

CHAPTER 20

Looking Ahead in Language for Specific Purposes

Jonathan Trace

University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa

1 Introduction

We’ve explored what Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) is and how it is different from English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and other kinds of language learning, settling on the immediate notion that the definition of purpose cannot be defined as simply present or not, but is instead spread out along a continuum. Beyond the simple rationality of this idea, it becomes even more apparent after looking through the proposals in this volume described by actual teachers designing and working through the difficulties of creating an LSP course. Even something as well defined as Language for Business Purposes, which was the topic of eight individual studies, shows an enormous degree of actual variation in terms of context, outcomes, learner proficiency, and, importantly, purpose. No wonder there remains debate about what exactly “specific purpose” means.

Rather than looking too long at these differences and trying to otherwise create another definition of LSP based off of what it isn't, a better use of our resources might be to look instead at the commonalities we can find across different contexts. What are the shared features, considerations, and even limitations that make up a typical, or not so typical, LSP course? As teachers and developers, how can we use this information to help us in the planning and development of our own courses? The answers to these questions may not bring us any closer to some all-encompassing definition of LSP, but they can shed light on what actually happens in the course of developing LSP, and that seems a much more practical outcome. Knowing about the different twists and turns that can happen during the development of an LSP course can be useful for those teachers facing the same challenge. To put it simply, working to establish common ground helps the field move forward together, rather than everyone having to forge new paths on their own.

2 How Do Different LSP Contexts Align?

Looking at the proposals presented here, four common themes seems to stand out as being consistent and important in the development and implementation of LSP. In no particular order, these are: (a) learner proficiency; (b) culture as content; (c) the target community; and (d) existing information. While these concepts will probably sound familiar to most language teachers in some form or another, they take on a slightly different meaning when we consider them in relation to the development and implementation of LSP.

2.1 Learner Proficiency

Proficiency over the years has taken on several meanings in the field of language education, from descriptions of competence or performance (see Brown, Malmkjær, & Williams, 1996; Bachman 1990; Chomsky, 1965), to being used synonymously with notions of fluency (see Chambers, 1997; Crystal, 1987), both in relation to discrete skills (e.g., reading or speaking) and across multiple skills. Often, proficiency is the subject of large-scale attempts at language learning standardization through the establishment of scales such as the American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 2010) proficiency guidelines in the U.S. or the Common European Framework (CEF, Verhelst, van Avermaet, Takala, Figueras, & North, 2009) in other parts of the world. In LSP, however, we commonly approach proficiency from a more local perspective in terms of linguistic competence on its own or in relation to content-area knowledge or even cultural knowledge.

As noted, because of the desire to describe proficiency as something measurable and categorical, it is usually discussed in the area of language assessment, though it also has a very practical place in curriculum development as well. When conducting an effective needs analysis, one of the first questions we must ask is about the language profile of our learners. What can they do with the language already, and what will they be able to do with the language when they finish the program? Already we're defining proficiency a bit differently than what is stated in standardized models such as ACTFL or the CEF (i.e., general language proficiency), and instead looking at proficiency in terms of being something that is deeply contextualized within the bounds of the classroom or the program (i.e., classroom- or outcomes-based assessment, see Norris, 2006; Brindley, 2001). In other words, from a curriculum development standpoint, we're looking at language ability in relation to individual improvement in the stated outcomes or goals

of a particular class, and not how well someone uses a language in general (for more on the differences between standardized and classroom assessment see Brown, 2005 and Popham, 2005).

By now you may be wondering what exactly this has to do with LSP specifically, as so far the discussion applies equally to all effective language instruction. To address that point, we should first consider that, in the context of LSP, we would hope that a definition of proficiency is situated in respect to the outcomes of the course. After all, the very reason we are engaging in LSP development is to delineate language ability in terms of a particular target language use or purpose, and indeed one of the goals we should set for our needs analysis is to determine the specific language abilities our learners need to acquire. In contrast, consider that many language for general purposes programs set their outcomes according to ACTFL proficiency guidelines for the very reason that actual target language uses are often hard to determine in these contexts.

In addition to the above, and perhaps more importantly for our purposes as LSP developers, is that many of the LSP contexts described in the proposals here were working with learners with a very limited range of actual language ability, and in the majority of cases the potential students were raw beginners. This is in part a product of the context, as most university foreign language (FL) programs in the U.S. have language requirements that do not extend beyond the equivalent of two years of instruction. Even in terms of general proficiency gains, the range of ability for most university FL learners will be quite limited outside of the minority that continue on to study language. This becomes even more evident for less commonly taught languages (LCTL). By comparison, ESP learners regularly come into the university level having

taken a wealth of general purpose English classes already. While this isn't true of all LSP university contexts, such as those Language for Business Purposes cases that require higher level learners because of the stakes involved (e.g., Chapters 6-9), there appears to be a clear connection between most LSP courses in university contexts and a low expected level of proficiency from the learner.

The range becomes even more restricted in those cases where the learners are professionals in the field (e.g., Chapters 2 and 3). Based on these cases, the learners almost always have a limited knowledge of the target language, and on top of this the LSP developer must also take into account logistical factors such as time constraints (e.g., learner schedules, limited contact hours of instruction). In these cases, not only is the starting proficiency low, but the achieved gains are also likely to be less than university learners, and this in turn has an effect on the potential design of the LSP course.

Creating an LSP course with low-level learners in mind means that the question of balancing language and content-area knowledge becomes a critical consideration, and it places some very real restrictions on just what the ultimate purpose of the course will be. If learners have zero language ability in the target language prior to the course, then we might wonder about the degree to which they are actually going to acquire enough knowledge to function in the target language at all. While it's possible we could narrow the instruction down to only a few very specific tasks or functions, this raises questions of the worth of the course and fairness towards the learners. If we're so restricted in what we teach, are we also denying learners the ability to learn beyond the scope of the course (Tollefson, 1991). For example, Sung (Chapter 19)

describes learners of Korean for hotel workers as having two primary language functions—checking in/out guests and providing directions—and while he expands the curriculum to include more than just these two tasks, if he were to reduce his curriculum to only teaching these, we would wonder about the validity of such a course. In this situation, if learners are presented with more difficult or even comparable tasks that are outside the scope of their L2 knowledge they may feel disenfranchised, either in the sense of feeling that their language learning experience was a waste of time, or that they were not even given the freedom during the course to expand their knowledge in a direction of their own choosing. While these are perhaps extreme reactions, they are not beyond the realm of possibility when language instruction is too far reduced.

The other alternatives to managing lower proficiency learners, however, would require either devoting part of the lesson to more foundational language instruction, or taking a more content-area driven approach. With the former, we again encounter problems with the question of how much foundation is enough. Do learners need to learn explicit grammar? Probably not, when chunks and set-phrases will work, but without any attention to structures how much language are they really learning? In the case of languages with non-Roman alphabets (e.g., Chinese or Russian), do learners need to learn how to read/write in the L2? The answer depends on a variety of factors, but as we saw in some of the studies here, some teachers did not see much reason to devote a large amount of time to learning different writing systems. If the orthography is not taught, however, the medium of instruction and materials is either limited to speaking and listening alone, or must rely on transliteration. Other questions of a similar nature abound, and as developers we need to keep these things in mind as we move forward with identifying our specific purpose.

The remaining alternative is to shift the balance away from linguistic instruction and towards content-area instruction, as this can be carried out in either the L1 or the L2. When we talk about content-area knowledge, however, this can mean two different but related things: (a) actual knowledge of the skills and tasks related to a specific purpose (e.g., engineering, working in a restaurant) or (b) cultural knowledge related to the target language or context (e.g. history, customs, pragmatics). The former is probably beyond the scope of most low-level university LSP courses and more applicable to advanced courses alone (e.g., English for Academic Purposes or Language for Business Purposes). The alternative, culture-based knowledge, however, might be a suitable option for LSP developers working with low-level learners, and indeed several authors here propose this very idea.

2.2 Culture and Content

For most LSP contexts, the culture of the community seems almost as important to learn as the linguistic content itself. Learning a foreign language for any purpose is about more than simply acquiring grammatical structures, vocabulary, or fluency, but rather a part of what makes it valuable is the cultural affordances that it provides. Knowing a language has long been understood as a way of opening the door for learners to understand, acknowledge, and negotiate other ways of thinking and viewing the world (see Byram, 2008; Kramsch, 2002). Certainly there are benefits for learning about the culture through the language, such as in learning pragmatics or examining concepts that only exist within a particular language (e.g., *gimu* in Japanese or *schadenfreude* in German), but cultural instruction in the language classroom is often an area where the L1 can be used to support and motivate L2 learning (Schweers, 1999;

Cook, 2001; Brooks, 1968). In LSP contexts, particularly where the level of the learner is low, culture can be an excellent resource both for accommodating the needs of the curriculum in terms of balancing linguistic and content-area knowledge, as well as for the learners who we can reasonably expect will be someday participating directly within an L2 community.

For several of the authors here, culture is an integral part of their proposed curriculum, represented in their outcomes, materials, teaching, and assessment practices. The link between culture and language is inseparable for many authors, especially when paired with a specific purpose. More so than language for general purposes, especially at advanced levels that are devoted to language and literature, LSP is about language in use within specific domains that are situated within a target language community. Though culture was already mentioned as a viable tool for teaching in beginner level classes, it is just as important with more proficient learners as well, and we have examples of this in the chapters on Business Language. Knowing how to function in a workplace in China, for example, is very different than in the U.S., and these differences certainly expand beyond just linguistic in nature. It the culture of the environment that can create the most difficulty for foreign workers, and so gaining a familiarity with the culture is essential if learners are going to be able to succeed.

Before moving on to look further at the importance of the context and the community in LSP, Kawaguchi (Chapter 10) raises an important aspect of culture instruction that might be easily overlooked in the process of planning and designing an LSP course. As one of the authors with specific student learning outcomes devoted to cultural learning, Kawaguchi remarks that in order to see whether or not these outcomes are being met, assessments will need to be included

that specifically target cultural learning, which is easier said than done. While we can imagine the many different ways we might measure a learner's skill in speaking or writing, or their ability to complete different tasks in the L2, assessing cultural knowledge is not quite as straightforward. In his proposal on Korean for Hospitality Services, Sung (Chapter 19) attempts to address this same question by proposing that students write essays on a topic in Korean culture to assess the degree to which they have achieved knowledge of culture. While this is certainly one option, culture in LSP contexts tends to be less about acquiring knowledge and more about familiarity, sensitivity, and, in many cases, knowing how to negotiate between cultures when there are differences present.

One potential solution to this may be to take a more task-based approach to culture, and create assessments that work from the specific target language uses and tasks that learners are likely to encounter (see Bachman & Palmer, 2010, 1996) that can incorporate some form of cultural component in the rating system. As an example, role-plays have been found to be a very useful and reliable approach to assessing pragmatic competence (Brown & Ahn, 2011), and it would be a relatively simple task to include within a scoring rubric a category such as cultural sensitivity or appropriateness that could account for the degree to which learners conformed or adapted to cultural conventions. Such assessments are popular in task-based contexts and certainly apropos in an LSP course where learners are expected to demonstrate their ability through performance. With more advanced level learners, the same kinds of criteria could be included in more difficult tasks (e.g., presentations, writing samples) just as easily. For a more detailed account on assessing LSP in general, refer to Douglas (2000).

2.3 The Target Community

Another major theme that affects the design of most LSP programs is the role of the target community. As we saw with culture and content, LSP courses are not taught in isolation, but rather in direct response to a specific and identified context. How this context is defined can have a significant effect on the entire structure of the course. We can divide LSP contexts into two categories: *local contexts* and *global contexts*. Local contexts are those where the L2 is being used as a FL within a targeted community of L1 speakers of the language. For example, teaching L2 learners of Italian to work as tour guides for Italian visitors to the United States. The FL is not the majority language of the larger context, but is used to address the needs of a minority community. Other examples of this can be found in several of the Language for Healthcare and Hospitality studies within this volume. Alternatively, global contexts are those where the L2 is learned primarily as a second language used to communicate or work within the larger community. Many Language for Business Purposes courses are examples of this, where learners are studying a language like Chinese or French to be used in Chinese or French contexts. Many ESP courses also fall under this category, as learners are either learning English to function in an English-speaking country or to use as a *lingua franca* in international contexts.

Based on examples of both of these types of contexts, we can observe their effect on the shape of LSP development. In the case of LSP studies pertaining to local contexts, almost always the starting proficiency of the learners is low, but the stakes tend to be low as well. In many of these contexts, the main purpose in using the language is to assist and facilitate communication, and otherwise prevent breakdowns from occurring. In other words, it's a support system, but usually not the only means of communication. Even in healthcare settings, where situations

could be considered life threatening, language is still used primarily as a way of comforting patients, showing respect and sensitivity to their culture, and perhaps expediting communication. There are certainly times when a lack of ability to communicate can have real consequences, but given the scope of the LSP courses here, those situations do not appear to be the primary intended purpose.

For global contexts, however, the stakes are often much higher and likewise the required proficiency is also higher. In business contexts, the ability to function in the second language could be the difference between getting promoted and getting fired. The way in which people use their language to deal with clients, write reports, negotiate contracts, and a variety of other high-stakes tasks can have a tangible effect on not only their individual success, but also the success of the company. The same can be said for many types of ESP, such as English for Academic purposes, where academic success or future employability are at stake.

Differences in context also have a direct effect on other aspects of the curriculum, such as the kinds of information gathered in the needs analysis steps, the availability of materials, and the logistical structure of the classes (e.g., university classes vs. drop-in night classes). Most of these will be revealed through the needs analysis itself, but as curriculum developers and teachers, thinking about how the context and community might affect the potential consequences or stakes involved for our learners is a consideration that should be examined early and not taken lightly.

2.4 Access to Information

Going back to one of the original questions about LSP and the balance between content-area knowledge and linguistic content, one issue that seems conveniently lost in this discussion is about the degree to which access to content-area information is even available. Compared to ESP, most areas of LSP are considerably under-developed, and outside of the more common areas such as Language for Business or Medical Purposes, materials and existing information are often all but absent. For many LSP developers—particularly those addressing needs related to local contexts or LCTLs—access to both instructional materials and content-area expertise can be a real concern. It becomes less of question of how to balance language and content, and more about whether it is even possible to do so in the first place.

Materials for many LSP contexts are difficult to locate that address both language and content. As is often the case, authentic materials may be content-rich, but the language barrier may be impassable, especially when we take into account the high likelihood that our learners will be coming into the classroom as beginners in the L2. Even those materials that do have a language focus in mind are usually aimed at more proficient L2 learners, as several authors here have pointed out. In these cases, designing or adapting materials may be the only alternative, as observed in the majority of studies presented here. When we consider that none of the authors in this volume are experts in their target content-areas, locating, developing, and authenticating materials is not always a task that is easily accomplished.

So what is to be done in regards to choosing or designing materials for LSP? While there is no simple answer, through looking at the proposals presented here we can point to several possible alternatives that curriculum developers and teachers might pursue. As needs analysis

should already be a part of the development process, one useful way of gaining access to experts and possible sources of information that some authors suggested was to go out and make connections with people in the target context. Though many found this to be a challenging task, especially when the target context was not available locally, there are many ways of networking via email or other means of online communication (e.g., *Skype*), or through questionnaires or talking to former students, coworkers, or colleagues. This is not only good practice for need analysis, but is also a way to get a foot in the door for seeking out advice later in the development process.

Another helpful tactic used by some authors was to look at similar LSP courses offered either locally or within other universities. Even when the language or the purpose does not match exactly, this kind of design by analogy tactic can be a great way to take what others have done and use it as an advantage (hence the creation of this book of LSP proposals). This may not work in every case, such as when the purpose is narrow or unique and finding a comparable course may not yet exist (e.g., Russian for law enforcement), but similarities can always be drawn at some level between even very different types of courses that can be useful for our own purposes. Regardless, materials and existing information can be hard to reconcile for many curriculum designers who are often already working with limited resources, however, being aware of the problem going into the process can help us keep an eye out for inlets to possible information and contacts.

3 Conclusion

Within this volume we've so far looked at the definitions and claims behind LSP, examined specific proposals for a variety of perspectives, and identified some of the important themes within LSP development. It's worthwhile to take a moment to reflect on what this all actually means for us as teachers and designers of LSP curriculum. For a long time FL learning has been about the three goals espoused by Norris (2006), of language skills, cultural knowledge, and the appreciation of the differences both afford in comparison to our own backgrounds and experiences. LSP, however, is an opportunity to put this into practice starting from a position of cultural sensitivity and language use. Instead of working through how language is acquired from a more theoretical view, or designing curriculum to fit within the bounds of a semester or program, we're putting the uses and the consequences (i.e., the outcomes) of instruction first¹. LSP is a very grounded perspective of language that doesn't just look at what we can do, but what we should do as teachers.

Ultimately, the goal of this project is to provide a unique and accessible resource for language teachers interested in LSP, and reinforce the importance of creating curriculum in a systematic way that is driven by the various needs of the program. Through this we hope to provide a template for others to follow, utilize, and integrate into their own contexts and purposes. We believe this can be beneficial for experienced LSP developers as well. Even an established course is never truly finished. One of the challenges of any form of curriculum development, and LSP in particular, is that with so many moving parts and so many variables that change—not only from context to context, but over time as well—is that the development

¹ Much like the work of Bachman and Palmer (2010) in second language assessment and validation, which starts from the perspective of potential consequences and target language uses.

process must respond in kind. The needs of the learners will shift, the community will grow, the methods will evolve, and the success or failure of the program will require more than a one and done mentality. We want to make available different perspectives, different limitations and challenges, and alternative approaches to LSP that even experienced developers can turn to when thinking about the next iteration or evolution of their program.

As LSP moves forward, there remain several challenges and new areas for teachers and researchers to explore. While I've presented issues particular to this set of proposals, there still remain questions about the level of specificity in LSP, the methods and focus of instruction, and the role of power and critical pedagogy (see Chapter 1 for more on this). As this book focuses on the beginning stages of development for LSP courses in university and professional settings, these overarching issues are beyond the scope of what we can yet address. Regardless, they remain challenges and questions that the LSP community needs to take up as the field grows. As one example, Northcott (2013) provides us with a short overview of possible future directions in terms of methods and instruction within LSP, such as the increased use of task-based or problem-based approaches and the growing availability and accessibility of technology in LSP (e.g., corpus linguistics). That said, power, values, and critical pedagogy in LSP remains relatively uninvestigated.

There is one last recurring theme that was found throughout the studies presented here that was not included in the above list. Many of the authors expressed their hope that through LSP they could encourage and inspire their students to continue learning language. Through a focus on needs and uses, LSP can act as a great motivator for learners who might otherwise feel

that learning a language is nothing more than a requirement to be fulfilled and forgotten. We should never forget that language has value, and as teachers we want to be able to instill this notion within our learners. We are only able to accomplish this when we work towards creating environments that can provide our learners with the affordances to embrace language as their own.