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Teaching English for human rights in France



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I am a non-native English teacher, lecturer and researcher living and working in Lyon, France. My mother tongue is Romanian. I am specialized in legal English and compared legal languages (English, French, Romanian, Portuguese and Spanish) in particular, but I also teach English law, the European Union institutions, English for human rights, English for communication, business English, medical terminology and general English at the University of Lyon. I obtained my PhD in 2007 at the University of Lyon on the question of the influence of the French legal language and culture in Europe, more precisely in Romania, Portugal and within the institutions of the European Union, as confronted to the English language. I am an associated member of the CRTT (Centre for research in terminology and translation) at the University Lumière Lyon2. Previously, I had been a legal interpreter and translator with the European Commission during Romania's pre-accession to the European Union.

I. Introduction

I would like to share with you some of my teaching experience, also as a way of saying thank you to those of you who wrote about their way of teaching and whose advice and personal experience help us all become better teachers.

More specifically, I would like to tell you about my experience as a teacher of English for human rights at the Human Rights Institute of the Catholic University of Lyon where I have been teaching for seven years now. As such, I have been fortunate enough to have students/trainees who come from all over the world, from Africa, Latin America, Asia, Europe, with different cultural backgrounds and English levels (well, truth be told, the latter is more of a headache than a sheer joy!). Most of them have a legal background, are lawyers or legal professionals, NGO workers, even members of the clergy. Their ages also vary, from 23 to over 50 years old. They are enrolled in a Professional Master's degree entitled "Theory and practice of human rights". At the end of their Master's degree, they find employment in international organizations such as the United Nations, the Red Cross, the UNHCR, or in

NGOs such as Amnesty International, Handicap International, Terre des Hommes, and many others in their home countries and all over the world. Their common point is that the human rights and the humanitarian activities play a very important part in their lives, not only in their studies. They have already worked or volunteered in NGOs, in France or abroad and, most of the time, their desire and professional need for the Professional Master's degree "Theory and practice of human rights" are motivated and originate from their professional and/or volunteering experience in the field of human rights.

I was mentioning that my students/trainees very often have different levels of English. Their mother tongues are varied, too: Spanish, African and Asian, French, Eastern European languages. They have learnt and studied English with very different methods, which vary from one country to another. They have different learning and studying habits, different rhythms, different approaches, different psychological blocks, even! Thus the French students are often frustrated and consider themselves "nulls" – total failures!-, the Latin Americans (Spanish or Brazilian speakers) are open-minded, easy-going and ready to try even if they make mistakes, the Asians are diligent hard-workers, the speakers of Slavic languages usually have a good English level already and are fast-learners, the speakers of African languages have a different rhythm and often have already used English in contexts related to human rights, such as refugee camps, etc. Sometimes, English may be associated with a traumatizing even from their past, or, on the contrary, with a happy memory, when being able to practice even a little English could help or even save a person or a situation.

In my class of "English for human rights" I have to deal with groups of students whose levels range from perfect beginners to advanced or even proficient. This can prove challenging and the number of students as well! Try and teach English for human rights and international humanitarian law to a group of 45 students enrolled in their Professional Master's and who have all the English levels that a teacher can dream of in his/her worst nightmare! The good point is that they are multicultural professionals, and ready to help each other out.

So, counting on these factors, for one course three years ago, I divided the class into two levels (beginners and intermediate-upper-intermediate-advanced, fortunately only four of them were really advanced) and each level into pairs with one better student in each pair. Then I had to imagine two different types of materials for each 2-hour-course, of course on the same topic. For example, we worked on the topic of refugees, and on the example of the war in Chechnya, with a documentary extract (English subtitles helped a lot). I prepared two different gap fills from the film, two different sets of true/false questions; two vocabulary enhancing exercises. Each pair would solve their exercise and then share it with the rest of the group; I would go from one group to another and check. Evidently it took more time and effort than usual, but it was worth the while, as every student got to work at his/her own rhythm. It was touching to see how well they worked as a team and how ready they were to help each other. But then, that is the spirit of human rights students that I learnt to appreciate over the years. Then we did a role play, in teams of six: one customs officer, one human rights worker, and a family – the mother, the father and their child; the latter were trying to flee from their war-ravaged country into another safer country. What was particularly precious about this exercise was that the fact that some of the students had poor English levels was perceived as natural and close to reality. How many of the world's refugees, or customs officers, speak perfect English?! So, in this kind of situation, they were able to use whatever English resources they had without feeling shy or intimidated, as they knew that scenario could well be real. Unfortunately, that role play brought back sad memories for some of them,

who had previously been refugees themselves, or had had members of their families or friends in this type of difficult situation.

II. Examples of lesson “English for human rights”

- duration of one class: 2 hours
- degree of difficulty: intermediate to advanced

1) The conflict in Chechnya

1. Video & audio document from witness.com.

Group discussion at the end of the video. Each group then shares their opinion with the class.

2. Reading:

« Problems of unemployment and the lack of sources of income

Unemployment and the lack of sources of income are another important cause of the outflow of people from the mountain regions. For the most part the people are self employed. The climate of the mountains of Chechnya is dry, but an abundant amount of natural springs eases the difficulties of irrigation. Winter is short and cool, snow cover is not constant and does not exceed 10 to 15 cm. Spring begins in the first half of March. Summer is long and hot. The climate is favourable for the growth of heat-loving plants: corn, grapes and grains. Beekeeping has been a traditional part of mountain life. Agricultural produce grown in the mountains is in high demand in the plains and presents a steady source of income for the mountain people. However, at present raising livestock is difficult because of the dangers of mines. People cannot put their livestock to pasture, or prepare hay for them, or stock up with firewood. A mountain farmer cannot afford to buy firewood and feed for a large farm. Officially, the people with jobs work for the administration, the military and law-enforcement agencies, and the educational system. Work in the military and law-enforcement agencies is almost the only chance for young men to earn a steady income. However, when a young person enters military service, above all else motivated by the sole desire to feed himself and his family, he instantly finds himself involved in the armed conflict with the members of the underground. Policemen become the object of the fighters' attacks, they participate in special operations involving the use of violence, which contribute to unhealthy social consequences and the mass militarization of the male population. The lack of safety, inadequate educational and medical services, the shortage of jobs and sources of extra income all contribute to the depopulation of the mountain regions. “

Source: www.witness.com

2. True or false?

- People can easily find a job in the mountain regions of Chechnya.
- The police forces are not involved in the conflict.
- The depopulation of the mountain regions is only due to the lack of medical services.
- Raising livestock is dangerous for the Chechnyan farmers.
- The mountains of Chechnya have a wet climate.

3. Answer the following questions:

- What caused the outflow of the people from the mountain regions of Chechnya?
- Which are the main activities of the Chechnyan farmers?
- What are the difficulties encountered by the Chechnyan farmers?
- How can the young Chechnyan men support their families?

e) What contributes to the mass militarization of the male population?

4. Match the following expressions:

- | | |
|--------------|------------|
| involved | a job |
| raise | of safety |
| without | of the law |
| to find | region |
| unemployment | his family |
| lack | livestock |
| mountain | in a crime |
| feed | level |
| enforcement | employment |



5. Fill in the blanks with the following words:

§clear	§coming	§worse	§describes	§jets	§troops
	§nobody	§more	§wherever		
	§in a doorway	§place	§for cover		§difficulty
	§war	§declare	§group	§an interest	
§a few	§opinions		§a couple	§ruins	§ago
	§threat	§to come	§city	§journalists	§blame
	§ borders	§federal	§limitations	§easy	§danger
§by	§civilians	§finished	§done	§correspondents	
§continued	§outside	§international	§willing	§attacks	
§so	§captives	§fighting	§unable	§themselves	
§apartment	§both				

“Russian stormed into the breakaway North Caucasus republic of Chechnya 10 years ago to crush a separatist revolt. As part of an in-depth series on the continuing conflict, bbcussian.com editor James Rodgers the bombing of Grozny and its aftermath.

"It'sthan Beirut," said the American photographer. He was standing, his neck weighed down cameras, looking skywards, expecting the Russian air force to strike at any moment.

They soon did. My BBC colleagues and I ran The explosion was loud and so close that I had hearing for the next two days. A of Chechen fighters had been standing metres away. Two of them now lay dead. It was January 1995, and the first Chechen war had begun only the month before. The Russian defence minister at the time, Pavel Grachev, had suggested that Grozny could be captured by a regiment of paratroops in of hours. That was 10 years While the nature of the conflict has perhaps changed, and there are many on how it could or should be stopped, it continues. The Kremlin and the generals have assured us countless times that the "military phase of the operation is to an end", but that end has yet

..... slips from news

..... knows how many people have been killed. Grozny, once a thriving, living, has been largely destroyed and no one can say how many bodies may still lie beneath the Those who have covered the, many of them seasoned war.....

usually say this is the worst they have been. This is a conflict which has never been to report. In the first war, you could go almost you wanted. That made it easier to get into....., as I found out that Saturday morning in January 1995 on Minutka Square. By the time the second war started, following the bombings of blocks in Moscow and elsewhere in the early autumn of 1999, the republic had become so lawless that kidnapping was the major

As the conflict, the Russian authorities put strict on the activities of reporters.

Chechnya seemed to slip from the world news agenda. Even if there was concern about what was happening there, no one was to pick a fight with Russia. It became difficult and dangerous for news organisations to send correspondents there, so fewer reports came out.

In September 2000, the second Palestinian intifada - or uprising - against Israel began. In September 2001, the on New York and Washington led the United States to its war on terror. of these events dominated international news coverage. Chechnya seemed all but forgotten the ruined republic's

Overspill

Then the conflict spread beyond those borders. It had so before, in the shape of the hospital siege in Budyonnovsk in the summer of 1995. This time it came to Moscow itself. Most of the hostage-takers and some 120 of their were killed when federal forces stormed a theatre where they were being held.

The conflict outside Chechnya reached new levels of savagery in September this year, with the slaughter at the school in Beslan. Why has nobody been able to bring the fighting to an end?

Some observers suggest that the federal forces are simply to do so. Others suggest more cynically that some of the protagonists have in the conflict continuing. The Chechen fighters appear divided, and lacking a direction. Neither General Pavel Grachev nor the American photographer who compared Grozny to Beirut would have imagined then that 10 years on we would still be discussing how to end the fighting. Chechen and conscript soldiers alike must have been hoping the war would be long since.....

It isn't. The two eternal questions which Russians have always asked themselves: "Who is to ?" and "What is to be done?" seem more salient than ever.

Source: BBC NEWS: Published: 2004/12/02 18:27:51 GMT © BBC MMVIII

8. Group activities: speaking & writing

a) Write a list of recommendations on how to develop and implement aid programs for the internally displaced persons in Chechnya, and more particularly on how to organize professional training for the young people in the mountain regions. (250 words)

b) Role play for groups of 4-5 students :

“A reporter working for a humanitarian magazine interviews an internally displaced family (parents and children) from the Chechnya mountains.”

II. Other types of classes

- duration of one class: 2 – 3 hours
- various degrees of difficulty
- As I am part of the committee interviewing the students who want to study in the Professional Master's degree "Theory and practice of human rights", I have the possibility to assess their English level before the academic year begins and discover their fields of interest as regards human rights. As a consequence, each year I create a new course with new teaching materials, based on my students' needs.

a) Freedom of Expression

- Brainstorming about the fundamental freedoms
- Video documentary "Outfoxed"
- Exercises on the documentary: fill in the gaps, questions, text comprehension, matching words
- Debate on the topic: "Media cannot be allowed to speak about everything at any moment"

b) Advertising for Human Rights

- Brainstorming and class discussion about advertising and human rights.
- In groups of 4, students analyse a given ad related to human rights, for example, one of the ads from the campaign "Make some noise for human rights" by Amnesty International, and then present their analysis to class. They work on a given ad analysis pattern.
- In groups of 4, students create an ad for a humanitarian purpose, then present it to class.

c) United Nations Speeches (source: UN website)

- Video on taking oath of office : Ban Ki-Moon + script
- Video on daily press briefing: Michèle Montas + script
- Discussion about the two speeches: differences, accents, contexts, impressions.
- In pairs, the students write a speech for a UN official (imagine situation, context, job, public, etc.)
- Role-play: "UN Official answers journalists' questions".

d) Aboriginal populations

- Brainstorming : Indigenous populations, Aborigines, Stolen Generations, ethnical minorities
- Australian Federal Government Apology : students watch the video, discussion about it, fill in the gaps (second listening).
- Canadian Government Public Apology: same activities.
- Reading : Position of the Canadian government on the question of indigenous populations: « Earth Mother and Her People », by Dan Ennis of the Tobique Nation. Comprehension questions about the text.
- Group work: in groups, students make a poster meant about the indigenous populations of a specific region (prior research necessary). Then they present and describe their posters and ideas.

e) Trafficking in human beings (source : Council of Europe website)

- Brainstorming about the topic
- Videos on the topic
- Reading :
 - Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings;
 - Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings and its Explanatory Report (Warsaw, 16.V.2005) Council of Europe Treaty Series - No. 197;
 - Rules of procedure for evaluating implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings by the parties, by the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA)
- Explanation of legal terminology
- Group work:

“During your internship at the Council of Europe, you are asked to prepare a questionnaire on the implementation by the parties of the specific provisions of the Convention on which the evaluation is based. The questionnaires will be addressed to the government of one the parties (= a country member of the CE) or the civil society in that country.”

f) Violence against women/ domestic violence/ gender-based violence

- Introducing the topic: talk about the legal concepts: “heat of passion”, “passional crime” in different cultures
- Videos on the topic
- Reading: different cases of domestic violence (Council of Europe data base)
- Explanation of legal terms
- Group work: “You are representatives of one of the international NGOs working in the field of violence against women and bringing legal advice. In groups, prepare a presentation of your NGO and of its actions regarding one of the case laws mentioned in the Council of Europe factsheet “Violence against women”.”

III. Conclusion

As far as teaching legal English is concerned, one might say that training legal professionals should be easier than teaching the profane. The problem is that professionals often tend to argue points of law instead of focusing on the language matters. Whereas the profane often need you to explain legal terms and concepts in plain English, in order to understand and be able to learn. But then I guess every teacher of English for specific purposes meets with the same challenge on his/her way of reaching out to the students’ attention, motivation and needs. We talked about this during the 2nd GREJA (a symposium on legal languages held in Lyon, organized by the Universities Lyon 2 and 3 on November 17th and 18th 2011) with other teachers, researchers, translators, interpreters, lawyers. The shared opinion was that teaching the profane was as difficult as teaching the professionals. To conclude, teaching cannot be easy all the time, but my students taught me that they can be my best source of inspiration!