition in the light of a foreign language approach

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with the notion of *Languages for Specific Purposes* (LSP) or *Specialized Languages* within the terminological theory and from a very particular point of view, that is, from the perspective of its acquisition. In order to do so some points that can relate LSP acquisition to foreign language learning (FLL) will be discussed. These considerations will be made from a theoretical point of view as there is not empirical evidence available that could confirm or invalidate our claims.

2. LSP AND TERMINOLOGY

Scholars in the field of terminology have approached LSP from a number of perspectives such as the following ones (see, for example, Hoffmann, 1979; Rondeau, 1983 and Picht and Draskau, 1985):

- a) its linguistic and formal characterization
- b) its functioning in specialized texts and
- c) its communicative effects within a give scientific community, etc.)

However, there is one aspect that has been systematically neglected in these studies which is that of the LSP acquisition. Bearing in mind this, the main purpose here is to give some elements that could help to approach the study of LSP acquisition by taking a look at some aspects of foreign language learning.

By LSP we basically –although not exclusively– mean terminology (that is, lexis), taking for granted that LSP also include other components of the grammar of the language. The polysemy attached to the term ‘terminology’ is widely known in terminological theory. It is at least relevant to the following notions (Cabré 1996, 16):

- a) the discipline
- b) the practice
- c) the product that is generated by this practice

As a discipline, terminology is a subject which is concerned with specialized terms; as a practice it is the set of principles oriented toward term compilation; finally, as a product, it is the set of terms from a given subject field. For the purposes of this paper we will focus on the third meaning. Thus terminology is seen as a set of terms of a subject field that conveys specialized knowledge.

3. LSP AND SPECIALIZED KNOWLEDGE

The specialized knowledge is understood as the knowledge of any scientific and technical subject matter. The specialized knowledge is possessed by the individual we call the **expert**, being the **novice** the subject who is involved in the learning process. The novice's acquisition process starts from his general knowledge i.e. his knowledge of the world .

We assume that the task of LSP acquisition takes place in a setting of formal instruction wherein the object of learning relates to scientific and technical subject matters which, broadly speaking, are being taught at secondary schools and at centers of higher education. When the learner faces the task of LSP learning he is endowed, as it has just been pointed out, with a general knowledge. In a setting of explicit instruction the learner is confronted with the task of coping with such a knowledge that, apparently, but only apparently, has little to do with his general or everyday knowledge. For instance, given the domain of physics the learner is introduced to its basic principles that are conveyed through its conceptual structure. At the core of this structure is the *concept*, which is the element that carries the key meanings of the domain.

Thus the acquisition of terminology basically consists in the acquisition of concepts and all the knowledge that are behind them. The specialized knowledge is different from the general knowledge in that it requires different ways of approaching the reality. It is assumed that there is one sole reality yet different ways of approaching it. The way the expert approaches the knowledge differs from the way of the novice.

The specialized knowledge –as well as the general knowledge– is usually conveyed through linguistic means, although it can also be realized by nonlinguistic means. Thus there are several ways in which both types of knowledge are related one to another.

Beyond the discussion about the actual definition of LSP, on which scholars in the field do not agree, we would like here to propose that LSP can be characterized in regard to three dimensions:

- a) Cognitive
- b) Pragmatic and communicative
- c) Semantic

For the purposes of this paper it suffices to say that the teaching of LSP is related to the teaching of a specialized knowledge carried by its correspondig scientific and technical subject matter. The LSP teaching has to keep in mind that the linguistic possibilities allowed in the *Specialized languages* are definitively more restricted than those allowed in the general language.

4. LSP ACQUISITION AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Our theoretical approach to LSP acquisition starts by focusing on the main issues of foreign language learning (FLL), which will not be treated here. Instead, we will try to show in which ways LSP acquisition can be related to foreign language learning. There are a number of research questions that are pertinent to FLL as well as to LSP acquisition (taken from Ellis, 1994):

- a) What is learned by the *novice*?
- b) How does the learner acquire a specialized knowledge?

- c) What individual differences can be established in the process of LSP acquisition?
- d) What effects has instruction in the learning task?

Taking the above questions into consideration we come to the conclusion that both FLL and LSP acquisition have some points in common:

- The study of a linguistic code other than the native or, at least, other than that of everyday situations.
- The description and explanation of the learner's competence.
- The analysis of the transfer of a linguistic and conceptual code close to the learner: the first language in FLL and the general language in LSP acquisition
- The starting point consists in previous knowledge and ideas.
- Considering a setting of explicit instruction, a certain degree of awareness in the process of acquisition.
- The focus on certain grammatical aspects. With respect to FLL, the learner will pay particular attention to those grammatical aspects shared by his native language and the target language. With respect to LSP acquisition, these aspects will be conditioned by the inherent features of every specialized language.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to approach the study of LSP acquisition. In this respect, a number of elements related to FLL have been given in order to shed some light on the study of LSP acquisition and specialized knowledge. Taking into account the theoretical approach of this paper, all claims that we have made are to be empirically tested so there is still a lot of work to be done in this direction.

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