

**BUSINESS ENGLISH AND POLITICAL CORRECTNESS IN  
UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION. A ROMANIAN CASE STUDY**

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***Abstract***

*Political correctness can address the wrongs and the discrimination perpetrated on vulnerable groups or individuals, it can stretch one's mind to make it more inclusive, and it can help one's business. Finely woven into the tapestry of the past 40 years with its present acceptance, yet originating in the early communist regimes, PC keeps a low profile in Romania.*

*The article documents an undergraduate initiative meant to sensitize business students to the complexity and the benefits of a PC behaviour. Despite the active learning approach employed and the careful design of the PC training, the results documented by means of a case study and supplemented by interviews and a focus group were inconsistent over time.*

**Keywords:** PC behaviour, sensitivity training in the Business English class, inclusive attitude to vulnerable groups, active learning, erratic PC behaviour over time

**1. Preliminaries**

No matter what attitude you may have to Political Correctness, if you are a professional, you certainly cannot ignore it. The term is almost 100 years old, of communist origin, and it appears to have originally referred to ideological attitudes either at the time of Lenin or Mao. In Lenin's Russia or in Mao's China the concept designated activities and attitudes that were in line with the official policies promoted by the Communist Party (Ford, 2017:1).

The concept was revived in the 1980s, this time in a different context and geographic area, in order to address socio-economic injustices. Depending on who you are, how old you are, how healthy you are, and how close to the center of power you can position yourself, you may find Politically Correctness an exhilarating, reparatory, and liberating experience or just the opposite, an inhibiting and constraining social strategy.

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If you support it or you reject it, you are never indifferent and untouched by it. If you treat it like a fad, that will ultimately die out like all fads, or you look upon it as the trigger of a new social paradigm, it is still intrinsically part of the 21st century social mould.

As such, the Business English class offers multiple opportunities to raise the students' awareness of Politically Correct/PC terminology and approaches. The present case study documents - in a concise fashion and by means of an illustrative case study - the activities that we developed in class for this very purpose, the students' response to PC lore that the activities facilitated, and also the students' long-term recall and internalization of PC-related issues.

## **2. Background**

To some people Political Correctness/PC may look more like “a ‘process of making judgments from the vantage point of a particular ideology’, and it usually represents a strong moral commitment that also carries a halo of special modernity and a high level of civilization” (Magnani, 2016:264). The range of reactions to PC and the circumstances underlying these reactions are so varied that “for some, PC now primes the prohibition of speech that is seen as derogatory toward historically marginalized groups, and well as the encouragement of more multicultural perspectives. ... Those in support of PC claim that using more inclusive language representing more diverse voices in college classrooms helps improve the lives of members of marginalized groups” (Ford, 2017:1)

Business English offers a fertile ground to Political Correctness while the demographics of the undergraduate student population in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies highly recommends the approach: with women accounting for 51.2% of Romania's population, only one in 4 Romanian employers is a woman; in addition, women will make 8.5% less than their male counterparts and the average woman-headed household in Romania makes only 67% of what the male-headed household makes (Greabu, Apostol, 2013). The latest sex ratio and population figures for Romania which are available on [countrymeters.info](http://countrymeters.info) and are based on the latest United Nations data indicate 940 males to 1000 females, which is lower than the global sex ratio.

Although Romanian legislation penalizes discrimination and in many countries “laws now protect traditionally underrepresented groups from blatant discrimination in hiring and promotion” (Elyet al., 2006:2), Political Correctness appears to still have a low profile among the academic population in Romania. This is the very rationale for the present research which centers on a case study that builds on empirical inquiry and explores the phenomenon within its real-life environment.

Third year students' apparent lack of interest in the Politically Correct approach to Business English intrigued me, all the more so as in the three third-year groups that I taught in the previous academic year and which inspired the case study, female students accounted for 55-70% of the student population. The case study relied extensively on my observations of student awareness, recognition and usage of PC terminology in the weekly Business English class over one full academic semester. The observations were enriched and reinforced, as the case may be, by a focus group with the three top students in the group in terms of their English proficiency, three students of average proficiency and two students with lower language skills.

The observations focused on the PC issues occurring mostly in reading texts, business articles, and TED talks. The students were sensitized to them through support questions and relevant comments and they were subsequently invited to come up with a gender-related justification of the PC term discussed. We also explored their own personal reaction to the PC terminology under discussion and the relevance of the terms in the context of their life experience and background in a loosely structured, informal sensitivity training.

Of the many forms of discrimination that PC addresses, we chose to focus strictly on gender and partnership issues, in an attempt to help students identify and ultimately eliminate the bias that “feeds into negative stereotypes” (Ely et al, 2006:2). Topics around a range of business skills - such as chairing meetings, entrepreneurship branching out into indispensable activities like setting up a business and expanding the business, sales and marketing, to mention just a few – lent themselves to our awareness-raising approach.

Towards the end of the semester the learning activities which originally had focused on recognition and socio-economic justification of the PC term acquired a productive dimension as the students working in small groups designed their own examples of politically correct behaviour that they subsequently shared with their colleagues in the form of minimalistic sketches that they performed in class.

Some of the students’ examples of political correctness in business and beyond were built around names of professions in English which were originally associated with the male gender - such as business man, chairman, sales man, foreman, clergyman, and the like - and which gradually opened up to women. The goal of the activity was to help the students give up the assumption that the respective professions were man-held by default.

A similar approach was taken when providing information on the students’ “significant other” and on the benefits arising from adopting the generic, gender-neutral term “partner” instead of terms like husband and wife, or girlfriend and boyfriend, which are very specific about the partner’s gender and, implicitly, assume the respective person’s sexual orientation or indicate the type of relationship and/or marital status.

The student-generated sketches were perceived both by their own creators and by the viewers as powerful carriers of meaning. In line with the research findings on learning retention rates, the sketches appeared to generate a lot of learning of PC behaviour, as the participants in the focus group revealed. In keeping with the research around learning retention rates that are visually symbolised by the learning pyramid, the students’ recall rates were high on account of two reasons: they invested themselves in the learning process and their learning was facilitated by participatory teaching methods: as they worked in teams, group work was the prevailing approach; in addition, they practised the PC behaviour by simulating it; and finally, by performing their sketch in front of their colleagues they actually taught them how to handle situations that were volatile from the PC perspective.

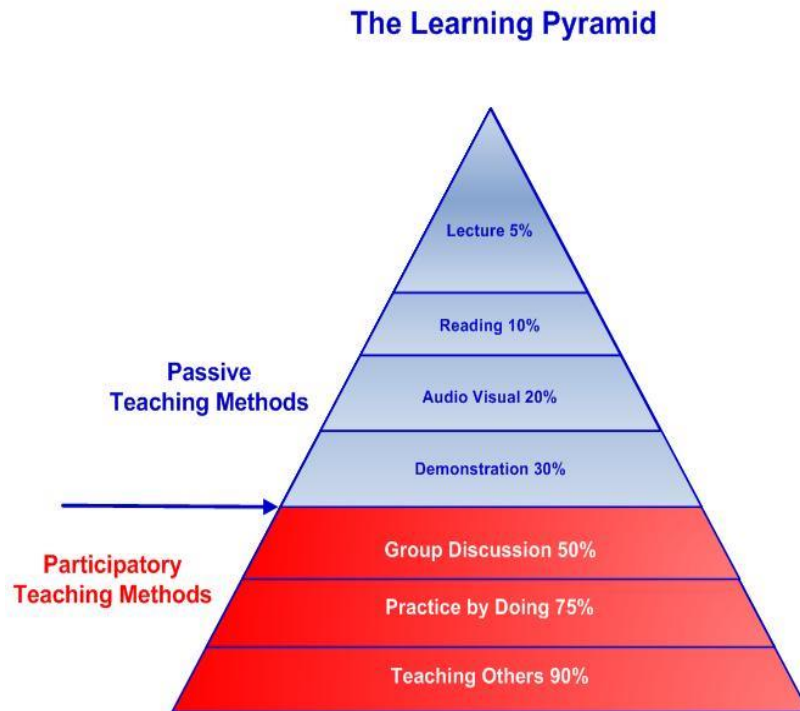


Fig. 1. Learner recall or learning retention rates in relation to the teaching method employed<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Findings

Throughout the observations the students demonstrated unflinching interest and engagement in the PC awareness and recognition activities. As concerns the productive stage, they approached it with zest and creativity. They conducted group activities and developed sketches around critical incidents involving instances of discrimination, exclusion, offence and/or downright harm. As the teams took turns to perform their sketches in front of their colleagues, the inherent fun and emulation added to the impact of the activity.

The focus group confirmed my observations and the students expressed satisfaction with the learning content and repeatedly verbalized their excitement about the PC behaviour they had explored. PC was making new friends and we were moving in the right direction. Or so it seemed.

In the following sessions the students recalled the PC “feast” and the active learning they had experimented. Despite the massive enthusiasm and their fond recollections of both the PC teaching content and the active learning approach, I soon noticed that they were falling back on their traditional ways, assuming one more time that the activities worth doing in business will necessarily be carried out by men.

Although we developed a working definition of PC in class – PC as the behaviour and language of choice in order to avoid excluding, humiliating, insulting, and harming people who are discriminated against or are perceived as being at a disadvantage within the community, students’ old patterns of behavior began to surface erratically. Despite the active teaching we used extensively, with me asking questions instead of lecturing, and the

<sup>2</sup> Source: <http://thepeakperformancecenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Learning-Pyramid.jpg>

supposedly high retention rate it generates in the learners, the PC behaviour was on and off. The seeds had been planted, but the new plant still required to be nurtured.

#### 4. Conclusions

A group discussion followed by two interviews with the leading students offered at least a partial explanation as to the fleeting effects of our sensitivity training. According to the students, the PC behaviour was discussed and modelled only in the Business English class, therefore their exposure was limited. This suggests that PC awareness needs to be constantly revisited, refreshed and enhanced as the teaching agenda allows it and the opportunity arises. Very much in the same fashion as grammar knowledge is no longer taught to undergraduate students but it is recycled, expanded and approached from the Business English vantage point.

Business training places a strong emphasis on long-term relationships and building on mutual benefits, on developing rapport, on doing business with people you like. Politically incorrect behaviour is not an option under the circumstances. When one uses pejorative labels against various identity groups, on account of gender, race, culture, age or disabilities, among others, one unconsciously reduces them to stereotypes, thus restricting their individual or group rights and opportunities.

Some of the students mentioned that they found the PC approach distracting and that by focusing on the PC vocabulary they were side-tracked, with the focus shifting from content to form. Their perception was that the PC code had an artificial ring and that it put pressure both on the minority group and the majority, further compounding their communication.

Opinions were voiced that PC could be just a strategy to look open-minded and unprejudiced while most of the students insisted on its mission to protect groups vulnerable to discrimination. To take this one step further, “whether the discrimination comes from racism, homophobia, sexism or transphobia, the bottom line remains the same. ‘Being PC’ just means you understand that your actions affect people who are vulnerable to discrimination” (ReachOut Australia).

Clearly more work is required in sensitizing Romanian business students to the benefits of a more inclusive approach that will ultimately benefit the community at large, facilitating productive communication and better business for both the majority and the minority groups. The group I focused on was randomly selected and as such, of questionable representativity. I undertook an informal analysis of the student reactions in the session dedicated to the PC problematique, as well as of my long-term observations of their PC behaviour throughout the academic semester. Therefore I cannot claim that the findings are representative for the Romanian undergraduate population in general.

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Mihaela Arsene, Ph.D. in adult education is an associate professor of business communication with the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, School of Intl Business and Economics, Dept of Modern Languages and Business Communication. The landmarks of her professional development were the master programs she completed in the UK and the USA, with University of Manchester ("Master of Education") and University of San Francisco ("Master of International and Multicultural Education"), under the aegis of the British Council and the Fulbright Commission, respectively. Her research interests lie in the area of teacher education, student empowerment and joyful learning for effective language instruction, U.S. academic excellence, academic writing, and English medium instruction programs.