LSP-taught target groups

When we talk about the teaching of LSP we may distinguish between two main target-groups

1) language students and

2) professional people or other learner groups with expert knowledge.

The language department has over the years offered a number of extra-curricular courses to the second target group, but the target-group proper of LSP-teaching at our department is language students. In my experience not only the objectives but also the content and the methods involved in the teaching of these two groups have very little in common. Take, for instance, the objectives. In the case of the first learner group - the language students - the long-term aim is to qualify the students for jobs such as professional translators and interpreters, which means that they have to relay communication between experts and other professional people. If we look at the second group, the teaching aim will normally be to qualify them for their own communication with foreign colleagues, which would clearly entail a different methodological approach. The views put forward here thus apply only to the primary target group of the language department of this school, that is language students without any previous expert knowledge.

Both written and oral relaying of communication make great demands on the relayer in respect of command of the language and background knowledge of the subject involved. For this reason it is essential that the study of content be integrated into the curriculum of the individual LSP disciplines. Here, there is a marked difference between the teaching of language for special purposes and that of non-specialised language. Generally, in learning non-specialised language the students do not have to cope with the problem of understanding the overall meaning or message of a given text, since in most cases this relates to the learner's general knowledge and cultural background. In the case of LSP teaching, on the other hand, the situation is quite different. Here we are primarily concerned with a content which does not form part of the conceptual equipment of the average language learner; this is the case with such subjects as: Law, Economics, and Science. Consequently, a substantial element of background and factual information must be injected into each LSP discipline taught; without this the student will be unable to understand and interpret specialised texts. This is obviously the case with LSP translation texts.

Since the average language student will not have any previous factual knowledge of the LSP-subjects taught, the vocabulary and terminology of these subjects will be alien to him both in his own language and, to an even greater extent, in the foreign language. The role of the mother-tongue in the LSP-teaching process is therefore of much greater importance than in non-specialized language teaching. In LSP teaching we therefore have to treat the mother tongue as another target-language.
To sum up we may say that the LSP-teaching process is an integration of three main elements.

1. Conveying background knowledge - national and foreign - of the LSP-subjects taught.

2. Imparting to the students the terminology - national and foreign - of the LSP subjects taught and their stylistic and syntactic characteristics.

3. Maintaining and extending the students' general linguistic abilities.

The three elements mentioned are, of course, variable and their inter-relationship will depend on many factors. If, for instance, the target group were experts, they would possess sufficient background knowledge of their subject already, and the third element - linguistic abilities - would be in the foreground in the teaching process. With language students as a target group the position is different.

The composition of the elements will first of all vary according to whether they are first-year, or sixth-year students. In the students' first years we have to work more on their general linguistic abilities, whereas in their last years more attention can be paid to background knowledge.

Each LSP-subject will have its own balance between the three elements. An example to illustrate this: When teaching a discipline like legal English one has to spend a lot of time teaching the students both the English and the Danish legal systems since the legal realities of the two countries are completely different. If then we compare technical English, the technological reality is in most cases the same and we have the advantage of dealing with concrete and not abstract matters as is the case in law. The main problem is one of quantity. Technological terminology develops much faster than that of legal terminology, and in the teaching process the second element - terminology - becomes the most important one.

Now, some might argue that we mean to train our students to become lawyers, engineers, economists etc. and translators at the same time. Nothing could be further from the truth. We have to content ourselves with the tip of the iceberg as far as subject expertise goes.

We can give the students an outline of the systematics of the individual subjects and then select a number of areas of study within each subject, which can be dealt with in depth. In that way the students will acquire a working method which they can use when they are faced with new topics.

What methods can be used in the LSP-teaching process?

LSP-teaching differs from foreign language teaching in general both as far as objectives and content are concerned. Such differences will be reflected in the teaching methods applied. I will discuss two methods: The text-based and the systems-oriented method.

In order to illustrate the two methods I will use an example from my own discipline, legal English: A translation exercise which is an extract from an English Act of Parliament.
Extract from the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973

Property adjustment orders in connection with divorce proceedings, etc.

24. - (1) On granting a decree of divorce, a decree of nullity of marriage or a decree of judicial separation or at any time thereafter (whether, in the case of a decree of divorce or of nullity of marriage, before or after the decree is made absolute), the court may make any one or more of the following orders, that is to say -

(a) an order that a party to the marriage shall transfer to the other party, to any child of the family or to such person as may be specified in the order for the benefit of such a child such property as may be so specified, being property to which the first-mentioned party is entitled, either in possession or reversion . . . . . .

The text-based method has been and is still widely used in LSP-teaching in Denmark. It bears some resemblance to the inductive method where you reason from particulars to universals or from a part to a whole. The element of background knowledge plays a secondary role and it is left more or less to the students to acquire this on their own. When using the text-oriented method one would for instance present the students with the above text and ask them to translate it. The students would have little previous knowledge of English and Danish family law.

In order to understand the text in the first place they would have to study the expressions underlined in the text and find out what their content is and how they fit into a functional reality or how they can be classified. Unless the student has a general view of the systematics of the subject so that he knows where and how to find information and documentation, this task is a very difficult and in many ways a dangerous one.

In my experience such lack of background knowledge gives rise to many serious mistakes in the students' translations. I have interviewed a number of students about their views on the two methods and they were all highly critical of the text-oriented method. Faced with a task like for instance this translation exercise, they felt lost and even if they had put a lot of effort into it, they still felt that only very rarely did they have a chance of coming up with a satisfactory solution. Apparently this method does not motivate the students - rather the contrary.

A better method, it seems to me, is the systems-oriented method, a feeling shared by most students.

This method may be compared with the deductive method in that one applies the general rule to the particular case. When applying the systems-oriented method the teacher would first give the students an outline of the systematics and the basic concepts of a given subject and then by way of tests - for instance translation exercises - make sure that the students have acquired a proper understanding of the subject. With a proper working knowledge of the individual subjects the students will be able to understand and interpret the specific texts on the subject that they have to translate and they will know where and how to find information and documentation.
Let us look at the example again. If the systems-oriented method is applied the students will have a good knowledge of English and Danish family law. They will be able to place the expressions involved in the conceptual reality in which they function. By comparing the English and Danish functional realities they will realize and be able to take into account the differences and thus avoid serious mistakes.

The following diagram (figure 2) is a simplified example of such a functional reality.

We start with the surface structure of the text, for instance the expressions that are underlined in the text. The next step will be to make a study of the content of the individual expressions and the third to find out how these concepts fit into a functional reality in the source language. When we move to the target language, the first step is to look at the functional reality and make a comparison, then we should try to establish to what extent the content of the expressions we find corresponds to the content of the expressions we are to translate. If the answer is positive we can finally decide how to translate the original English expressions. If the answer is negative - which is unfortunately very often the case because the functional realities, in this case the legal systems, of the two countries studied are not the same - it will be necessary to translate by way of an explanation, which again requires intimate background knowledge.

In many cases it may also be necessary to make an investigation as indicated by the dotted lines. Here we try to place the concept in a systematic classification, for instance in a hierarchy of concepts, and compare that with the corresponding hierarchy in the target language.

Once such a working method has been acquired by the student for translation exercises it can also provide a general tool for linguistic analysis and description of LSP texts. An increasing number of students have elected to write their assignments and dissertations in LSP areas (i.e. comparative stylistics, terminology, etc.) and some training in the application of scientific methods has therefore become essential.
The diagram shows the route from marriage to separation, divorce and annulment of a marriage in England and in Denmark and it illustrates the differences between the procedures in the two countries. If students are taught to work along these systems-comparative lines they will gradually acquire a viable method and at the same time have a tool for information retrieval which is absolutely vital when they are faced with new topics.
Figure 3 is a model-flowchart illustrating such a working method.

MODEL FLOW CHART OF STUDENTS' WORKING METHOD

FIGURE 3

The solid lines show the method applied in connection with a translation of the text in my example.