

Business Communication in Foreign Languages. An Interpretation of Students' Perspectives

Lucia-Mihaela GROSU-RĂDULESCU
Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies

Abstract

This article presents a fresh and up-to-date view of foreign language learning in the Romanian higher education. This research is based on a qualitative analysis of students' opinions regarding foreign language learning at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies.

Two research questions form the core of the present study: "Should English become the lingua franca of business communication?" and "Should English become the single working language in the EU?"

This article will tackle these issues relying on recent studies in the field of European multilingualism and business communication and trying to interpret students' choices and perspectives as expressed in their essay assignments. It will be made apparent that although there are numerous discussions in the EU regarding the European ideal of unity through diversity and the importance of cultural/language individuality, Romanian students are inclined to believe in English becoming the lingua franca of business worldwide without dismissing the importance of learning other foreign languages.

This paper will draw a few conclusions on the present research as well as formulate some suggestions for further study.

Keywords

ESP; business communication; English as lingua franca.

1. Introduction

Since 2007 when Romania became a member of the European Union the issues of multilingualism and multiculturalism have reached our social and academic forums and they have been either acclaimed or criticised. Foreign language learning received special attention when curricula were developed and in higher education institutions such as the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (BUES)³⁷. This is a standard concern which is motivated not only by the "Europeanization" project but also by the shifts on the economic stage brought forth by globalization. The prefix "multi-", especially in the form of "multinational" companies, is attractive to young undergraduate and postgraduate students alike since it carries the values purported by a functional (prosperous) global market.

This article aims at interpreting to what extent students at the BUES are aware that English is becoming the lingua franca of business communication. Another purpose is to identify if students support the idea of multilingualism or if

³⁷Henceforth the Bucharest University of Economic Studies will be abbreviated the BUES.

English as a global language is a better project in the European Union. These two research purposes are joined by an initial curiosity regarding the degree of importance held by ESP classes among the BUES students taking into account the fact that these are mandatory not optional courses in the university's curricula.

2. English as lingua franca and the EU multilingualism policy

In order to have a clearer appreciation of concepts and the recent European state of affairs in what EU languages are concerned we need to review opinions on multilingualism versus English as lingua franca.

The simple definition of "lingua franca" as the Merriam-Webster dictionary informs us is "a language that is used among people who speak various different languages" (Merriam-Webster 2015). The definition is straightforward and it emphasizes the practical use of such a language. Although English is informally recognized to play this role in the world of business, official documents of the European Commission stress the fact that a multilingual approach is deemed to be preferable: "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).

In a fresh and interesting article, "The Elephant in the Room", Sue Wright claims that the multilingualism project of the European Union, one that gives equal status and power to all official languages of the EU is a failed one. She notices that there is a discrepancy between official/ political recognition of linguistic equality and real-life situations.

At present, the linguistic side effect of the current social phenomena is linguistic convergence towards a single lingua franca. Language policy cannot work against these social currents and impose multilingualism from the top down. It alone will not reverse the trend to use English as lingua franca. (Wright 2009: 107)

Wright argues that the perception of any language playing the role of lingua franca to the detriment of another is a negative one because language is closely associated to national identity (100-102). According to M. Byram, culture is defined as "the beliefs and knowledge which members of a social group share by virtue of their membership" (Byram 1989: 81) and one of the main channels through which (national) culture takes form is through language. Therefore, "the identities of the citizens of nation-states are shaped through their imagining of themselves as members of a national language community" (Wright 2009: 100). Wright goes on and analyzes the possibility of listing three EU official lingua francas (English, French and German) and the confusion which such a decision could produce.

Wright's arguments are coherent and her conclusions to the point:

A lingua franca allows contact and exchange across borders and permits the circulation of knowledge. A single lingua franca does this more effectively than a

number of different languages shared by different constellations of groups. A lingua franca is of general benefit to Europeans. (Wright 2009: 114).

In 2014, Juliane House, a German scholar, revisited the idea of English as Lingua Franca (ELF) also from the perspective of the EU multilingualism project. She stresses the extreme efficiency of EFL and its wide expanse at a global level:

[...] the most important features of ELF are its enormous functional flexibility, its variability and spread across many different linguistic, geographical and cultural areas, as well as its openness to foreign forms. Internationally and intranationally, ELF can thus be regarded as a special type of intercultural communication. Since English now has substantially more non-native than native speakers, it is fair to say that English – in its role as a global lingua franca – is no longer owned by its native speakers. (House 2014: 354)

She also formulates an explanation to the global expansion of English as lingua franca which is deeply rooted in world history:

The answer is simple: it is due to the former worldwide British Empire, which was seamlessly replaced after the Second World War by the United States and its current dominant political and economic status. Another facilitating factor is contemporary technological progress driving a demand for fast and efficient international communication – preferably in one language. (House 2014: 364-365)

In the following part of this article we will see to what degree House's poignant explanations as to the expansion of English are met by the BUES students' opinions of this matter.

3. Research method and data collection

As mentioned in the Introduction, the main purpose of this research is to establish if business students are inclined to believe that English should become the lingua franca of business communication and if (learning) other languages is worthwhile in Romania.

The method applied was a thematic qualitative analysis. In an attempt to find out to what extent students at the BUES are aware of the relevance of their ESP classes, I decided to conduct research among my ESP groups and I chose seven first year groups (Faculty of Accounting and Management Information Systems), two third year groups (Faculty of Business and Tourism) and Master students in their first year and second years (International Economy and European Business MA programme and International Economy and Business MA programme). The sample analysed comprised a total of 188 people.

Towards the end of the winter semester 2015, I assigned composition/essay work on fourteen topics³⁸. Because the variety of suggested subjects was

³⁸Here is the full list of essay topics assigned to students: 1) Present your opinion on whether English should become the single working language of the EU.; 2) Discuss the following question: "Should everyone be taught English as to make it the only global language of business?"; 3) Discuss the following question: "Is it worth learning other

adequately wide I infer that the students' choices of topics to discuss are also an indicator to be analysed and interpreted. Since this is not a quantitative analysis, I will only mention that in terms of the essay subjects chosen the largest percentage decided to comment upon the following three topics: 1) Present your opinion on whether English should become the single working language of the EU.; 2) Discuss the following question: "Should everyone be taught English as to make it the only global language of business?"; 3) Discuss the following question: "Is it worth learning other languages apart from English?".

These three themes form the core of my research purpose and surprisingly 52% of first year students, 34% of third year students and an overwhelming 63% of Master students chose them from the suggested list.

4. Findings

I have started this research endeavour from the assumption that the BUES students display a clear understanding of the importance of the ESP classes they attend. In a 2014 study performed on pre-service Czech students, Barbora Chovancová emphasized the fact that ESP offered students "a chance to practise some of the communicative skills, specific terminology and relevant issues typical of their fields" (Chovancová 2014: 45). Her study points to the conclusion that pre-service students are not very much aware as to the purposes of ESP (specifically legal English courses) and their answers "reflect some of the topics that are included in the general English syllabus at secondary schools, which attests to the transitional status of first-year university students" (Chovancová 2014: 52).

The following analysis will show that the answers of the 96³⁹ Romanian business students on learning English for business communication as well as their opinions on the importance of learning other foreign languages show a more focused understanding of ESP than their Czech peers'.

languages apart from English?"; 4) How would you characterize Romanian businesspeople from a cultural perspective?; 5) Discuss the following statement: "When learning business English at university studying grammar is less important than practising conversation skills"; 6) Express your opinion on the following statement: "It's not the strongest species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the most responsive to change" (Charles Darwin). Can this be applied to the business environment? Feel free to provide examples to support your position; 7) Being a business student in Romania – a survival guide; 8) The adoption of Anglicisms into Romanian language – pros and cons; 9) Express your opinion on the following statement: "A friendship founded on business is better than a business founded on friendship" (John D. Rockefeller); 10) Express your opinion on the following statement: "Talk low, talk slow and don't say too much" (John Wayne). Is this good advice when making a business presentation?; 11) State your opinion about work migration nowadays; 12) In your view, can students contribute socially?; 13) Discuss the following quotation: "Price is what you pay. Value is what you get." (Warren Buffet); 14) Express your views on the following opinion: "Innovation is the specific instrument of entrepreneurship...the act that endows resources with a new capacity to create wealth." (Peter F. Drucker).

³⁹The number of students who chose the above mentioned main core topics for their essays.

The main questions that form the core of this research deal with the usefulness of multilingualism versus English as (business) lingua franca. The table below illustrates the students' arguments for both positions.

<i>Importance of English</i>	<i>Importance of Multilingualism</i>
A prerequisite to success and personal development;	To study abroad (in a non-English country);
<i>It is the language of science, technology (especially high technology), aviation, diplomacy, international business;</i>	Socialize with people from different countries and create relationships
<i>Finding a good job in Romania or abroad;</i>	Knowing other languages than English ensures a higher salary;
<i>It is vital to know for researchers to publish their work;</i>	To do research and access more sources of information;
English as a global language helps companies overcome communication problems;	Understand different cultures better;
"If we don't know English we don't exist"(from a business point of view)	Makes you a more open-minded person;
Making English the only official language of the EU is cost effective (as EU institutions hire around 3000 translators)	Multilingualism develops your brain;
English is not difficult to learn and there are many sources from where to learn it (entertainment, internet).	Gives you an advantage for landing a good job (English is not enough).

The students' answers gathered above point to a few important directions which help us draw our conclusions.

One central aspect is that these responses are common to all three categories of students asked, namely first and third year undergraduates (most of them pre-service) and Master students (most of them already employed). Taking this into account and given the equal number of arguments for the two positions we can infer that the BUES students are clearly aware of the essential role played by their ESP courses which supports my initial assumption. This conclusion is also supported by a 2013 study conducted by Irina David on a sample of BUES students regarding their perceptions of business English writing skills. In the article "Developing Business English Writing Skills: Views of Students at The Bucharest University of Economic Studies", the author's findings show that

some respondents consider good writingskills [in English]will offer them a competitive advantage in their future professional life [my emphasis], asmost people of their age can express themselves fairly well in spoken English, butsignificantly fewer can achieve a high level of performance in written English. (David 2013: 15)

Another interesting aspect which needs to be mentioned is the fact that supporters of English as lingua franca do not dismiss the importance of learning other foreign languages as well. None of the respondents had an "extreme" position

from this point of view. Moreover, students displayed a mature attitude concerning the practical usefulness both of ELF⁴⁰ and of multilingualism. I believe their standpoint can be motivated by their main field of study which promotes a pragmatic interpretation of the world.

The arguments students gave regarding the roots of the English language expansion are in line with the ones mentioned by House (364-365) namely that English is the language of science and technology. One student also addressed the issue of the intense American influence in the world and specifically in Romania which she deems double-edged. She argues that borrowing US holidays (such as Valentine's Day or Halloween) is harming our national identity. This stance is closely linked to Sue Wright's belief that national identity is perceived as being constructed as a part of a cultural and "national language community" (100).

Another frequently expressed opinion was that for Romanian business students knowing English has become the norm but it is not enough. Learning other foreign languages such as German, Spanish or more difficult ones like Mandarin or Arabic offers a competitive advantage that should be taken into account when receiving an education in business.

5. Conclusions

This study was prompted by my personal interest as a business English professor at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies to find out if students at different levels of tertiary education are aware of the role played by their ESP courses in what their future plans are concerned. Given that ESP classes are mandatory in our university my purpose was to establish if students perceive them as relevant for their employability and personal development.

I proceeded by allowing students to choose from a variety of assignment topics and I selected the essays dealing with English as the single working language of the EU, English as the global language of business and the importance of learning other foreign languages.

The findings of my analysis point to the general conclusion that both undergraduate and graduate students have a very pragmatic view of the role played by foreign languages in their education, with English taking precedence. Although Romanian is one of the official languages of the European Union, a majority of responses argue that knowing only one's mother tongue does not ensure landing a well-paid job due to the fact that the Romanian job market is dominated by multinational/ multilingual corporations.

It becomes noticeable that students are inclined to perceive the Romanian business world as an active part of the globalizing movements. Knowledge of business English ensures them to have a chance at accessing not only jobs in their country but envisage being selected at an international scale.

One possible further research direction could consider the same assignment topics from the perspective of Romania entering the Schengen area and the Eurozone. Students could approach the subject of ELF and multilingualism from

⁴⁰English as Lingua Franca

the viewpoint of Romania's more powerful position in Europe which could yield interesting results.

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