BUSINESS ENGLISH NEEDS ANALYSIS

– A CASE STUDY AT "PETRU MAIOR" UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This article aims to investigate and analyse the perceived English language needs of first year students who want to get a Bachelor's degree in the fields of Management and Finance – Banking at "Petru Maior" University of Targu Mures. Taking into consideration the specializations mentioned above, the article focuses on the perceived needs of students concerning Business English, not General English. Due to the business and economic development of the last decades, English has rapidly become the language used all over the world in fields such as: Economics, Management, Finance, Banking, Insurance, Negotiations, etc. This was just one of the reasons that led to the the emergence of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). As a result of the development that the fields mentioned have experienced another type of English has emerged from ESP, in order to meet the particular needs of the learners, and this is generally known as Business English.

Keywords: Business English, special vocabulary, English for Specific Purposes

I. Introduction. A theoretical overview.

Needs analysis (NA), also known under the name of needs assessment, is one of the most important characteristics of ESP. Needs analysis has an essential role in domains where courses are tailor-made, being especially designed to meet the specific needs of the learners.

As compared to General English, ESP emphasizes more the importance of needs analysis as a tool in the process of designing the courses. Within the former, the existence of NA as a tool has usually been ignored, mainly because the needs of the learners vary and as a result it is difficult to determine all of them.

According to Dudley-Evans and St John, there are differences regarding the level of focus on needs analysis even within the different types of ESP: "Needs Analysis may indeed be even more fundamental to Business English than to English for Science and Technology, as the learners' needs may vary much more." (Dudley-Evans, St John, 1996, p.2) One of the explanations is the fact that the term ***business*** has various meanings and it involves a wide range of different activities:

> Business is about buying and selling, or more broadly, exchanging and exploiting resources and capabilities. It uses the language of commerce, of finance, of industry, of providing goods and services. It is about people coming together to accomplish things they could not do as individuals. It is about design and innovation, traditions and values, about the exciting and the mundane. It is about cooperation, negotiation, and conflict. It is about persuading and

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> understanding, power and control, explaining and finding solutions to problems. (Frendo, 2005, p.1)

The concept of NA was not considered a priority before the 1970s although it first emerged in India as "analysis of needs" in the 1920s. During this period little research was done focusing on this concept because language teachers did not perceive it as being worth the attention and in consequence they based their teaching on "some kind of intuitive and or informal analysis of learners' needs" (West, 1994, p.1).

The situation started to change after 1970 and during the 1970s the concept was established by the Council of Europe in the field of ESP. Things have been considered from a different perspective since Munby (1978) investigated this concept in detail, classifying learner's needs by creating lists and ticking boxes.

Munby's performance-based approach had a considerable influence in the field, but was somehow limited because failing to investigate areas that other researchers have broadened since then. Some of these are: materials selection, learning strategies, teaching methods, intercultural training.

In the 1980s new larger meanings were added to the term *needs*. One of the researchers in this field, Brindley (1984) in his article on curriculum development, offers a wider definition of the term than the ones previously known and used in needs analysis for educational purposes. The new definition activates other meanings of the term *needs*, i.e. expectations, desires, demands, wants, motivations, lacks, requirements and constraints. The importance of this wider perception of the term is a consequence of the possible conflict between the curriculum and the learners' expectations and assumptions. One of the supporters of this idea is Nunan and he has mentioned that "the effectiveness of a language program will be dictated as much by the attitudes and expectations of the learners as by the specifications of the official curriculum" (1989, p. 176).

One of the new tendencies in this field is represented by the task-based needs analysis (Long, 2005). One of the most important features that distinguishes it from the rest of needs analysis, such as *target situation analysis* (Munby, 1978), *present situation analysis* (Richterich & Chancerel, 1980), and *learning centred approach* (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987), is that this uses tasks as the unit of analysis and syllabus design while the other types mentioned have used linguistic categories (structural, lexical, notional or functional) as units of analysis.

Broadly speaking, regardless of the approach used, a needs analysis provides the teacher with information that helps him/her understand the learning level of the learners at the beginning of the course, the current situation, and the level they need to achieve by the end of the course, the target situation: "A needs analysis helps the teacher to understand the difference between where the learners are, in terms of communicative competence, and where they need to be to meet their business aims." (Fredo, 2005, p. 15)

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II. Business English Needs Analysis at "Petru Maior" University

The needs analysis undertaken for this paper has been designed for the Business English Communication course, attended by first year students at the specialisations Management and Finance – Banking. Some years ago this English course was optional. Fortunately after the Bologna Treaty was adopted it became compulsory.

The typical students attending this course are pre-experienced language learners who do not have any job experience or knowledge in the fields mentioned above. They are supposed to have already acquired the general communication skills and also to have achieved an intermediate level of General English at least. Therefore the course is designed to provide them with specialized vocabulary and to focus on developing communication skills within a specialized business context.

They have this course delivered weekly for a year and a half (three terms – the Management students) and for the first two years (four terms – the Finance – Banking students) respectively. Another distinction consists in the fact that Management students are delivered a one-hour lecture with discussion followed by a two-hour seminar each week while Finance – Banking students have only a two-hour seminar (practical course) each week.

In the process of data gathering for this business English needs analysis conducted at "Petru Maior" University, a twenty-five items questionnaire was conceived. This business English needs analysis questionnaire was not based exclusively on one of the approaches concerning needs analysis mentioned above, but it was rather set up as a combination of them. Furthermore, the first part of the questionnaire, questions 1 to 13, focuses on a present situation and target situation analysis, while the second part, questions 14 to 25, focuses on a task-based approach.

The needs analysis aims to investigate the current language situation of the learners as well as their attitudes towards this course, their expectations and wants.

The questionnaire has been applied to 100 first year students from the Faculty of Economic, Law and Administrative Sciences, half of them studying Management and the other half of them studying Finance – Banking. Out of the total number of respondents, 41 are male students and 59 are female students.

It has to be mentioned that usually only students who have studied English as a first foreign language are allowed to attend this course. However, based on the awareness of the importance of English as an international language in these fields, some of them whose first foreign language is French or German refused to attend business German or French communication courses and submitted a request to be allowed to attend English classes. From the total number of respondents 32% have studied English a second foreign language and they have chosen to attend English classes. In consequence, 13% of the respondents

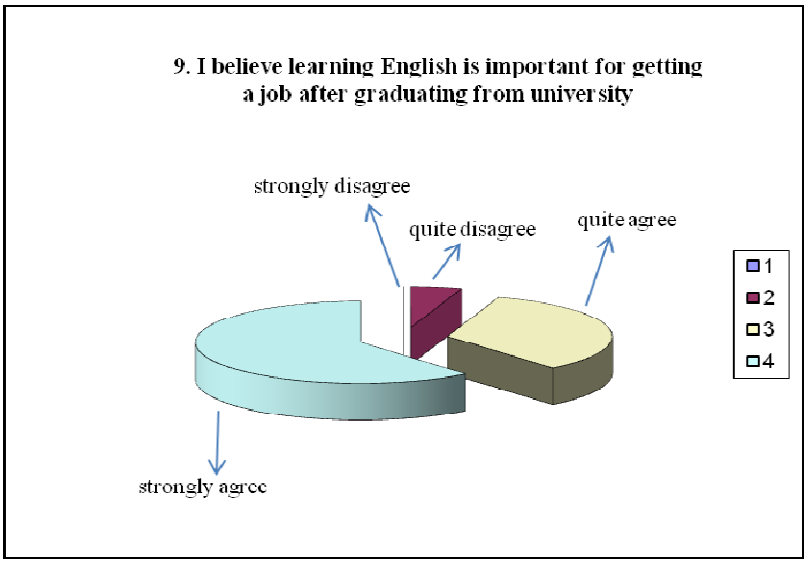
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have been studying English for 5 years, 34% for 6 – 8 years, and 63% for more than eight years.

When asked to comment the statement: *I aim to get a job which requires the use of English after graduating from university*, just one student strongly disagreed, 5 quite disagreed, 62 quite agreed and 32 strongly agreed. When asked to comment the statement: *I aim to get a job in an English-speaking country after graduating from university*, 3 respondents strongly disagreed, 25 quite disagreed, 49 quite agreed and 23 strongly agreed.

When asked to assess their current overall level of English ability, none of them considered it as very poor, 15% assessed it as quite poor, 71% as good and only 14% as very good.

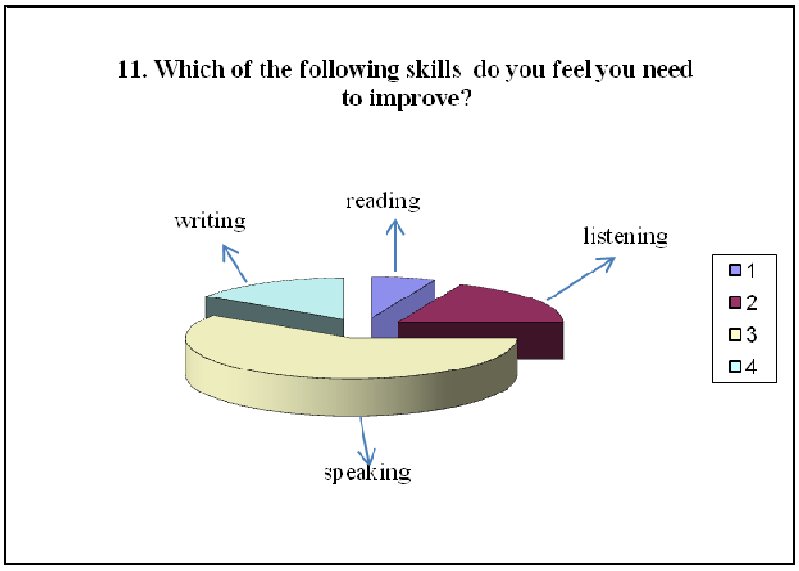
Having to comment the statement: *I believe learning English is important for getting a job after graduating from university*, none of them strongly disagreed, 5% quite disagreed, 34% quite agreed and 61% strongly agreed.



Asked to decide what they would do if English courses were optional, 96% would choose to take them and only 4% would choose not to take them. Analysing the answers of the last to items we have reached the conclusion that their level of awareness regarding the importance of English and the need to improve and develop their English skills is high.

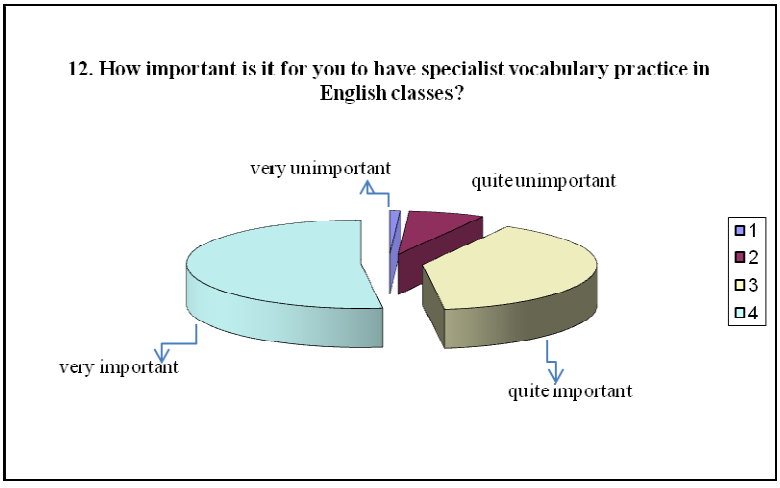
When considering the skill they feel they need to improve, 7% chose reading, 19% listening, 58% speaking and 16% writing.

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It is necessary to provide a short insight into the approaches to language learning and teaching in Romania, in order to understand and analyse the answers provided for the last question. For many years the approach to language teaching and learning used in our country was a cognitive one. Over the last few years there has been a shift towards a communicative approach to language learning and teaching.

When asked about the importance of having specialist vocabulary practice in English classes, 1% of the respondents considered it as very unimportant, 7% as quite unimportant, 40% as quite important and 52% as very important.



The same question arose about grammar practice and 2% of the respondents assessed it as very unimportant, 9% as quite unimportant, 48% as quite important, and 41% as very important.

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Comparing the answers of the last two questions we observe that although grammar practice is also needed, the need for specialist vocabulary practice is higher, students being aware that this has an essential role in their future jobs.

Items 14 to 25 of the questionnaire focus on the skills that students regard as goals toward using English in the future. The results for these items are provided in the table below. The following scale was used for the students' answers:

1. strongly disagree 2. quite disagree 3. quite agree 4. strongly agree

	1	2	3	4
14. Reading English business documents/business e-mail	2%	10%	55%	33%
15. Reading English specialist newspapers/magazines	0%	15%	54%	31%
16. Reading English articles/novels for pleasure	8%	26%	47%	19%
17. Listening in meetings or small-group discussions at work with English speaking members	4%	8%	40%	48%
18. Listening to take notes of a class lecture in English	1%	19%	50%	30%
19. Watching and listening to movies or TV programs in English	0%	7%	37%	56%
20. Speaking informally in English with foreign people	3%	8%	45%	44%
21. Giving speeches/presentations in English in university classes	5%	25%	45%	25%
22. Giving speeches/presentations in English at work	5%	21%	46%	28%
23. Writing business documents in English	5%	20%	36%	39%
24. Writing e-mails/letters in English to foreign friends	2%	16%	42%	40%
25. Synthesizing English information from several sources	3%	19%	53%	25%

It can be noticed that some of the highest figures represent positive answers regarding skills that students will need in order to be able to cope with a business environment, but also if they want to integrate in an international linguistic environment.

III. Conclusions

All things considered, the process of collecting data about the needs as well as wants and desires of the business English learner is now regarded as increasingly important in the design of business English courses. Furthermore it gives the teacher the opportunity of helping the student improve the skills he/she needs in order to meet the requirements of the field he/she is preparing to work in.

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The analysis needs conducted reveals that students are fully aware of the importance of Business English as a tool that provides them an opportunity to find a better job after they graduate from university. In order to achieve a higher level of business English they will need to develop and improve their communicative skills and this has to be accomplished within a specialized context and having precise knowledge about specialized vocabulary.

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Appendix 1

Business English Needs Analysis Questionnaire

1. Gender: 1. male 2. female

2. Specialization: 1. Finance – Banks 2. Management

3. What is your mother tongue?
   1. Romanian 2. Hungarian 3. Other - ……..
   (In case you choice is no. 3 please mention your mother tongue)

4. Have you studied English as a:
   1. first foreign language 2. second foreign language

5. How long have you been studying English for?
   1. 5 years 2. 6-8 years 3. more than 8 years

6. I aim to get a job which requires the use of English after graduating from university:
   1. strongly disagree 2. quite disagree 3. quite agree 4. strongly agree

7. I aim to get a job in an English-speaking country after graduating from university:
   1. strongly disagree 2. quite disagree 3. quite agree 4. strongly agree

8. I feel my current overall level of English ability is:
   1. very poor 2. quite poor 3. good 4. very good

9. I believe learning English is important for getting a job after graduating from university:
   1. strongly disagree 2. quite disagree 3. quite agree 4. strongly agree

10. If English courses were optional I would choose
    1. to take them 2. not to take them

11. Which of the following skills you feel you need to improve:
    1. reading 2. listening 3. speaking 4. Writing

12. How important is it for you to have specialist vocabulary practice in English classes:
    1. very unimportant 2. quite unimportant 3. quite important 4. very important

13. How important is it for you to have grammar practice in English classes:
    1. very unimportant 2. quite unimportant 3. quite important 4. very important

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How much do you feel each of the following skills is a goal for you toward using English in the future? Use the following scale for your answers:

1. strongly disagree 2. quite disagree 3. quite agree 4. strongly agree

14.	Reading English business documents/business e-mail	1	2	3	4
15.	Reading English specialist newspapers/magazines	1	2	3	4
16.	Reading English articles/novels for pleasure	1	2	3	4
17.	Listening in meetings or small-group discussions at work with English speaking members	1	2	3	4
18.	Listening to take notes of a class lecture in English	1	2	3	4
19.	Watching and listening to movies or TV programs in English	1	2	3	4
20.	Speaking informally in English with foreign people	1	2	3	4
21.	Giving speeches/presentations in English in university classes	1	2	3	4
22.	Giving speeches/presentations in English at work	1	2	3	4
23.	Writing business documents in English	1	2	3	4
24.	Writing e-mails/letters in English to foreign friends	1	2	3	4
25.	Synthesizing English information from several sources	1	2	3	4

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