



Languages for Special Purposes in a Multilingual, Transcultural World

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Professional communication in the world of diversity

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Abstract. Constantly increasing global connectivity, integration and interdependence affect workplace relations which have to be adapted to the new reality. Global workers need to know how to operate in new, often challenging environment, how to understand cultural diversity and ethical issues. Communicative competence is a skill that is top-ranked by employers. It includes all the behaviours and feelings that exist within the participants of the communication process, and which govern interactions. It is essential for establishing appropriate interpersonal and professional relationships that allow building trust and lead to successful workplace communication. Lack of communication skills or lack of confidence in using such skills may hinder the effective use of the language chosen for communication. The Towers Watson 2009/10 Communication ROI Study shows that companies which are highly effective communicators generate higher total return to shareholders over a five-year period than companies paying less attention to communication issues. Yet, there is evidence that European companies make losses due to poor communication. Insufficient knowledge of intercultural issues and its impact on the ultimate outcome of business dealings is common among business personnel in various countries. In times when globalization reached the momentum, the focus of interest of education institutions should be on intercultural training which allows learners to communicate effectively with speakers representing different cultural backgrounds. Recent business college graduates, however, are lacking in communication skills that allow them to be successful in diverse and global work-related environment.

Keywords. Business communication, diversity, intercultural awareness.

1. Introduction

Globalization opens unlimited opportunities in various aspects of life but only for those who can handle the new reality. In times when it reached the momentum, the focus of interest of educational institutions should be not on "teaching to the test" but providing university graduates with skills that will prepare them for challenges ahead and increase their employability. In the corporate world, it is becoming even more apparent and necessary.

For decades people engaged in business, whether as entrepreneurs or educators, tried to answer the question: What guarantees success? Is management more about art or science? Giving an answer in favour of either could be challenged. On the other hand, answering that management is both art and science does not require great wisdom. Although not as old as humanities, business education has a well-established tradition. Schools specializing in teaching business related subjects were known in 18th century e.g., *Aula do Commercio* in Portugal was founded in 1795, Harvard Business School in 1910.

Whichever of the plethora of business education institutions we choose to study at, we can expect to be taught certain core subjects including, among others, economics, entrepreneurship, operations management, strategic management, HRM, business law and ethics, accounting. In most cases the subjects aim at developing hard business skills - concrete areas of knowledge and abilities that can be easily defined, usually learned in schools and from books, and relatively easily measured. This is the science. What is the art? The art is a set of soft skills that business people should possess to work effectively in various roles contexts. According to Gra Direct (2008), although important, the right academic qualifications are not the key requirements. The most valued by employers are: ability to analyse complex information and solve problems, flexibility and adaptability, teamwork, communication skills. More and more often one of the employment prerequisites is fluency in foreign languages, English in particular.

2. Communication in diverse companies

Nowadays English is no longer regarded as one of the foreign languages individuals may wish to learn. It is necessary to operate effectively in the globalized world. There is a growing evidence that English has become the primary language for business communication. In fact “it has come to lead a life of its own as an ergolect, or work language” (Rogers, 1998). GlobalEnglish, one of the global providers of services to companies wishing to develop their employees’ Business English communication skills, surveyed 26,000 of its users to get their perspectives on the globalization of English, trends in business communication, and the needs of global enterprises. According to the results of the Globalization of English 2010 survey “it remains clear that the “flattening” of global business increasingly mandates English competency as a crucial skill for the workplace. A growing number of global workers must communicate in English—both within and outside their company—on a regular basis. 92% of global employees say English is required or important for their job, and this is true at all levels of the organization all over the world. At the same time, only 10% of global workers consider their English fluency as sufficient to communicate effectively at work.

There is evidence that European companies make losses due to poor communication (ELAN Survey 2006). Why? Business communication is always goal oriented and regulated by a set of rules and norms that do not commonly apply in non-professional communication situations. The lexical and grammatical choice often depends on the institutional context and constraints on what is allowable to be said or written. Certain linguistic features may be regarded as more or less appropriate in particular genres as they may affect the way message is received and understood. Modern communication dynamics require much more from communicators engaging in professional discourse than it was necessary before, resulting to a great extent from progress in communication technology, the need for specificity, the unprecedented workplace diversity. To stay on the market businesses have to be sensitive to variations and differences in business encounters as establishing positive relationships may be critical for success.

Global workers need to know how to operate in new, often challenging environment, how to understand cultural diversity and ethical issues. The first thing that comes to mind when thinking about intercultural issues is the communication problem that may appear between representatives of different nationalities. But it does not have to be a clash between e.g., native and immigrant workers. There are many dimensions of diversity, such as sex, age or cultural background. It has been proven that men think differently than women, that people of different age may see things differently as they often have different sets of values, just like people coming from different cultural backgrounds. Bednarek and Caple (2010: 7) claim that “communication is the collaborative construction and negotiation of meaning between the self and others as it occurs within cultural contexts” and explain that the act of communication is not “just about the speaker but also about those who may come in contact with her/his messages (including language, sounds, gestures, and other forms)”. Building rapport requires a set of advanced communication skills, which in the so far relatively homogenous companies, have not been an imperative. Yet, lack of intercultural awareness and understanding of its impact on the ultimate outcome of business dealings is common among business personnel in various countries

An ever growing number of individuals get immersed in situations they have never experienced before. Today’s graduates are technologically sophisticated multitaskers who are deficient in skills that allow them to process information in a variety of ways to accommodate the diversity that exists in the workplace together with the global nature of business (Hartman and McCambridge 2011: 26). Business ‘students should be educated about the dynamics of the interpersonal communication process and should be taught techniques for improving their interpersonal behaviour’ (Hulbert et al, 1987: 25). To this end, business schools introduce various subjects and courses incorporating business communication, including English as a Foreign Language. Planken et al. (2004: 309) notice that “content from other courses (intercultural communication, management, marketing, IBC research, document design) is integrated into FL curriculum”.

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Sometimes an assumption is held that it is the role of an EFL teacher to help learners in “achieving an awareness of cultural diversity and an understanding of different modes of living and behaviour” (Krück, 1992: 299). Despite some efforts undertaken by educators, there is a gap between where business graduates are and where they should be in terms of communication skills.

3. Business communication in lingua franca

Being commonly chosen as a medium for communication, English can be called a “global language” (Crystal 2003) or an “international language” (Jenkins 2003). In 1989 T.S. Elliot argued that a common language needs a common way of thinking and feeling. Yet as M. Kramer (2001:152) notices “despite the prevalence of English in business, we should not assume that our business audience knows our variety of English or understands it well. Furthermore, we should not make the universalistic mistake of assuming that because someone speaks the same language we do, his or her thinking will also be much the same”.

Language is almost always identified as an important element of intercultural communication. It is taken as the medium through which a culture expresses its world view. Language is learned and conveys values, beliefs, attitude, perceptions, norms, etc. The importance of language to intercultural communication is most obvious when cultures speak different languages. Differences in meaning can occur even when different cultures use the ‘same’ language. It is particularly common in use of lingua franca. (House 2003: 573)

Knowing the language system is not enough to enable the speaker to communicate freely. “A lot more is involved: there are rules of use without which rules of grammar would be useless; what is needed is not so much a better understanding of how language is structured, but a better understanding how language is used.” (Dakowska 2007: 92). Effective communication depends, among others, on the right selection of content, proper organization of the content material, on the style and tone a speaker uses in various situations.

As communication process does not take place in isolation but in a social context, it has become obvious that to develop communicative fluency, Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) methodology should not only focus on developing linguistic but also interpersonal skills as they complement each other. Lack of interpersonal skills or lack of confidence in using such skills may hinder the effective use of the studied language. In other words, to be linguistically equipped to get engaged in effective communication acts, foreign language speakers need to possess a well-developed set of competences leading to communicative competence. Competences necessary for communication are defined in detail in The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. According to this document (CEFR 2003) communicative competence includes linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence. Developing language competence has become the main objective of FLT. However, a question that should be asked is how it translates into the ultimate real- life communication process outcome. Since there is not one reliable tool for checking particular professional language competence, communication skills required by each foreign language user are best verified by real life experience. Too often, though, it becomes evident that teaching practices and the performance of language users in their daily professional encounters do not have much in common.

4. Business communication needs and challenges - empirical study analysis

To gain an insight into the possible reasons of the problem, a multi-stage empirical research was undertaken in 2012. The first part of the study, already completed, focused on distinguishing communication skills that business people need to perform their professional duties in typical business situations, and the most effective ways of developing them. The research tool chosen for this stage was a survey distributed among part-time students of various business related

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disciplines at one of the business universities in Poland. The study group was diverse as it consisted of people representing different age groups, different job experience and different types of companies operating in various sectors of economy.

There were 230 questionnaires distributed but six of them could not be analysed due to incorrect completion. Each questionnaire had 22 questions relating to business communicators' needs and skills, both in native and foreign language. The analysis of the results allowed to draw some interesting conclusions, however, due to the limitation of the paper only the issues that are most relevant for its topic will be addressed.

Most of the respondents (67%) admit to using both oral and written communication in their workplace. Only oral forms are used by 25%, while only written by less than 10%.

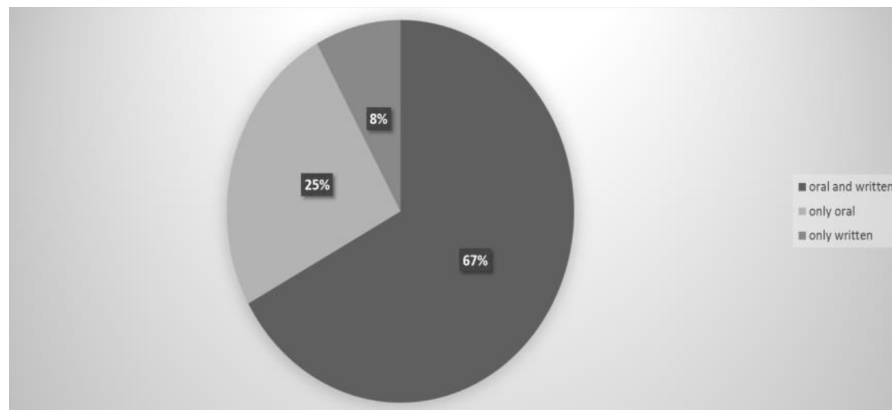


Figure 1: Use of business communication forms

The written forms required on daily basis include (as ranked by the respondents): e-mails, business reports, routine forms, business letters. The oral forms most frequently chosen are: telephone conversations, giving professional presentations, attending and running meetings and business negotiations.

As already mentioned, the respondents work in different types of firms. In originally Polish companies only 52% of the respondents have to communicate professionally in a foreign language, in international corporations 70% of the respondents are engaged in communication in English. This difference is insignificant when it comes to the recognition of the value of fluency in English for professional career.

A majority of the people surveyed regard fluency in foreign languages as a key to professional success. Almost one third of them (28,6%) say that being able to speak a foreign language is necessary, for 42% such an ability is very important, for 21% it is somehow important, and only for less than 9% it is not important. However, 61% of the respondents assess their communication skills in foreign languages as insufficient. It is still a good result compared to the 10% positive response in the already mentioned Globalization of English 2010 survey.

When asked about the biggest challenges of communication in a foreign language they name insufficient knowledge of professional vocabulary, styles and formats of written communication, and insufficient business skills. 15% mentioned intercultural communicative competence as an important issue. The respondents were asked to self-assess their communication skills on a ten-point scale where 1 was the lowest and 10 the highest mark. The skills included: use of professional vocabulary, giving presentations, running meetings, negotiating, writing business documents, intercultural competence. 5% decided that all their skills are on the highest level, while a vast majority chose the level between 5 and 6. Not even one person assessed their skills as lower than 3. There was no significant difference in the number of points allocated to different skills. This question shows that most of the people surveyed are aware of the limitations in their professional performance resulting from poor communication skills, see the need to improve them and declare willingness to do so.

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The most effective way to improve communicative effectiveness is gaining practice and professional experience by performing workplace duties. The second best way according to the respondents, is attending a foreign language course. It needs to be pointed out that this option was chosen both by people who communicate in English in workplace environment and by those who do not use English for work.

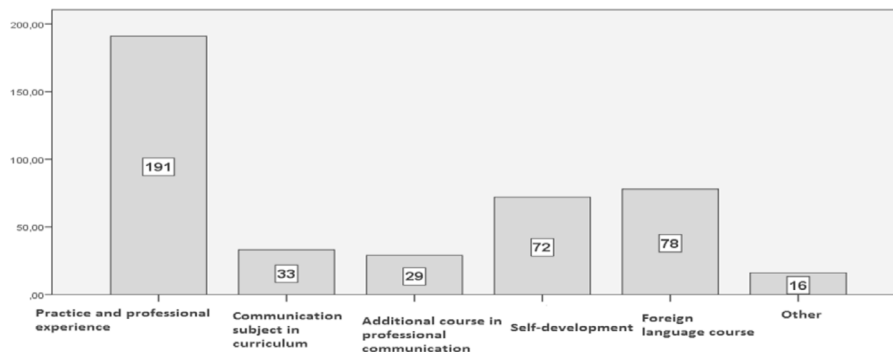


Figure 2: What helps develop communication skills? The respondents could choose more than one option.

As language courses have such an impact on developing professional communication skills, they should be tailored to best meet the communicative needs of those who attend them. One of the questions aimed at eliciting information on what, according to the respondents, English for Business Purposes (EBP) course should focus so that it can effectively improve learners' professional communication skills. They could choose any number of the options given, but were asked to order their preference.

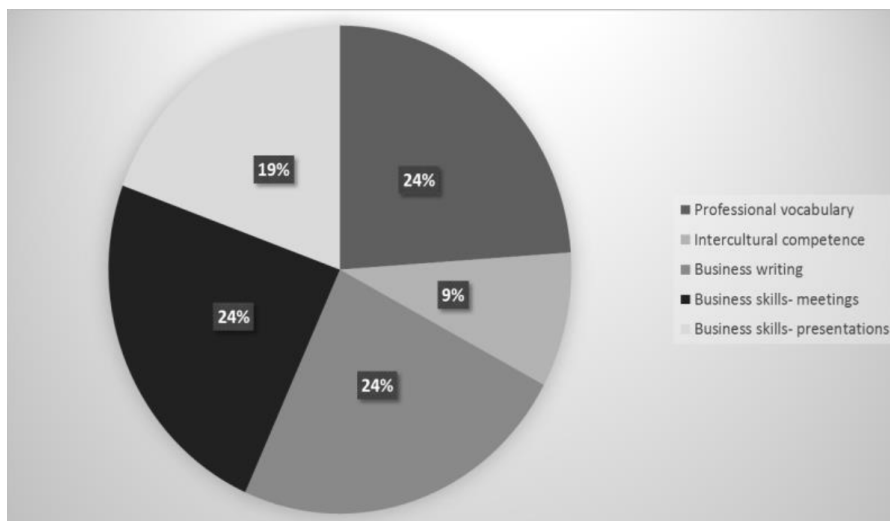


Figure 3: What would you like to learn in an ESP course? The respondents could choose more than one option.

The results show their expectations are mainly expanding the range of professional vocabulary and developing business skills. The least popular choice was developing intercultural competence. Less than 10% indicated interest in gaining this skill.

5. Conclusions

Emphasizing the importance of linguistic skills allowing fluent and effective communication in a foreign language is not new in the history of business communication, but with ever-spreading globalization it gained a new dimension. Language and its usage can be one of the key barriers, particularly in intercultural communication. Effective use of language is difficult to learn. "Words are not passive vehicles into which ideas might be deposited" (Crow 1988: 94).

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Different communities have different ways of doing business. Different business communities have different client expectations. In monocultural ones it is easier to anticipate the reaction of the recipient to a particular speaker's words. In multicultural encounters the impressions the message sender believes his words create may not coincide with the impressions the interlocutors form of him. "However, effective intercultural communication can be learned" (Chick 1990: 255).

The analysis of the study results allows to draw a conclusion that the main concern of non-native users of English is to develop linguistic competence while failing to recognize the importance of the socio-pragmatic component of the communicative competence. The respondents of the survey who wish to improve their communication skills in English believe that knowledge of professional vocabulary together with business skills guarantee effective interactions in all business contexts. They do not realize that as Gerritsen and Nickerson (2009: 182) notice "the literature on lingua franca communication would suggest that BELF communication may fail for one of three reasons, which can occur singly or in combination: lack of comprehensibility, cultural differences and stereotyped associations". Effective communicators know how to demonstrate audience awareness. They carefully consider the arrangement of information e.g., format and structure of the message, the style, tone and level of formality appropriate for business conversation, and the word choice.

In their article "Written Communication Skills of International Business Person", Casady and Wasson (1994: 36) observed: "Companies understand that their success in international business activities hinges on developing cross-cultural appreciation and strengthening fundamental communication skills among their employees for national as well as international business activities". However, the road to effective business communication is still long, and will not get shorter unless users of English understand that developing cultural awareness and sensitivity – elements necessary for developing communicative competence - is not an extra skill but a key to successful global interactions.

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