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**ENGLISH, THE UNIVERSAL CODE OF BUSINESS?  
STUDENT PERCEPTIONS AND MISPERCEPTIONS AT THE BUCHAREST  
UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMIC STUDIES**

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***Abstract***

*The article focused originally on English as the pre-eminent global communication tool in business and on student perceptions of it, in an attempt to boost student motivation and enhance language learning. During the research this approach was also juxtaposed with the EU multilingualism policy, which also appeared to carry much promise and incentives for upgrading language standards in business higher education. To what extent linguistic realities in international business and EU language policies are known to the students in our institution and are perceived as instrumental to increased language proficiency lies at the core of this small-scale research. Ultimately, do our undergraduate students pick the cues from the world business context and the EU official stance on multilingualism and, if so, are they able to act upon them in order to upgrade their language learning? The article answers these questions and raises more in the process.*

**Keywords:** pre-eminence of English, EU multilingualism project, undergraduate business students, fine perceptions yet limited action, unbridged gap.

***1. Introduction***

This paper has been inspired by the Romanian students in the School of International Business and Economics who study Business Communication in English throughout their undergraduate program. They also study a second foreign language for business purposes, commonly French or German.

The School of International Business and Economics in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies generally attracts very competitive students, with a language proficiency level ranging, as a rule, from B1 and B2 to C1 and C2, less so in writing.

As a member of the European Union, Romanian academic institutions have developed comprehensive curricula in response to the EU multilingualism and multiculturalism policies.

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In this context, the environment for language learning for business purposes in our institution looks ripe for student linguistic upgrades. But are the students aware of these trends and policies? Do they respond to them? Does the promise held by these policies actually materialize in increased language proficiency? These questions are pivotal to the present small-scale research.

## **2. Scope of Research**

My research hypothesis was that undergraduate students of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies/BUES were already fully aware of English as the global language of business. Moreover, BUES students appeared to grasp the ubiquitous role played by English in today's manifold activities, ranging from trade and business to diplomacy, from science to IT, and from education to music, entertainment, and travel. I consequently expected this awareness to underlie their motivation to upgrade their language skills in general and their Business English proficiency in particular, alongside their overall foreign language standards.

My assumption was that once the students documented the prevailing role of English in all the major fields of activity and its association to success, as in statements like "English is the language of success", they will develop an increased motivation that will ultimately contribute to enhancing their language standards. As concerns the perception that a good command of English is instrumental to success in business and beyond, a more nuanced approach is available in what follows: "English language skills may not solve all the problems facing the parts of the world with the largest youthful populations, but English gives talented young people from those places an opportunity to participate in the global knowledge economy, share ideas around economic and social development, and give themselves options for the future." (Global English)

Although documenting student awareness of English as *lingua franca* was the main goal of my research, its relationship to the other languages studied for business purposes at the BUES in response to the EU emphasis on multilingual policies became an inescapable side topic to be also pursued in this small-scale research.

## **3. Methodology**

I intended research to be minimally invasive, therefore I relied on techniques of qualitative research, such as focus groups and observation. The focus groups were formed ad hoc, at the end of three teaching periods, and they included three groups of second year students, 81 in all, who split into focus groups of maximum 8 students. The focus group participants were most of them aged 19 or 20. In their focus groups they engaged in guided and then open discussion around the study "Global Business Speaks English: Why You Need a Language Strategy Now," by T. Neeley, published by the Harvard Business Review in 2012.

The students were informed about the focus of the research work and they enthusiastically agreed to participate in it. I acted as moderator of the discussions which built on the Harvard Business Review Article and reacted to it. In this capacity I guided the discussions and encouraged the participants to get involved and express their views. I also directed their attention to reflecting, identifying, and sharing their own first-hand experiences of the benefits of speaking Business English for their professional development and career growth while still in progress with their undergraduate program - as a significant percentage of the full-time students hold part-time jobs - and/or after graduation.

The ultimate goal of the research was to learn about the students' perception of the relevance of learning Business English and the value they attached to the study of the other foreign languages for business purposes that their curricula accommodates. This was intended as a grass-roots approach to the EU's multilingualism project as seen through the undergraduate students' eyes, basically a reality check of the relevance students perceive in it.

In logistical terms, it will certainly help to add that each of the multiple focus groups mentioned above took between 40 and 60 minutes and was held at the Pizza Hut across the University where the participants' contribution and hard work was rewarded with communal pizzas. As each student group was split into 3 focus groups, which took turns in engaging the facilitator's guidance and support, the remaining two groups acted as observers and shared their observations with the facilitator at the end of the focus group session.

The data provided by the focus groups were then correlated with the participant observation data which I was able to glean throughout the academic year. In this way, my observation data of the students' perceptions of the usefulness of English study alongside French and German, all three for business purposes, rounded off the qualitative research.

The research intended to highlight students' overall perception of the EU multilingualism policy and, implicitly, the latter's materialization among the core target audience, the younger generation. As such, in preparation of the research I refreshed my knowledge of the steady EU stand on multilingualism as revealed throughout the years. For example, in 2008 the EU clearly stated its preference for a multilingual approach as against an all-English policy: "although English has a leading role as the business language of the world, it is other languages that will provide EU companies with a competitive edge and allow them to conquer new markets" (EU Commission 2008). An EU-commissioned study of 2016 reviewed the relevant core policy as follows: "Multilingualism and the development of European citizens' linguistic abilities are at the heart of the EU's mission. As a reflection of this, in 2002 the European Council met in Barcelona and invited Members States "to improve the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age" and "the establishment of a linguistic competence indicator by 2003". This has been commonly known as the Barcelona goal of the "mother tongue +2" (Cambridge English Language Assessment/Association of Language Testers in Europe: Nick Saville, Esther Gutierrez Eugenio, 2016: 1).

The EU message on multilingualism is loud and clear. Does this imperative call for action carry to the end users, in this particular case the undergraduate students in the BUES? And if they hear the call, do they act on it? Ultimately, does this uniquely European linguistic policy impact student motivation for studying multiple foreign languages, enhancing their determination to acquire proficiency in a range of languages, beyond the two foreign languages they are required to study in the School of International Business and Economics? These were the key questions that prompted my research. The Harvard Business Review article "Global Business Speaks English: Why You Need a Language Strategy Now" (Neeley, 2012), the students' reactions to the article and their opinions on the EU multilingual imperative, together with my long-term observation of their actions in response to it underlie the findings below.

A final comment on the choice of the reading assignment: the article in question focuses on language policies implemented by successful international businesses and analyzes the

benefits and pitfalls of promoting English as the sole corporate language of communication even for business based in countries where English is not the mother tongue. In the process, the article also reinforces the perception of English as the leading language for business worldwide. The quantitative evidence is very powerful: “The fastest-spreading language in human history, English is spoken at a useful level by some 1.75 billion people worldwide—that’s one in every four of us. There are close to 385 million native speakers in countries like the U.S. and Australia, about a billion fluent speakers in formerly colonized nations such as India and Nigeria, and millions of people around the world who’ve studied it as a second language. An estimated 565 million people use it on the internet” (Neeley, 2012:2). The arguments in support of English **only** in international business, as surveyed in the article, are equally pragmatic and undeniable. “There’s no question that unrestricted multilingualism is inefficient and can prevent important interactions from taking place and get in the way of achieving key goals. The need to tightly coordinate tasks and work with customers and partners worldwide has accelerated the move toward English as the official language of business no matter where companies are headquartered” (Idem:11).

The students involved in this research were familiar with this approach from first-year projects intended to raise their awareness of the urgency of developing their Business English. Numbers like the ones below underlie the language policy consistently pursued in the School of International Business and Economics: in addition to its major role in trade and business, English is the leading language in other significant fields. “**English is the language of science.** More than 75% of scientific papers are published in English. In some disciplines, this number is as high as 90%. **English is the language of the internet.** Of the roughly 900 million websites on the Internet, 54.5% are in English. Of the 3 billion Internet users in the world, 851.6 million are English-speaking. The next closest language groups? 704.5 million users are Chinese-speaking and 245.2 million users are Spanish-speaking. English is leader in the Internet Age. **English is the language of the world.** English is spoken in 101 countries and an official language in 35. Arabic is the second most widespread, spoken in 60 countries around the world and an official language in 22. French is third, spoken in 51 countries and an official language in 29.” (AMIDEAST, 2015)

The final point to make is that, as a natural outcome of the pre-eminence of English in all the key fields of human activity worldwide, English attracts the highest number of language learners. “While English lags behind Chinese and Spanish in native speakers (335 million to Chinese’s 1.19 billion and Spanish’s 414 million), it ranks supreme in the number of language learners. There are currently 1.5 billion English language learners worldwide compared to Chinese’s 30 million and Spanish’s 14.5 million. The British Council estimates that there will be 2 billion English language learners by 2020. English’s nearest competitor is French with 82 million current learners. English is geographically and educationally dominant” (AMIDEAST, 2015).

I shared these numbers with the students in the post-reading discussions occasioned by the focus groups. I opted for this particular quote on account of its comprehensive quantitative information, its brevity, its powerful language and clarity. I also found it valuable for the multilingual dimension it helped inject into the conversation around the use of English only in business, in line with the Harvard Business Review Article. Just what the article – adamant in its promotion and perception of English as the global language of business, and implicitly of success, required for balance. Again, I need to emphasize that the primary focus of the article lies elsewhere and the linguistic considerations on the multiple benefits of using English only in business are, in the author’s approach, the means to the end she envisages.

#### **4. Findings**

The Harvard Business Review article as a reading assignment offered a very categorical stance, in stark contrast to the EU policies on the use of foreign languages. This dualistic approach, with English only at one end of the spectrum and multilingualism at the other and nothing much in between turned out to be very helpful and easy to grasp by the participants in the focus groups.

The results are indicative of the students' awareness of the complexity of the linguistic issues at stake. They unanimously expressed their overwhelming interest in developing their Business English, precisely on account of the versatility English displays in all the major fields of activity nowadays and the competitive advantage they could develop around their English proficiency. They appeared to justify their limited enthusiasm for studying one more language for business communication - that is French or German, as the case may be - by means of the English only approach and the massive evidence made available in the Western media on English and its singular relevance to international trade and business.

As the focus groups shifted their interest to the EU multilingual policies, the students reacted with some degree of enthusiasm to the benefits of multilingualism, especially in terms of the pragmatic and financial considerations they emphasized concerning the labour market and the competitive advantage they could develop when proficient in English **and** some other language.

The two approaches that fueled the discussions were so far apart that the students struggled to find ways to somehow harmonize them. Considering the statements they made, the students appeared to see merit in both approaches. As a result, their opinions and comments revealed that they were prepared to make the most of both worlds: study Business English as if it were the one and only language for global business, at the same time developing familiarity with, if not altogether proficiency in another foreign language or even in more than one.

What looks like a perfect formula that they were able to tactfully put together may not be, after all, every language teacher's dream as it may not be entirely truthful and authentic. As mentioned in the Method and data collection section, for the purposes of this research I also relied on my longitudinal observations made throughout the academic year. My perception is that the painting the students candidly painted in the focus groups may be somewhat rosier than it actually is in real life. Their real-life performance in the language sessions they attend in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies may occasionally leave one wondering if they are fully aware that English is the main channel of communication in international business. And the non-verbal communication they consistently display when their classes in other foreign languages for business purposes get mentioned - rolling eyes, sighs, and long faces - may suggest that multilingualism is more appealing in theory than in practice.

My understanding would be that the students' realization that Business English is a key ingredient of success in international business should motivate and inspire them in upgrading their language skills. While their savvy comments on the multiple benefits of mastering other foreign languages in addition to English would suggest zest and commitment when approaching the study of other foreign languages.

## 5. Discussion of the Results

The research documented the students' awareness that international business is conducted extensively in English and that English connects business people all over the world, thereby facilitating the growth of their businesses, their profits and overall success. What English does in the international business community fully resonates with the definition of a lingua franca.

By way of example, the Cambridge Dictionary offers the following on lingua franca: "a language used for communication between groups of people who speak different languages", and illustrates the concept by means of the example: *The international business community sees English as a lingua franca*. The Collins Cobuild Dictionary adds interesting nuances: "A **lingua franca** is a language or way of communicating which is used between people who do not speak one another's native language." and opts for an example that correlates business and English once more: *English is rapidly becoming the lingua franca of Asia*.

To what extent this awareness transfers to the Business English classroom, boosts the students' motivation and impacts their language learning process is a legitimate question which, however, is beyond the scope of the present research. According to my observations, students have the information, but it looks as if they may still miss the determination to act upon it. As if the information has not been fully internalized yet, therefore there is no sense of urgency in the students' response to strike the observer.

As concerns the EU imperative of multilingualism, although this appeared to be well known to the students, this too was found to hardly translate into energetic student initiatives intended to upgrade their language standards. As informal discussions with fellow teachers consistently indicate, with all the trends and policies that students know about, there is still a perceptible sense of contained enthusiasm at best and moderate self-complacency hovering over the language classes for business purposes.

## 6. Conclusions

Despite the small-scale representation of the student population in the Bucharest University of Economic Studies in the study, with only 81 students involved and all of them in the second year of study in the School of International Business and Economics, their perceptions of the role of English as the foremost communication channel in business worldwide come across as homogeneous and consistent. The same is applicable to their views on the EU multilingualism policy. The extent to which this homogeneity in their perceptions may be attributed to groupthink, peer pressure or a conforming attitude to what they perceive as official requirements needs to be further addressed.

The "student misperceptions" mentioned in the title are to me, as I reflect back on the focus groups and the students' observable behaviour in the Business English classes, their very approach to both linguistic stances simply as theoretical constructs that they appear to embrace at intellectual level only, without allowing these constructs to transfer to their academic linguistic routine and to materialize in an increased commitment to language learning conducive to superior language standards. In short, based on the findings of this study, these two approaches hardly inspire and guide the students' practical activity as they

clearly have not been able yet to bridge the gap between top-down policies and grass-roots linguistic practice.

One possible direction of research emerging from the present study could take the conversation with students further and highlight the practical, hands-on activities they perceive as instrumental to upgrading their language standards, and the specific activities they actually engage in to the same purpose. My observation pointed out a fracture, if not a discrepancy altogether, between the students' recognition and acceptance of trends and policies - with English as a lingua franca perceived as a trend, and the EU commitment to multilingualism as a policy – and real-life classroom situations. This is similar, to some extent, to the discrepancy Sue Wright noticed as early as 2009 between the EU multilingualism project and the political recognition of linguistic equality it entailed, on the one hand, and the real-life complexities and social phenomena apparently leading to “linguistic convergence towards a single lingua franca” (Wright, 2009:107).

Until we find ways to mend this fracture, we are left with what the Cambridge English Language Assessment team who reviewed the European Strategy on Multilingualism in view of its implementation at the EU Level call “a simple and intuitive recipe for success: a language is learned better where motivation is high, where learners perceive it to be useful, and where it is indeed used outside school, for example for communicating over the internet, for watching TV or travelling on holiday” (Cambridge English Language Assessment, 2016:Table 1).

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