



# Languages for Special Purposes in a Multilingual, Transcultural World

Proceedings of the 19th European Symposium on Languages for Special Purposes, 8-10 July 2013, Vienna, Austria

<http://lsp2013.univie.ac.at/proceedings>

## Italian for social sciences and humanities at tertiary level in Serbia: Challenges and prospects

Danijela Djorovic

**Cite as:** Djorovic, D. (2014). Italian for social sciences and humanities at tertiary level in Serbia: Challenges and prospects. In G. Budin & V. Lušicky (eds.), *Languages for Special Purposes in a Multilingual, Transcultural World, Proceedings of the 19th European Symposium on Languages for Special Purposes, 8-10 July 2013, Vienna, Austria*. Vienna: University of Vienna, 143-150.

**Publication date:** July 2014

**ISBN:** 978-3-200-03674-1

**License:** This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>. This license permits any non-commercial use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original authors and source are credited.



# Italian for social sciences and humanities at tertiary level in Serbia: Challenges and prospects

Danijela Djorovic

*Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, Serbia*

*Correspondence to: ddjorovi@f.bg.ac.rs*

**Abstract.** Tertiary FL education is regarded as an integral component of university studies as it provides linguistic and communicative competencies indispensable for students' academic and professional development. The importance of teaching foreign languages not for general, but for specific, discipline-oriented purposes has already been acknowledged as a necessity worldwide. However, a survey of the pertinent literature indicates that most of the theoretical and empirical research conducted within this context has focused, understandably, on English, as the *lingua franca* of international communication, whereas other languages have been considered to a much lesser extent.

This paper aims to provide an overview of current situation in teaching Italian for social sciences and humanities to non-language students at Serbian universities as regards different aspects of this undergraduate university course (learners' needs and motivation, level of language and subject matter proficiency, teaching and learning methodology, learning outcomes, material design, evaluation and other curriculum development issues. The theoretical perspective taken in this study includes a view of tertiary language instruction as learner-centered, contextualized, collaborative, personalized as well as an increasingly autonomous process.

**Keywords.** Italian for Specific Purposes, tertiary language instruction, social sciences and humanities.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Tertiary FL education

It is a well known fact that foreign language teaching at university level is an integral part of scientific education of any member of academic community. Acquiring adequate linguistic and communicative competencies has always been and now is, more than ever, a prerogative for any individual wishing to pursue a career or simply participate in the dynamics of expert community and the information flow within it. Furthermore, learning a number of different languages, all useful (to a greater or to a lesser extent) in various spheres of modern life, is in accordance with multilingual and pluricultural educational language policy of Serbia, Europe and the whole world.

Not only is the foreign languages ability important for the modern individual, but it is now more accessible than it used to be. Evidence gathered from recent groundbreaking developments in technology, science, educational practice, standards and assessment reveal that learning different languages can be more effective, faster, more available and purposeful than it used to be. Each individual who sets foot in the realm of foreign languages is given a variety of learning choices and is expected to take responsibility and a more proactive approach in planning his/her learning, according to personal preferences, learning styles and language needs.

### 1.2. FL learning as LSP learning in tertiary education

As far as learning foreign languages at tertiary level of education is concerned, a number of issues and dilemmas may still arise, concerning most of all questions such as: What sort of language are university students supposed to learn? At what level of study and for how long would it be best to learn foreign languages? How intensive should such a course be? What are the most desirable learning outcomes of such a language course?

## II. LSP in specific languages, countries, regions of the world

D. Djorovic

First of all, let us consider the sort of language non-philological students should learn at university. There seems to be a consensus in the most recent literature that foreign languages at tertiary level cannot and should not be taught as general language courses. What's more, no language text or utterance used in academic or professional settings can be neutral or insensitive to the particular context in which it is realized. Instead, certain elements of specialized languages of the student's field of study should be incorporated into university foreign language curricula.

Students should have an opportunity to acquire skills and competences necessary for their academic and future professional lives. In order to enable them to master this particular aspect of the foreign language of their choosing they need to get familiar with a number of specific linguistic and stylistic choices, typical of subject-specific communication at different levels of complexity and expertise (from divulgative scientific language to expert- to- expert communication means).

Thus, the introduction to the LSP offered at university becomes an introduction into the scientific and discourse community, which carries also a significant sociolinguistic value, as pointed out by Balboni (Balboni 2007: 51): students learning LSP at university level acquire basics of rhetoric-formal style of scientific language skills indispensable for their personal and professional growth.

### 2. Tertiary FL education in Serbia

#### 2.1. A brief historical overview

Foreign language education for specific purposes has had a long tradition in our country. Ever since the foundation of first vocational schools and colleges in Serbia in the second half of the XIX century foreign languages taught for special purposes had their rightful place within the hierarchy of school subjects (Ignjacevic 2006: 87).

Immediately after the World War II, Serbian universities introduced a foreign language as mandatory subject for students of all disciplines. Each faculty was autonomous in deciding which foreign languages to include in their programs of study, what status the foreign language instruction will have, at what level foreign languages will be taught, what class load will be suitable etc.

For decades, only four foreign languages were widely taught at university level in Serbia: English, Russian, French and German. Italian was another foreign language offered, ever since 1961, but only at one faculty, whereas Spanish was introduced only much later, in 2001. Students learnt the foreign language they chose, mostly for the first two years (four semesters) of their studies. Even than the language taught was not meant for general but for specific, vocational and academic, purposes. Throughout the second part of the XX century LSP at tertiary level in Serbia was taught, analyzed and researched, the proof of which could be found in numerous papers, textbooks and conference proceedings dealing with tertiary LSP instruction and teaching in Serbian context.

However, with the reform brought about by the Bologna process, when Serbian universities faced drastic changes in curricular organization, a strange trend appeared. Due to a number of newly offered subject-specific courses, the space planned for LSP instruction seemed to become occupied by other, non-linguistic subjects pertinent to students' programs of study. Strangely enough, in Serbia, where foreign languages policy was oriented towards multilingualism even long before the claim for linguistic diversity in Europe has gained ground, the reform induced by Bologna process caused a falling trend in the number of foreign languages offered at universities, as well as in class load, status and position of this once important university subject. More in danger have been and still are foreign languages other than English. Thus, in the academic year of 2005/2006, research shows that 40% of Serbian faculties offered only English courses (Ignjacevic & Brdarski 2006: 154). Understandably, English has survived the impact of reform changes, thanks to its status of *lingua franca* of international scientific and professional

## II. LSP in specific languages, countries, regions of the world

D. Djorovic

communication, and remains the major foreign language for specific purposes taught and studied at tertiary level in Serbia.

Nevertheless, there are still numerous voices contrary to reducing a fairly rich choice of languages offered at university level to English exclusively. Within Foreign Language and Literature Association of Serbia, there is a very active section, LSP Special Interest Group, concerned with questions of status of LSP as university subject. Regardless of undeniable supremacy of English as the language of science and profession, there are still many disciplinary areas in which other languages (such as French, German, Russian, Spanish, Italian) can boast pertinent, relevant and unavoidable literature, worthy of consulting. Italian, for instance, is a must for any art historian researching Renaissance, while some of the most valuable works on classical philology is written in German, not to mention the importance of reading in original greatest philosophers of all times who wrote either in German or French, and these are but some examples).

To sum up, recent developments in language learning area have confirmed the unique position of English as a mandatory foreign language in any field of expertise, but this does not mean that other foreign languages are obsolete or useless. Students should all know and use English language at a satisfactory level, but they will enrich learning resources by becoming familiar with other foreign languages during their course of study.

### 2.2. Italian for Specific Purposes at tertiary level in Serbia

The Italian is, together with English, French, Russian, German and Spanish one of the six official languages, taught as foreign language in Serbian schooling system. It was first officially introduced in elementary schools in 2001, and in high schools even before, as experimental instruction, as early as 1997.

As far as tertiary level is concerned, Italian Language and Literature Seminar was founded in 1930, which originated into Italian Language and Literature Department, enrolling for years now a great number of Italian major undergraduate, master and doctoral students, second only to English Department (Vučo 2006: 148). At the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad Italian language is taught as compulsory course for students of Romance languages and optional course for students of other Departments. Italian language is also taught as mandatory subject at some non-philological faculties of Serbian university such as Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, Faculty of Drammatic Arts in Belgrade, Academy of Arts in Novi Sad, Faculty of Music in Belgrade, and Faculty of Philology and Arts in Kragujevac.

Ever since private universities have been founded in Serbia in the 1990s, Italian language has been taught as compulsory subject at Alfa University (Faculty of Management, Faculty of Trade and Banking, Faculty of Entrepreneurial Management, Faculty of Foreign Languages), at European University (Faculty of International Management, Faculty of Business and Marketing), at Union University (Faculty of Law), at Singidunum University (Faculty of Informatics and Management, Faculty of Tourism and Hotel Management). Looking closely at the above mentioned faculties offering Italian in their study programs we can conclude that in Serbia the subject areas regarding Italian as relevant for their specific purposes are: social sciences, humanities, business, marketing, banking, tourism and law.

### 2.3. Italian for social studies and humanities at the Faculty of Philosophy

The Department for Foreign Languages at the Faculty of Philosophy was founded back in 1961. The courses of English, French, Russian, German and Italian were at that time incorporated in social sciences and humanities programs of study. This fact corroborates the multilingual orientation of the Faculty of Philosophy which has for more than 50 years stood for high quality LSP instruction as an integral part of tertiary education within the above mentioned fields.

From the very beginning the Italian language course at the Faculty of Philosophy has cherished

## II. LSP in specific languages, countries, regions of the world

D. Djorovic

a particular sort of LSP instruction bearing in mind specific purpose of learning a foreign language while studying at university. In the spirit of the early research and theoretical assumptions regarding LSP, back in the sixties, the first learning goal was concerned with mastering terminological system of disciplines of students' interests. However, as the LSP research headed towards a more complex and wider understanding of LSP learning goals, Italian language curriculum has included mastering general academic and scientific discourse as well as acquiring pragmatic and socio-cultural competencies indispensable for pursuing students' academic and professional career.

Regardless of numerous changes the organization and development of Italian language curriculum at Faculty of Philosophy has undergone in the past decades (and in the past years, for that matter) the basic principle of foreign language study has remained unchanged: dedication to disciplinary sensitive language instruction with LSP components incorporated from the beginning. The language that students should learn at university level is language in function of science and profession, language as a useful tool for a professional, rather than an end in itself. What was subject to change was methodological approach to language teaching, which followed general trends and tendencies in foreign language teaching methodology towards a less frontal, more learner-centred and needs analysis-based LSP teaching.

### 3. Italian for Specific Purposes: course description

Students enrolled in the Faculty of Philosophy majoring in Philosophy, Sociology, History, History of Art, Education, Classics, Anthropology, Psychology or Archaeology can all choose Italian to be a compulsory subject during the first two years of their studies. The course is divided into two two-semester modules, Italian Language 1 (2+0 hours per week, 6 ECTS credits) and Italian Language 2 (2+2 hours per week, 8 ECTS credits). The Italian Language curriculum in question, as an introductory LSP course, aims at developing all basic language skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing), with special regard to discipline-oriented language usage. The vast majority of our students have no previous knowledge of Italian language, so we start from level A1 according to the CEFR. As already mentioned, along with the basics of Italian language system a number of different morphological, syntactic, pragmatic and stylistic components of LSP are introduced.

#### 3.1. Course objectives and learning outcomes

In line with Richards (Richards 2001: 120) course objectives are defined with special regard to students' needs and interests as university students and future members of disciplinary discourse communities. The primary goal is to enable students to deal with subject-specific texts upon a four semester instruction and learn how to consult relevant literature written in Italian for their academic and professional needs. As for the learning outcomes, after the biannual Italian course we expect our students to be able to (a) understand/interpret subject specific texts, (b) recognize discourse patterns pertinent to the subject area and use Italian within this field of study.

Evidently, the goals set are rather ambitious and it would be extremely difficult to succeed in such a highly set task if it were not for our students' intrinsic motivation and their fluency in at least one more foreign language or more than one, as well as some but gradually increasing knowledge of their field of study. These three factors help us overcome most difficulties encountered on our way to achieving our goals.

#### 3.2. Skills and competences

Tertiary foreign language education involves acquiring a great variety of skills and competences indispensable for using foreign language functionally, as means of entering the world of the disciplinary area chosen.



## II. LSP in specific languages, countries, regions of the world

D. Djorovic

Reading proficiency, not only in foreign languages but also in L1 is undoubtedly crucial to academic success. If students need guidance and practice in order to become efficient LSP readers in their own mother tongue (Hancock 2007:26) it is only natural that the first and the most relevant skill they are to acquire in order to become competent readers in languages other than L1 is LSP reading comprehension skill. It is developed gradually by learning and practicing how to build vocabulary, find main ideas, read for global understanding, read for detail, draw inferences, read critically etc. All the mentioned elements fall into the domain of textual competence (Colombo 2002: 61) which is not an innate ability, but a competence developed gradually, in the course of reading, studying, developing the expectance of coherence and textuality etc.

Although the accent is on receptive competences, when it comes to their written production, students need to learn how to take notes and tackle different types and forms of reproductive writing (reformulation, summary, report, plan, essay, project etc.) as well as how to apply various strategies for text reception and production.

Oral and written production skills (oral presentations, oral commenting on the texts they read, note taking, written synthesizing and text reformulating, the basics of oral academic/professional interaction) are targeted mostly within our second year program. Evidently, the majority of the skills mentioned are not strictly related to any particular subject area, but are widely applicable as general academic skills.

Additionally, LSP teacher has to deal not only with language-based methodology issues but also with more general, and, as it seems to be, rather poorly developed general study skills, such as managing time well, making effective study plans, searching for learning resources and so on. When dealing with a complex LSP text, students with moderate Italian language knowledge have to rely on their cognitive and metacognitive competences as well as on their knowledge of the world and of the subject area. Hence, we deem very important skills such as: making use of contextual clues, using word structural knowledge, using signal words, understanding organization patterns, understanding tone and purpose etc.

On their road to mastering foreign language for such a specific purpose students are expected to acquire understanding of different communicative acts typical of the LSP in question (naming, defining, describing, explicating, comparing, assessing, interpreting, presenting, quoting etc.). Students get familiar with different textual typologies, learn how to recognize and discern their structure and pragmatic function, master different techniques of reading and apply the adequate one in each situation.

Furthermore, while getting equipped for consulting literature in foreign languages students can also broaden and deepen their subject matter knowledge. In order to ensure that, a certain form of cooperation between language teacher and subject matter teacher is crucial, not to mention the value of interdisciplinary approach proposed. If the students are presented with adequate learning material directly connected with issues already familiar to them from subject matter instruction, both disciplinary and linguistic knowledge are likely to be acquired. Finally, the intercultural component of foreign language learning should not be neglected as intercultural competence is not a prerogative of general foreign language instruction but has its impact in LSP teaching and learning as well (Hyland, 2000:22).

### 3.3. Course contents

The contents of the Italian for Specific Purposes at the Faculty of Philosophy correspond to the goals set: for Italian for Specific Purposes 1 the content is Italian language system at orthographic, phonological, morphosyntactic and lexical level. Together with the basic contents of Italian language learning proposed by level A1-A2 according to the CEFR, the course contents are adaptable to students' specific needs. Hence, the topics included are, from the start, based on general academic issues (university life and practices, oral and written communication for academic purposes, studying, reading etc.) and are gradually enriched by LSP aspects

## II. LSP in specific languages, countries, regions of the world

D. Djorovic

(vocabulary and terminology issues, specific structures and textual patterns, contrastive analysis of certain elements in Serbian, Italian, English and other languages students use etc.). In our case all of this is possible due to the fact that the language of social sciences and humanities is one of the least formalized and least hermetic variants of LSPs, and closest to the general language of a higher register (Arcaini, 1988:42). As far as grammatical content is concerned, the components proven to be frequent in LSP are covered in more detail (e.g. historical present, nominalization, expressing impersonality etc.).

The contents of the Italian for Specific Purposes 2 are selected and proposed with a view to reaching level B1-B2 of the CEFR, but some of the structures the CEFR proposes for even higher levels (infinitive, participial and gerundial constructions, periphrastic structures etc.) are also addressed, as they appear regularly in the specialized texts used and pose substantial understanding problems for students. Authentic LSP texts, introduced at an early stage, stand as the basis for analysis and interpretation of LSP, as well as for the first steps towards oral and written production in Italian.

Topics to be covered are normally not pre-set, rather roughly outlined so they spring from the students' inquiries and interests and are negotiated in the process.

Any language of any subject area is neither a homogenous nor monolith phenomenon: it ramifies in formally, stylistically and content wise diversified textual genres (forms, biographies, citations, reports, abstracts, articles, presentation, summaries), none of which should be neglected when tailoring contents for the course, as it is valuable for students to get to know as many and as diverse discourse models, genres and patterns they are likely to come across in the future.

### 3.4. Course materials

Bearing in mind heterogeneous disciplinary interests of our students, it is no wonder that a commercial textbook that would cover all the subject fields mentioned, does not exist yet, at least to our knowledge. The only natural solution would be a tailor-made textbook that could address such diversified and often dissimilar needs. However, further difficulties in creating such a material lie in the fact that the exact number of students coming from different Departments is neither predictable nor stable but varies from year to year, so it might just happen that one year there is only one Philosophy student compared to 20 History of Art students, and the next year the situation could turn out to be opposite. This can present substantial difficulties in planning, designing and developing curriculum for our language course. Taking into consideration all this, we have come up with an in-house textbook containing a number of materials for all the disciplines studied at the faculty, so that each year students and teacher together can choose and decide which texts are to be covered in-depth. The basic criteria for text and material selection are: authenticity, representativeness, and up-to-dateness. As most students are informed well enough on the most appropriate topics and literature concerning their fields of study (which could be also checked by subject matter teachers), they take an active part in the selection of texts. They usually opt for literature proposed by their subject teachers, or other texts they consider pertinent for deepening their disciplinary knowledge. Both subject matter teachers and language teachers are at disposal for any kind of suggestions or help. Thus, students' active role in course design has been asserted.

After the texts have been selected a lot of work awaits the teacher: analysis for LSP elements worthy of presenting and using in class, didacticization of adequate text passages, devising of various exercises etc. This means a substantial increase in teacher's workload and greater responsibility for the success of the course, but also an incomparable gratification for offering relevant and meaningful materials to meet students' specialized needs. On top of that, a lot of different audio and video materials concerned with the subjects taught are chosen and didacticized for classroom use (audio/video recordings of academic lectures, interviews, TV debates etc.).

### 3.5. Methods and didactic principles

Such specific circumstances and goals set accordingly require special attention when deciding on teaching approach to take. The quest for the ideal teaching method has marked the period from the late XIX century till the end of the XX century, when it became widely accepted that no single method, but rather combining more methods, works best. The combined teaching method escapes clear definition; its secret being exactly flexibility and well-balanced selection, tailoring and the right dosage of various elements (Ciliberti 1994:83). It is also crucial to adapt and bear in mind at all times the pertinence of choices made to the real life situations and practices. It is our strong belief that teaching foreign languages for specific purposes at university requires an integrative and open didactic approach, in which different linguistic, communicative, pragmatic and cultural aspects are intertwined and interrelated. This being said, it is only natural not to be satisfied with what has been accomplished so far, but to continue pursuit for new and innovative teaching techniques and more opportunities of experimenting with them in concrete learning situations.

Certainly, students differ greatly in their academic and linguistic potential. They are equipped unequally with language and non-language competences, their motivation and learning styles are far from similar or uniform. Accordingly, we do not expect them to reach the same proficiency level, but each of them will follow his/her own path to knowledge and competences, in keeping with his or her abilities, interests and efforts. In our methodological framework, progress is always regarded as individualized, taking into account the starting point of each student as well as the growth exhibited. Such a methodological approach allows us to treat more justly and respectfully students who may have started off with less experience in foreign language learning, underdeveloped language awareness, or less opportunities to develop their metacognitive and cognitive competences.

A crucial role is played by individualization and differentiation as methodological key to overcoming instability and heterogeneity of the group. In the past few years a major attention in our university context has been given to semi-autonomous and autonomous learning processes. Fostering self awareness of our students as LSP learners, as well as leading them the way towards a more autonomous approach to language and subject-matter learning, thus opening the door for their future lifelong learning (Jarvis 2007: 134), constitutes another important aspect of our methodological approach.

### 4. Challenges and prospects of teaching Italian for Specific purposes in tertiary settings

While teaching Italian for social sciences and humanities in the context described above is a rich and rewarding experience, there are some unique challenges involved that influence significantly our decisions regarding the organization and development of the curriculum.

One of the first and most obvious challenges lies in a large number of students (60-80) interested in learning Italian. Due to a lack of organizational solutions for dividing students into smaller groups we end up with a single, very large group of students who, on top of that, study different disciplines. Working in large, heterogeneous groups requires a special approach to creating and developing curriculum. Organizational complexity of the Faculty of Philosophy, comprising ten departments (some of which are disciplinary rather distant) calls for careful and thorough course planning and programming. In practice, this means, that course materials should be equally relevant, informative and useful for all the interest groups: for instance, a specialized text analyzed in classroom should ideally cover all the majors of our students, as we assume that psychology students would have motivation issues if the lesson focused on, let's say Pindar's poetry or excavation reports. There are, however, creative and fulfilling ways of turning the disadvantages of heterogeneous groups into a unique opportunity and challenge of finding texts that would cover more disciplines such as education in ancient Rome, or philosophical, sociological and psychological implications in primitive art.



## II. LSP in specific languages, countries, regions of the world

D. Djorovic

Additionally, one should not overlook some other potentially challenging circumstances such as: different levels of students' motivation, or their different level of language and subject matter proficiency, or their reluctance to engage in exploring innovative ways of learning (we propose inferencing, activating the pre-existing knowledge of the world, searching for personal learning style etc.). There are no final or easy solutions for these matters. What is needed is rather an open mind and a handful of creative ideas to lessen the risks of failure and enhance the positive effects when possible.

What are the prospects of teaching Italian for social sciences and humanities in Serbian tertiary settings? It is expected that the interest for Italian for specific purposes will likely survive, regardless of the supremacy of English, due to valuable specialized literature in Italian still existing and "on the market". The unfixedness of curriculum issues and readiness to change rapidly and constantly in order to meet students' specific needs as well as learner-centred orientation have potentials to attract more students.

As we continue to research and monitor the new trends in the language of social sciences and humanities discourse communities, we must not forget to refresh continually needs analysis and organizational issues in order to keep an open mind for further adjustments and improvements.

It is our strong belief that teaching LSP is different from teaching general language in so much as learning the language in question is not an end in itself but it is a useful tool and a key to entering the world of science and profession. In order to accomplish the task of teaching students how to use language skillfully and efficiently to serve their means, we need to rely on cognitive and inductive teaching methods, on a better collaboration with subject matter teachers, as well as on fostering broader autonomy in language learning with a view to developing students into reflective professionals.

Learning from our previous experience and taking into account students' suggestions and modern trends in this line of teaching pedagogy, we at the Faculty of Philosophy, hope to remain one of the strongholds of plurilingualism and diversity at Serbian university.

### 5. References

- Arcaini, Enrico (1988). *Epistemologia dei linguaggi settoriali. CLUC: Il linguaggio delle scienze e il suo insegnamento*. Brescia: Scuola.
- Balboni, Paolo (2000). *Le microlingue scientifico-professionali: natura e insegnamento*. Torino: UTET.
- Colombo, Adriano (2002). *Leggere. Capire e non capire*. Bologna: Zanichelli.
- Hancock, Ophelia (2007). *Reading Skills for College Students* (7th ed.). Upper Saddle Rivers, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Hyland, Ken (2000). *Disciplinary discourses: Social interactions in academic writing*. Harlow, UK: Longman.
- Ignjacevic, Andjelka. (2006). *Engleski jezik u Srbiji*. Beograd: Filološki fakultet.
- Ignjacevic, Andjelka & Brdarski, Milica (2006). Strani jezik struke i univerzitet. *Primenjena linguistica*, 7, 152-160.
- Jarvis, Peter (2006). *Towards a Comprehensive Theory of Human Learning*. London: Routledge.
- Richards, Jack C. (2001). *Curriculum Development in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Vučo, Julijana (2006). Diffusione e insegnamento dell'italiano in Serbia. *Comunicare letterature e lingue* 6, 147-156.