Working Smarter: Two Case Studies  
Using Foreign Language as a Tool and Subject Matter as Focus

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**ABSTRACT:** A recent trend in foreign language instruction makes use of a content-based approach, where a particular subject is taught in the target language. Students receive help in the language, but their main efforts are directed toward the mastery of a particular set of content. Advantages to this approach are (1) increased efficiency, i.e., instead of leaching or studying for two classes—a language class and one in the content area—one class is involved, and (2) increased motivation, because some area of content is taught, presumably with applicability in the life of the student.

Such an approach is not new, as it has been used in the advanced literature courses and as the model followed by the typical foreign student in a university setting. In the past, however, this approach has been reserved for only the most advanced students. This paper argues that such an approach can be undertaken much earlier in the language learning of most students, and that it can pay remarkable dividends by injecting a measure of reality into language courses. Two case studies demonstrate how a content-based approach can be used; one in a university setting and one in a military setting. In both cases, the increased challenge and motivation for students and teachers alike are apparent.

**Introduction**

A recent movement in foreign language instruction makes use of a study in a particular content area. Instead of studying the language per se, the student sets about to learn the material of a particular subject, and the target language becomes the vehicle for learning. Using as an example a high school student with a background in French, instead of taking a course in 3rd year French and a separate course in analytic geometry, the student would study analytic geometry in French in a single course (not a bad choice, since the field originated with the writings of the French mathematician René Descartes). Obviously, a certain basic fluency is required. The major advantages of this mode are efficiency (one course rather than two) and motivation (the student has an academic goal). The target
language becomes a tool for study, rather than an object of study.

In the recent book *Content-based Second Language Instruction* (Newbury House, 1989), Donna Brinton and her colleagues make a strong case that this mode of learning is gaining recognition in the language instruction community. They distinguish between three modes: (1) Theme based; (2) Sheltered; and (3) Adjunct. A theme-based course studies a particular subject matter in the foreign language. Language teachers have been following this practice for years in the teaching of literature classes, because the focus is upon the literature and the culture of the country, using the second language as the vehicle. The course may enroll native speakers or second language learners, and either will gain from the instruction.

The second approach, sheltered instruction, uses a course of deliberately simplified material to prepare second language learners to function with the vocabulary of the content area. Under this approach, native speakers will not be enrolled. An example might be the beginning linguistics course for international students taught by Stephen D. Krashen at the University of Southern California, preparing the students to function with appropriate vocabulary and usage for the regular graduate classes.

The final approach combines the two others, to provide a theme of theme-based course enrolling native and non-native speakers, but providing an additional class section where the non-native speaker is coached on the information necessary to succeed in the class.

All of these approaches require that the teacher have expertise in both the second language and the content area. Thus, the teaching of both content-based and second language courses offers a challenge to the teacher. Because students are expected to succeed in both content area and the second language, the course offers a particular challenge to the students. One indication of the difficulty faced by such students can be seen with international students whose native language is something other than English studying in the United States. These students typically must work exceptionally hard in the beginning to overcome the language barrier and then to master the content under study. Indicative of the diligence required is the large number of foreign students to be seen studying in university libraries during holidays and on weekends. One must work hard to succeed in this mode.

**Case Study 1**

*Background:* A course taught annually for the Department of Languages and Philosophy at Utah State University is entitled "Information Technologies in the French-speaking World" (L'informatique dans le monde francophone). The course is taught in French and makes use of authentic French video, microcomputer, and videodisc technologies. It draws upon the instructor’s experience in Paris, France and Quebec, Canada, making the technologies
themselves the course focus and the French language the vehicle for the instruction. Two years of college French instruction, or the equivalent, are required to enroll in the class. Learners are generally sophisticated second language learners, the majority having spent some time in-country, some as missionaries for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

The course was originally taught at Laval University, Quebec, Canada, in the summer of 1984. Returning to Utah State University, the course was proposed to faculty in the Department of Languages and Philosophy, first to be taught as an experimental course and later as a regular course offering each fall. Since the initial teaching quarter with two students in 1985, the course has averaged seven students enrolled. The course is taught on a volunteer basis, with the department covering the cost of software acquisition. The enterprise can best be viewed as a "labor of love" for the instructor, since no addition to salary is involved, and as an unusual course for students, since it is taught by someone from outside the French faculty.

The Course: Objectives for the course are as follows. At the completion of this course, students will be able to: (1) use appropriate terminology to discuss French information technologies; (2) Cite 4-6 current projects involving information technologies underway in the French speaking world, noting the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches taken; and (3) using appropriate software and equipment, demonstrate use of (a) at least three language instruction programs, (b) the French writing assistant program, Système D, and (c) videodisc authoring program, CDS-Genesis.

An unusual feature of the course for most students is the focus upon professional vocabulary and usage patterns. In some ways it is similar to a literature class, in that students read authentic materials and are exposed to authentic utterances in a variety of dialects through video (Altman, 1989). The focus is upon content, however, and aside from some testing of vocabulary on the three quizzes given, all questions tap the students' understanding of French technologies. Students are generally pleasantly surprised on the first quiz to find such a focus.

The course as presently taught uses a weekly cycle with three parts: (1) background in class, covering the topic and required assignments (Monday); (2) video use in class, usually with a follow-up out-of-class assignment (Wednesday); and (3) work with computers in the lab (Friday). Thus, for example, in week 4, the class material covers word processing, the vocabulary, and concepts on Monday. Then, on Wednesday, the class views portions of a videotape "Bureautique" (from PICS), and on Friday, they work with the Writing Assistant program "Système D" (Noblitt, Sola and Pet; Heinle and Heinle, 1988).

Results: Student course evaluations have been used each of the course's five years to provide formative feedback. The most recent class, Fall 1989, had eight students enrolled: six undergraduates, one graduate student, and one
faculty member from the Economics Department. From questionnaires completed by the six undergraduates, the following questions were answered:
- "This course provided a valuable learning experience." (four Strongly Agree, two Agree)
- "Exams are representative (of) assignments, materials, and lectures of the course." (two Strongly Agree, four Agree)

This question is significant, as it may indicate some crossover between the language oriented objectives and the content base as subject matter, and possibly some confusion in the students' minds.

Student comments are indicative of opinions of these undergraduates:
- "The class offers a valuable learning experience about the French-speaking World and how they are trying to compete with the rest of the world. It adds a lot of insight with valuable and valid input from knowledgeable sources." (adding on) "It is difficult to stay current with everything that is going on and at times I felt some material may have been outdated."
- "I enjoyed being able to use French programs in the lab. I was impressed with Système D and the videotape about language learning at the Air Force Academy. The videos, although difficult to understand, were a good exposure to hearing the language spoken. The hands-on experience (in the computer lab) was an important aspect of the class."
- "This information (about information technologies) was very helpful to me as I have not worked much with computers before. Things that were introduced to me which were new, such as interactive videodisc, were very interesting. I also enjoyed the fact that it (the class) wasn't totally centered on France."
- "I thought it (the course) was fairly difficult but I enjoyed that because it was more of a challenge than my other French courses."

In Conclusion: The course LFR 514, "Information Technologies in the French Speaking World", is unique on our campus in that it is taught in French by a person from outside the foreign language department (i.e., Instructional Technology in the College of Education) and has a content rather than a language focus. The course uses a variety of media to try to recreate the progress made by Francophone countries in their drive to use these technologies effectively. Although enrollment in the class is small (generally 7-8 students per year) results from students of this course are enthusiastic, providing a new world view of technology applications. Students seem to take well to the challenge of studying a content-based class using the French language as a tool.

Case Study 2
Background: The 141st Military Intelligence Battalion (Linguist), like its parent unit, the 300th Military Intelligence Brigade (Linguist), has a unique mission of providing linguist support to U.S. Army units and other service
branches to include the U.S. Government. Members of the 141st MI Bn have a unique assignment of serving not only as linguists, but to perform as soldiers also in interrogation, counter-intelligence, intelligence analysis, and voice intercept.

Recently, the 141st MI Bn received a training affiliation with the 500th Military Intelligence Brigade headquartered in Japan. Through this affiliation the 141st has been tasked to train more deeply in its military skills, at the same time maintaining its proficiency in the language. Until that time, the 141st MI Bn had placed more emphasis on language training. The new affiliation now left the question of how to concentrate on military skills and not neglect language training.

The Language Development Program: For the past five to six years, the linguist unit has been attempting to implement a more effective means of documenting language training, so it may more closely correlate to the method used in military skills training, namely "Task, Condition, and Standard" (or behavioral skills). Since the inception of the linguist unit, language training and military skills training were most often performed separately from each other. Language training dealt mainly with common terminology. Military vocabulary and usage was studied only to accommodate existing training requirements.

In 1989 an effort was undertaken to develop and implement a stand-alone language program which would integrate language training and military skills training. This program was entitled the Language Development Program (LDP). Content experts for each of the 32 languages in the brigade were gathered from within the 300th MI Bde over a period of three months to develop a language training documentation system which would encompass behavioral skills. When the program reached the editors in the form of a sparsely filled three-inch ring binder, it was determined that in no way could this program ever run completely from what was contained in this "stand-alone" binder. It was seen, though, as a resource to a much more ambitious language development program.

Content-based Language Instruction: After the final version of the Language Development (Resource) binder was completed, it was presented to each of the line units by the battalion Language Support Officers in the two sister battalions. In the 141st MI Bn this was done in conjunction with the presentation of a new thrust in language training, i.e. content-based language instruction. Up to the time of this program being implemented, a weekend drill consisted of 8 hours of language training: four hours of military skills training on Saturday, and four hours of company briefings on Sunday.

The new program was designed to run with eight hours on Saturday devoted to military skills training performed in language. During this training, the warrant officer of the section, the language training technician, identifies weaknesses in the language. These weaknesses may be many or they may be few. The next day, four hours are devoted specifically to language training.
During these four hour sections, members are trained on the areas of weakness, using the LDP binder as a resource. The section has the flexibility of using this binder as they wish. For example, the trainers may want to refer to a certain page in a text where examples or lessons are given. If the trainers have access to a specific videotape or videodisc which deals with a certain task, they may refer to it also. If there are omissions to the LDP binder, they simply send a change recommendation up through channels to the 300th MI Bde Language Support Section so the changes may be implemented brigade wide. Sections are encouraged to try out new ideas to make language training more effective and more challenging. A main reason for members leaving the linguist unit is that they are not challenged. The majority of those joining the unit do so for the language training opportunities. If this training is not provided to them, they eventually lose interest and leave the unit.

There are still many flaws in the new program, but it has been met with great enthusiasm at all levels. One Spanish section in the battalion has implemented a new program where they carry a 2” x 2” card on their sleeve button with the number "5" printed on it. Each time they are caught speaking a word of English to another Spanish linguist, they must contribute a nickel to a section fund. They will eventually buy more language material with this fund (the battalion Language Support Officer hopes they never make enough money to buy anything!).

It is hoped that this program will cause a greater esprit de corps within the sections as they explore new territories in language study. A way in which the battalion staff has attempted to encourage this spirit is by sending sections on active duty training together as a section. In the past, the battalion has announced a training opportunity to the entire battalion and has sent all those who volunteered. Now, the battalion assigns sections for active duty training and these sections deploy and train together. This pattern of training will aid in language training when these sections return home, because they all have a view of the section’s needs for language training. This change represents a paramount event, since it had never been done until the Korean section was recently deployed together to an assignment in Korea.

The Language Development Program is regarded as an answer to many of the training problems in the 300th MI Bde structure. The 141st has led out in implementing this program and is already experiencing a great change in attitude in language training. In the near future the 300th MI Bde expects to achieve a new level of language proficiency and will become an even greater asset to the U.S. Army.
References


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