

# THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE – A BRIDGE TO THE EUROPEAN UNION

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## **Abstract**

*This paper presents both the benefits of the ECL examination and The English Language – A Bridge to the European Union, a project co-financed by the European Union, a seven-month partnership between "Spiru Haret" University and Hârșova City Council. The project is striving to harmonize local and national interests with European Union economic and social structures, to promote, develop and improve cooperation and coordination with such structures through **English**. The main idea is that this particular language should be learnt by the people who work for local and central public administration, thus the city clerks will be able to improve their knowledge of English, their reading, speaking, listening and writing skills in order to get easier access to documents in English. After a 72 hour course, the learners took the ECL examination either for A2 or B1 level.*

**Key-words:** English, ECL examination, European Structural Funds.

**1. The English Language – A Bridge to the European Union** [5] is a project proposed and run by a team of professors [1] willing to apply their knowledge to practice in order to help local community. Although they teach and do research in various fields, they joined their efforts, through English, in 2009, in a common, interdisciplinary project. It is actually a partnership between a Romanian university and a Romanian city council. The teaching staff provides the "know how" in order to train city clerks and make them better

prepared for their job. The project involves courses in English, management, environment protection, informatics, communication, European law, accounting; workshops, conferences, and a council clerk exchange in a neighboring country - Hungary.

Various European programmes represent invaluable help and source of experience for universities in Central and Eastern Europe. All universities welcome the chance to be involved in numerous projects that introduce workers of different fields to the area of European cooperation. Josef Hynek and Antonín Slabý (2001) describe their projects, their development, evolution of partnership, the problems which arose and were solved. The main stress is given to expertise obtained, methods of assessment, persistent links and their influence on integration to EU educational and research programmes, through English language.

According to the official contract, *The English Language – A Bridge to the European Union* is a project co-financed by the European Union, a seven-month partnership between the Romanian private university *Spiru Haret* and Hârşova City Council. The initiators and promoters have set bold, demanding objectives, tasks and follow-up activities.

The project is striving to harmonize local and national interests with European Union economic and social structures, to promote, develop and improve cooperation and coordination with such structures through **English**. The idea is that this particular language should be learnt by the people who work for local and central public administration because English learning can lead to:

- better, and efficient public administration services. The clerks will be able to communicate in English appropriately, fluently, both orally and in writing with potential business partners for the benefit of the local community;
- more and more exchanges of clerks all over Europe in order to learn how public administration problems and issues can be better dealt with;
- applying for more and more projects which can lead to interregional and intercommunity development.

The project has as a main aim the training of city council clerks, through courses in English, which can contribute to better investments in human resources, higher organizational

efficiency and better services provided by the city council on a local, regional, and even national basis, in order to implement educational, economic, and social reforms.

The city clerks will be able to improve their knowledge of English, their reading, speaking, listening and writing skills in order to get easier access to documents in English and mass-media. On the other hand, a minimum specialized vocabulary will help them discuss, and find solutions to problems involving: social and economic issues, European law, environment protection, equality, communication, computerization, business management.

Besides courses, the project will rely on problem solving activities, conferences, an international exchange with clerks from a city council in a neighboring country, like Hungary.

Hopefully, the project will carry out studies that can assist local communities in their attempts to economically develop the region, especially agriculture and tourism.

2. After many years of professional preparatory work, in 1992 the Member States of the European Union established a consortium, centered in London. Its task was to develop a set of standardized language tests in the languages of the Member States of the EU. In accordance with the EU unification policy, the Member States that formed the consortium wanted to ensure equivalency and recognition of the certificates in each language without having to be validated on a national level.

The ECL Consortium [3] is an association of institutions representing European languages. Its aim is:

- to promote the mutual teaching of the languages of Europe (with special respect to the less widely taught and used languages), both in and outside the school context by developing and disseminating a standardised language course system;
- to provide unified, reliable and valid *standards for the assessment* of attained language knowledge with the help of the *ECL language exam*, a *standardised* testing system adapted to the languages of the member states of the European Union and those of the candidate countries;
- to provide *the comparability of certificates obtained and exam results achieved* in the individual languages for both the candidates and the users with the help of the *ECL exam* in accordance with the harmonisation objectives of the European Union.

The essence of standardization lies within the construction of the exam tests, the examination, results evaluation and the bestowment of graduation diplomas based on a set of well-defined principles within a single examination system.

The adaptation of standards for 15 European languages has been performed, based on which the attainment tests are constructed in each language and the ECL exams proceed. The professional responsibility for the ECL language tests is assumed by a prestigious university from the country of origin of each language, which creates the tests and evaluates the papers. Based on the uniform criteria established in the first stage of standardization, ECL exams can be taken in English, German, Spanish, Italian, Croatian, Polish, Slovak, Hungarian, and Romanian and are recognized at a European and international level. The ECL exam's environment is the European Union, however, due to its general aspect it can easily be taken by South or Central American candidates.

The ECL examination system is open to every social category, from students to adult employees. It tests the oral and written capacity to use language in everyday communication on practical, professional and personal subjects, at different degrees of complexity. The ECL exam is useful in the international recognition of language skills, in the attestation of foreign language skills required to pursue studies, do research and seek employment in European countries or anywhere else in the world. It is advantageous for pupils, students, employees and adults who study multiple languages and wish to possess an equivalent language exam portfolio. The ECL exam is a "language passport" that aids in the international recognition of achievements in language study and of different linguistic and multicultural experiences.

The ECL Consortium's efforts regarding language teaching and motivation of language learning are very much appreciated by the competent EU forums, proof of which are its moral appreciation and the allocation of permanent funds for the development and expansion of the ECL examination system.

EUROCENTER AMOBA [2] is the operator of the ECL program in Romania, as a National Examinations Center (NEC). The National ECL Exam Centre co-ordinates the language teaching provided in the framework of the standardised ECL preparatory courses and the organisation and conduct of the ECL exams. University *Spiru Haret* Bucharest is one of the 33 examination test centers in Romania.

For the purpose of our project, the team analyzed different types of internationally recognized types of testing (see Sullivan, Zhong 1998 for TOEFL): Cambridge ESOL, TOEFL, ECL exams. For all reasons mentioned above, we have chosen the ECL examination.

Tests (see Ur 2003, 242-259) in the foreign language teaching field serve specific educational purposes.

Clark (1972) places foreign-language testing activities into the following categories:

- *prognostic testing*, i.e. ‘aptitude or achievement test scores, school grades, teacher ratings [...] used to estimate or “predict” the probable degree of success’ (Clark 1972: 9);
- *achievement testing*, i.e. ‘any skills testing activities which are based on the instructional content of a particular language course and are intended to measure student acquisition of that content’ (Clark 1972: 25);
- *proficiency testing*, i.e. the real-life use of language competencies;
- *knowledge testing*, i.e. testing “culture” of the foreign-language country, its literature, and the foreign language as a subject matter (p. 133).

According to McNamara (2008), language tests differ in respect to test *method* (paper-and-pencil language tests and performance tests) and test *purpose* (achievement and proficiency tests).

Students may prepare for the ECL exams either within the framework of a standardised ECL exam preparatory course co-ordinated by the *Regional ECL Exam Centres* or within other language courses. The language teaching course of 72 hours provided by the project *The English Language – A Bridge to the European Union* was designed as both a preparatory course for the effective and professional preparation for the ECL exam and a language knowledge based course.

Our students were divided into two groups: beginners and intermediates. The first group was trained for the A2 level exam and the second one for the B1 level exam. For the guided course the NEW HEADWAY by Liz & John Soars (Beginner – Student’s Book and Elementary – Workbook, Oxford University Press) was chosen. Besides the 72 class hours course, students had 60 hours of self study.

The main objective was to develop the students’ ability to understand and express him/herself in the spoken and written language, using basic skills, in everyday situations requiring a simple and direct exchange of information. Thus the primary objective was to

enable the candidate to act in the foreign language context/situation, to communicate in everyday situations requiring a simple and direct exchange of information.

The students were trained to establish and maintain communication (respecting spelling rules in writing), to give and receive personal information, to identify and describe people and things, to relate actions in time.

The syntax matters were correlated to the A level of European Framework of Reference for Languages as follows: positive statements and negative statements, open-ended and yes/no questions, polite requests, verbs and prepositions, use of adjectives, use of adverbs of time, place, frequency, manner, use of modal verbs, co-ordinate sentences, use of direct and indirect objects, use of infinitive, use of basic conjunctions (and, but, however, because), use of numerals, use of relative and possessive pronouns, the word order of simple sentences. The basic vocabulary related to everyday situations and to the communicative tasks was strengthened on morphology structures as simple and past tenses, verbs *be* and *do*, pronouns, basic prepositions, quantifiers and numbers.

In addition to the objectives described for level A, the students who applied for the B1 level exam were trained to communicate in a variety of situations and to express personal opinions on familiar topics, to express and respond to feelings such as surprise, happiness, sadness, interest and indifference, to give instructions, to make proposals, suggestions and invitations, to express belief, opinion, agreement and disagreement, intention and discuss events and experiences from the past.

They were encouraged to form imperatives, positive and negative structures, statements with infinitive and gerund, compound and complex sentences, question tags, to use clauses of time, manner, place, purpose, exclamations, and linking devices.

They were introduced to other tenses, such as present perfect, conditional, continuous tenses, past perfect, as well as modals (can, must, may, might), passives, possessive pronouns (statements and interrogatives), comparative and superlative.

Above all, they studied standard British English, extended to include some current colloquialisms.

After passing the complex exam for B1 level, from 11 students 9 got a performance of 91 to 98 % and only two obtained a lower score, respectively 89% and 86%.

From 39 students trained for A2 level exam, two chose only the written exam and passed it successfully and the rest took the complex exam with a performance range between 73% and 93%. (see fig.1)

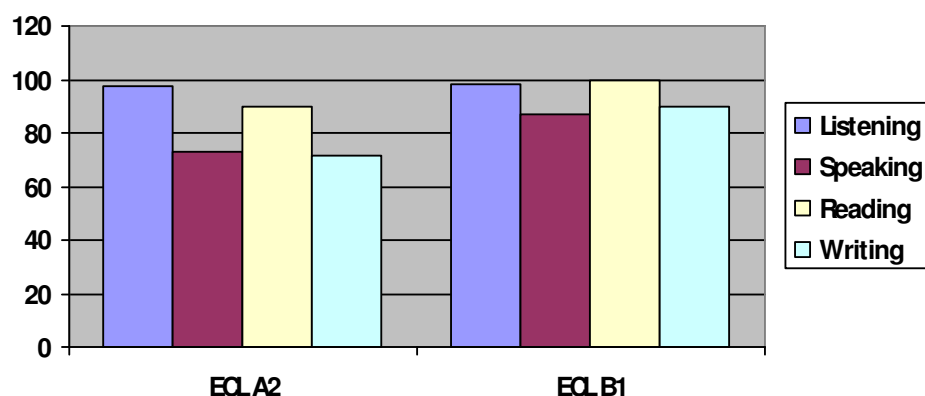


fig. 1

## Conclusions

Any strategy of public administration education should be based on both: competency needs analysis and training needs analysis, which is not easy in the context of rapidly changing economic and social environment. It is particularly difficult in the context of economic crises, which are imposing budgetary restrictions and revision – often reduction - of public administration role, functions, modes and scope of intervention. An adequate institutional framework for strategic human resource development closely interconnected with the administrative reform and modernization process is strongly needed. The project *The English Language – A Bridge to the European Union* is making one step forward in specialized training activities related to the specific field of Civil Service, developing public sector human resource and delivering demanded communicational skills, thus understanding the modern public sector competency needs in acquiring English language knowledge.

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#### Notes

1. The team consists of specialists in teaching English (Lavinia Nădrag, Camelia Boarcăș, Onorina Botezat), in Informatics (Claudiu Chiru), Statistics (Gabriela Neacșu), Economics (Cristian Nicolae), Communication (Olga Dușu), Accounting and auditing (Liana Elefterie), Management (Pompiliu Golea and an ISO company), Environment protection (Alexandru Bologna), European law (Roxana Drumea) and others. The activities are supervised by a team from the Management Authority in the Ministry of Administration and Interior.

2. In Romania, the National Examination Centre is Eurocenter Amoba Training Center in Sfântu Gheorghe.

3. The information about ECL is retrieved from the website <http://www.ecl.org.ro/home/>

4. ***The Secretariat of the ECL Consortium: UNIVERSITY OF PÉCS, Foreign Language Centre***

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[www.ecl-test.com](http://www.ecl-test.com) \* <http://inyt.pte.hu>

5. The web site of the project - <http://engleza-ap.ro/>

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