

Language Policy and Teaching at Arteveldehogeschool

Linda Bogaert

In a media training like ours, the Graphical and Digital Media (GDM) department of the University College Arteveldehogeschool (AHS) that is preparing graduates for an internationally minded labour market in which communication plays a major role, the importance of language training cannot be neglected.

Nowadays we observe an erosion of the proficiency levels due to a structural and chronic language deprivation in secondary and higher education in Flanders. We cannot take this for granted in an industry in which communication and good linguistic competence are important. That's why we, AHS/GDM, have started several actions to restructure this trend.

This article informs you about some initiatives of the university college/department to increase student's awareness of the importance of languages and to pursue a mastery level of both the native and foreign languages that meets the requirements of the labour market.

Language policy in a European and Belgian/Flemish perspective

Not only AHS/GDM considers this issue to be a hot topic. The care for languages was also put on the agenda of Mr Frank Vandenbroucke, Flemish Minister of Work, Education and Training. In February 2007 he published his Language policy document "De lat hoog voor talen in iedere school. Goed voor de sterken, sterk voor de zwakken" (The bar should be high in every school. Good for the strong ones, strong for the weak ones). The main idea of this text is that in all schools language care and training should be considered as being very important. Language training as such should be "good" for those students having a high mastery level of languages, and "strong" for the weaker ones. As this idea fits within the European language care the Council of Europe has declared 26 September as annual European Day of Languages.

Language Policy AUGent

The Ghent University Association consists of four institutions of higher education active in Flanders: Universiteit Gent, Arteveldehogeschool, Hogeschool Gent, Hogeschool West-Vlaanderen. These members join forces in the area of education, research, services to society, infrastructure and student-related facilities. Within the framework of this collaboration, the Association has developed a joint language policy. The following are the 4 basic goals of AUGent's language policy:

1. The language of instruction is Dutch.
2. All members pursue a sufficient command of ("academic") Dutch of students in order to ensure equal chances for all students.
3. All members aim at giving students top chances to gain competences in the field of foreign languages in view of the best employment perspectives in a global society.
4. To familiarize students with 1) the training-specific terminology and 2) to consult specialized topics in another language than Dutch (often English) part of the study material is offered in another language. Foreign guest lecturers are involved in the curricular activities.

University College Arteveldehogeschool/ AHS: Diversity and Equal Chances

AHS provides a stimulating environment to learn. In order to achieve this objective, among other things, it creates maximum opportunities for its students and staff. Some of the key principles that underpin the educational concept, or 'credo', of AHS are linked to language issues as well:

1. Study programmes are student-centred and address individual learning needs. This idea is obvious on the language level too: taking into account student's individual language problems, AHS/GDM offers distinct solutions.
2. Teaching methods stimulate students to learn in an active, independent and cooperative way. In this framework language training not only is a matter of "ex cathedra" teaching, but involves students actively, either working indi-

vidually or in team.

3. Study programmes are targeted on societal developments and the needs of the practice. As due to the open market situation graphical and digital media companies emphasize the increasing importance of language care, we too must pay more attention to this development and need.
4. The study programmes are characterised by flexibility, international cooperation and exchangeability. We offer flexible learning paths to students in need of extra language training. In a global market this attempt is not to be ignored.

Language Entry Requirements

As in our current Flemish society more foreign students than ever before start higher education we had to define some language entry requirements. As such the first-year AHS-student has either at least finished (with success) one fulltime year of study in secondary or higher education executed in the Dutch language, or he got a CEF certificate (Common European Framework of Reference) - level B2 (advanced) Dutch (or higher).

Studying with dyslexia

Combining dyslexia and higher education does not pose insurmountable problems at AHS: students contact the social service coordinator of the department to look for flexible solutions of possible study limitations. Moreover, each AHS multimedia centre/library is equipped with SPRINT +. It helps people with reading, writing and spelling problems. A clear voice (a Dutch and English voice is standard) reads texts (Word, pdf, e-mail, internet), even texts you keyboard yourself. This tool is for hire or sale. More info: <http://www.tni.be/products/wordsprint.php>

AHS Language policy offers a backpack full of chances

The basic assumptions of AHS language policy are that there is a possible link between linguistic skills and study success. Moreover, we believe that language problems might pose a barrier to starting AHS studies or a cause of study failure. That's why we offer all students Language Support. On DileAHS (AHS digital learning platform) AHS Students are automatically registered to

the AHS course "Language Support". Moreover, within each AHS department a Coordinator Language Support is assigned. Annually he formulates an Action plan Language Support. Below we list several chances students get.

Chance 1: Entry courses

Before the start of the academic year entry courses are organized by AHS Study Tutoring Service.

We aim at interested students who pursue to polish up their spelling skills, to broaden their vocabulary, to learn how to give a smooth presentation or to write fluent texts.

Chance 2: Language Screening Test

During a Welcome week before the start of the academic year we test first-year students' mastery level of the Dutch language. Goal is having students (and staff) perceptive for language issues and to check the students' language ability. It is a digital screening test taking about 25 to 30 minutes only (<http://q-port.artveldehs.be>) and sifting through 5 units:

1. Academic wording
2. Spelling
3. Grammar
4. Writing skills
5. Reading skills

Students get prompt feedback as results are communicated during the second course week. As well follow-up and remediable steps are taken instantly.

At the start of the academic year 2008-09 141 AHS-GDM students took the test. Their average result is 66,23%. 32 students got an A-mark, meaning that they did very well, 37 got B (sufficient), 35 got C (insufficient) and 37 got D (amply insufficient).

We are aware that this screening is only indicative for the language competence at the intake of first-year students. As students solely focus on language during the test their screening result most probably is higher than in real-life situations. However, the test also helps us to identify the high-risk group and be able to focus on these special language needs through remediable courses.

Examining some individual students' data we learnt that the following are indicators influencing the screening result:

1. Students' preliminary training (number of years, level)
2. Study content in secondary education (general, technical, professional, art)
3. Study discipline in secondary education (a lot of attention for language(s)?)
4. Mother tongue and home speech/local dialect

Student's Testimonies of Language Screening proof that they highly appreciate our efforts:

"The test makes you face the facts. I had to guess quite often and that is not right. I will have to take the matter in hand."

"I feel this test was very helpful, because now I know that my command of the Dutch language should be polished."

Chance 3: AHS Language Workshops

In the course of the academic year and for those "in need" we organize workshops on:

1. Professional Writing skills
2. Spelling
3. Academic Dutch
4. Pronunciation and Articulation

In small groups students get a mix of classical colleges and individual coaching using authentic material.

Chance 4: Embedding the care for language(s) in the AHS-GDM Curriculum

Throughout the entire training students are forced into paying attention to languages, both native and foreign ones. That's why none of the courses listed below is optional.

In the Professional Development Course (1st year) we strongly emphasize the importance of the Dutch language.

Communication courses (in Dutch) are offered during the entire training. We pay special attention to Communication Techniques, Reporting Skills, Presentation & Negotiation Techniques and Business Communication.

As Flanders is an open and export-oriented market French and English language courses (general and training-specific in the 1st and 2nd year)

are part of the curriculum. As such we comply to a strong demand of the industry.

We incorporate Multilingual projects in our curriculum of the 2nd year. These projects are whether or not executed in association with partner institutes (abroad or in the French/German community of Belgium). Our aim is to stimulate competence-directed training in some kind of work simulation or business context. As such language training is getting concrete and applied.

Additionally foreign language input in non-language courses is aimed at during the entire training. Internationalisation at Home (inviting foreign guest lecturers or using foreign language texts) and Abroad (Training in an international perspective – LLL/Erasmus) initiatives meet this goal to a high extent.

Chance 5: Het Perspectief (The Perspective)

We observe that about 10 out of 100 students need extra language training/coaching. These experience severe language limitations. Among this group we as well include NT-2 students (having Dutch as a 2nd language). They are referred to Het Perspectief (an adult education institution) offering profound and intensive Dutch language coaching. In 10 lectures of 90 minutes (10 weeks) embedded in the regular timetable and 35 hours of individual coaching using authentic material students' command of languages is enhanced.

Chance 6: Online exercising

Aimed at students suffering to understand "academic" vocabulary in syllabuses and during lectures is the link: <http://icto.arteveldehs.be/woordenlijst/>. Here students get the meaning of the academic word and an example in a sentence.

Currently AHS invests in network versions of Software Nederlandse Spelling (Dutch Spelling). In libraries and pc-rooms students may practise this software. As well online versions are available for the student at home.

My experience

Being a ("new approach") language teacher at GDM for sure is a challenge. Time-consumption has grown to quite an extent. But! Job satisfaction has increased too, because integrating language teaching in other courses results in more frequent cooperation (and as such joy) with colleagues. Moreover, students' feedback on this evolution is very positive and we observe that this way of working is paying off. Ultimately, this is what counts.

Conclusion

Ideal language teaching is a mix of classical colleges and individual monitoring using authentic texts.

Each teacher is a language teacher. It is crucial that language is supported by all staff members. The entire team should be perceptive to the importance of language skills. That's why it is a good idea to offer all non-language lecturers the chance to get language trainings themselves, a list of criteria to bear in mind when assessing texts or presentations and a checklist containing tips to have colleges and course texts easily receptive for students having language limitations. Striving for a holistic approach, having students and staff perceptive for language issues, GDM's language colleagues joined forces to compose a concise checklist that offers a survey of linguistic issues to bear in mind when coaching and assessing students' works.

(first received: 16.01.08)



Linda Bogaert

Lecturer English and Communication
- Departmental International Coordinator,
Graphical and Digital Media department,
University College Arteveldehogeschool
Gent –Belgium

linda.bogaert@arteveldehs.be
www.arteveldehs.be