

Teaching Foreign Languages in Belgium

Dans le cadre d'un séjour ERASMUS à Florence, Murielle Veraghen, maître-assistante à la Haute Ecole Charlemagne, a préparé ce résumé de l'enseignement des langues en Belgique (plus particulièrement en Communauté française) à l'intention des étudiants italiens.

When do young Belgians start learning a foreign language?

Compulsory lessons in a foreign language used to start at the beginning of secondary school, with students aged between 11/12/or 13 years except for the region of Brussels capital where children had to start the second language (Dutch or French) at primary school or in the German-speaking part where some lessons are given in French right from the start.

A decade ago, with the aim of promoting bilingualism, a foreign language was introduced all over Belgium at the end of primary school, at the age of 10/11.

English is the language most often chosen by the students. It used to be followed by Dutch but nowadays Spanish is getting a bigger and bigger audience. German, on the contrary, is considered by most teenagers to be "too" difficult and is less and less chosen.

And How?

There are many methods of teaching languages. Some have had their heyday and have fallen into relative obscurity; others are widely used now; still others have a small following, but contribute insights that may be absorbed into the generally accepted mix.

The methods

1) THE GRAMMAR TRANSLATION METHOD [analytical]

The grammar translation method instructs students in grammar, and provides vocabulary with direct translations to memorize. It was the predominant method in Europe in the 19th century and that's how people who are now 70 years old (your grandparents 's generation) were taught; it was directly inspired by the teaching of Latin (a dead language) This method was quite ineffective as far as the speaking and oral understanding skills were concerned.

2) THE DIRECT METHOD, also called natural method [analogical]

This method that refrains from using the learners' native language and just uses the target language, it operates on the idea that second language learning must be an imitation of first language learning. A child never relies on another language to learn its first language, and thus the mother tongue is not necessary to learn a foreign language. A child can speak before he can write. According to this method, printed language and text must be kept away as long as possible. Learning of writing and spelling should be delayed, and grammar and translation should also be avoided because this would involve getting back to the learner's mother tongue. This method aimed at correct pronunciation and fluency. It advocates teaching of oral skills at the expense of every traditional aim of language teaching.

3) THE AUDIO-LINGUAL METHOD, also called structuro-global, audio-visual method [analogical].

[The audio-lingual method was used by the United States Army for "crash" instruction in foreign languages during World War II.]

In the 70ies, inspired by the direct method, the audio-lingual method had students listen to tapes while they were viewing slides of language models acting and dialoguing in situations. Students were supposed to repeat sentences without any written reference and they practice a variety of drills. The target language was used at all times and no grammar explanations were given. There was a interval of approximately 6 weeks between the listening and repeating of linguistic pattern in situations and the reading and writing of those dialogues.

This method was quite successful for students whose listening memory was good but those who had a more visual memory and needed to see the words and sentences spelled, or those with a kinaesthetic memory who needed to write the words or sentences to remember them were completely helpless.

Another drawback of this method is that if students could speak very quickly and express themselves in the stereotyped situations of the dialogues, as the student's choice of what to say was not flexible, they had difficulties transferring their skills in other situations.

4) THE COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is an approach to the teaching of languages that emphasizes interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning a language. The emphasis is on the message ! If you understand what's relevant to your needs in what is said in the foreign language [e.g.: the departure or arrival time of your train at the station] and if the person you're speaking to gets your message, all is well, even if your grammar is poor and your spelling inaccurate; the stress is on oral communication in adequacy to your needs. Teaching grammar was strongly inadvisable or even forbidden.

This method was inspired by language immersion and it put students in a situation where they had to use a foreign language, whether or not they know it. This created fluency, but not accuracy of usage. It was the old dream of using language immersion to get to bilingualism, except that the immersion was reduced to 4 (or sometimes 2) period of fifty minutes per week!

5) BILINGUAL EDUCATION, also called 'immersion school'

In the 1990s some "elite" reputed school started bilingual schooling schemes. Pupils have to enter the system at nursery school (at the age of 4 or 5) where they have half the activities given by "English-speaking" natives; this system continues in primary and secondary school where subjects other than languages are taught in a foreign language (the foreign language is no longer an aim in itself; it's just a tool of communication). Although there is no real entrance exam, this system is aimed at the most gifted students and relies on a deep involvement of the parents. It's increasingly developing.

6) TODAY : TEACHING / LEARNING BY COMPETENCE

What do we call a « competence » ?

The ability to put together and use a coherent set of:

- ↳ Knowledge
- ↳ Know how
- ↳ Attitude

to accomplish/perform a certain number of tasks.

Indicators of the TASKS [adapted from J. Beckers (ULg)]

1. The given tasks **should be put into context** (contextualisation of the task : the oral communication is always put into an authentic situation)
2. They **should be finalized** (the communication task has got an aim : to negotiate, to buy, to convince ... ; it isn't talking for talking or to show the teacher you can talk)
3. They **should be open** (the students choose themselves the information they want to convey, the strategies and idioms they want to use and they structure themselves their language).
4. They **should be original** (new, not a repetition of an existing pattern)
5. They **should be integrative / complex**
6. Besides they **should contain means to help diagnosing the student's difficulties** and help him out.

This teaching/learning combines the integration of 4 skills : oral skill (with or without interaction), listening skill, reading skill and writing skill the importance given to each of them being related to the study option chosen by the students.

The teaching of grammar is restricted to making it possible to all the students to correct their expression, to understand the remarks which are addressed to them and to understand the texts which they read.

The attention is centred more on the learner (the student) than on the teacher; the student is encouraged to play an active part in his learning; he becomes an actor of his learning.

7) DIFFERENTIATED PEDAGOGY AND SELF LEARNING

The differentiated teaching takes into account the disparities and the heterogeneity of learners. Based on the concept that there are different profiles of learners and different ways of learning; the teacher uses a wide range of varied tools (such as : co-operation among peers, the ex-cathedra explanation, the individual approach with oral instructions, written instructions, instructions through pictograms, pictures, ...) in order to enable the learner to identify which type of approach suits him the best and which tool(s) he could pick for a most effective learning. This method leads the learner towards a progressive autonomy. The attention is centred more on the learner (the student) than on the teacher; the student is encouraged to play an active part in his learning; he becomes an actor of his learning. Successful learn-

ing is no longer due to the teaching quality. The role of the teacher is no longer to “feed” the students but to provide the different dishes among which the learners can pick (books, authentic folders, newspapers, movies, software, e-learning...), he becomes a resource-person. From teacher-centred to learner-centred.

Murielle Veraghen

*THE TEACHER IS NOT ANY MORE
THE SAGE ON THE STAGE
BUT A GUIDE ON THE SIDE*

Nikos KASANTZAKIS

*EXPERIENCE IS NOT WHAT HAPPENS TO A MAN,
IT IS WHAT A MAN DOES WITH WHAT HAPPENS TO HIM*

Aldous HUXLEY

*Talk to me and I will forget,
Teach me and I will remember,
Involve me and I will learn...*