Language training for European trade unionists – a guide

The Concept

Within the enlarging European Union, the purpose of trade union education varies from country to country. This in turn depends on a number of factors, including the historical context of trade unionism and the subsequent scope of influence of the movement within a particular member state. In addition, the purpose is also affected by the extent of involvement of the state in the process through funding and legislation. Workers within the EU therefore enjoy differing degrees of access to trade union education; in certain countries, all employees are entitled to paid time-off to pursue courses, in others this is restricted to elected representatives.

There is increasingly widespread acceptance of the effectiveness of a communicative approach.

In attempting to define 'best practice' at a European level, it is essential to take account of these diverse traditions in trade union education. Similarly, in language teaching, there are differences, but there is increasingly widespread acceptance of the effectiveness of a communicative approach based on a competence and task-based syllabus. It is within this framework that we suggest possible convergences between trade union education and language training, following a consideration of what at first appear to be divergent principles.

Ideological or pragmatic?

In certain countries, trade union education is clearly seen as having an ideological purpose. Through education, the trade unionist will have a clearer vision of the world and its social constructs, and this knowledge will help the learner decide how s/he can contribute to
Language training for European trade unionists – a guide

positive changes. This education could also be said to have a liberal purpose, since it leads to a better quality of life for the individual trade unionist 1.

Elsewhere, the purpose of trade union education is conceived in more pragmatic terms. Skills-based training leads to a more competent individual who will carry out trade union duties more effectively.

The competence-based language syllabus obviously reflects this pragmatic view of the purpose of trade union education. However, according to the proportional model adopted in the Curricula Guidelines, as the level of language learning increases, so does the knowledge base and communicative function. Learning a language also improves the quality of the individual's life at home and abroad, in allowing for more meaningful exchanges and contact with speakers of the target language. Thus, if learning a language is viewed as a continuum, it can be said to embrace both the ideological and pragmatic purposes of trade union education.

Tutor-directed or learner-centred learning?

Trade union education in the European Union uses both approaches, with some organisations favouring one approach, while others adopt a combination. Communicative methodology in language training on the surface seems to require a learner-centred approach. In practice, adults learning a foreign language initially may need to learn how to learn. They will require unobtrusive support from the tutor as they gradually develop as more autonomous learners. Tasks set will require the learner to be increasingly self-reliant. Such tasks therefore need to be carefully structured, and the tutor must give clear directions for the learners to follow. Learners should be involved in as many decisions about the learning process as possible in order to increase their self-reliance.

Learner-centred or group-centred learning?

Trade union education usually takes place within a group, whether this be tutor-directed or learner-centred. A collective approach to learning is appropriate to trade unionists, with the establishment of a 'learning community'. Autonomous learning need not mean isolated learning. A group-centred approach would involve activities which depend upon team-building and peer-support, communication and cooperation, taking and sharing responsibility for learning, confidence-building, effective feedback mechanisms, authentic interaction, negotiation and democratic decision-making.

1 Miller & Stirling, "Evaluating Trade Union Education", in Industrial Tutor Vol. 5, No.5, 1992
The tutor should aim to create liberating structures which free the learner to learn. This can be achieved by helping the learners make informed choices about their learning, and by creating an atmosphere of collective supportiveness, which is a basic tenet of effective trade union education.

**Transparency of purpose**

**Within any group of learners** there will be differing perceptions regarding what is to be learned and the most effective way of learning. The tutor must ensure that all are aware of the aims and objectives of a particular task or activity, and that there are identifiable learning outcomes which justify the time spent in their achievement. The competence-based syllabus assists the learner in evaluating precisely what has been learned.

**Linking trade union interests and language learning**

The design and delivery of dedicated language courses for trade unionists is a relatively recent and exciting development in the field of foreign language teaching. But a survey of language-training materials available for this target group quickly reveals that very little is available, apart from those published over the years by ETUCO.² If we are to succeed in meeting the needs of trade unionist learners then courses and materials must be designed in such a way that the best methods in language training are linked to the specific needs of this target group.

² The European Trade Union College, now ETU-REHS Education
Courses and materials that are designed on the basis of the unique synergy between trade union education and language training will be distinctive, catering to the special and diverse needs of officers, representatives and members of trade union organisations. This distinctiveness will serve to increase the motivation in the target group, which is paramount if the language learning is to be effective. There will be a balance of structured and communicative activities to ensure structural progression, consolidation and confidence-building and increasing autonomy in the language learning process.

**Assessing learners’ needs**

Many of the learners may have previously attended non-specialist courses and although they may have succeeded in achieving a good level of communicative competence some will have been left with a feeling of frustration by the topic areas which do not meet their professional needs. If we are to serve the needs of trade unionists it is important that topics chosen for language practice are of interest to trade unionists in their workplace.

It is an important challenge for the language tutor to establish the needs of both the group and the individual. This is best done by means of a pre-course questionnaire which will enable trainers to identify those activities where the learners will have to use the target language: for example, receiving delegates from abroad, representing his/her organisation at international meetings, making contact by telephone or e-mail, etc. The language skills and vocabulary necessary for carrying out these functions can be incorporated into the course by the tutor, as appropriate to the language level of the learners.

Learners can be asked to prioritise their needs in the pre-course questionnaire. This can be particularly useful information for tutors designing short courses where it would be impractical to attempt to target all the language skills identified.

*[See section on pre-course needs analysis for more detail and example.]*

**The learners’ language level**

Having identified the activities and language skills of importance to the learners, the next step for the language tutor is to assess the language level of the learners who are to attend a course. There are several tests published for assessing the level of proficiency in English as a foreign language (see section on pre-course testing for examples). There should also be some consideration given as to how to organise the teaching in classes where there is a broad spectrum of language ability. Multi-skill activities can be designed to enable a mixed level group to work on tasks more effectively. For example, when dealing with a grammar point to mixed levels, the higher group can be set the task of designing exercises for the lower group for further practice while the grammar point is being presented.
Ideally courses should be designed for classes of learners with similar language levels. However, it is important that the learners of different levels are brought together for some of the learning activities. In this way, tutors can attempt to mirror the real world where trade unionists meet and communicate with other trade unionists with different levels of language proficiency.

Course content

**Decisions need to be made by the tutor** about which language functions and grammar areas should be addressed. To illustrate this, a group of learners at advanced level who prioritised "discussing in small groups at seminars" are likely to require some focus on functions such as, agreeing and disagreeing, asking for and giving clarification, summarising orally, and writing a summary. The tutor can then plan the input to include modal verbs for making requests, conjunctions for listing points and making conclusions, as well as the use of other discourse markers in short presentations.

The vocabulary taught will depend on the issue being discussed at the seminar and could be one which has been highlighted in the pre-course questionnaire.

In the absence of shared interests on specific issues, it is the task of the tutor to design activities which will encourage active participation of the learners. An example of this could be a meeting of four trade unionists from different countries or organisations. Preparation for the meeting would involve telephoning, sending e-mail messages to decide on the venue; planning the meeting and agreeing a programme; finally, participating in the meeting itself to exchange information which should be based on the learner's own experience.
**Course materials**

**Tasks and activities** designed by the tutor should be as authentic as possible. Grammar exercises can be designed where the structures are practised within a framework of vocabulary of interest to the trade union learner. The language tutor should have access to trade union resources in the target language and, where possible, be able to work with trade union educators when designing materials for the course.

It is important to recognise the value of the learner's own knowledge of trade union organisation and trade union issues and to capitalise on this by maximising the opportunity for the learners to contribute their own knowledge to the teaching-learning programme.

As it is unlikely that learners will share the same needs or improve their proficiency at the same rate, it is important that the tutor should provide self-study activities as an integral part of the course. This will encourage independent learning and give the learner time to check his/her learning.