

ENGLISH IN THE WORKPLACE

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Abstract

My paper will be an exploratory study of the importance of Business English in the professional lives of employees of several companies in Bucharest. It attempts to examine the communication needs of the personnel in the workplace by shedding light on their perceptions of needs, wants and lacks. In addition it attempts to explore the employees' attitudes toward English and the use of English in the workplace.

The purpose of my paper is to look at ways in which teachers of Business English can really adapt their choice of methodology, topics and skills to the requirements of the market and I consider that the only way we can do that is by establishing a closer relationship to the business environment.

Keywords: Business English, Business communication, English for Special Purposes, needs analysis,

Rationale for the Study

That English is today's Lingua Franca goes without saying. Knowing a foreign language is more often than not a requirement in the recruitment and selection process – “In over 80% of vacancies, knowing a foreign language is compulsory” declares Mihai Ganj, Managing Director of International House Romania – this is something that theoretically all students know. And still I have noticed a dramatic decrease in student motivation (or should I say lack of it).

Another issue that made me wonder is that following conversations with friends very much involved in the business life they told me that one doesn't need to know the correct English taught in school, but one only needs to be fluent at all costs and get the message across. I have also encountered a similar idea in a research paper written by Guadalupe Dominguez and Patricia Rokowski in which they claim that company employees' language

competence may contain errors that do not impede understanding or cause communicative breakdowns”.

Also, when dealing with the topic of CV writing several of my students asked me whether the Europass, the format that I requested, is compulsory in companies, and I have to confess I did not know the answer. When dealing with Interviewing they asked me how things are really done and I told them that they needn't worry with such questions and rather concentrate on being well prepared for any real-life situation they might come across, but I did not know the answer myself.

This is how the idea of doing some research on my own came to me. And given that my marketing master's thesis referred to the opinions and level of satisfaction of REI students with respect to the English classes in which I applied a market research tool – the questionnaire, I thought I could give it a try, only this time I wanted to concentrate on the business environment. The main purpose was to reinforce the important role played by English within the labor market.

When writing my dissertation I was inspired by The Prosper Project, this time I was inspired by a research project which has been carried out in our university, “Proiect Prioritar ASE” 2006-2007 – Evaluarea Eficientei Invatamantului in Academia de Studii Economice.

Given how recent this project is I will concentrate on its findings which I consider to be of interest to us, teachers of Business English.

The methodology of the project “Evaluarea Eficientei Invatamantului in Academia de Studii Economice” was based on fundamental concepts such as efficiency, quality, qualification and/or higher education services “consumer” satisfaction. The volume presents on the one hand, methodological recommendations regarding the in-depth knowledge of the various aspects of the efficiency of education provided by a higher education institution and on the other hand, recommendations as to the interpretation of data gathered following the administration of questionnaires designed to find out opinions of potential candidates, students, teachers, graduates and their employers.

For the purpose of my paper, I focused on the data and recommendations on their interpretation concerning graduates and employers.

Employers' opinions regarding ASE graduates competences/performance:

Surprisingly (or not?) when selecting a candidate for a position which requires high economic training, the most important criteria mentioned by employers were those referring to the candidates' “professional experience” and especially “moral and psychological

qualities”. The team of researchers admit that these are elements over which the university cannot intervene to a high extent.

At the other end – the criteria deemed less important by employers – “the candidates’ school/educational performance” and “the candidate’s extra-curricular activities”. “ That doesn’t come as a surprise, although as teachers it is difficult to acknowledge that the evaluation of students is almost completely ignored by employers”, the team of research acknowledges.

This is unfortunately something that our students are well aware of and our attempts to make them see further into the future is, in most cases, useless, and I think this is one of the reasons why they lack motivation.

Further on, the report emphasizes that none of the respondents was dissatisfied with the ASE graduates’ performance on the job. This leads to the conclusion that despite some weak points and recommendations expressed by employers, the activity of our institution is a good one.

Among the strenghts mentioned : graduates are well prepared, they have solid speciality knowledge, communication skills, fast learners, foreign language skills, they are serious, they can work in teams.

Among the weak points: theoretical knowledge, **low level of foreign languages**, the desire to get promoted too quickly, lack of experience, shallowness, expectations above their level, insufficient personal organization, lack of initiative.

However, when asked to express opinions regarding certain aspects, this is what employers mentioned with regard to foreign language knowledge :

	Degree of requirement satisfaction				
	completely	to a large extent	neither nor	to a small extent	not at all
The Organization’s requirements for graduates					
foreign language knowledge	18%	52,8%	19,8%	2,9%	0,8%

So, on the one hand they are satisfied with the graduates’ knowledge of foreign languages but they also mention the low level of foreign languages among the weak points?

Another interesting aspect mentioned in the report, and one that is consistent with the purpose of my paper – is that according to employers, the main preoccupations of teachers in ASE, should be to collaborate more closely with the business environment. 58,3% of respondents chose this as very important and 29,1% as important.

Just as our students need feedback from teachers to improve overall performance, teachers need feedback not only from their students but also from graduates so that they can adapt their teaching to what really goes on in the market.

Data and Methodology

According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), and Dudley-Evans, T. & Jo St John, M. (1998). The best methodology for studying the target needs of any particular group of employees/students is to use such methods as Questionnaires, follow-up interviews, collection of authentic workplace texts, and visits to the workplace.

In order to have an approximate idea of the authentic situation of the English language in the workplace nowadays, I devised a questionnaire and I asked friends and acquaintances from 5 companies to give it to their colleagues. The 5 companies were: Mercedes Benz Romania, Raiffeisen Bank, EFG Retail services IFN, Unicredit Tiriatic, Hewlett Packard - Global eBusiness Operations Center (GeBOC).

The questionnaire was designed to elicit different types of data on the employees' use of English in the workplace for different purposes, target needs, wants, lacks.

I am well aware of the highly limited scope of my questionnaire and its various limitations, but I like to think of it as a personal attempt to bring further proof that English still counts, that it is not just an overused phrase, as many of my students seem to think. And I think, we, as teachers of Business English need to find ways to raise their awareness in this respect.

The questionnaire contains 19 questions related to the use of English within the work place and analyses the use those polled make of the traditional four skills.

I will further list the main limitations of my research: the sample of respondents, which, due to its informal character, numbered only 45 employees, their heterogeneity, the phrasing of several questions, the lack of other, more relevant questions that I should/could have used, the lack of in-depth knowledge as far as encoding the answers, the lack of scientifically data analysis procedures.

Notwithstanding, the empirical analysis of the data obtained was able to show some interesting results as far as the use of English is concerned.

The descriptive features of those polled:

Companies:

Mercedes Benz - 17 respondents; Departments: Human Resources – 3 respondents (1 HR director, 2 HR specialists); Finance and Accounting – 4 respondents (3 financial analysts, 1 –

reception); After Sales and Marketing – 7 (1 marketing specialist, 1 client service/customer care representative, 1 – order processing, 1 administrative assistant); Car and Truck Spare parts – 3 respondents (1 economist, 1 commercial technical representative, 1 engineer)

Raiffeisen Bank – 7 respondents - 1 department manager, 1 assistant director, 2 restructuring analysts, 3 recuperating officers

EFG Retail Services IFN – 5 respondents - 4 financial accounting, 1 financial analyst, 1 cashier

Global E-business Operations (GeBOC)– HP - 6 respondents - Departments: Commercial operations - 3 operation specialist, 1 client service analyst; Customer support – 1 fraud analyst, 1 Department manager

Unicredit Tiriac: – 10 respondents; Department - Loan Administration (9 loan administrators, 1 – Coordinator Large Corporate and Real Estate (management)), IT software development – 1 software developer/analysis, Restructuring – 1 restructuring officer

Other observations:

- most respondents – subordinate position and just 3 management positions
- most respondents have graduated fairly recently
- most respondents graduated The Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies or other financial institutions, a few Politehnica University of Bucharest, and fewer still, The Faculty of Foreign Languages - The University of Bucharest

Findings of the research:

➤ All respondents use English at work. (7 Mercedes employees also use German). English use is deemed very important by 48% of respondents and important by 46%, just 3.6% considered it rather important and only one respondent chose not important.

➤ I have to say that question nr. 10 – What type of skill do you use most often? suggested the respondents choose one answer which is not what I intended, however, most respondents chose more than one, some chose one and some chose all answers. This should not happen in a professional questionnaire but an empirical analysis of the answers allows us to observe one phenomenon, that most respondents chose reading and writing and just 8 chose listening and 11 out of 45 chose speaking and in those cases the employees' position involves dealing with customers. Thus, 55% - reading, 71% - writing, 17% - listening and 24% - speaking.

The reason why so few chose speaking might have been because of how the question was phrased or because the employees' position does not in fact imply so much of this skill. However further investigation and research in companies belonging to different domains of activity could show that there is a strong correlation between the place of work and the

effective needs of workers in terms of language skills practiced and terminology used. (as observed by Edwards (2000) with the occasion of a study which took place in a specialized business context involving senior German bankers, and cited by Mahmoud Al-Khatib, in his article “English in the workplace: an analysis of the communication needs of tourism and banking personnel”). This is important for us as teachers in our choice of materials and textbooks and activities.

➤ When asked in which situations they need English at their workplace, 45, 86% chose written communication within the company, 80% chose verbal communication within the company – which is rather inconsistent with the previous result, and would need further investigation. All 45 respondents need English to read materials, 33% chose written communication with company clients, 26% - oral communication with company clients and 28% - business travelling.

➤ 66% of respondents need English to communicate with colleagues – here I should have asked for details; 64% - business correspondence, 44% - business presentations, 51% - business meetings, 24% - negotiations and 66% need English for research. In the following section I will provide a better version of several questions.

➤ Regarding the level of English necessary to handle the requirements of the job, the results (5 chose excellent, 48% chose very good, 40% - good,) match the words of Mihai Ganj, Managing Director of International House Romania “As far as the requirements of the companies regarding the employees’ level of English are concerned, these are very clear, at the recruitment stage and the promotion one. For top managers the minimum necessary level is Upper-Intermediate and for middle-management the minimum necessary level is Intermediate” (www.finaciarul.com)

I consider that I should have introduced the general scale of assessment – pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate, advanced, proficient.

➤ All 45 employees self-assessed their skills, most of them chose good and very good, fewer chose excellent (4 for speaking, 11 for reading, 9 for listening and 5 for writing) and even fewer satisfactory (9 respondents for speaking skills, 2 for reading, 2 for listening and 4 for writing). Only 3 respondents chose weak for writing skills.

➤ 55% considered that their level of English is enough but could be improved, 28% that they can handle but it could be improved and only 4 admitted their level is not enough.

➤ In question 18 respondents had to decide what skills they would like/ need to improve? – I should have been more specific, and only choose “do you need”. 62% chose the specialized

lexical corpus and technical terms; grammar - 55%; writing skills - 22%; listening skills – 15% and speaking skills – 48%.

That many employees are interested in improving their vocabulary or speaking skills comes as no surprise, but what really drew my attention was how many employees chose grammar. This goes together with my experience in class, either with my students, or with graduates, as in both cases I have noticed that there are huge gaps in their language accuracy. As far as my students are concerned, they lack elementary level knowledge: verb-subject agreement, uncountable nouns, word order in English, asking questions. And I consider that besides focusing on communicative tasks that will undoubtedly help our students in their professional lives we need to focus on remedial work as well.

➤ The following three questions refer to English courses and I wanted to see if employees are investing in their development. Unfortunately the wording of the question is not very indicative of this as “Did you attend English courses, beside school/the faculty?” (Q17) does not point to courses that employees took while on the job.

A better version of the question would have been: Since graduating/After starting your professional life, have you taken English courses?

So the answers, **yes** chosen by 21 respondents and **no** by 25 just indicates that as pupils/students, respondents needed extra English classes beside what they did in school, be them private lessons or courses in languages schools. As to why it was necessary to attend these courses (Q 19), predictably, 10 chose “to obtain certificates”, just 2 chose “promotion”, and as I have read English is not a criterion in companies in order to get promoted, because it is a pre-requisite, and the other 11 chose personal interest which is very vague and I should have asked another open question, so that they could further explain what they mean. I might have added one more alternative, concerning access to funds and projects.

Improving the questionnaire:

- Devising a questionnaire with a clearer objective, tailor-made for specific workplaces or business sectors.
- Instead of question 9: How often do you use English at work? never, hardly, ever, frequently – better to show the use of English in the workplace
- Instead of question 10, a much more relevant question would have been: How often do you use the following skills?

	never	hardly ever	often	frequently	always
reading					
writing					
listening					
speaking					

- Instead of question 15, I should have asked – What are you doing to improve your level of English? With the alternatives: organized courses, private lessons, reading, listening to TV and radio programs, on-line platforms, other.
- How often do you use oral/written communication skills in your present post? Every day, frequently, very occasionally, rarely, hardly ever, never

Other questions that a thorough questionnaire should include:

- Do you think English is important during university study?
- Was English useful when studying it at the university? or Is the English that you studied at the university useful for your present post?
- Did your level of English help you to get the present job?
- Was English a criterion in getting the job?
- A detailed list of tasks they have to perform on the job:

At present you use English for the following
To read
specialist literature , e-mails, operation manuals, technical documents, business correspondence, contracts,
To write
filling in forms, e-mails, business correspondence, reports, specialist papers
For interpersonal communication
telephoning, meetings and discussions, presentations, socializing, negotiations

- I should have also introduced an open question: Other comments in order to find out their ideas, suggestions

The second part of my research:

In addition to the questionnaire I have also asked my contact people in these companies the following questions, in order to get a more insightful perspective:

Does your company test the applicants' level of English?

What is the minimum level of English required from applicants? Does the company require the European Language Portfolio or the Europass CV?

Do applicants need a certificate in English?

Are language skills a requirement for promotion?

Does your company pay for language courses?

Their conclusions are that if the vacancy requires knowledge of English, the companies will test the employees (in Appendix 2 there is a sample test given by Mercedes HR specialists); that language certificates are not a requirement and are not taken for granted even if applicants have them, that English is definitely a must especially in companies such as Geboc and IngRomania, in which English is the corporate language and that training is more and more offered by companies in the form of access to on-line learning platforms, thus the employee becomes responsible for his/her own development.

Conclusions

Being fully aware of the limitations of my research I consider it does provide some food for thought for teachers of Business English and also for our students. We need to constantly relate to real-life situations, from Romania especially, in order to increase their motivation. This was in fact the main purpose of my paper, to try and bring the workplace closer to us as teachers and closer to our students. I think teachers should keep open the channels of communication with their graduate students; we should be more informed as to what is really going on in Romanian companies or multinationals, something that the Prosper Project dealt with so successfully more than 10 years ago.

Moreover, although I do not challenge the importance of the communicative approach to teaching language, nor the ESP principles, I consider that striking a balance between communicative tasks and language and grammar input is of utmost importance. One cannot communicate fluently enough in demanding business contexts that call for one's persuasiveness, refinement, politeness, coherence, cohesion and so on, if one does not have a proper language foundation. Unfortunately our students have different backgrounds, we usually have to deal with mixed-ability classes and this makes it difficult for us to address their language and grammar gaps appropriately.

Appendix 1

Bună ziua, mă numesc Simona Ionel, sunt asistent universitar și predau limba engleză pentru afaceri în cadrul Academiei de Studii Economice. Vreau să utilizez rezultatele acestui chestionar pentru îmbunătățirea activității didactice dar și pentru motivarea studenților și adaptarea actului didactic la cerințele pieței muncii.

Vă mulțumesc pentru timpul și ajutorul acordat.

1. Care este numele companiei dvs. și care este domeniul de activitate?

Numele companiei: _____

Domeniul de activitate: _____

2. În ce departament al companiei activați? _____

3. Care este poziția dvs. în cadrul companiei? _____

4. Este o poziție de:

1. management
2. execuție

5. De cât timp ocupați această poziție?

_____ ani, _____ luni

6. Ce facultate ați absolvit și în ce an?

Facultatea: _____

Anul de absolvire: _____

7. Ce limbi străine folosiți la locul de munca? (Puteți să optați și pentru mai multe opțiuni)

1. engleză
2. franceză
3. germană
4. italiană
5. spaniolă
6. altele: _____
7. nici o limba străină

(Următoarele întrebări sunt adresate celor care utilizează engleză la locul de muncă)

8. Cât de importantă este folosirea limbii engleze în compania/instituția în care lucrați?

Nu este deloc importantă							Este foarte importantă
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

9. Ce tip de competență folosiți cel mai des?

1. citit
2. scris
3. ascultat
4. vorbit

10. În ce situații aveți nevoie de limba engleză la locul de muncă? (Puteți să optați și pentru mai multe opțiuni)

1. pentru comunicare scrisă în interiorul companiei
2. pentru comunicare verbală în interiorul companiei
3. pentru comunicare scrisă cu clienții companiei
4. pentru comunicare orală cu clienții companiei
5. pentru călătorii de afaceri în străinătate
6. pentru a studia în aceasta limba
7. pentru promovare
8. pentru a citi materiale în limba engleză
9. pentru a privi programe în limba engleză
10. alt răspuns: _____

11. Pentru ce activități aveți nevoie de limba engleză? (Puteți să optați și pentru mai multe opțiuni)

1. corespondență de afaceri
2. prezentări de afaceri
3. întâlniri de afaceri
4. negocieri
5. documentare
6. comunicare cu colegii
7. pentru PR
8. alt răspuns: _____

12. Care este nivelul de limbă necesar pentru a putea face față cerințelor postului pe care îl aveți?

1. excelent
2. foarte bun
3. bun
4. satisfăcător
5. slab

13. Vă rog să vă auto-evaluați competențele în limba engleză!

	excelent	foarte bun	bun	satisfăcător	slab
vorbit					
citit					
ascultat					
scris					

14. Considerați că trebuie să vă îmbunătățiți nivelul de limba engleză pentru a performa mai bine (profesional/ personal), sau vă este suficient nivelul pe care îl aveți în acest moment?

1. este suficient, mă descurc excelent pe toate planurile
2. este suficient dar se poate îmbunătăți
3. mă descurc dar trebuie îmbunătățit
4. este insuficient și trebuie îmbunătățit
5. este mult sub nivelul acceptat

15. Ați prefera:

1. un curs clasic
2. metode alternative (de exemplu excursii în străinătate, burse de studiu, tabere internaționale)
3. altele: _____

16. Care sunt competențele pe care ați vrea/este necesar să le îmbunătățiți?

1. corpusul lexical specializat și de termeni tehnici
2. gramatica
3. scriere
4. citire
5. ascultare
6. vorbire
7. altele _____

17. Ați avut nevoie și ați urmat cursuri de limba engleză, suplimentar față de ceea ce ați învățat în școală/facultate?

1. da
2. nu

18. Dacă răspunsul la întrebarea anterioară este DA, unde ați urmat aceste cursuri?

19. Care este motivul pentru care a fost necesar să urmați cursuri suplimentare de limba engleză?

1. obținere certificate (Cambridge, Toefl, Ielts etc.)
2. promovare
3. pentru a lucra în străinătate
4. interes personal

Vă mulțumesc pentru timpul și ajutorul acordat.

Appendix 2

1. Un client care a comandat un Mercedes C Klasse, a primit un pachet de optiuni diferit de cel comandat. In loc de Elegance a primit Avangarde. Directorul de la Financial Services te roaga sa ii scrii o scrisoare prin care Compania MBRO isi cere scuze pentru neintelegere, si il asigura ca va remedia problema.

- in engleza
2. Un memo prin care anunti departamentul de resurse umane ca un coleg si-a dat demisia.
- in engleza
3. Un memo prin care anunti colegii despre noul program de training. In acelasi timp le solicitati sa iti comunice orele in care sunt disponibili pentru training pentru a forma apoi grupe.
- in engleza

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